PASSIVES IN STANDARD ARABIC:
The Enlightenment from Relational Grammar

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INTRODUCTION:

This paper deals with the types of passives that Standard Arabic (SA) has. It is shown that there are two types of passives in this language: Personal passives (Section 2.2) and impersonal passives (Section 3.2). The former type involves the advancement of a direct object to subject. The latter type operates on unaccusative clauses only. In such a case a dummy is inserted as direct object which advances to subject. This analysis of impersonal passives is argued to be superior to another analysis—the Spontaneous Demotion—which does not posit any dummy insertion or advancement (cf. Section 3.2.1).

The discussion in this paper is conducted in the Framework of Relational Grammar (RG) as proposed by Perlmutter and Postal (1974; 1983a, 1983b, 1983c).
RG (cf. Section 1) is chosen since it aspires to universality, that is, it states rules in such a way that they would be true of all (or most) languages of the world irrespective of word order or case system. For example, the passive rule formulated by RG (Section 2.1) would apply to such diverse languages as English, Arabic and Dyirbal (cf. Dixon 1972).

1- Relational Grammar: an Outline:

Relational Grammar (RG) was developed by Perlmutter and Postal (1974). The basic claim of RG is that syntactic rules should directly refer to the grammatical relations (GR) of elements in the sentence rather than to phrase markers as in Transformational Grammar (TG) (Chomsky 1962) or to semantic relations as in Case Grammar (Filmore 1968).

Grammatical relations in RG are taken to be primitives of grammatical theory: predicate (p), subject (1), direct object (2), indirect object (3), obliques (Obl) (e.g., Locative (loc), Instrumental).
(instr) etc.) and Chomeurs(cho). The chomeur relation is borne by" nominals that bear no other nominal clause relation at that level" (Gerdts 1984)\(^2\).

These grammatical relations fall into two classes: nuclear terms which include 1s, 2s, 3s and non-terms, consisting of chomeurs and obliques\(^3\).

According to RG, any syntactic structure must refer to three things that are represented by three elements in Relational Network. (Perlmutter 1980:1981):

(a) The elements that bear relations to each other: this is represented by a set of nodes.

(b) The grammatical relation that is borne by each element in the sentence: this is shown by a set of R-signs.

(c) The levels at which each element bears grammatical relations to the other; this is indicated by a set of co-ordinates.
In RG, the relation between linguistic elements can be described in terms of nodes (e.g. (a) and (b) in (1):

(1)

\[ \text{GR}_x \]

The linguistic element \( a \) bears the GRX relation to \( b \) in (1): for example, if GRX is direct object in (1), then \( b \) should bear the 2-relation to \( a \) and so on.

As can be observed in (1) the linguistic levels are not shown. (1) needs arcs to identify the levels at which an element bears a relation to another element. This is seen in (2):

(2)

(2) shows that \( b \) bears the 2-relation to \( a \) at the
first and second level.

Moreover, RG claims that a nominal may change its grammatical relation at the surface level. Thus in a clause like (3) which is represented in (4).

(3) That book was reviewed by Louis.

(4)

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{review} \\
\text{Louis} \\
\text{Book}
\end{array}
\]

the nominal book has a distinct GR in each level: it is an object (2) in the first level: a subject (1) in the second one.

2- Personal passive:

In this section I will present the RG treatment of personal passives (section 2.1). Then I will discuss personal passives in SA (section 2.2) showing that such constructions conform to the predictions of RG.
2.1. Personal passive in RG:

RG claims that passivization is universally characterized as follows (Perlmutter and Postal 1983:9):

(5) A direct object of an active clause is the (superficial) subject of "corresponding" passive.

(6) The subject of an active clause is neither the (superficial) subject nor the (superficial) direct object of the "corresponding" passive.

(5)-(6) show that any passive rule should refer to the grammatical relations of the nominals involved. Any attempt to characterize such phenomena in terms of the linear order of elements would not have language independent application. To illustrate (5)-(6), let's examine a clause such as (8a) which is the passive counterpart of (7).

