

A Theme-Rheme Analysis of Exclamatives and Clause Typology in English and Arabic

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Abstract: *This paper is an attempt to offer a theme-rheme typology of English and Arabic clauses with exclamatives in focus. This is done by investigating the theme-rheme organization of all clause types in English and Arabic and showing that a three-feature system can help provide two different typologies of clauses in both languages. It is shown that a [theme-initial, rheme-initial] feature system is not enough a system and that a third feature i.e. [transition-initial] is needed for such a task. It is also shown that in English, the features [trans-final, theme-final] are needed to distinguish between two theme-initial types of clauses. It is also shown that in Arabic the same two features, i.e. [trans-final, theme-final], are needed to make a distinction between two different types of clauses. The analysis reflects the differences and similarities between clause types (if any) between the two languages in question.*

1. Introduction

Clauses in English and Arabic are traditionally classified with respect to their semantic content as statements (or declaratives), wh-questions, yes-no questions (both referred to as interrogatives), and exclamations (or exclamatives). An examination of other ways of classifying clauses will either confirm or differ with this classification. Both of which results are considered again beside other consequences that might come out of this re-examination.

According to Aziz (1988), there are a number of problems associated with delimiting the thematic and rhematic elements of a sentence which should be clarified. He points out that there are two main methods of identifying the theme of a sentence: the Hallidayian approach and that of the Prague theory. The former defines theme as “the point of departure of the message” (Halliday 1970:180). In English, this role is usually realized by the first element(s) of a sentence. Halliday distinguishes theme-rheme and given-new as two different systems; the former belonging to thematization, the latter to information. In the unmarked pattern, theme is associated with new information. The Prague theory, Aziz continues, defines theme on the basis of the communicative dynamism of the utterance, where communicative dynamism means “the extent to which the sentence element contributes to the development of communication” (Firbas 1972:78). Therefore, theme is the element that contributes least to the communicative dynamism of the sentence. Furthermore, the Prague theory

This makes exclamatives Rheme-initial (see also wh-questions in (4)) at their surface structure.

2.1. Other Clauses in English

Statements in English have a theme-rheme structure as in (7) below, which depicts that they are theme-initial. See also the d-structure of wh-exclamatives above.

(7) a. It was a nice day.
 Theme Trans. Rheme

Out of statements like (7), yes-no questions may be derived via fronting the auxiliary verb making the Transition element initial as in (8):

(8) Was it a nice day? (Yes-no question)
 Trans. Theme Rheme

(8) makes English yes-no questions Trans-initial.

Via two other transformations, one can also derive a wh-question from the same statement by fronting the wh-phrase representing the Rheme and the auxiliary to a position immediately following the wh-phrase to give the order in (9):

(9) How was it? (wh-questions)
 Rheme Trans. Theme

(9) shows that the two transformations that applied to the English statement produced the thematic order where a wh-question in English will be best characterized as Rheme-initial.

The discussion above can now be summed up in the following table:

(10)	Them-initial	Trans-initial	Rheme-initial
Wh-excl.	-	-	+
Statements	+	-	-
Yes-no Questions	-	+	-
Wh-questions	-	-	+

From the table in (10), one can clearly notice that Wh-questions are Rheme-initial. But, compare this to wh-exclamatives in (1) which are also Rheme-initial. We find that we now need another feature of the three to differentiate between the two. It appears to be the feature of [theme]. When we do so, we find that while both clause types are Rheme-initial, wh-questions are Theme-final whereas wh-exclamatives are Trans-final as the table in (11) shows:

(11)	Them-final	Trans-final	Rheme-final
Wh-excl.	-	+	-
Statements	-	-	+
Yes-no Questions	-	-	+
Wh-questions	+	-	-

The table in (11) shows that wh-exclamatives are [- theme-final] while wh-questions are [+theme-final]. Therefore, exclamatives are [Rheme-initial, Trans-final] while wh-questions are [Rheme-initial, Theme-final].

A Fourth feature in this feature system can be [+/- Trans-internal] which can produce the following pattern:

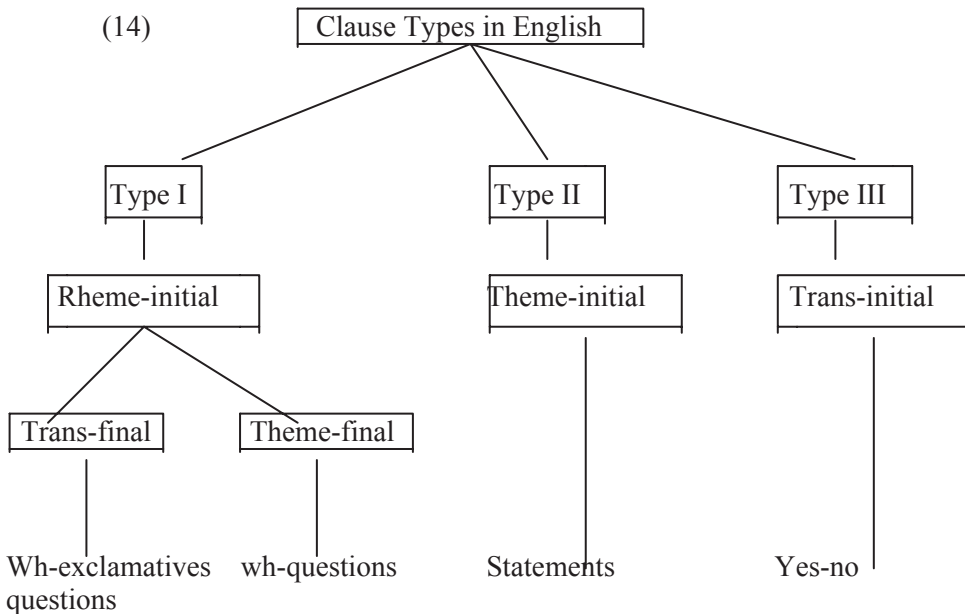
(12)	Trans-internal	
Wh-exclamatives	-	
Statements	+	
Yes-no questions	-	
Wh-questions	+	

(12) shows that the feature [+/- Trans-internal] is shared by statements and wh-questions only which are already distinct due to the feature [Theme-final] and [rheme-initial]. This fact makes the feature [+/- Trans-internal] unimportant for any classification of clauses in English as a whole. This feature, however, divides the clauses in English into two parts. Part one includes wh-exclamatives and Yes-no questions which are [-Trans-internal] and Part two includes statements and wh-questions which are [+Trans-internal].

So far the features we explored using in our typology has consisted of the features in (13):

(13) a. [Theme-initial]; b. [Trans-initial]; c. [Rheme-initial]; d. [Theme-final]; and e. [Trans-internal]

Excluding (13e), we are left with a four-feature system. This system gives rise to the following typology of the four types of clauses in English:



A general note about this systematic consideration of clauses in English is that it collapses the number of clauses recognized traditionally into three types instead of four. It also recognizes a surface level of representation of these clauses which succeeds in predicting the similarities between wh-exclamatives and wh-questions while not recognising the similarities between yes-no questions and wh-questions.

3. Exclamatives in Arabic

Arabic exclamatives are as in (15):

- (15) a. ma 'akrama Zayd-an!
 Excl. be-generous Zayd-acc.
 "How generous Zayd is!"
 b. 'akrim bi-Zayd-in!
 be-generous-imp. upon-Zayd-gen.
 "How generous Zayd is!"

The exclamatives in (15) above have the following declarative counterpart:

- (16) a. Zayd-un kariim-un.
 Zayd-nom. Generous-nom.
 "Zayd is generous"
 b. Karuma Zayd-un.
 Be/become-generous-past Zayd-nom.
 "Zayd became generous"

If we take the point that all other clause types in Arabic are derive some how by a transformation from a basic declarative clause like (16), we reach the conclusion that the examples in (15) are derived from those in (16). Al-Seghayar (1997) offers an account of Arabic exclamatives that claims that constructions like (15) are base-generated CPs with an IP without a subject.

Following Aziz (1988), the thematic structure of (16) may be given as in (17) where the subject is always associated with the theme element:

- (17) a. Zayd-un kariim-un.
 Theme Rheme
 b. Karuma Zayd-un.
 Trans. Theme

(17) shows that there are two types of clauses in Arabic: (17a) traditionally known as the *nominal clause* (i.e. verbless clause) and (17b) which is traditionally called *verbal clause*. In both types the subject is associated with the theme element while the adjectival predicate in (17a) is considered Rheme and the verb in initial position in (17b) is considered a Transition element.

Now given the analysis offered in Al-Seghayar (1997) and the facts discussed here about declaratives, we may propose a theme-rheme structure of exclamatives in Arabic as in (18):

- (18) a. ma 'akrama Zayd-an!
Rheme
- b. 'akrim bi-Zayd-in!
Rheme

(18) can be interpreted as saying that Arabic exclamative constructions contain only Rheme on the surface. This means that in both types, the subject which is to be analysed as Theme is obligatorily absent.

Therefore, exclamatives in Arabic can be characterized as Rheme-only constructions.

3.1. Other clauses in Arabic

Arabic clauses other than exclamatives include declaratives (statements), yes-no-questions and wh-questions. Arabic declaratives are either as in (16) repeated in (19) or as in (20):

- (19) a. Zayd-un kariim-un.
Zayd-nom. Generous-nom.
"Zayd is generous"
- b. Karuma Zayd-un.
Be/become-generous-past Zayd-nom.
"Zayd became generous"
- (20) a. 'ishtaraa sadiiq-ii bait-an
bought friend-my house-acc.
"My friend bought a house"
- b. dhahaba Zayd-un 'ilaa al-suuq-i
went Zayd-nom to the-market-gen.
"Zayd went to the market"

While the theme-rheme structure of (19) was given in (17) above, repeated below as (21a, b), (21c,d) are the theme-rheme structure of (20):

- (21) a. Zayd-un kariim-un.
Theme Rheme
- b. Karuma Zayd-un.
Trans. Theme
- c. 'ishtaraa sadiiq-ii bait-an
Transition Theme Rheme
- d. dhahaba Zayd-un 'ilaa al-suuq-i
Trans. Theme Rheme

(21) shows that Arabic declarative clauses show two theme-rheme structure: one more marked and that is the theme-initial, and one less marked (i.e. more common and preferred) and that is the Trans-initial.

