

COLLOQUIAL ARABIC : WORD ORDER CHANGE

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Introduction :

This paper discusses the word order change that occurred in Colloquial Arabic (CA), as spoken in the Northern part of Egypt. The situation of Arabic in Egypt would facilitate the task of studying the diachronic development that CA has gone through. This situation is known as diglossia which refers to " two varieties of a language (that) exist side by side throughout the community, with each having a definite role to play " (Ferguson 1959: 325). By observing the two varieties of Arabic in Egypt (Standard Arabic [SA] and Colloquial Arabic), we can figure out (a) what type of word order change has occurred and (b) what factors are responsible for this change.

This paper is dedicated to answer these questions. The discussion is organised as follows : First, I discuss the type of syntactic restructuring that has occurred in CA. Second, I present some languages that have undergone the same word order change and the

factors that have triggered such a change.
Third, I return to the discussion of the basic factors that are involved in the change of CA word order.

I. Word order change in CA :

CA demonstrates that the direction of word order change is from VSO¹. That is, a sentence that is VSO in SA (Cf. Abbas 1984) changes to SVO in CA (cf. Gary and Gamaal El-deen 1982). I will summarize my findings demonstrating such a change in the following way :

(1)

S A -----> C A
V+S+(O) S+V+(O)

(2)

a. jara al-walad-u (SA)
 ran the-boy-Nom
 !The boy ran.!

b. al-wad gara (CA)
 the boy ran
 !The ran.!

(3)

a. darab al-walad-u al-bint-a (SA)
hit the-boy-Nom the girl-Acc
'The boy hit the girl.'

b. al-wad darab al-bit (CA)
the-boy hit the-girl
'The boy hit the girl.'

It is clear from (2-3) that the word order change in Arabic has been VSO ----> SVO. The most significant pathway of change is the direct rearrangement of sentential elements within the set of simple sentences rather than the collapsing of complex sentences into simple sentences with a new word order [cf. Mandarin Chinese (Li and Thompson 1974)]. For example, the subject (al-walad-u 'The boy') which follows the verb in SA sentences are made to precede it in the CA sentences.

II. VSO ----> SVO in other languages :

CA is not the only language to undergo word order change from VSO to SVO². It was found that such African languages as Kongo (Frajzyngier 1985) and Teso (Heine and Reh 1984) undergo word order change from VSO to SVO. There

are two factors that are responsible for the word order change in these languages : Auxiliation and pragmatic marking. The former factor (auxiliation) shows that word order change has been triggered by the desemantici- zation or semantic reformulation (cf. Langa- cker 1976) of auxiliary verbs. In Teso (Heine and Reh 1984 : 185), for example, the subject has to precede the main verb :

(4) a-bu etelepat ko-lot ore bian
he-come Past-boy he-go home yesterday
'The boy went home yesterday.'

In (4) the subject is flanked by an auxiliary which precedes it and a main verb which follows it. What happened in Teso is that the auxiliary has lost all its semantic content and has been reanalysed as a tense marker , resulting in SVO word order.

The other factor (pragmatic marking) is operative in the word order change of the Chadic languages (Frajzyngier 1983)³. The nouns being focused are placed in the clause- initial position. Eventually, this position loses its pragmatic strength or significance and it is exclusively occupied by the subject

noun phrase, the result being the new word order SVO. Thus two factors are behind the word order change in Kongo and Teso. In the following section we will examine the factors that trigger word change in CA.

III. The motivation for VSO ---> SVO :

It seems that in CA the process of grammaticalization is responsible for the word order change. Grammaticalization is defined as " an evolution whereby linguistic units lose in semantic complexity, pragmatic significance, syntactic freedom and phonetic substance, respectively. This is the case, for instance, when a lexical item develops into a grammatical marker"(Heine and Reh 1984:15)⁴. The case markers in SA are significant in determining the grammatical relation or function of the elements in the sentence : the subject is marked nominative whereas the direct object is marked accusative. This situation enables the language user to have a relatively free word order :

(5)

a. darab al-walad-u al-bint-a
hit the-boy-Nom the-girl-Acc
'The boy hit the girl.'

b. darab al-bint-a al-walad-u
'The boy hit the girl.'

without confusing the grammatical relation that each element holds to the verb. What probably happened in Spoken Arabic or CA is that phonetic processes (cf. Vennemann 1973) such as erosion and loss took part in eliminating the case morphemes. Thus loss, which is considered " the last of the processes within the cycle of linguistic evolution leads to the disappearance of a morpheme (case morphemes in CA) as a phonological unit " .
(Heine and Reh 1984 : 27):

(6) * darab al-walad al-bint
hit the-boy the-girl
(cf. 'Hit the boy the girl')

Here it is impossible to determine which element (al-walad or al-bint) is the subject or direct object ; there is no morphological clue to help us assign a grammatical relation to each element in the sentence. The situation as it is indicates that proper communication is blocked. The process of morphemic loss has to be followed by a further step, that is permutation which is " a process which

changes the basic arrangement of linguistic units in a sentence " (Heine and Reh 1984:28). As is indicated, this syntactic change is motivated by communicative needs per se (cf. Givon 1979 : 83) ; it is for communicative needs that we have to distinguish the subject and direct object ⁵.

(7) al-wad darab al-bit
 the-boy hit the-girl
 'The boy hit the girl.'

Now the subject is distinguished from the direct object by its position in the sentence : the nominal al-wad is subject in (7) since it precedes the verb ; the nominal al-bit that follows the verb is the direct object ⁶.

IV - Conclusion :

This paper has shown that the direction of word order change in CA is VSO ----> SVO. Two processes are responsible for this change: a phonetic process and a syntactic process. The phonetic processes (erosion and loss) cause the case morphemes to disappear, which results in two elements of nominals that do not have any case marking or clue to indicate

their grammatical functions. This situation is to be corrected by the syntactic process-permutation : the nominal functioning as subject is placed before the verb ; the nominal functioning as direct occupies the post-verb position.

NOTES

1- The following abbreviations have been used throughout the paper :

Acc	Accusative
CA	Colloquial Arabic
Nom	Nominative
O	Object
S	Subject
SA	Standard Arabic
V	Verb

2- Languages with SVO word order also undergo change : in this case the direction of change is SVO--> SOV. For example, Li and Thompson (1974 : 201) claim that in Mandarin Chinese the direction of change is SVO --> SOV ; this is achieved by collapsing complex sentences into simple ones with the SOV word order.

3- Pragmatic origins (e.g. present relevance) for Romance Permatic has been reported by Suzanne Fleischman (1982).

4- Hoenigswald (1963) defines it as " the emptying of lexically meaningful Morphs and their transformation into "function""elements" (p.36).

- 5- The claim that communicative needs are the sole factors that trigger syntactic change has been criticized by Heine and Reh 1984 and Bybee 1985.
- 6- The same process occurred in English, which used to be a VSO language and was extensively inflected (Eckersely 1960).

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