(7) Noami gave that book to me.

(8)

a. That book was given to me by Noami.
As (8b) (which is the stratal diagram of (8a)) shows, the nominal that book bears the 2-relation in the initial stratum in accordance with (6). In contrast, the nominal Noami which bears the initial 1-relation (i.e. the subject of the active clause) is placed en chomage in the final stratum. This fact is in line with the chomeur condition, which is informally stated (Perlmutter and Postal 1983:20) as in:

(9) The Chomeur Condition: A nominal bears the chomeur relation if and only if its GR is taken over by another nominal.

2.2.: SAs Personal Passive:

In SA passive constructions the nominal that bears the final stratum 2 relation (the direct direct object) advances to I(subject), as in the
(b) clauses:

(10a) Saraba al-qit-u al-maa?-a
     drink-pst the-cat-nom the-water-acc
     The cat drank the water.

b. Suriba al-maa?-u
     drink-pass-past the-water-nom
     The water was drunk.

(11a) Darabat al-bint-u al-walad-a
     hit-pst-f the-gril-nom the-boy-acc
     The girl hit the boy.

b. Duriba al-walad-u
     hit-pass-pst the-boy-nom
     'The boy was hit'.

The nominals that bear the final 2-relation in (10a) and (11a) advance to I in the (b) clauses: the nominal al-walad-a, which is a final 2 in (11a), is a final 1-arc in (11b). This is evidenced by two facts (Abbas 1982): (a) These nominals are in the nominative in the (b) clauses; they are in the accusative in the (a) clauses. (b) these nominals occupy the post-verbal position which is normally
reserved for subjects in SA.

In contrast, nominals that head other than final 2-arcs can not undergo passive: they can not advance to subject in passive constructions. Thus clauses like (12b-c) are ungrammatical since a nominal that is not a final 2 is allowed to advance to 1 (subject). (5)

(12)a. qaddama ar-ra?i:s-u risa:lat-an
give-pst the-president-nom letter-acc
li-l-mudaris-i fi-l-madrasst-i
to-the-teacher-obl in-the-school
"The president gave a letter to the teacher in the school";
b. *quddima al-mudaris-u risa:lat-an
give-pass-pst the-teacher-nom letter-cc
"The president gave a letter to the teacher in the school."

c. *quiddima-t al-mardrassat-u risa:lat-an
give-pass-pst-f.the-school-nom-letter-acc
-i-l-mudaris-i fi
to-the-teacher-obl in
"The school was given a letter in to
the teacher."

Clauses like(12b-c) are ungrammatical: in each
case a nominal that is not a final 2 is made to
advance to 1 (subject): in(12b) the advancee is
a final3(indirect object): in(12c) the nominal
that advances to 1 is an oblique( a directional
nominal).

Thus the passive rule in SA can be given as
follows:

(13) The passive rule:
    Only final 2s can advance to 1 in
    passive constructions.

In this section we have discussed personal
passives in SA. The next section deals with SA
impersonal passives.

3 • Impersonal passive

In this section I discuss the nature of
impersonal passives as treated in RG(section 3.1)
In section(3.2) I show that SA impersonal passives
are based on a special class of intransitive verbs.

3.1. Impersonal passive in RG:

Impersonal passives (Perlmutter 1978:1983) are associated with a special class of intransitives. This fact is accounted for by the Unaccusative Hypothesis (UH) which claims that there are two classes of intransitive clauses: initially unergative clauses and initially unaccusative clauses (6). The former type contains a 1 but no 2; the latter contains a 2 but no 1. Thus (14) is an ergative clause whereas (15) is an unaccusative clause:

(14) The man ran.

