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Perspectives on Arabic Linguistics I

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‘Orality’ and Discourse Structure in Modern Standard Arabic

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1. Introduction

There is a large body of recent research in discourse analysis and communication theory in which the term ‘oral’ is used in characterizing discourse that is patterned in a repetitive, paratactic, formulaic way. Some of these studies deal with discourse which is in fact oral, that is, with spoken language. Others, however, use terms such as ‘oral strategies’ as technical terms applicable to discourse displaying the formal features of repetitiveness, parataxis, and formulaicity, whether or not the discourse in question is in fact spoken. Since expository prose in Modern Standard Arabic clearly displays all three of these features, one is tempted to use the term ‘oral’ in describing it, as has in fact been done (Ong 1982:26).

There are, however, two complementary theoretical dangers lurking in the use of terms like ‘oral’ or ‘spoken-like’ to describe the repetition, parataxis, and formulaicity in Arabic prose, or in any non-spoken discourse. One is the danger of being too particular: of pinning one’s explanation of the presence of these formal features to concepts like ‘oral residue’

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(Ong 1982) or ‘unplannedness’ (Ochs 1979), or looking exclusively for evidence of the influence of speaking on writing, and explaining repetition, parataxis, and formulaicity simply as carry-overs from one medium to another. In doing this, one risks never catching sight of more general reasons for these discourse features, reasons rooted in basic communicative exigencies and in the rhetorical nature of all discourse.

The other danger is that of being too general. In the attempt to place all texts, irrespective of the contexts of their production, along the same continuum (oral/non-oral, like speech/like writing), one risks losing sight of what is different about a given text, of the text’s emic status in its own linguistic and cultural context. In the case in question, one risks not noticing the ways in which the repetitiveness, parataxis, and formulaicity of Arabic prose are made necessary by the syntactic strategies available in Arabic and by particular Arabic discourse traditions and communicative needs.

In what follows, I will first describe the studies of orality and of spoken discourse which form the background for my discussion. I will then present an example of expository prose in Arabic and show that it is characterized by three formal features that have been identified as quintessentially oral: repetition, parataxis, and formulaicity. In the succeeding sections, I will discuss why the Arabic text is the way it is, in general terms, examining what has to be involved in any attempt to persuade, then in particular terms, examining the Arabic nature of the text. The paper will end with a discussion of the multiple sources of discourse constraints, and the methodological and practical consequences of choosing among them as one describes a text.

2. Oral Forms and Style

2.1 Uses of ‘oral’ in the literature

Current research on orality and literacy, speaking and writing, has tangled roots in several different but overlapping lines of inquiry. Often cited as the earliest of these traditions is the work of M. Parry (A. Parry 1971), Lord (1960), Havelock (1963) and others, on oral poetry. Grounded in the philological, literary critical tradition, these studies explained why certain poetry, first the Homeric epics, and, later, poetry in other languages and contexts, displayed what had seemed to be aberrant formal patterns and strange discrepancies in attribution, by claiming that the received ‘texts’ were not texts at all but rather written-down versions of oral rhapsodies, or stitchings-together. In this philological work on orality, ‘oral’ clearly means ‘spoken’; it was and is the purpose of such studies to show that the poetry in question can only be understood if it is acknowledged not to have been written.

A second line of inquiry, originating in the fields of education, sociology, and communications studies, includes the work of McLuhan (1962), Goody (1977), Goody & Watt (1968), Ong (1971, 1977, 1978, 1982), and others, dealing with the cultural and linguistic effects of literacy. In these studies, it is claimed that a culture’s acquisition of a new medium produces profound changes in patterns of thought — or, as Ong calls them, noetic patterns. The noetic world becomes larger as more people can communicate with one another (McLuhan), history and myth are for the first time clearly distinguished (Goody), and logical analysis becomes possible (Ong). For these and other media-oriented scholars, ‘oral’ refers to a kind of thought, not simply a medium of discourse. Thus, for these researchers, a written text can be ‘oral’, or at least ‘residually oral’, to use Ong’s term, if it displays evidence that its author was thinking in ‘oral’ ways as he or she wrote.

