

English and Arabic Cleft Sentences as Subject Prominence

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Abstract: *The same translation of Arabic verbal and nominal sentences raises a question if there is a difference in meaning expressed in different sentence structure. The idea of canonical and non-canonical sentence structure opens a discussion involving the phenomenon. The term fa'il or agent and mubtada' or topic can be associated theme and rheme.*

The canonical sentence structure in English follows SVO pattern, which contains a theme and rheme. The non-canonical one is produced by fronting the emphasized sentence element and doubling the theme and rheme. In Arabic the canonical sentence structure follows VSO pattern. The cleft sentence is obtained by fronting, which results in nominal sentence and the change of verb in accordance with the nominative noun in the sentence.

This article tries to discuss the cleft sentence, especially the subject prominence or the subject fronting both in English and in Arabic. The result is expected to explain the different functions of sentence elements. Thus, the cleft sentence is supposed to reveal different emphasis or meaning in different sentence structure.

Keyword: *canonical sentence, non-canonical sentence, theme, rheme, fronting.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In English or in any other languages there are canonical and non-canonical sentences. The canonical sentence shows the standard sentence structure. Since English canonical sentence structure follows the SVO pattern, all the verbs functioning as the predicate are preceded by a noun or its equivalence to show the subject function. The following sentences exhibit the canonical and non-canonical sentences in English (Collins, Peter C., 1991:83).

- (1) John gave Mary a present.
- (2) John gave a present to Mary.
- (3) It was **John** who gave Mary a present.
- (4) It was **Mary** whom John gave a present.
- (5) It was **the present** that John gave Mary.

The above mentioned sentences show the canonical sentences of (1) and (2) and the cleft sentences of (3-5). Unlike the canonical sentences the cleft sentences reveal the prominence of the parts of the sentence. The successive cleft sentences indicate subject, indirect object and direct object prominence respectively where the emphasized parts are put in front of the rest. This is also called fronting or left dislocation. The term fronting is more acceptable since some languages write from right to the left.

The first two canonical sentences show no difference in meaning. It means they are interchangeable or both are accepted as standard structure. They fulfill the SVO pattern.

Arabic knows both SVO and VSO sentence structures. They are called nominal sentences *جملة اسمية ġumlatun ismiyyatun*, and verbal sentences *جملة فعلية ġumlatun fi'liyyatun*. Consider the following sentence (Chacra, 2007:82).

- (6) شرب الكلبان حليباً

šariba l-kalbāni ḥalīban.

The (two) dogs (m.) drank (m. sing.) milk.

(7) الكلبان شربا حليباً

al-kalbāni šaribā ḥalīban.

The (two) dogs (m.) drank (m. dual) milk.

The difference between (6) and (7) is that the first is a verbal sentence and the second is a nominal sentence. The translation of both sentences are the same. The writer of the book mentions that in (6) الكلبان al-kalbāni is called *fa'īl* or the performer while the same word in (7) is called *mubtada'* or topic. Seeing the different function of the word, the writer is interested in discussing a cleft sentence in Arabic especially the subject prominence and its equivalence in English.

2. CANONICAL AND NON-CANONICAL SENTENCE STRUCTURE IN ENGLISH

The canonical and non-canonical sentence structures in English differ in emphasis. The former puts more emphasis on the verb so that the subject, object and other peripheral elements are parts of the verb. In government binding the verb determines other elements such as the noun, which can be classified as agent, patient, experiencer, and benefactor. The term *subject* is not sufficient to describe the role of noun in a sentence. Consider the following.

(8) Mary suffered from a head ache.

The proper noun *Mary* is not the actor moreover she is the sufferer or the patient. The presence of the noun is determined by the verb. If for example the slot is filled with another noun, which is animate the sentence does not make any sense. Thus the following sentence is not acceptable.

(9) *The car suffered from a head ache.

In traditional point of view the sentence is grammatically correct but it is not acceptable. This statement reveals the weakness of the descriptive theoretical side. It is expected that grammar can describe linguistic phenomena exhaustively. Furthermore, another noun cannot be added indiscriminately. The following is an example.

(10) *Mary suffered from a cake.

Besides, the verb in the above sentence determines an animate noun, it also determines another noun, which causes the animate noun to bear. Thus, the noun *a cake* cannot cause Mary to suffer from it.

The English canonical sentence structure allows the order of sentence elements to follow the pattern of SVO. One of the ways of forming the non-canonical sentence structure in English is done by fronting i.e. by putting the emphasized elements in front of the others and by forming a double theme and rheme in the sentence.

(11) Tom offered Sue a sherry

Theme	Rheme
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It was a sherry that Tom offered Sue

Theme	Rheme	Theme	Rheme
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The above rule applies to any part of the sentence to appear in the front part of the sentence with its new theme-rheme structure. Consider the following analyses.

(12) Tom offered Sue a sherry

Theme	Rheme
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It was Tom who offered Sue a sherry

Theme	Rheme	Theme	Rheme
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(13) Tom offered Sue a sherry

Theme	Rheme
-------	-------

It was Sue whom Tom offered a sherry

Theme	Rheme	Theme	Rheme
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The above mentioned cleft sentences show the emphasized part of the sentence in English. Since English sentence structure follows the SVO pattern the presence of dummy subject is needed in the cleft sentence.