(15) The snow melted;

The structures of (14)-(15) can be represented by the stratal diagrams (16)-(17), respectively:

(16)

\[ \text{ran} \quad \text{man} \]

(17)

\[ \text{melt} \quad \text{snow} \]

In RG it is claimed (Perlmutter 1978:163) that whether a clause is initially unergative or
initially unaccusative is predictable from the semantics of the clause. The class of initially unergative clauses contain predicates that describe willed or volitional acts such as work, play, speak, walk, talk etc. The class of initially unaccusative clauses are characterized by predicates that denote involuntary acts, the subject being a patient to whom things are happening. Such predicates include smell, sleep, melt, fall, sink, dry, drown etc.

This classification is justified by syntactic facts. The prediction made here (cf. Perimutter 1978) is: only the initially unergative intransitive clauses would be compatible with impersonal passives; the initially unaccusative clauses can not be the basis for impersonal passives. This prediction holds in English:

(18) It is run through this road.  
(19) * It is melted here.

(18)-(19) clearly show that only initially unergative intransitive clauses can be the basis for impersonal passives. This fact has also been attested in several languages (e.g. Dutch (Perimutter 1978)).
The fact that the two types of intransitive clauses behave differently with respect to impersonal passives directly follows from such an RG law as the I advancement exclusiveness law (IAEX) which claims that "a given clause can have at most one advancement to 1" (Perlmutter 1980:211). It is claimed (Perlmutter 1978) that impersonal passives involve the insertion of a dummy as 2 which advances to 1 placing the initial 1 en chomage. This is the case when an impersonal passive is based on an unergative intransitive clause. Thus a clause like (18) would have the stratal diagram (20).

(20)

![Stratal Diagram]

Initially unaccusative intransitive clauses have been shown to involve 2 to 1 advancement. If an impersonal passive is based on them, another advancement to 1 would occur. That is, the advancement of the dummy. This would definitely
lead to the violation of the AEX. A clause like (19) would then be represented as in (21).

(21) *

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 melt snow D
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3.2.: Impersonal passives in SA:

Impersonal passives in SA are exemplified by (22)-(23):

(22) rugisa fi-l-hafl-i
    dance-pass-pst in-the-party-obl
    "It was danced in the party."

(23) luqiba fi-l-hadi:qat-i
    play-pass-pst in-the park-obl
    "It was played in the park."

A preliminary examination of (22)-(23) indicates that these impersonal passives are based on initially unergative intransitive clauses: the predicates these clauses contain describe willed or volitional acts. This might lead us to believe that SA also obeys the unaccusative hypothesis as
posed by Perimutter(1978)(see section 3.1). In order to test this hypothesis (i.e. only initially unergative intransitive clauses are compatible with impersonal passives), let's examine the possibility of classifying SA intransitive predicates into two semantic classes:

Intransitive verbs denoting voluntary acts include:

(24)

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ragasa} & \quad \text{"dance"} \\
\text{laqaba} & \quad \text{"play"} \\
\text{basqa} & \quad \text{"split"} \\
\text{zahafa} & \quad \text{"crawl"} \\
\text{baka} & \quad \text{"weep"} \\
\text{sarraxa} & \quad \text{"cry"}
\end{align*}
\]

Intransitive verbs describing involuntary acts are given in (25):

(25)

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{waqa} & \quad \text{"fall"} \\
\text{halama} & \quad \text{"dream"} \\
\text{šamma} & \quad \text{"smell"} \\
\text{sašala} & \quad \text{"cough"}
\end{align*}
\]
RG predicts that the predicates in (24) are compatible with impersonal passives whereas those in (25) are not:

(26) busiqa ?ala al-?ard-i
     spit-pass-pst on the-floor-obl
     "It was spit on the floor".

(27) zuhifa ?ala al-?ard-i
     crawl-pass-pst on the-ground-obl
     "It was crawled on the ground".

(28)* wuqi??ala-?ard-i
     fall-pass-pst on the-ground-obl
     "It was fallen on the ground".