A third body of research begins with styles of language use rather than styles of thought, and has as its goal a taxonomy of discourse types. In this category is the work of linguists like Chafe (1979, 1981), Ochs (1979), R. Lakoff (1981a), and Tannen (1980, 1981, 1982). Here the emphasis is on comparing spoken and written data with an eye to finding formal reflexes of cognitive (Chafe, Ochs) or functional (Lakoff, Tannen) differences. By those researchers in this tradition who use the term ‘oral’, the term is applied not only to spoken language. Written texts can and do make use of ‘oral strategies’ and can be more or less ‘oral’ on the oral-literate continuum.

2.2 Formal features of orality

Throughout the literature I have discussed, one finds reference to three formal features of discourse styles which have been called oral: PARATAKIS, FORMULACITY, and REPETITION.

Oral discourse is almost always described as being more paratactic, that is, more additive and less subordinative, than non-oral discourse.
Chafe (1979, 1981) points out that speakers make use of paralinguistic and non-verbal strategies to create cohesion, with little overt linguistic marking of intercursla relations. Writers, on the other hand, make connections explicit by means of complex syntactic constructions, including a greater number of complement and relative clauses. Ochs (1979) makes a similar point: both within and between propositions, unplanned discourse (whether spoken or written) makes semantic links in non-syntactic ways, ways based on what she calls “nextness” (62). In the same vein, Ong claims that “in live oral communication the hearer will not need many ‘logical’ connections ...” (1978:3). Orally-based expression is, he says, “additive rather than subordinative”, and makes use of a great many and’s to introduce clauses (1982:37). Several studies have involved statistical tests of the hypothesis that oral discourse is more paratactic than non-oral discourse. Kroll (1977) has shown that in the English corpus she examined there were over twice as many subordinate clauses (35%) in written texts as in spoken ones (14%).

Research on orality in the philological tradition bases its claims about the orality of the poetry it examines on the presence of linguistic formulas in the texts. In general terms, oral bards were said to have re-created their epics as they spoke them, making use of fixed sets of words that fit conveniently into the metrical structure of the poem. For Parry, a formula was “a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea” (A. Parry 1971:270). The definition of the formula has been broadened in subsequent research on oral poetry to include looser correspondences among phrases which exhibit resemblances of various kinds and can all be traced to the same ‘Gestalt’ or prototype phrase (Nagler 1967; for a discussion of these developments see Zwetler 1978:6-8). Tannen (1987b) shows how formulas — that is, repeated phrases, sounds, and rhythmic patterns — emerge in the course of conversation and help to structure the talk and keep it going while speakers process information for production and comprehension. Studies of what Ong has called the “oral lifeworld” claim that oral noetic processes require things to be said the same way again and again (Ong 1982; Havelock 1962). R. Lakoff, while not using the term ‘formula’, claims that “ordinary conversation” is highly ritualized, and spontaneous only in conventional ways (1981b).

Repetition, as a formal characteristic of oral discourse, cannot be completely disentangled from parataxis or formulaicity. Paratactic syntactic strategies often involve grammatical parallelism, which is a kind of repetition, and a phrase does not become a formula until it is repeated. Other kinds of repetition have, however, been identified with orality in the literature. Ong speaks of the “redundant”, “copious”, or “pleonastic” character of oral discourse (1982:156). Ochs points out that in unplanned discourse, speakers repeat not only morphosyntactic structures but also phonological ones, plugging new information into pre-established formats. Tannen (1987a,b) also discusses the functions of phonological, lexical, and syntactic repetition in oral narrative and in conversation.

