ARABIC DATIVES, DITRANSITIVES, AND THE PREPOSITION *LI*-  
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1. INTRODUCTION: CASE-MARKING AND ARABIC DATIVE STRUCTURES

The dative “case” is one of the most widely studied topics in case analysis and in theoretical approaches that include some aspect of semantic and syntactic roles typically marked by case or by case-type relations (e.g., theta-roles, frame semantics, construction grammar, lexical semantics). Arabic is a nominative/accusative language with the genitive as the third separately marked case in inflectional paradigms. Overt case-marking is therefore restricted to these inflectional exponents and the realization of typical dative structures such as the beneficiary/goal/recipient category are signaled either by accusative or genitive markers. Syntactically, Arabic dative structures are marked as accusative (in the ditransitive structure) or marked by the benefactive/allative preposition *li*- prefixed to the Recipient argument, which carries the genitive case. In the case of the Arabic ditransitive dative, therefore, there is dative-accusative syncretism, and in the case of the prepositional dative, there is dative-allative syncretism. In this paper I study Arabic dative structures by examining the particular semantic properties of verbs that impact verb-phrase syntax through the analysis of core case roles which, as Pinker notes, are “also called predicate argument structures, subcategorization frames, subcategorizations, case frames, lexical forms and theta grids.” One of the reasons I find Arabic intriguing on this count is the attention that classical Arabic grammarians paid to syntax and its interaction with the semantics of derived forms of the Arabic verb. In particular, Arabic grammarians long ago posited the existence of underlying conceptual structures to rationalize surface structure anomalies (e.g., *taqdīr*, *iḍmār*).  

The morphological structure of Semitic lexical items wherein lexical root information combines with morphosyntactic pattern information, offers a productive perspective from which to examine key issues in syntactic and semantic theory through the analysis of the formal semantics of

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Arabic lexical roots and their derivational modifications. Whereas English lexical items may be polysemous or homographic because of semantic and morphological merging over time, Modern Standard Arabic lexical items remain largely transparent in terms of their lexical structure and syntactic argument requirements. When derivational or syntactic modifications yield ditransitive constructions, it is often possible to discover semantic reasons for particular syntactic constraints. This paper forms part of a larger study I am undertaking to examine case and grammatical relations in Arabic, particularly relations that involve predicate-argument structures, prepositions, and semantic structure.

2. DATIVE AND DITRANSMITIVE CONSTRUCTIONS

Syntactic analysis in this paper relates components of semantic structure to the valency or argument structure of Arabic verbs and prepositions in context, in particular the dative structure and its ditransitive realization. Case grammar, construction grammar, lexical semantics, componential analysis, and argument structure all provide useful ways to examine the interrelationships of syntax and semantics in dative and ditransitive verb phrases and prepositional phrases. In particular, these theoretical approaches provide ways to demonstrate how semantic and lexical distinctions interact in certain types of syntactic structures, including such topics as locative, dative, and directional uses of spatial predications. Analysis so far has shown a rich and systematic internal structure for Arabic verbs and prepositions as well as conditions for parametric variation of Arabic prepositional phrases contrasted with English. This article focuses primarily on the Arabic preposition li- ‘to,’ ‘for,’ and its discourse function as a component of dative structures. In particular, it provides an analysis of dative-type argument structures and shows how semantic components of Arabic verbs interact with syntax to frame predictable double-object or ditransitive alternations, and how these contrast with similar English verbs.

2.1. Current Studies of Ditransitivity and the Dative

The ditransitive instantiation of the dative structure occurs in a number of languages. Goldberg notes that “it is the only construction in which an argument with ‘recipient’ semantics is expressed by a postverbal NP.”

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