

The Difficulty of Being Different: ‘Reversed’ Adjectival Syntagms in Classical Arabic

Marcin Michalski

Institute of Linguistics, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

marcinmichalski@yahoo.es

The most common word order of an adjectival phrase in Classical Arabic is Noun - Adjective (e.g. *al-baradu l-jāmidu* ‘frozen hail’). In such a syntagm the noun must always agree with its adjective in determination or indetermination. However, there are three constructions which permit the adjective to precede the noun. This happens on various conditions and entails syntactic transformations. The agreement in determination is violated then. For the use of this paper, these constructions, which vary as to their semantic, stylistic and, to a lesser degree, syntactic restrictions, will be called ‘reversed’ adjectival syntagms. They can be briefly characterized as follows:

i) genitival syntagm, e.g. *jāmidu l-baradi* ‘frozen hail’, in which the noun in genitive (*al-baradi* ‘hail’) goes after the adjective. Here some semantic and stylistic restrictions will be discussed.

ii) formal annexion, e.g. *(rajulun) kabīru r-ra’si* ‘(a man) who has a large head’, in which the noun in genitive (*r-ra’si* ‘head’) goes after the adjective. The ultimate function of this construction, however, is not to form an adjective to modify the noun in genitive but to form a syntagm to modify the head of the broader syntagm (i.e. ‘the man’). It can, however, occur separately and function predicatively. Some differences and similarities between these constructions and Indo-European compound words can be exemplified here.

iii) “pseudorelative”, e.g. *(rajulun) kabīrun ra’suhū* ‘(a man) who has a large head’, which is often explained in terms of relative clause. However, on account of some syntactic features, they should be distinguished from true relative clauses. Similarly to ii), this syntagm is also formed in order to modify the head of the broader syntagm. It can, however, occur separately, e.g. *jā’a l-kabīru ra’suhū* ‘that one with the large head has come’, with its head omitted.

Some relations between these constructions and similar phenomena in some Indo-European language (compound words, meaningful word order), as well as aspects of their occurrence in Modern Arabic will be discussed.