3. Discourse Style in Written Arabic

3.1 Background to the text

The text I will use for this analysis is part of an essay by Satti al-Husari (al-Husari 1959). I will discuss in detail only a very small portion of the text, just enough to illustrate the features of al-Husari’s style which are relevant for my present purposes. In this passage, al-Husari lays out the claim that while nineteenth-century European authors on the topic of nationalism were enthusiastic about nationalistic movements in Europe, they did not feel that the principle of nationalism applied to Asia or Africa.

3.2 Passage from Satti al-Husari, Ma hiya al-qawmiyya? (“What is Nationalism?”)

1 (ضر) (س) wa- mimmaa huwa jadiirun bi-al-dikri
and among which it is worthy of the mentioning

2 wa-al- mulaahDaatii: ?anna jaamil?i al-?aara?i
and the noting that all the opinions

3 allatii ?ubdyyat, wa-al- ?abHaabi
which they-were-produced and the researches

4 allatii nu’?rat fi ‘fikra?i
which they-were-published on idea

5 al- qawmiyyaati wa- fii ‘mabda?i Hugu?qi
the nationalism and on principle rights

6 al- qawmiyyaati xilaala al- qarni
the nationalities during the century
3.3 The texture of the al-Husari passage

3.3.1 Parataxis

If parataxis is defined, partially, as the relatively low incidence of subordination, then the al-Husari passage does not, on first glance, look especially paratactic. A closer look reveals, however, that this is putting it too simply. For one thing, much of the syntactic embedding in the passage in fact serves the paratactic function of logical coordination. For another, subordination is at least as poorly defined for Arabic as it is for English, and some Arabic clause types which are routinely referred to as subordinate may in fact not be fully embedded.

In the first place, the nominalizations in S, with maa and with ?anna do not serve the semantic function of hypotactically subordinating one idea to another for rhetorical purposes. The vast majority of sentences in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) discourse are explicitly connected to the preceding discourse by means of one or more connectives. A connective can be a conjunction like wa “and” or fa “and so”; or the connective slot at the beginning of a sentence can be filled with a series of connectives, like wa-ila-?aali?ka fa “and therefore so”, as in S. Some connectives are phrasal: mimmaa huwa jadiirun bi-al-?ikri wa-al-mulaaHadati “among that which is worthy of mentioning and noting”, in S, is one such phrasal connective. So while a standard syntactic analysis of S, would label this phrase as its subject, a rhetorical analysis, which takes into account the fact that MSA sentences almost always begin with connectives and that connectives serve a necessary rhetorical function in all discourse in MSA, would label the phrase as a connective, not part of the propositional core of the sentence at all but a separate element which serves an exclusively syntactic (connecting) function. This is an example of embedding used for a paratactic purpose: for stringing sentences together.

Turning now to the second nominalized clause in S, ?anna jami?la al-aara?i ... al-?ifriiquiyyata (the rest of the sentence, in other words), we will see that there are two reasons for which this clause needs to be nominalized, neither of which has to do with semantic subordination. For one thing, while mimmaa huwa jadiirun bi-al-?ikri wa-al-mulaaHadati “among that which is worthy of mentioning and noting” is logically a connective and not part of the sentence’s propositional core, it is, in the surface syntax, the subject of an equational sentence. Hence, what is logically the whole core sentence needs to be realized as an NP, and so it is nominalized.
The tension between the two functions of *minnuwa huwa jadiiron bi-al-diikri wa-al-mulaaHaDati* — its logical function as connective and its syntactic function as subject — is evident in al-Husari’s orthography. In line 2, he has used both a colon, which suggests that the two things it separates are relatively independent, and the nominalizer *?anna*, which suggests that they are not. The relevant point is that hypotactic or paratactic relations among clauses are logical relations, not necessarily syntactic ones. Counting up things that look like subordinate clauses is not the way to arrive at judgements about relative hypotaxis or parataxis.