3. CANONICAL AND NON-CANONICAL SENTENCE STRUCTURE IN ARABIC

Unlike English sentence structure, Arabic sentence structure follows the VSO pattern. The appearance of verb at the beginning of the sentence determines other sentence elements. This is known as *جملة فعلية* *ġumlatun fi'liyyatun*. The structure of Arabic canonical sentence of this kind equals to the canonical English sentence structure of SVO. The same translation of different structure as shown in (6) and (7) presents a question. As an English cleft sentence shows a different emphasis on the part of sentence by fronting, it is necessary to consider the different structure of Arabic verbal and nominal sentences as having different emphasis or meaning.

The cleft sentence in English is obtained by fronting, so is the cleft sentence in Arabic. It is clear that in (7) the noun *ألكلابين* *two dogs* is the result of fronting from the canonical sentence structure VSO into the non-canonical one SVO. This fact is supported by the condition that the noun *ألكلابين* *two dogs* affects the verb *شرب* *šariba* in (6) to change into *شربا* *šaribā* in (7). Thus, the translation of the Arabic cleft sentence in (7) is:

(6) *ألكلابان شربا حليبيا*

al-kalbāni *šaribā* ḥalīban.

It was the (two) dogs (m.) that drank (m. dual) milk.

By so doing, it is clear that Arabic nominal sentence *جملة اسمية* *ġumlatun ismiyyatun*, and verbal sentences *جملة فعلية* *ġumlatun fi'liyyatun* are different in the emphasis of sentence element or meaning. The verb in Arabic canonical sentence structure knows two kinds they are masculine and feminine. Consider the following sentences.

(14) *غسل الطبيب جرح الطفل*

ġusala ṭ-ṭabību ġurḥa ṭ-ṭifli

The doctor (m.sin.) washed the child's wound.

(15) *غسلت الطبيبة جرح الطفل*

ġusalat ṭ-ṭabībatu ġurḥa ṭ-ṭifli

The doctor (f.sin.) washed the child's wound.

(16) *غسل الأطباء جرح الطفل*

ġusala ṭ-ṭibbā'u ġurḥa ṭ-ṭifli

The doctor (m.plu) washed the child's wound.

(17) *غسلت الطبيبات جرح الطفل*

ġusalat ṭ-ṭibbā'atu ġurḥa ṭ-ṭifli

The doctors (f.plu.) washed the child's wound.

From the sentences above, it clear that there are two kinds of verb i.e. masculine and feminine verbs. The number of the nominative nouns does not affect the form of the verb. This fact is different from the nominal sentences, whose number and gender all affect the verb form as shown in the followings.

(18) *الطبيب غسل جرح الطفل*

Aṭ-ṭabību ġusala ġurḥa ṭ-ṭifli

It was the doctor (m.sin.) who washed the child's wound.

(19) *الطبيبة غسلت جرح الطفل*

Aṭ-ṭabībatu ġusalat ġurḥa ṭ-ṭifli

It was the doctor (f.sin.) who washed the child's wound.

(20) الأطباء غسلوا جرح الطفل

Aṭ-ṭibbā'u ġusalū ġurḥa ṭ-tifliġ

It was the doctors (m.plu) who washed the child's wound.

(21) الطبيات غسلن جرح الطفل

Aṭ-ṭibbā'atu ġusalna ġurḥa ṭ-tifli

It was the doctors (f.plu.) who washed the child's wound

The above sentences show the different forms of verbs due to the different forms of nominative nouns. The complete verb forms affected by the different nominative nouns can be seen in the following table (Zahoor, 2008:81).

Table1. The conjugation of the verb: ترجم to translate

	SINGULAR	DUAL	PLURAL
3 rd PERSON MASCULINE	ترجم <i>tarġama</i>	ترجما <i>tarġamā</i>	ترجموا <i>tarġamū</i>
3 rd PERSON FEMININE	ترجمت <i>tarġamat</i>	ترجمتا <i>tarġamatā</i>	ترجمن <i>tarġamna</i>
2 nd PERSON MASCULINE	ترجمت <i>tarġamta</i>	ترجمتما <i>tarġamatumā</i>	ترجمتم <i>tarġamtum</i>
2 nd PERSON MASCULINE	ترجمت <i>tarġamti</i>	ترجمتما <i>tarġamatumā</i>	ترجمتن <i>tarġamtunna</i>
1 st PERSON MASCULINE/FEMININE	ترجمت <i>tarġamtu</i>	ترجمنا <i>tarġamnā</i>	ترجمنا <i>tarġamnā</i>

The different role of sentence elements in Arabic verbal and nominal sentence suggests different translation of Arabic sentence into English. The above mentioned nominal sentences are of subject prominence or nominative noun prominence. The discussion of different sentence element prominence needs a special attention.

4. CONCLUSION

From the brief discussion above, the writer can conclude that English canonical sentence shows SVO pattern and Arabic canonical sentence exhibits VSO pattern. The non-canonical sentence formation in both English and Arabic involves fronting. The subject or nominative noun prominence involves doubling theme and rheme while in English it involves different concord between the noun and the verb.

The presence of canonical and non-canonical sentences suggest that different translation of Arabic nominal sentence from verbal sentence into English non-canonical sentence. This article may help solve the problem of translation from Arabic into English. The existence of cleft sentence adds new perspectives in theoretical linguistics and its practical use.

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