Yes-no questions in Arabic are as in (22):

- (22) a. hal Zaydun kariim-un?

- Zayd-nom. Generous-nom.
 b. hal HaDara Zayd-un?
 came Zayd-nom.
 “has Zayd come?”
 c. hal ‘ishtaraa Zayd-un bait-an?
 bought Zayd-nom. house
 “Did Zayd buy a house?”

According to Aziz (1988), since polarity expresses the message of the interrogative particle ‘hal’, the particle itself is rhematic. The rest is thematic. Therefore the structures are:

- (23) a. hal Zaydun kariim-un?
 Rheme Theme
 b. hal HaDara Zayd-un?
 Rheme Theme
 c. hal ‘ishtaraa Zayd-un bait-an?
 Rheme Theme

Thus, yes-no questions in Arabic are Rheme-initial, Theme-final.

Arabic wh-questions are as in (24):

- (24) a. man al-kariim-u?
 who the-generous-nom.
 b. mathaa fa9ala Zayd-un?
 What did Zayd-nom.
 c. man ‘ishtaraa bait-an?
 Who bought house
 d. maadhaa ‘ishtaraa Zayd-un?
 What bought Zayd-nom.

In (24), the wh-words are Rhemes while the rest is either Theme or divided into Theme and Trans as seen in (25):

- (25) a. man al-kariim-u?
 Rheme Theme
 b. mathaa fa9ala Zayd-un?
 Rheme Trans. Theme
 c. man ‘ishtaraa bait-an?
 Rheme Trans.
 d. maadhaa ‘ishtaraa Zayd-un?
 Rheme Trans. Theme

(25) shows that wh-questions in Arabic are Rheme-initial and when the question does not concern the subject. It also shows that when the subject is targeted by the question, the clause is Trans-final.

The discussion of Arabic clause thematic structure above may now be summarized in the table below:

(26)	<u>Them-initial</u>	<u>Trans-initial</u>	<u>Rheme-initial</u>	<u>Rheme-only</u>
Exclamatives	-	-	-	+
Statements	+M	+Unm.	-	-
Yes-no Questions	-	-	+	-
Wh-questions	-	-	+	-

Table (26) shows that, unlike the English case, to account for a typology of Arabic clauses in this way we are in need to at least four obligatory features which are as in (27):

- (27)a. Theme-initial
- b. Trans-initial
- c. Rheme- initial
- d. Rheme-only

When we come to the final position, we find that the features conspire to give the following grid:

(28)	<u>Them-final</u>	<u>Trans-final</u>	<u>Rheme-final</u>	<u>Rheme-only</u>
Exclamatives	-	-	-	+
Statements	+ intransV	+Mark.	+ V-init.	verbless
Yes-no Questions	+	-	-	-
Wh-questions	+	+ Subj.-ques.	-	-

As for the feature [+/- trans-internal], one can find out the following regarding Arabic:

(29)	Trans-internal
Exclamatives	?
Statements	-
Yes-no questions	-
Wh-questions	Verbal - Verbless?

(29) shows that the feature [+/- Trans-initial] has only a minus value reflecting a fact about Arabic that says that this language prefers Trans-initial clauses whenever there is an overt verbal element in the sentences.

Table (26) together with table (28) give the typological classification of Arabic clauses in Figure (30) in **Appendix I** below, which shows a more complex typological situation of Arabic clauses that is made almost impossible by the divisions and sub-divisions noticed within the wh-questions and the statements. Therefore, table (26) and figure (30) give a four-type theme-rheme typology of Arabic clauses in accordance with the number of clause types in

traditional grammar, compared to English which, unlike the traditional typology, had a three-type typology.

4. Conclusion

In concluding this paper one can say that to produce a theme-rheme typology of English was a lot easier than to do the same with Arabic. This was not a surprise because of the fact that we know that Arabic has a more relaxed less strict syntax when it comes to word order which is the syntactic phenomenon primarily concerned here.

Despite the difficulties, we think that we have had some success in showing that a typology based on the theme-rheme analysis of clauses in both English and Arabic is feasible.

It was found that Arabic will need a more elaborate feature system to deal with its clauses than that needed for English. It was, hence, shown that this feature system has given rise to a more complex and overlapping typology.

It is interesting that the feature [+/- Trans-internal] was found unimportant for both languages. This does not mean that the category or element Transition is not important but it would rather mean that the internal position of this element in both clauses systems isn't so.

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Appendix I : Clause Types in Arabic (next page)