There is yet another reason for the fact that the logical core element of *S*$_1$ appears as a nominalized clause, a reason which interacts closely with the reason given above. While the basic word order of clauses in MSA is VSO, there are a number of connectives which must be followed immediately by the subject of the clause, in the accusative case. This set of connectives is referred to as *?inna wa-?xawatu-haa “?inna and its sisters”, ?anna, in *S*$_1$, and *?anna, in *S*$_2*, are both members of this set. Part of the function of *?anna* and *?anna* is to topicalize the clause’s subject, shifting it to preverbal position. An author who wishes to topicalize the subject of a clause in this way must pay the price, so to speak, of having the clause become a nominalized one. A clause which is syntactically subordinate for this reason need not be semantically subordinate to anything.

There is one further point to be made about the apparently high incidence of subordination in what I am claiming is an essentially paratactic text. Three of the apparently subordinate clauses in the passage are definite relative clauses, introduced with *allati*: in *S*$_1$, *allati?tabdiyat* “which were produced” and *allati?nusira “which were published”, and in *S*$_4$, *allati?tas-taHiqqu-haa al-su?uubu al-?uuruubbiyyatu “which the European peoples deserved”. It is generally assumed, in the literature on MSA syntax, that MSA relative clauses are embedded in the same way as English ones are. There is intriguing (if still speculative) evidence, though, that something different may in fact be going on. MSA modficational syntax is highly appositional in nature (Johnstone 1987); items from the same syntactic category are often juxtaposed in a clause or sentence, and the modficational relationship of one to the other is recovered via the pragmatic principle that nextness implies relatedness. Indefinite relative clauses, as well as condition (*Haal*) clauses, are formally identical to independent clauses. The only thing which distinguishes definite relative clauses, like the three in the passage, from independent clauses paratactically adjoined to what they modify, is the presence of the definite relative clause marker *?alla?di* (in one of its agreement forms). What all this suggests is that definite relative clauses in MSA may not be embedded at all, but that they are instead appositive clauses which are marked simply to make them agree in definiteness with their head nouns, the way adjectives do.

The point of the preceding discussion has been to show that subordination in MSA is not as simple as it seems, and that much of the apparent subordination in the passage does not constitute evidence that the passage is hypotactic in nature, but in fact precisely the opposite. Further evidence for the essentially paratactic nature of the passage is more immediately evident.

The passage is completely syntetic; each sentence begins with a linking word or phrase. In *S*$_1$, there is *wa* “and”, which is particularly striking here in view of the fact that this is the beginning not only of a paragraph but of a chapter. *S*$_2$ begins with *?anna “because”. While *?anna* is a subordinator, its main function here seems to be as a topicalizer (see above), and its logical force is fairly diffuse. *S*$_3$ begins with *wa* “and”, *?alika “for that” or “therefore”, and *fa* “and so”. Like *wa, fa* is a coordinating conjunction, with additive as well as causative meaning.

3.3.2 Repetition and formulaicity in MSA

Discourse in MSA makes use of formulas at all levels: lexical, morphological, syntactic, and discourse-structural. Some of these are what I will call ‘prior-text formulas’, that is, phrases, structures, or patterns of discourse construction which recur in texts by many different authors at different times. Formulas like these are common in MSA prose: the phrase *jadiiron bi-al-diikri* “worthy of mention” (line 1 in the passage) is one that occurs again and again in various texts, for example.

A second category of formulas consists of what I will call ‘emergent formulas’. These are formulas which an author creates in the process of writing a sentence or an essay, by making repeated use of the same phrases and structural strategies. Most of the considerable repetitiveness of MSA discourse can be related to the need for emergent formulaicity, and emergent formulaicity is responsible, to a very great extent, for cohesion in MSA. There is a very general rule for the construction of MSA discourse which can be roughly stated this way: If an author does something once, he or she will, if at all possible, do it again, at least once. I will call this the ‘doubling’ rule.
There are examples of doubling throughout the al-Husari passage. One example of the phrasal level consists of the formula al-sa'ūubu “the peoples” plus a nisba adjective derived from the name of a continent: ?uuruubibiyuatu “European”, ?asyawiyiyyatu “Asian”, or ?ifiriqiyuatu “African”. Versions of this formula occur in lines 8, 9-10, 13, and 18.

