

Why Arabic Verbless Sentences are Verbless: A Recent Study

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ملخص:

يتناول هذا المقال تركيبية الجملة الاسمية اللافعلية في اللغة العربية في إطار النحو التقلصي والنظريات الجديدة لنوم شومسكي. أقر النحاة التقليديون أن الجملة الاسمية تتكون من المبتدأ والخبر، خلافاً للغة الفرنسية والإنجليزية. لكن الإشكالية المطروحة هي: لما الجمل الاسمية اللافعلية لا تملك فعل الكينونة.

ولهذا، وظفت مقالي هذا للإجابة عن هذه الإشكالية، وذلك بتقديم جملة من الحجج البناءة. أما بالنسبة لضبط مؤشر الزمن في غياب فعل الكينونة، افترضت أنه يتحدد بزمن الخطاب الذي هو الحاضر. **الكلمات الدالة:** فعل الكينونة، مؤشر الزمن، الجملة الاسمية، النافية، الضمير، زمن الخطاب.

Abstract:

The present paper deals with the syntactic structure of Arabic verbless sentences in the framework of minimalist syntax(1) and recent theories. The aim of this paper is to show that thematic features [φ -features]: (number, person and gender) are not the only features that can be inherited from C to T (cf. Chomsky 2008(2), Richards 2007)(3). T can also inherit TST-feature (i.e. speech time feature).

Key-words: Verbless sentence, inheretence features, speech time, TST/ φ -features, NEG, copula, tense, predication.

1. Introduction:

The verbless sentence is defined as a structure which is deprived of a visible copula in the present tense. This type of structure is labelled « *al-ğumal al-’smiya* = the nominal sentences » by traditional Arab grammarians (Sibawayhi (*Al-Kitaab*)).

Numerous studies were undertaken for the sake to investigate the syntactic structure of AVS. The traditional grammarians, such as Sibawayhi and Ibn Jinni (1010-AD, 1993)⁽¹⁾ proposed that in this kind of sentences the predication is achieved without V (to be). Under such a proposal, the Arabic verbless sentences (AVS) consist only of DP_{topic} (the so-called *mubtada’*) and *khabar* (XP_{predicate}). Contrary to this view, modern Arab linguists such as Berman (1978)⁽²⁾, Bakir (1980)⁽³⁾, Fassi (1993)⁽⁴⁾, Bahloul (1994)⁽⁵⁾ and Ur Shlonsky (1995)⁽⁶⁾ argue that the verb *be* is morphologically defective but present in syntax.

¹ Ibn Jinni, A. (1002-AD), *Sirr Sinaat Al-kitaab*, Hendawi H. (ed.), impression, Damascus: Dar Al-Qalam

² Berman, R. A. (1978). *Modern Hebrew Structure*. University Projects, Tel Aviv.

³ Bakir, M. (1980). *Aspects of clause structure in Arabic*. Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, Bloomington

⁴ Fassi Fehri, A. (1993). *Issues in the Structure of Arabic Clauses and Words*. Dordrecht : Kluwer Academic Publishers.

⁵ Bahloul, M (1994), “The copula in Modern Standard Arabic”, in Holes C. & M. Eid (eds) *Perspectives on Arabic Linguistics V*, Amsterdam, John Benjamins, 209-229.

⁶Shlonsky, Ur. (1995). “ Clause Structure and Word Order in Hebrew”. Ms. University of Geneva, Geneva, Switzerland.

Within the Minimalist Program and Chomsky's recent work (2008)⁽¹⁾, this present paper addresses the issue of the structure of AVS in Standard Arabic (SA) and Moroccan Arabic (MA). In this paper, we will defend that AVS are syntactically deprived of copular verb in the present context. Here, we dispense with the idea that sentences always have a verb [+V]. We propose that the nonverbal sentences contain $T^{ST(2)}$ and ϕ -features. Since T^{ST} is not [+V], there is no need for a manifestation of a verbal copula. In the second chapter, we will demonstrate that Arabic lacks a copular verb in present tense, and that (*yakuunu*) is not a potential copula. In the third chapter, we will explain, referring to *Feature Inheritance Mechanism* (Chomsky 2008), the crucial problematic concerns the reason why Arabic is deprived of a copula in present tense. In the fourth chapter, we will provide some empirical arguments that stipulate that $C^{(3)}$ is the original

locus of ϕ -features and T^{ST} . Specifically, we advocate the mechanism of feature inheritance, according to which tense and thematic features [T- ϕ] originate in C, and they are inherited from C to the lower head T in overt syntax.

