

PREDICATION TESTS, COPULA, AND A POSSIBLE LINK WITH AŞĀRISM

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This paper very briefly describes a series of predication tests in the works of the early Arab grammarians and links them with the concept of the “copula” in the philosophers. It concludes with the suggestion that there may be some connection between these two topics and later Aşārite speculations about the attributes of God. Naturally there can be no certainty about such a conjecture, though the paper will conclude with some remarks which might at least make it seem reasonable.

Predication tests in grammar are observable as early as al-Mubarrad (d. 898 A.D.)¹ and are a prominent feature in the works of such later figures as Ibn as-Sarrāġ (d. 929 A.D.)² and Ibn Mālik (d. 1274 A.D.)³. Under the general heading of *al-ihbār bi-lladī wa-l-lām* a simple sentence is paraphrased either with a participle or *alladī*, often achieving great complexity, sometimes to the point of incomprehensibility. The following table presents a basic sentence⁴, its two paraphrases with the participle and *alladī* and, for contrast, the normal patterns of topicalization. For the purposes of the later discussion the boundary between subject and predicate is marked (|), the anaphoric pronouns which bind the two together are in bold type and non-canonical structures are starred:

¹ *Muqtaḍab*, ed. M. ʿA. H. ʿUḍayma, Cairo 1963-68, vol. III, p. 89f.

² *Uṣūl an-naḥw*, ed. ʿA. H. al-Fatī, Beirut 1985, vol. II, pp. 261f, 331f.

³ *Alfīyya* (any edition), verse 717f.

⁴ It is derived from al-Mubarrad’s *Muqtaḍab*, vol. III, p. 93.

1a Basic sentence, normal word order

a'taytu zaydan dirhaman

1b Normal topicalization

anā | a'taytu zaydan dirhaman

zaydun | a'taytubu dirhaman

(**dirhamun | a'taytubu zaydan*)

ammā anā | fa-a'taytu zaydan dirhaman

ammā zaydun | fa-a'taytubu dirhaman

(**ammā dirhamun | fa-a'taytubu zaydan*)

2a Paraphrase with participle (*al-ihbār bi-l-lām*)

al-mu'tī∅ zaydan dirhaman | anā

al-mu'tīhi anā dirhaman | zaydun

al-mu'tīhi anā zaydan | dirhamun

2b Paraphrase with *alladī* (*al-ihbār bi-lladī*)

alladī a'tā∅ zaydan dirhaman | anā

alladī a'taytubu dirhaman | zaydun

alladī a'taytubu zaydan | dirhamun

or: *alladī a'taytu iyyāhu dirhaman | zaydun*

alladī a'taytu zaydan iyyāhu | dirhamun

3a Regular topicalization of 2a

anā l-muṭīḍ zaydan dirhaman
zaydun | anā l-muṭīḍi dirhaman

(**dirhamun | anā l-muṭīḍi zaydan*)

3b Regular topicalization of 2b

anā | lladī aṭaytu zaydan dirhaman
zaydun | illadī aṭaytuhu dirhaman

(**dirhamun illadī aṭaytuhu zaydan*)

It is obvious that the examples in 2a and 2b are not instances of the regular topicalization seen in 1b. In fact they are the opposite of topicalization, fronting or foregrounding, as it is variously termed, since they reverse the usual order of the given and the new. This is shown clearly by the starred forms in 3a and 3b, for while it is perfectly correct to make the indefinite word *dirhamun* the predicate in 2a and 2b, *dirhamun* cannot be topicalized into a subject position in 3a and 3b.

Interestingly the sentences with *zaydun* as the final element in 2a and 2b appear to break a rule of logic that predicates cannot be proper names. This rule has attracted some attention among the medieval Arab philosophers, not least of al-Fārābī, who evidently rejected it⁵. al-Baṭalyawsī also discusses the question, and argues that a case such as *alladī darabtuhu zaydun* is merely an inversion of *zaydun illadī darabtuhu*, hence not an infringement of the rule of proper name predicates⁶. This view is somewhat vulnerable, however, for the illegal **dirhamun*

⁵ See the discussion in K. Gyekye, *Arabic Logic: Ibn al-Ṭayyib's Commentar on Porphyry's Eisagoge*, Albany 1979, p. 188f.