Semantic doubling at the lexical level takes the form of ‘lexical couplets’ (Koch 1983a), in which a word is coordinated with a roughly synonymous word, as in al-bikri wa-al-mulaaHaDati “mentioning and noting” (lines 1-2) or al-taqaddumi wa-al-tamadduni “progress and civilization” (line 15). In the second of these examples, al-taqaddumi wa-al-tamadduni, the synonymous terms are also morphologically parallel, sharing the derivational pattern tafa’idun. Furthermore, the morphological roots of both words (q-d-m; m-d-n) have medial d.

This example of partial doubling of morphological roots brings us to another level on which the doubling rule applies. Once a morphological root is used once, it is very frequently used again, in varying forms. In S3, lines 16-18, we see laa tastaHiqqu al-Huquqa aYaftii tastaHiqqu-haa al-su’uubu al-?uuruubibiyuatu “they do not deserve the rights (“deserts”) which the European peoples deserve”. This phrase, in which forms derived from the root H-q-q are used three times in close succession, also echoes the use of H-q-q (Huquqi) in S1, line 5.

A particularly complex example of multi-level doubling is found in lines 2-4, in the phrase jamii’?a al-?aara?al aYaftii ?ubdiyat wa-al-abHaathi aYaftii nu?itar “all the opinions which were produced and the research which was published”. Al-Husari has here made two successive uses of the same syntactic pattern (a noun modified by a relative clause containing the passive form of a verb). The two syntactically parallel constructions are paraphrastic, involving two lexical couplets, al-?aara?al al-?abHaathi and ?ubdiyat/nu?itar, both of which are morphologically parallel.

The first two sentences in the passage both contain examples of formulas which involve semantic as well as structural doubling. In S1, lines 4-6, there are two prepositional phrases with fit “in”, conjoined with wa “and”. Their objects are fikrati al-qawmiyyaati “the idea of nationalism”, and mabda?i Huquqi al-qawmiyyaati “the principle of the rights of nationalities”. The effect of these two prepositional phrases together is paraphrastic; although their respective focus is on slightly different aspects of nationalism (nationalism as an ‘idea’ vs. nationalism as a ‘principle’), there is really only one referent.

The final part of S1 is a verb phrase which consists of two conjoined VP's. The first is kaanaat tanHaSuru bii-al-su’uubi al-?uuruubibiyuatu wa-furuu?i-haa “were confined to the European peoples and their branches” (lines 7-8). Here is another paraphrastic conjunction: “the European peoples” and “the branches of the European peoples” are not two distinct sets of people. The second VP is wa-lam ta’smal al-su’uuba al-asawiyiyyatu wa-al-?ifiriqiyuatu “and they did not include the Asian and African peoples” (lines 9-10). The two VP’s are paraphrastic in a special way. What the first VP says in a positive way, the second says in a negative way; the two VP’s describe the same thing from opposite perspectives. This kind of paraphrase, which I call reverse paraphrase (Koch 1984), occurs frequently in MSA prose.

The predicate of S2 also includes paraphrastic doubling, in the conjoined elements laysat ‘muta?axxiratan’ fa-Hasbu “are not only ‘backwards” (lines 13-14) and bal hiya ‘maHruumatun min qaabiliyiyuati al-taqaddumi wa-al-tamadduni ?ayDan “rather they are deprived of the capacity for progress and civilization” as well” (lines 14-16).

The entire three-sentence passage in question here is the laying out of an argumentative claim, a claim which is supported with examples in what follows. The three sentences are closely connected to one another by repetition of lexical items and by anaphoric pronouns. S1 and S2 are similar in structure: one NP, two VP’s. The first sentence is a very general statement of the topic; the second a more specific statement which expresses the thesis explicitly to be dealt with in the succeeding discourse; and the third a sort of logical continuation of the second. The semantic structure of the threesome is a reflex of a formula at the discourse-structural level: this pattern recurs again and again in al-Husari’s writing and in the writing of others. It is, incidentally, a pattern which reflects the tripartite structure of a single MSA sentence: introduction/connective, subject, and predicate. This structural iconicity could be seen as yet another kind of formula.