¹ Chomsky, N. (2008). On phases. In *Foundational issues in linguistic theory*, ed. Carlos Otero Robert Freidin and Maria-Luisa Zubizarreta, 133–166. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press

² T^{ST} is tantamount to speech time.

³ C is the highest head in the hierarchical structure.

The next sections explore this intuition and reveal the proposal that AVS has an abstract tense glossed as TST.

II. Standard Arabic lacks a present copular verb:

The present-tense copular constructions in Arabic are similar to sentences including an overt copula⁽¹⁾ in other languages. In Arabic, the copula (**kaana**) has no present tense form.

Notice, however, that in certain present tense contexts, typically those with an aspectual reading, the copula has to surface, contrary to what we expect under standard proposal. An example from Egyptian Arabic (EA) is given in (1-a).

(1-a) ʕali bi-**yikuun** taʕbaan lamaa bi-yirgaʕ min ʔil-
˘suyɫ

Ali asp-be tired when asp-return from the-work
‘Ali is (normally) tired when he comes back from work.’

-b ʔal-jawu **yakuun-u** bārid-an fi ʕitaʔ-i

The-weather-NOM is cold-ACC in the winter-GEN
‘The weather is cold in winter.’

By contrast, the imperfective form of the copula (**yakuunu**) is not allowed in AVS as shown by (34) below.

(2-a) * ʕamr-un (yakuunu) tawil-an (AS)
Omar-NOM (Pres-be.3MS) tall-ACC

(-b) ʕamr-un tawil-un
Omar-NOM tall-NOM

¹ Overt copular: visible copular in phonetic forme.

‘Amr is tall.’

According to the above data (1-2), we are facing a problematic issue due to this fact: two structures of predicative sentences in the present tense are found in Arabic. One is without a copula and another with an overt copula.

This analysis leads to these questions: (i) Is there a semantic difference between them? (ii) Is “*yakuun*” a real copula?

Indeed, there is semantic difference between the two constructions. Predicative sentences without copula of type [DP_{topic}-AP]⁽¹⁾ indicate the meaning of “permanence” as illustrated by (2-b). That is to say, “tall” is a permanent characteristic of Amr’s body. By contrast, predicative sentences with an overt copula “*yakuun*” perform other semantic functions such as “describing situations that are usually true in the past, are true in the present, and are expected to be true in the future” (Benmamoun 2000: 47)⁽²⁾. In (2-b), the verb (*yakuun*) is syntactically in the form present tense “imperfect” and semantically conveys a general or habitual meaning. In this regard, the occurrence of the copula in the present tense is very conditional.

Thus, it is reasonable to reject the analysis in which “*yakuun*” is analysed as having the same functional

role as *kāna*, because they display semantically different structures. In this connection, we admit that “*yakuun*”

¹DP is a nominal group composed of determinant and an NP.

²Benmamoun, E. (2000). The Featural Structure of Functional Categories: A Comparative Study of Arabic Dialects. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

doesn't serve the function of linking the DP_{topic} to the $DP_{predicate}$, and therefore cannot be a potential copula. In Arabic, present predicative sentences are deprived of an overt copula and consist only of DP_{topic} and $DP_{predicate}$. The fact that “*yakuun*” doesn't appear in present predicative sentences distinguishes it from the copula *kāna*, which must show up in other tenses. A related question that arises in the context of the so-called verbless sentences concerns the reasons why AVS lack an overt copula.

In the following section, we first revisit the main proposal that choose to implement the distinction between past and nonpast forms in feature checking terms along the lines suggested in Chomsky's (1995) *Minimalist Program*. We then propose a new proposal (adopting “feature inheretence” mechanism, Chomsky (2008)) to account for this asymmetry. We propose that while past tense is $[T^{REF}]^{(1)}$, present tense is $[T^{ST}]$. Under such a proposal, $[T^{REF}]$ will attract V in past tense contexts, but no such attraction takes place in present tense context for the simple reason that tense is conveyed by C^{ST} , and hence does not require a hosting category (typically V).