⁶ See A. A. Elamrani-Jamal, "Les rapports de la logique et de la grammaire d'après le *Kitāb al-masā'il* d'al-Baṭalyūsī", *Arabica* 26, 1979, p. 82f (Arabic text), 86f (translation).

illadī a'taytuhu zaydan in 3b is sufficient to prove that inversion (here of *alladī a'taytuhu zaydan dirhamun*) is not always possible. We should therefore be cautious in accepting al-Baṭalyawsī's ideas as a full explanation of the phenomenon.

Finally we should note that there are some restrictions on the use of *al-ihbār bi-lladī wa-l-lām*. Two may be noted here: neither the *maf'ūl mutlaq* nor the *mudāf* may occur as predicates⁷, i.e.

4a *ḍarabtu zaydan ḍarban*

4b **alladī ḍarabtuhu zaydan ḍarbun*

5a *ḍarabtu gulāma zaydin*

5b **alladī ḍarabtuhu zaydin gulāmu*

In the case of 4b the rule of *ifāda* is breached, since the utterance would convey no more information than was already in *ḍarabtu*. In 5b *gulāmu* cannot be pronominalized since pronouns cannot occur as the first elements of *idāfa* (contrast *alladī ḍarabtu gulāmahu zaydun*)⁸.

The question now arises, what was the purpose of this elaborate procedure? The Arab grammarians regard these sentences as student practice, but that simply leads to another question, practice in what? The key to the answer probably lies in the term *ihbār*, which strongly implies that the main concern of the exercise was the mechanism of predication, testing thereby the predicability of any noun in the sentence. For reasons which will become relevant later on, we suggest that in the earliest stage the focus was indeed on the predicability of the noun, and that relatively little attention was paid to the pronouns which automa-

⁷ See al-Mubarrad, *Muqtaḍab* vol. III, p. 103, and cf. p 91f for other restricted categories.

⁸ The same restrictions apply to any topicalization of the *mudāf*, e.g. after *ammā* or *inna*.

tically appear as traces of the noun when it is moved into the predicate position.

Since the *ihbār* test appeared in the time of al-Mubarrad, we may also hypothesize that it has some connection with the grammarians' interest in logic which begins to be noticeable in this period, particularly the principle of falsifiability which had intruded into grammar from logic⁹. If we call to mind the critical Arabic distinction between verbal and nominal sentences, the *ihbār* method presents itself as a very effective device to test falsifiability.

For not only is there a formal difference between nominal and verbal sentences, but there is also a logical difference. We may characterize verbal sentences as intrinsically "historical", as narrative statements, empirical, non-demonstrable: it cannot be apodictically "proved" that an event ever took place, and so verbal sentences are logically non-falsifiable. By contrast nominal sentences, by merely asserting that *x* and *y* are the same thing without the mediation of any verbal copula, are demonstrable, logical propositions and therefore by nature falsifiable. This, we would claim, is a likely motive for the *ihbār* test, since it enables all the nominal elements of a sentence (apart from the exceptions already alluded to above) to be placed in an equational relationship and thus become falsifiable. Straightforward topicalization cannot achieve this since, as has been shown, the indefinite nouns in the sentence cannot be fronted, whereas there is nothing to stop them from being thematized as predicates by the *ihbār* method.

In passing it may be observed that the verbs in such sentences have to be accepted as a given fact, exactly as in the English analogue, "what I gave him was a dirham", which is one good reason why the *maf'ūl mutlaq* type **alladī darabtubu darbun* is disallowed. This is not trivial, since one of the features of the verbless equational sentences of Arabic

⁹ Cf. al-Mubarrad, *Muqadab* vol. III, p. 89., which seems to be the earliest instance of truth/falsehood as a sentence criterion. The gradual prevalence of *isnād/musnad/musnad ilayhi* over the purely structural terms *ibtidā'/mubtada'/mabnī 'alayhi* probably belongs to the same trend.

is that they also take for granted the "being" of the subject, as was pointed out very perceptively by Elamrani-Jamal and to which we shall return shortly¹⁰.