4. Source of MSA Discourse Constraints

4.1 The orality explanation

Since the Arabic discourse under discussion in this paper is written, not spoken, its apparent oralness — parataxis, formulaicity, repetition — can-
not be attributed to its spokenness. Neither does it make sense to think of our text as unplanned: it is difficult to imagine anyone producing such elaborate balance without very careful planning. It would, however, be possible to explain the oralness of MSA discourse historically, as a hold-over, in writing, of earlier oral norms and requirements. One such explanation is that of 'Abbas Mahmud al-'Aqqad, who claims that Arabic prose consists partly of “remnants of extemporaneous oration if not oration itself written not uttered” (al-'Aqqad 1966:339; this translation from al-Batal 1985:88).

Al-'Aqqad puts the matter too simply: one is not justified in claiming that discourse features are residually oral simply because they look like they might be. However, the actual history of the development of MSA written style suggests that there is, in fact, a historical link between contemporary prose and older spoken discourse forms. Specifically, MSA rhetorical style can be shown to be in part the result of a pre-Islamic spoken discourse genre called saîf. Saîf, or rhymed prose, is considered the oldest form of Arabic poetical speech (Nicholson 1969:74). The distinguishing feature of saîf was that it fell into rhymed lines11. The saîf form is, with some modification, the form of the Qur'an, and it was later used in the medieval maqamat, collections of stories and anecdotes (Lichtenstädter 1976: 43, 112). As the traditional system of balayya “eloquence” or “rhetoric” began to be codified around the ninth century, the emphasis on rhythm and balance in the construction of discourse was maintained, though the requirement of rhyme was dropped. Early Arab rhetoricians speak of the need for al-takraar “repetition” and al-waSl wa-al-faSl “connection and separation” in persuasive discourse (see Hamod 1963).

To the extent that the traditional emphasis on style in Arabic rhetoric continued to be taught and learned, and traditional models continued to be used, there is an actual historical connection between pre-Islamic oral forms of discourse and twentieth-century written ones, and residual orality is part of the explanation for why MSA prose is the way it is. As we shall see, however, there are also other compelling explanations, historical and otherwise, for the discourse features we are interested in. So while orality is part of the explanation, it is not the whole explanation by any means.

4.2 A rhetorical explanation: presence

A crucial fact about the kind of discourse I am examining in this paper is that it is persuasive. That is to say not only that it is intended to persuade — to change readers’ minds — but also that it has apparently succeeded, to judge by al-Husari’s reputation. A crucial step in any attempt to persuade is the presentation of one’s ideas to hearers or readers. In order for a person to ‘see’ a point, the point must be present, in the here and now of discourse. ‘Presentation’ means precisely ‘making present’, and persuaders make use of the resources of their language to bring distant ideas into the affective present. One of the main ways in which persuaders establish presence is by repeating, accumulating, insisting (see Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969:115-120; 144-145). While rationalistic descriptions of persuasion tend to ignore this aspect of rhetoric, consigning repetition, formality, and parataxis to the realm of ‘figures of speech’, the universal rhetorical requirement for presentation is another important reason why MSA prose is the way it is: paratactic, formulaic, and repetitive.

4.3 Some Arabic explanations

4.3.1 The linguistic context12

I alluded above to some of the ways in which the syntax of MSA is paratactic. There are not very many ways in MSA to make clauses which are really subordinate (embedded and semantically dependent). Relative clauses and Haal “condition” clauses are formally identical to full independent clauses. While definite relative clauses are marked with alladhi in one or another of its agreement forms, this may be as much a definiteness marker as it is a pronoun (cf. Russell 1977:114-122). Indefinite relative clauses are not marked at all but simply placed next to the NP's they modify. Haal clauses (though usually translated into English subordinate clauses with “while”, "as", or “when”) are often marked with wa “and” and “dependent” only in a loose semantic sense. It is interesting to note that Arab grammarians traditionally make no distinction between ‘clause’ and ‘sentence’: both are jumla.