III. Why AVS lack an overt copula:

III.1 Analysis: categorial features of tense [+D/+V]:

Following Bahloul (1994), we suggest that the non-occurrence of the copula in AVS is related to the categorial feature specification of the Tense. Chomsky (1995)-

¹ $[T^{REF}]$ is referential time (past and future).

(2001)⁽¹⁾ points out that the T(ense) head has both verbal and nominal features. Chomsky suggests that T in English is specified for two categorial features: the verbal feature [+V] and the nominal feature [+D]. The categorial feature [+V] determines the interaction between the tense and the verb, while the categorial feature [+D] determines its interaction with the subject. The [+V] feature has to be checked by verbal heads, while the [+D] feature can be checked by nominal heads. Thus, the feature parametric of T in English has the following representation:

$$(3) \text{ T(ense)} \\ [+D, +V]$$

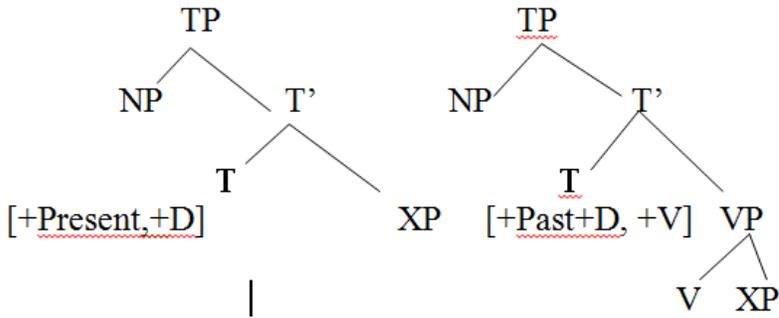
In English, both the present tense and past tense are specified for such features, hence the obligatory presence of the copula in both tenses. On the other hand, in Arabic, the present tense is not specified for [+V]. It is only specified for [+D] that must be checked by the subject. The

past tense, by contrast, is specified for both nominal and verbal features, hence the obligatory presence of the copula. In this connexion, Benmamoun (2008) accounts for the occurrence and non-occurrence of the copula by proposing the following structures (4).

¹Chomsky, N. 2001. Derivation by Phase. In Ken Hale: a life in language, edited by M. Kenstowicz, 1-52. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

(4) a. Present tense

b. Past tense



[XP= {AP/PP/NP}]⁽¹⁾

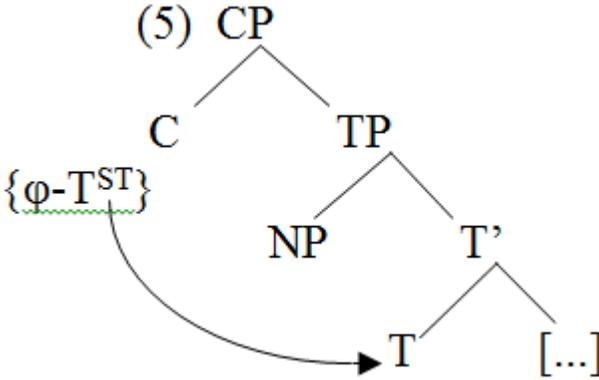
Thus, the apparent difference between the two relevant forms of the copula, covert and overt⁽²⁾, in Arabic, seems to be related to T and more precisely to features [+D, +V], i.e., the overt form of the copula cannot be shown up only if T is [+D, +V], while it is covert when the T is [+D].

III.2 “Feature Inheretence” in the C-T system:

Chomsky (2008) assumes that C is originally endowed with not only ϕ -features but also what he calls Tense-feature, and that “feature inheritance”, also applies to Tense-feature. This assumption is motivated by the fact that T, for example, carries ϕ -features and TST-feature [{ ϕ -TST}] only in the presence of C. The feature inheritance mechanism is illustrated in (5).

¹ Adjectival, prepositional and nominal phrases.

² covert copula is phonetically absent copula. Arabic verbless sentences lack a visible copula. Hence, they display a covert copula.