There remains the historical difficulty of tracing the origins of the *ihbār* procedure. Nothing conclusive can be said about it here, in the absence of any strong indications either of a foreign or an indigenous origin, but it is certainly a problem which deserves a proper investigation.

Turning now to the copula, it must be said at the outset that there are serious historical problems here too. Surprisingly the word *copula* is not a term of classical Greek or Latin grammar, nor are its place and date of entry into medieval European grammar precisely known¹¹. And finally there is the fundamental fact that whatever may be the history of the *rābiṭa* concept in Arabic linguistic analysis (see below), it is never at any time equated¹² with a verb "to be" or indeed any notion of existence, for the reason already noted by Elamrani-Jamal above, that Arabic equational sentences do not assert but simply presume the existence of their subject.

As elaborated among the philosophers and grammarians, there were two different kinds of problem to be solved, firstly what was the formal, syntactic link between subject and predicate and secondly what was the nature of the semantic, ontological link between these two. The structural possibilities reduce to three, exemplified in the following:

¹⁰ See A. A. Elamrani-Jamal, *Logique aristotélicienne et grammaire arabe*, Paris 1983, p. 139.

¹¹ The first appearance in Europe is attributed to Abelard, Elamrani-Jamal, *ibid.* p. 130, note 5.

¹² The word has been chosen carefully: certainly some affinities were perceived between Indo-European verbs "to be" and the hypothetical *rābiṭa*, but there the similarity ends, cf. Elamrani-Jamal, *Logique aristotélicienne* p. 134.

- 6a Predicate = an “underived noun” (*ism ġāmīd*)

zaydun raġulun

- 6b Predicate = a sentence

zaydun māta abūhu

zaydun ġāriyatuhu dāhibatun

- 6c Predicate = a “derived noun” (*ism muštaqq*)

zaydun qā'imun

The first two present no difficulty. In 6a the semantic relationship is one of identity as the paraphrase *huwa huwa* for this type illustrates¹³, and there is no need to look for a formal syntactic connection between subject and predicate (note that there is also no need to seek any element denoting the existence of either component since that is taken for granted). In 6b the problem is solved by the explicit connecting pronoun (*rābit(a)* or ‘*ā'id* in the conventional terminology) which establishes the predicate as referring to the particular subject in accordance with the normal syntax of the *ġumla dāt waġħayn* (the inverted verbal sentence *ar-riġālu dāhabū* can also be regarded as a variant of the *ġumla dāt waġħayn* in which the topic/subject happens to be the same as the agent of the verb in the predicate)¹⁴. The second example in 6b is a case where the *ġumla suġrā* of the predicate is itself a sentence of type 6c, and will be discussed under that heading.

¹³ *Huwa huwa* is one of Sibawayhi's representations of the basic sentence types, cf. *Kitāb*, ed. H. Derenbourg, Paris 1881-89, vol. I, p. 237 (= Būlāq ed. I, 275).

¹⁴ In medieval grammar it became axiomatic that all complex predicates contained a pronoun referring to the subject, cf. M. G. Carter, “The term *sabab* in Arabic grammar”, *ZAL* 15, 1985, p. 62.

In 6c the predicate is neither an underived noun identical with the subject, nor a sentence containing an overt pronoun referring to the subject. The philosophers recognized the potential inconsistencies and were perturbed by them: the underived noun was by definition resistant to further analysis and all 6a type sentences reduce to *hurwa hurwa* as already mentioned, but the derived noun, with its manifestly verbal concordance (as the pattern sentence *a-qā'imun iz-zaydāni*, with singular form of the participle in a verbal position is meant to display)¹⁵ was a challenge. Orthographically it may be a single word but semantically it is a complex notion.

al-Fārābī's discussion of the problem comes to perhaps the only possible conclusion that there must, in fact, be some element which connects the subject *zaydun* with the predicate *qā'imun*¹⁶, and he appropriately calls this element *rābiṭa*, a term which he was apparently the first to use¹⁷. His explanation is doubtless the product of a mixture of influences. From the Arab grammarians he could draw on a well-established theory that derived nouns (including the whole category of adjectives) are equivalent to verbal predicates, i.e. *zaydun ḥasanun* is synonymous with *yahṣunu zaydun*: in this way the phenomenon of adjectival concord is accounted for in terms of the agent pronouns either visible or concealed in verbs¹⁸. From the Greek grammatical ideas to which he was

¹⁵ This is an example quoted by the grammarians in support of the claim that *qā'imun* may observe the rules of verbal concord when preceding its noun, see M. G. Carter, *Arab Linguistics*, Amsterdam 1981, p. 189.