(29)* Summa fi-l-?ari:q-i
     smell-pass-pst in-the-road-obl
     "It was smelt in the road."

Clauses like (28)-(29) show the incompatibility of initially unaccusative intransitive clauses with impersonal passives.

SA impersonal passives involve a dummy that is inserted as a 2 which advances to 1.8 This analysis of impersonal passives in SA shows why
clauses like (28)-(29) already have an advancement to 1 any further advancement to I would render the clauses ungrammatical.

Thus SA has two types of intransitives that are classified on the basis of their semantic properties. These two classes have been shown to differ as to their syntactic function: only initially unergative intransitive clauses can get into construction with impersonal passives. Is this analysis justifiable or is there another proposal that would account for these facts? The following section will discuss this possibility.

3.2.1. The Spontaneous Demotion

In this section I will propose an alternative analysis—the Spontaneous Demotion—for SA impersonal passives. I will then argue against this analysis showing the superiority of the Advancement Hypothesis in dealing with impersonal passives.

Recall that in the previous section the SA impersonal passive is characterized as involving
the insertion of a dummy as a 2 which advances to
to 1, placing the initial 1 en chomage (Perimutter
and Postal 1984:106). In contrast to this analysis,
Comrie (1977) posits the Spontaneous Demotion (SD)
which claims that clauses \(I \rightarrow 2\) do not involve
any dummy insertion; the nominal bearing the final
1-relation is spontaneously demoted to chomeur.
Thus a clause like (26) would have the stratal
diagram (30) rather than (31):

(30)

\[\text{Diagram (30)}\]

(31)

\[\text{Diagram (31)}\]

Not that (30) violates the chomeur condition
since there is no nominal that has taken over the
GR of the chomeurized nominal. Does this analysis constitute a threat to RG?

This analysis (the SD analysis) lacks the descriptive capacity in dealing with SA impersonal passives: For Comrie, clauses like (26) and (28) have the same initial GR, namely 1. Therefore, there is no way for Comrie to explain why (28) is ungrammatical whereas (26) is grammatical and there is no justification for the distinct syntactic behavior of the predicates in (24)–(25).

Under the advancement Hypothesis, the ungrammaticality of impersonal passives of initially unaccusative clauses (28)–(29) is a consequence of universal principles of grammar" (Permutter 1978:175).

4. Conclusion:

To recapitulate, this study has shown that there are two types of passives in SA: personal passives and impersonal passives⁹. Personal passives are characterized as involving the advancement of a 2 to 1. Impersonal passives
have been shown to be based on initially unergative intransitive clauses: they involve a dummy as 2 which advances to 1 placing the initial 1 en chomage. The insertion of a dummy as 2 in the SA impersonal passives has enabled us to account for the ungrammaticality of the impersonal passives that are based on initially unaccusative intransitive clauses. The SD analysis would not be able to account for such clauses without positing ad hoc statements and devices that would complicate SA grammar.

NOTES

1- RG rules such as the chomeur law and the 1-Advancement Exclusiveness law are discussed in the appropriate sections.

2- See Perimutter(1980) for more detailed discussion.

3- All other nominals show the relation between the predicate and nominals in a clause (see Perimutter 1980).

4- Note that(3) can also be represented as in (1):
5- Olmstead and Gamaal El-Deen(1982:90) claim that in Colloquial Arabic an indirect object can be subject in a passive.

6- For a detailed discussion of the Unaccusative Hypothesis, see Perimutter(1978).

7- The Unaccusative Advancement entails that every intransitive stratum is called "unaccusative stratum" which contains an initial 2 must advance to 1(according to the final 1 law( Perimutter 1978).

8- Note that the dummy is not visible in languages such as English or Arabic but there are several languages(e.g. German and Dutch(Perimutter 1978) in which the dummy appears on the surface.

9- Olmstead and Gamaal El-Deen(1982) claim that colloquial Arabic does not have impersonal passives.
REFERENCES