Lower-level modification in MSA is also paratactic and makes use of repetition. Traditional Arabic grammars do not include terms for ‘adjective’ or ‘adverb’. While most adjectives are morphologically distinct from nouns, they are syntactically marked — for definiteness, gender, number, and case — exactly the way nouns are. Verbal modification is accomplished via a variety of strategies. One of the most common of these, the cognate accusative, calls for the repetition of the verbal root, in the maSDar or verbal noun form, in the accusative.
There is also an important linguistic-structural reason on the discourse level for MSA prose to be paratactic. The requirement of polysyndeton in MSA discourse is almost absolute. In a study of one 49-sentence text, al-Batal observes that "...there is an almost complete dominance of syntactic constructions. With only one exception, all clauses and phrases exhibit syntactic conjoining" (1985:82). Beeston, too, has pointed out that "...it is rare in SA [MSA] for a new main sentence within a paragraph not to be linked to the preceding context by a coordinating functional; even the paragraph frequently begins with 'and' (wa or fa)" (1970:144).

MSA syntax, both on the sentence level and on the discourse level, thus favors parataxis, formulaicity, and repetition. Here, then, is one very particular source of constraint on a writer of MSA.

4.3.2 The sociolinguistic context
The Arabic language as a whole is widely felt, even by the educated, to be superior to others: more expressive and more logical (see Ferguson 1968; Chejne 1969). Arabic verbal morphology, with its characteristic Semitic orderliness, is, for Arabs, iconic of the language as a whole. Arabic is often claimed to have more words than other languages, perhaps because of the large number of borrowed words that have come into the language in the past two centuries.

These facts about the important role of Arabic in Arab cultural history and Arab identity have been discussed by many scholars. What has not been discussed is the way in which the special status of Arabic constrains users of the language to draw continual attention to the language as they use it. When a person says something in Arabic, the fact that it is being said in Arabic can be as important as what is being said. One way in which people draw attention to the language in everyday talk is through puns and other kinds of word play, which are ubiquitous.

What of talk in more formal situations, such as the one I am considering in this paper? How does a writer of prose draw attention to the language as he or she uses it? One linguist who has had a great deal to say about drawing attention to the language of a message is Jakobson (1960, 1966, 1968). For Jakobson, 'poetic' uses of language are ones in which attention is drawn to the language itself, making the words and structures of a message as salient as its propositional content or its pragmatic function. A speaker or writer does this, says Jakobson, by means of parallelism, or repetition-with-variation: formulas, repetitions, parataxis. The poetic quality of MSA prose — the oral features we have been discussing — can thus also be seen as a result of the particularly Arabic rhetorical need to draw attention to the Arabic-ness of one's talk as one talks. This is then another way in which the parataxis, repetition, and formulaicity in MSA prose are a response to a particular constraint, a constraint imposed by the language itself, in its cultural context.

5. Conclusion: On the Multiplicity of Discourse Constraints

Why, then, does written prose in MSA tend to have an 'oral' flavor? I have shown in this paper that there are several interacting reasons. For one thing, stylistic preferences in contemporary writing can be partially traced to earlier oral styles; in this sense, the text we have examined could in fact be called 'oral'. But while orality — the spokenness of a text, or its historical relationship with spoken forms, plays a role in giving discourse its shape, it never plays the only role. Linguistic and sociolinguistic factors also help account for the formulaic, repetitive, paratactic quality of MSA writing: writers are constrained by what the syntax of their language makes available to them, and by the intended audience and function of their writing.