¹⁶ See A. A. Elamrani-Jamal, "Verbe, copule, nom dérivé (*fī'l, kalima, ism muštaqq*) dans les commentaires arabes du Peri Hermeneias d'Aristote, avec un texte inédit d'Ibn Rušd", in Kees [C. H. M.] Versteegh and M. G. Carter (eds), *Studies in the History of Arabic Linguistics II, Proceedings of the 2nd Symposium on the History of Arabic Grammar, Nijmegen, 27 April - 1 May 1987*, Amsterdam and Philadelphia 1990, pp. 151-164.

¹⁷ Elamrani-Jamal, *Logique aristotélicienne* p. 131.

¹⁸ For this reason adjectives are terms "quasi-participial" (*mušabbaha bi-smi l-fā'il*) in certain contexts. It is not the purpose of this paper to review the *ḍam'ir mustatir* theory, but the examples in 2a, 2b and 3a show clearly how it was necessary to infer the existence of an agent pronoun in unmarked verbs. Note, too, that *anā l-mu'tī...* is often expressed

indirectly exposed he was probably also aware of the intermediate status of the verbal noun (*maṣḍar*) which might have suggested to him the possibility of an agent being concealed in a noun in the same way as it is in several Arabic verb forms as a *ḍamīr mustatir*¹⁹.

The combination of these ideas and al-Fārābī's own logical imperatives produced the conclusion just mentioned, that indeed there was some invisible connecting element in *qā'imun* linking it to *zaydun*. This element, being invisible, was also entirely inferential. We must beware of misinterpreting the paraphrase **zaydun huwa qā'imun*²⁰ as implying that there was a real pronoun either concealed or, worse still, merely elided in *zaydun qā'imun*. This would be a gross error: in the first place **zaydun huwa qā'imun* is not a natural Arabic sentence at all (we are not talking of the emphatic appositive *huwa* here), and the artificial *huwa* is on no account to be confused with the *ḍamīr al-faṣl*. In the second place it contradicts al-Fārābī's own argument, which is, that the linking element has no linguistic status beyond its ability to be paraphrased by the appropriate free pronoun. We shall see that for a number of reasons this is a perfectly sensible position.

It is hardly surprising that there was disagreement among the philosophers over the exact nature of the linking element²¹. al-Fārābī's interpretation of a word like *qā'imun* is that unlike *yaqūmu*, which is predicative by nature and contains a pronoun (whether hidden, as here, or not, as in a *yaqūmūna* etc.), *qā'imun* is unable to stand as a predicate

anā huwa l-mu'tī... when the hidden pronoun is externalized.

¹⁹ Cf. the discussion of the debate over the priority of verb and verbal noun in C. H. M. Versteegh, *Greek Elements in Arabic Linguistic Thinking*, Leiden 1977, p. 83f.

²⁰ Elamrani-Jamal, *Logique aristotélicienne*, p. 134. Interestingly enough, when the grammarians wish to externalize an agent pronoun in the participle they seem to prefer a different word order in the paraphrase, e.g. *marartu bi-raḡulin mā'ahu mra'atun dāribuhā huwa* placing the pronoun after the participle (Sibawayhi, *Kitāb I*, 208/243, cf. Carter, *ZAL* 1985 p. 58).

²¹ What follows is drawn from Elamrani-Jamal, *Logique aristotélicienne* p. 135f and the same writer's "Verbe, copule, nom dérivé.." *op. cit.* note 16.

unless some connecting feature is assumed (note that in *qā'imūna* for example, the *ūna* suffix is not a pronoun but a plural marker, and the linking element is still to be inferred). al-Fārābī is here taking into account the fact that *qā'imun* also occurs in other functions than predication, unlike verbs, which can only be predicates. However, his ideas were subsequently attacked by Ibn Rušd, who makes a different kind of distinction between verbs and participles, namely that verbs predicate extrinsically (*muğarraḍ*) of their subjects while participles predicate intrinsically of their subjects and inherently denote the meaning in the object they qualify.