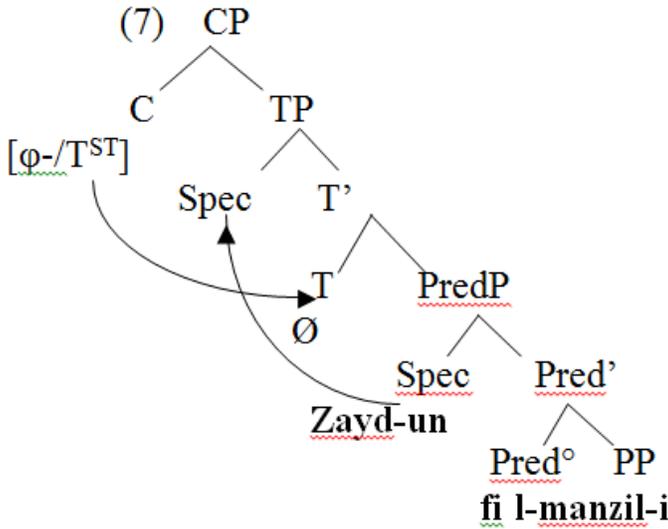


As shown in (5), the feature bundle $[\{\phi-T^{ST}\}]$ originates in C, and it must be discharged to T after C is merged to TP. In this connexion, Chomsky (2013) makes an intriguing note on why TNS-feature is inherited in T in accompany with ϕ -features. He notes that features of a lexical item can not move separately of the feature bundle to which they belong. Under Chomsky’s proposal, this paper assumes that the complex $[\{\phi-TNS\}]$ belongs to the same feature bundle and that it plays a significant role in feature

inheritence. This implies that if ϕ -features are inherited to T, also TNS-feature is inherited concontantly.

The proposed system works fine for capturing the basic facts in AVS. Sentence (6) is a simple case to which the system applies. The derivation of (6) is illustrated in (7).

- (6) Zayd-un fi l-manzil-i (SA)
 Zayd-NOM in the-house
 ‘Zayd is in the house.’



As shown in (7), C discharges the features $[\phi-]$ ⁽¹⁾ and $[T^{ST}]$ to T. $[\phi-]$ in T enters into an Agree relation

with $[\phi-]$ of the subject *Zayd*, and *Zayd* is attracted to Spec-TP. On the other hand, $[Tense]$ inherited to T

obtains \emptyset -tense⁽²⁾ morpheme (\emptyset stands for zero). Given that the tense is simultaneous to speech time (ST), $[Tense]$ is lexically unrealized. In structural description of (7), this tense is labelled as T^{ST} , as shown in (8):

(8) Zayd-un T^{ST} fi l-manzil-i
 Zayd-NOM T^{ST} in the house-Gen
 ‘Zayd is in the house.’

¹ $[\phi-]$ is thematic features (nombre, gender and person).

² \emptyset -tense symbolizes the total absence of referential time.

In the next section, we provide robust arguments that demonstrate that C is the locus of ϕ -features and TST, and Case in Arabic verbless sentences (AVS).

III.3 Arguments: C is the locus of [ϕ -TNSST] and Case :

Although Arabic verbless sentences are deprived of an overt copular verb ⁽¹⁾, they have been argued to encode TP⁽²⁾ (Benmamoun (2000, 2008)).

In dealing with the temporal system that operates in the embedded clauses, Enç (1987) develops a theory of tense in which tenses are referential expressions that denote intervals.

In Foundational Issues in Linguistics Theory.

Relying on the “close connection between Comp and Infl” she assumes that “Comp⁽³⁾ can optionally carry a temporal index...” yielding an interval as its semantic value” (p.641). Consider the following example:

(9) ‘John heard that Mary **was** in the house.’

Enç (1987) argues that (9) conveys both readings in English:

¹Benmamoun, E. (2000). The Featural Structure of Functional Categories: A Comparative Study of Arabic Dialects. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

² Benmamoun, E. (2008). Clause Structure and the Syntax of Verbless Sentences.

³Comp is an abbreviation of complementizer.

- (a) 'John hears at a past time that Mary was in the house at a time prior to that.'

- (b) 'John hears at a past time that Mary is in the house at the time of the hearing.'

By contrast, Arabic would only convey the (a) reading for the sentence identical to (9), as shown in (10):

(10) samiḡa Ali-un 'anna Maryam-a k̄āna-t fi l-manzil-i
 heard Ali-Nom **Comp** Maryam-Acc **was** in-the-house
 'Ali heard that Maryam was in the house (prior to the time of hearing).'