It is of course impossible to make a clear distinction between constraints imposed on a speaker or writer by the syntax of the language and ones imposed by the sociolinguistic situation of the talk. As speakers and writers adapt to the rhetorical tasks at hand, they create new ways to express ideas — new syntactic possibilities — at the same time as they make use of the syntactic strategies which are already available to them. Arabic syntax is the way it is because speakers have certain rhetorical needs and not others. Conversely, speakers of Arabic make the rhetorical choices they make in the context of what the Arabic language makes possible. Discourse is multiply constrained, and the various sources of constraint interact with one another.

NOTES

1. Ong's example of introductory and's is a passage from the Douay version of Genesis, which "keeps close to the Hebrew original" (1982:37). As I will show, the requirement for clause-introducers like Hebrew we or wa or Arabic wa may be a Semitic phenomenon.
the 'introductory and's' may be there because Ong's text was a Semitic one rather than simply because it was an oral one.

2. Other research suggests, to the contrary, that speakers use as many dependent clauses as writers (O'Donnell 1974; Halliday 1979; Beaman 1984). The reasons for this discrepancy probably have to do with the fact that different researchers have used different sorts of samplings of discourse, and, as Thompson (1984) points out, with the fact that 'subordinate clause' is a poorly defined entity.

3. Lord (1985) distinguishes between formulas and repetitions in oral poetry by saying that repetitions call attention to themselves, and thus serve a rhetorical function, while formulas do not, functioning only to help a poet make his poem. While this is an interesting distinction, I do not think the matter is quite so simple in non-poetic discourse.

4. 'Redundant' is a tricky term. While 'redundancy', used as a technical term in communications studies, refers to repetition which serves a crucial function (in light of the imperfect nature of most communication channels), 'redundant' is ordinarily used to mean 'unnecessarily repetitious', and to use the term to refer to repetition in general is to suggest that repetition has no function.

5. It should be noted that the writing style with which I am working here is a relatively traditional one. Not all contemporary writing in Arabic is as paratactic, formulaic, and repetitive as al-Husari's. But while writers of Arabic may be aiming increasingly towards a sparser, less ornate style, writing like al-Husari's is still fairly common, and appears in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) textbooks and in the English writing of many Arab ESL students.

6. Readers who are interested in my analysis of the texture of the entire al-Husari essay as well as four other texts are referred to Koch 1981; for more detailed discussions of repetition and formulaicity in MSA, see Koch 1983a; 1983b; for parataxis, see Johnstone 1987.

7. I am not attempting in this paper to provide a fully adequate characterization of subordination for Arabic. This is a project which badly needs to be done, and to which I hope to devote more attention in the future. For my present purposes, 'parataxis' is defined as a discourse style which proceeds horizontally rather than vertically, in which ideas of equal importance for an argument are chained together. To accomplish this end, paratactic discourse often makes use of syntactic coordination and polysyndeton, which I refer to as paratactic formal features. 'Subordination' is defined here as a relationship between two clauses which is at once syntactic (one clause is embedded in the other) and semantic (one clause is less crucially related to the backbone of the argument than is the other).

8. Most of these ideas about the status of MSA connectives arose in discussions with Mahmoud al-Batal or are drawn from his work (1985).

9. As evidenced from a number of papers delivered at the First Annual Symposium on Arabic Linguistics, there is considerable debate about the underlying word order of Arabic. The present claim is simply an observation about surface syntax.

10. A note on the meaning of the quotation marks in this passage is in order. Like other MSA authors, al-Husari does not use punctuation marks in consistent ways. Quotation marks can be used to signal exact quotations, but they are also used to signal words that are mentioned rather than used, words that are emphasized, and foreign words which are unfamiliar. It is very unlikely that the material in quotation marks in S, is actually a quotation, first because there is no citation, and second because the sources of the ideas al-

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References


Halliday, M.A.K. 1979. "Differences between Spoken and Written Language: Some Implications for Literacy Teaching". Communication through Reading: Proceedings


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