Ibn Rušd sees a contradiction in al-Fārābī's position: if, as al-Fārābī claims, the reference of *qā'imun* to its subject is different from the linking element it is assumed to contain, then the same word is both subject (by reference) and predicate (by *rābita*) of itself. Conversely, if predication is only by linking element then the quality predicated need not be intrinsic to the subject but may be in the relationship of substance to accident, which Ibn Rušd will permit for the verb but not the participle. We cannot know to what extent this line of argument is determined by strictly logical considerations but it is clear that there are parallels with the discussions of the nature of God's attributes which raise the same difficulties in hylomorphic terms. When Ibn Rušd insists on the unicity of the *qā'imun* word class we must assume he was at least aware of its implications for theology even if we cannot say that this was the reason for his view.

By way of conclusion to this section a short digression may be permitted on two contemporary problems of the copula. It should be obvious that any modern treatment of Arabic syntax which treats the verb *kāna* as a copula is a lamentable confusion of two entirely unrelated syntactic systems. The only medieval grammarian who ever made this equation probably took it more or less directly from Greek and his

views were never generally adopted²². Secondly it should be equally obvious that the growing tendency to use a *damīr al-faṣl* in modern Arabic *as if it were a copula* is an awesome demonstration of the cultural impact of Western syntax on Arabic thought patterns which has now become so ingrained that it is unlikely that any Arab is aware of the extreme irony of referring to the *damīr al-faṣl* (whose purpose is to keep things apart) as a copula (whose purpose is to link things together)²³!

Returning to the topic in hand, we now consider the controversy over the attributes of God in the light of the above information. Two solid points may be cited as a foundation for the approach taken by this paper, the first being the generally acknowledged fact that theological arguments in Arabic are inescapably linguistic in nature. This contention need not be elaborated, it surely suffices to appeal to the authority of Michel Allard²⁴.

The second point is rather more delicate and crucial for the present case. It is that in Ašārite theological debate the attributes of God are seemingly always expressed in participial form: thus when God's knowledge, for example, is under discussion He is said to be *ʿālimun*²⁵. We presume that this preference for the participle is not a random choice.

²² az-Zaḡḡāḡī (d. 949 A.D.), in his *Ġumal* (ed. Muhammad Ben Cheneb, Paris 1957), p. 53 refers to *kāna* and its related verbs as *hurūf*, which has evidently been taken by later grammarians as meaning that they are "like *rawābiʿ*", q.v. in M. G. Carter, *Arab Linguistics*, Amsterdam 1981, p. 208, where this view is ascribed to "the Kūfans".

²³ Since this paper was submitted for publication the present writer has examined the copula problem in more detail, cf. M. G. Carter, "Copula in Arabic Grammar", to appear in the Proceedings of the 17th Congress of the Union of European Arabists and Islamicists, St. Petersburg, August 22-25 1994.

²⁴ M. Allard, *Le problème des attributs divins dans la doctrine d'al-Ašʿarī et ses premiers grands disciples*, Beirut 1965, passim.

²⁵ Cf. Allard, *op. cit.* pp. 115, 197, 241 etc. In the same work, p. 115, it is mentioned that al-Ḡubbāʾī preferred participles to nouns, and cf pp. 197-199 for more on the reasons for this.

As it happens, verbs would be a singularly inappropriate vehicle for expressing God's attributes. Whether we follow the indigenous grammatical tradition or the Aristotelian categorization which was later absorbed into Arabic grammar, there is an indissoluble connection between verbs and *time* which rules them out as useful tools for formulating ideas about God²⁶.

Moreover it is not so much what God *does* which interests the theologian but what God *is*, and it is precisely this concept for which Arabic lacks a verb! Admittedly adjectives could be used, but all adjectives are reducible to participles anyway, and there is also the objective fact that many of God's attributes are already expressed in the Qur'ān as participles which do not have truly adjectival equivalents.