Standard Arabic (SA), in contrast to English, expresses the simultaneous reading with sentences where the matrix conveys past tense, but the

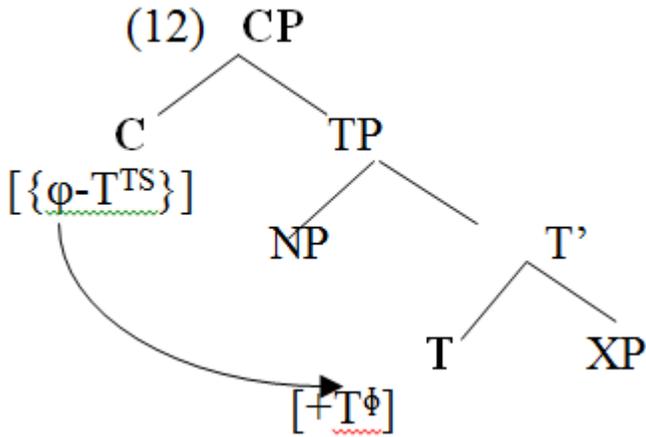
complement conveys present tense. Consider the following example:

(11) sam iḡa Ali-un 'anna Maryam-a fi l-manzil-i
 heard Ali-Nom **Comp** Maryam-Acc in-the-house
 'Ali heard that Maryam was in the house.'

(11) conveys the following intended reading: 'Ali heard that Maryam was in the house at the time of hearing' (simultaneous reading).

In looking closely at the above examples (9)-(10-11), one may argue for the presence of distinctive COMPs

(**'anna** and **that**). This difference is based on the nature of the features encoded in C. In AVS, C encodes for the feature bundle $[\{\phi-T^{TS}\}]$. T^{TS} stands for (Speech Time). T^{TS} is non-affixal, hence does not need to be lexically supported, and therefore does not force verb movement or merge⁽¹⁾ with T. Accordingly, we postulate the feature structure for the verbless sentences as in (12):



According to this analysis, there is C above TP to host T^{ST} . Hence, this structure can arguably explain the fact that Arabic verbless sentences do sometimes contain temporal adverbs that locate the event in time, as is shown in the following example:

(13) al-jaww-u jamiil-un **l-'alaan** (SA)
 the-weather-NOM nice-nom now

¹ Merge: syntactic operation whereby the head absorbs the features.

‘The weather is nice now.’

The idea here is that the temporal adverb *l-'alaan* which denotes present time is compatible with the TST, while *'amsi* "yesterday" is not. The same contrast can be obtained in AVS as the examples below show:

(14-a) r-rajul-u mariiD-un **l-'aana** (SA)
 the-man-NOM sick-nom now
 ‘The man is sick now.’

(-b) *r-rajul-u mariiD-un **'amsi**
 the-man-NOM sick-nom yesterday

The fact that the example (14-a) is grammatical with the temporal adverb *l-'aana* but not *'amsi* suggests that C is the locus of TST in Arabic verbless sentences. This is also supported by the fact that when the copula *kaana*⁽¹⁾ is used in (14-b), the sentence is rendered grammatical, as shown in (15):

(15) kaana r-rajul-u mariiD-an bil-**'amsi**
 was the-man-NOM sick-acc yesterday
 ‘The man was sick yesterday.’

Hence, the grammaticality of (14-c) is due to the compatibility of the temporal adverb and the [TST] on C.

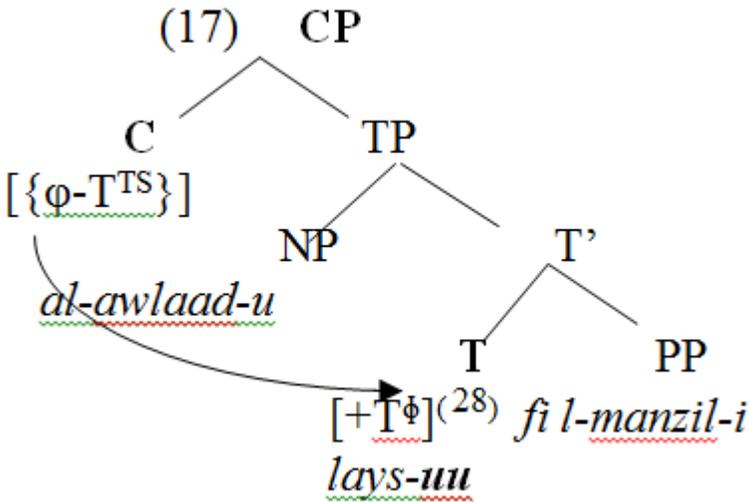
¹kaana is the copula employed in the past. *yakuunu* is n't a potential copula in the present.

