

How to Parse Effective Objects according to Arab Grammarians? A Dissenting Opinion on *al-mafʿūl al-muṭlaq*

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1 The Meaning of the Term *al-mafʿūl al-muṭlaq*

In 1991 two articles were published in which the technical term *al-mafʿūl al-muṭlaq* was examined. Levin's article (1991), entitled "What is meant by *al-mafʿūl al-muṭlaq*?", is dedicated in its entirety to this issue, whereas Larcher (1991:153 [= 2014:292 f.]) discusses it succinctly in a single paragraph. Their findings are virtually the same:¹ The element *mafʿūl* in the phrase *al-mafʿūl al-muṭlaq* is a personal passive participle. It means 'that which is done', designating the action done by the agent. For instance, in the sentence *qumtu qiyāman* lit. 'I rose a rising', *qiyām* denotes the action done by the speaker.

The word *muṭlaq* here means 'unqualified', and should be understood in contradistinction to the other terms in the category of *mafʿūlāt/mafāʿūl*, e.g. *al-mafʿūl fihi*, lit. 'that in which the action is done' (technically: the locative/temporal accusative), terms in which the word *mafʿūl* is an impersonal passive participle, qualified (*muqayyad*) by a prepositional phrase (or a *zarf* phrase). By contrast, in the case of *al-mafʿūl al-muṭlaq*, the passive participle *mafʿūl* is not qualified by any phrase, as it designates, by itself, the intended meaning, viz. that which is done.

Some grammarians discuss the difference between *al-mafʿūl al-muṭlaq* and *al-mafʿūl bihi*, direct object, lit. 'that to whom, or to which, the action is done'. They state that whereas *al-mafʿūl al-muṭlaq* designates what is done by the agent, viz. the action, *al-mafʿūl bihi* designates to whom, or to what, the action is done. For this reason, some of them regard *al-mafʿūl al-muṭlaq* as the 'real' *mafʿūl* (*al-mafʿūl al-ḥaqīqī*, *al-mafʿūl fi l-ḥaqīqa*). For instance, in the sentence *ḍaraba zaydun ʿamran ḍarban* lit. 'Zayd hit ʿAmr a hitting', *ḍarb* designates the action done and ʿamr refers to the person to whom it is done. Zayd (the referent of the *fāʿil*) produced the action; he did not produce ʿAmr. Furthermore, gram-

¹ The reader is referred to Levin (1991) for references to primary sources.

grammarians sometimes state that *qāma zaydun*, for example, conveys the same meaning as *fa'ala zaydun qiyāman* lit. 'Zayd did a standing'.² Levin's (1991:920 f.) definition of the term *al-maf'ūl al-muṭlaq* runs as follows:

the accusative which is a *maṣdar* expressing the act performed by the *fā'il*, and which is denoted in grammatical terminology by the word *al-maf'ūl* only, without adding to it a restrictive phrase, such as a preposition + genitive.

This was indeed the most common interpretation of the term *al-maf'ūl al-muṭlaq* by Medieval grammarians, and it will also be the axis around which our discussion will revolve. In the Excursus at the end of this article I will discuss alternative explanations for this term by Arab grammarians.

2 Effective Objects in Western Linguistics

The following discussion can benefit from a distinction made in Western linguistics between 'effective object' (also: 'effected object', 'object of result') and 'ordinary' objects,³ illustrated by Lyons (1968:439) with the sentences in (1) and (2).

(1) 'He is reading a book' (an 'ordinary' object)

(2) 'He is writing a book' (an 'effective object')

He explains that "in (1) the book referred to exists prior to, and independently of, its being read; but the book referred to in (2) is not yet in existence—it is brought into existence by the completion of the activity described by the sentence".⁴

2 See, in this regard, al-Suhaylī's (d. 581/1185) unique view, discussed in Baalbaki (1999:31 f.).

3 'Effective object' is often contrasted with 'affective object' (also: 'affected object'); see in what follows, and also Baalbaki (1990:34, 166), who translates 'affected object' (in e.g. 'He cut the apple') as *maf'ūl bihi muta'attir*. I shall refrain from using this term here, as it implies the preclusion of objects of verbs such as *ḥasiba* 'he thought' (on which see Kasher 2012a, and the references therein), which will be regarded here as subsumed under 'ordinary' objects.

4 Baalbaki (1990:166) translates 'effected object' (in e.g. 'They erected a monument') as *maf'ūl bihi muḥdat*, and 'object of result' as *maf'ūl al-natīja* (ibid., 343).