Nouns, on the other hand, are used in theological discourse: we read *lahu 'ilmun* and the like in the context of God's attributes. But we must be very careful to distinguish the logical status of such expressions. A closer look reveals the unbridgeable gap between *huwa 'ālimun* and *lahu 'ilmun*: both refer to God, but in *huwa 'ālimun* we have a statement directly about God while in *lahu 'ilmun* we merely have a statement about *huwa 'ālimun* which is thus of an entirely different order. In fact the periphrastic *lahu 'ilmun* is completely unacceptable as a definitive theological formulation since it blatantly externalizes the very dualism which was at the root of the problem. It contains two linguistically and semantically discrete entities and, to make matters worse, an explicit relational term²⁷.

²⁶ On the built-in dualism of verbs cf. B. Weiss, "Subject and predicate in the thinking of the Arabic philologists", *JAOS* 105, 1985, 613 (the article has many other useful insights relevant to the topic of the present paper, especially the notion of the "linking symbolism" in predication).

²⁷ It is to the credit of the theologians that they apparently did not consider resorting to the nonsensical **huwa 'ilmun* to escape from this predicament. No matter how much they may have wanted to prove that God's nature and attributes were identical they could never bring themselves to do violence to the common sense enshrined in normal linguistic usage. This would have immediately caused them to be ejected from the linguistic community, either by ridicule or silence.

From what has just been said it may well appear that the theologians were compelled to use the participle in the absence of any acceptable alternatives (which would conform very nicely with the Ašcarite doctrine of *kasb!*), but even the inevitable must be plausible, and the purpose of this paper is to show that there was already a solid grammatical and philosophical tradition to predispose the theologians to favour the participle in this particular context.

The participle has all the features necessary to solve the theologians' difficulties: it denotes attributes intrinsically without any formal dualism, and unlike verbs, which also denote attributes, it has no reference to time²⁸. It is thus a perfect linguistic analogue of the divine *tawhīd*, a unity of subject and attributes that are integral with its essence. The theological statement *huwa 'ālimun* has exactly the same structure as Sībawayhi's symbolic sentence pattern *huwa huwa*: the subject and predicate are identical, the latter however is enhanced by an attribute joined by an invisible link. This kind of sentence can thus be restated symbolically in the form *huwa (huwa + šifa)*, where the bracketed element is as much a single entity as *huwa* by itself. The obvious echo of the Old Testament "I am that I am" seems worth mentioning at this point, as *huwa 'ālimun* in the end means no more than "He is what He is" until we ascertain the real nature of His attributes.

It was, after all, the Ašcarīs who maintained that since God spoke to us in human language His words and our discourse about Him are both subject to linguistic criteria no matter how transcendental the themes. Otherwise, says al-Ašcarī himself, it would not matter what we or God said as it would all be equally meaningless²⁹. What this paper has tried to show is that the Ašcarite position is in fact fully consistent with the grammatical and philosophical level of enquiry which, as hardly needs proving, was already the context out of which Ašcarism

²⁸ Here we must disagree with Weiss, *JAO* 1985, p. 617, that the particle shares with the verb the function of attributing a *ḥadaṭ* to a *dāt*. There is no "event" in the participle: all it implies is eternal potential, cf. the "Kūfan" term *fīl dā'im* for the participle.

²⁹ M. Allard, *Problèmes des attributs* p. 182.

evolved. We may invert al-Aš'arī's proposition and claim that if any of the theological arguments had been incompatible with or not up to the standard of the very sophisticated grammatical theories of the time they would have been totally rejected³⁰. The use of the participle, therefore, is not just a theological convenience but a recognition that theology must conform to the principles of the language sciences as well as those of abstract thought³¹.

³⁰ This may look like a truism, but it is surprising how often the linguistic contribution to theological argument is downgraded to "mere grammar" (G. E. Hourani, *Reason and Tradition in Islam*, Cambridge 1985, p. 120) to quote one example.

³¹ Two recent works, F. M. Zimmermann, *Al-Farabi's Commentary and Short Treatise on Aristotle's De Interpretatione*, Oxford 1981 (pb. 1987) and S. B. Abed, *Aristotelian Logic and the Arabic Language in Alfarabi*, Albany 1991, contain extensive discussions of predication, copula and the participial form. However, neither author addresses the specific issue of predication tests in relation to divine predicates.