The claim that Arabic verbless sentences possess the feature bundle $[\{\phi-T^{ST}\}]$ on C is based on sentential negation. Though depriving of V, the verbless sentences encode sentential agreement, which shows up on the negative copula “layssa”, as shown in (16). Hence, the verbless sentences are ungrammatical with the non- ϕ -inflecting negative markers, as (16-b) shows, thus suggesting that these sentences encode ϕ -features that have to be hosted by negative marker, in the absence of V. Thus, under the feature inheritance

proposal, the feature structure of (16-a) would be as in (17):

(16-a) al-awlaad-u lays-uu fi l-manzil-i (SA)
 the-boys-NOM Neg-3pm in the-house-GEN
 ‘the boys are not in the houses.’

-b * al-awlaad-u laa fi l-manzil-i (SA)
 the-boys-NOM Neg in the-house-GEN



We propose that (16-a) is grammatical because it is in accordance with feature inheritance. Given that all features of C should be inherited, the ϕ -T^{TS} features of C is transmitted to the lower head, where the negative copula “laysa” agrees with the inherited ϕ -T^{TS} features on T. By contrast, the negative marker *laa* is non- ϕ -inflecting marker insofar as it does not agree with the feature bundle on T, hence the ungrammaticality of (16-b).

One additional argument for the existence of C as the locus of ϕ -T^{TS} and case has to do with the licensing of structural case. It is clear, from the above

examples, that case in the topic is morphologically realized. The topic is often assigned default nominative case. The claim of default case is that of Schütze (2001)⁽¹⁾ and Soltan (2007)⁽²⁾ according to which a nominal is assigned default case only if it is not in the scope of a Case assigner. The following examples are illustrative:

(18-a) 'al- walad-**u** fi l-manzil-i
the-boy-**NOM** in the-house-GEN
‘The boy is in the house.’

-b 'inna 'al-walad-**a** fi l-manzil-i
COMP The-boy-**ACC** in the-house-GEN
‘Certainly the boy is in the house.’

The proposal that the topic receives default Nom Case (due to the lack of a Case assigner) is supported by the fact

¹ Schütze, Carson. (2001). On the Nature of Default Case. *Syntax* 4:3, 205-238.

² Soltan, Usama. (2007). On Formal Feature Licensing in Minimalism: Aspects of Standard Arabic Morphosyntax. Doctoral dissertation, University of Maryland.

that it realizes Acc(usative) Case in the presence of *'inna*, a COMP Acc Case assigner (18-b). This thus indicates that the DP_{topic} “the boy” is not in the scope of a Case assigner in (18-a), otherwise it would not have assumed the Case assigned by *'inna*. We here assume the Case Freezing Condition (CFC) of Uriagereka (2008)⁽¹⁾ according to which a nominal may not assume more than one case value.

III.4 Towards a new Proposal:

In this section, we present an account of tense feature in AVS. What we need to show here is why Arabic verbless sentences are typically verbless. Consider the following sentences:

(19-a) Zayd-un 'ustaad-un (SA)
Zayd-NOM teacher
'Zayd is a teacher.'

-b Zayd-un **kāna** 'ustaad-an
Zayd-NOM **be.PAST** teacher-acc
'Zayd was a teacher.'

To account for the contrast in (19-a-b), we assume that tense morphology, in AVS, is absent due to the presence of a featureless T. This T head is distinctive from its past-tense counterpart in that while the latter has a [T] feature that refers to the time of event (T^{REF}), the former has a [TST] feature which binds the event variable and is also anchored

¹ Uriagereka, Juan. (2008). *Syntactic Anchors: On Semantic Structuring*. Cambridge University Press.

to speech time (ST). Hence, $[T^{REF}]$ denotes referential tense, and $[T^{ST}]$ denotes anaphoric tense.

Since T is radically featureless in Arabic verbless sentences, T refers to C that encodes T^{ST} , and therefore inherits ϕ - and TNS-features from C (Chomsky 2005)⁽¹⁾. In this connexion, we posit a distinctive paralelism between past and nonpast T in Arabic that has to do with ϕ -feature availability and TNS referentiality. In contrast to the past and future

tenses which are specified for both $[+T^{REF}]$ and $[+\phi]$ features, the present tense in AVS is specified as $[+T^{ST}]$ and $[+\phi]$ features.

The fact that present tense is specified for a $[+T^{ST}]$ feature implies that the copula is not needed to check this feature. The $[+\phi-]$ feature, on the other hand, can be checked by the subject. In more technical words, T^{REF} turns T affixal, hence in need of a host, resulting in V-raising in past tense contexts (19-b). Nonpast T, by contrast, is featureless, hence anaphoric (T^{ϕ}). In this case, Nonpast T inherets its features via the operation of “*inheritence feature*” (Chomsky 2007⁽²⁾, 2008⁽³⁾, Richards 2007⁽⁴⁾),

¹ Chomsky, Noam. 2005. On Phases, Ms., MIT.

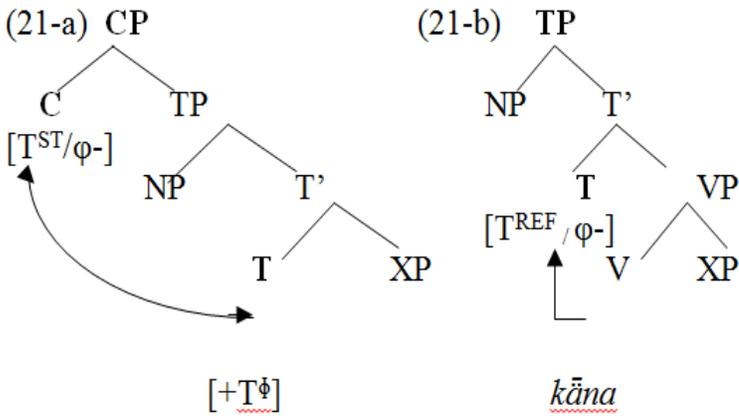
² Chomsky, N. (2007). Approaching UG from below. In Interfaces + recursion= language?: Chomskys minimalism and the view from syntax-semantics, ed. Uli Sauerland and Hans-Martin Gartner, 1–29. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

³ Chomsky, N. (2008). On phases. In Foundational issues in linguistic theory, ed. Carlos Otero Robert Freidin and Maria-Luisa Zubizarreta, 133–166. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

⁴ Richards, M. D. (2007). On Feature Inheritance: An argument from the Phase Impenetrability Condition’. Linguistic Inquiry.38:3:563-572.

capturing the derivational dependence of T on C: ϕ - and TNS-features reside in C, from where they are handed down to T. Under that approach, the feature structure of past tense and present tense in Arabic is illustrated in (21-a-b).

- (20) a. Simple present b. Simple past
 ‘Feature inheretence’ mechanism V-raising



Accordingly, we assume that when the T is $[+T^{REF}, +\phi$ -features], T selects a VP complement headed by a verbal element *k̄āna* that obligatorily moves to support the tense features in T; but if T is $[+T^{\phi}]$ other categories than VP would occur (XP =NP, AP, or PP). Under such proposal, we may postulate rules (22) for the copula:

(22)

a- “The copula is overt when T° is $[+T^{REF}]$, otherwise spell it as null”.

b- “The copula is null when T° is $[+T^{\phi}]$ that requires checking via C-T link.

Hence, it seems plausible to admit that this is precisely the reason why AVS_S in this language are deprived of V in present tense contexts, the reason being that T is featureless, and therefore does not require a verbal host. Since T is valued via “*feature inheretence*” operation with C^{TS}, the tense feature remains non-

affixal, thereby accounting for the assumption of null V in AVS.

In a nutshell, one can conclude that AVS_S are indeed configurationally verbless (Benmamoun 2008).

III. Conclusion:

We have provided an analysis for the assumption that AVS are deprived of a covert copula in the present tense, which is phonetically unrealized. Adopting this analysis, we have argued in favour of the analysis that AVS contain syntactically a null V, and hence no VP. Accordingly, the syntactic structure of AVS would be as [DP_{topic} TST XP_{predicate}]. With respect to the tense system in AVS, it is proposed that the present tense is conveyed by C^{TS}.

Finally, we have provided empirical arguments for the assumption that AVS possess a featureless T that specifies for anaphoric feature [+T^φ], and hence verifies its time feature via a **C-T-chain** system.

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