

# Why two word orders of the superlative in Syrian Arabic?

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The superlative, or more accurately the superlative-expressing elative,<sup>1</sup> in Syrian Arabic (SA) can appear in two different orders. First, it can precede the noun it modifies; see the examples<sup>2</sup> in (1-a) and (1-b), Hallman (2016). Second, as all adjectives in Arabic, it follows the noun as in (2), Al-Bitar (2019). In this case, it has to be definite; otherwise, only the comparative meaning is obtained; see (3).

- (1) a. *nuha Til'-it 'alaa 'a'laa jabal.*  
Nuha climbed-F on **high.ELA** mountain  
'Nuha climbed the highest mountain.'  
b. *nuha Til'-it 'alaa aktar jabal 'aali.*  
Nuha climbed-F on **much.ELA** mountain high  
'Nuha climbed the highest mountain.'

Hallman (2016, p. 1289)

- (2) *nuha Til'-it 'alaa l-jabal al-'a'laa.*  
Nuha climbed-F on the-mountain **the-high.ELA**  
'Nuha climbed the highest mountain.'  
(3) *nuha Til'-it 'alaa jabal 'a'laa.*  
Nuha climbed-F on mountain **high.ELA**  
'Nuha climbed a higher mountain.'

The question that arises is: how are these two ways of expressing the superlative in SA related? The suggestion to be presented is that the first way where the elative precedes

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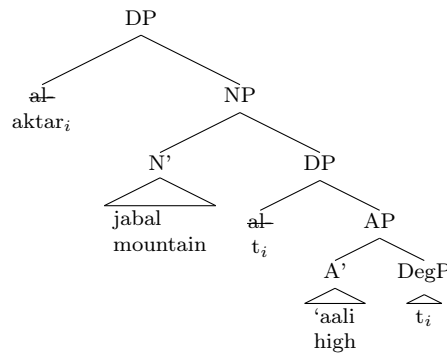
<sup>1</sup>In Arabic, the comparative and the superlative are expressed by the same form, e.g. *'a'laa* 'higher/highest'. This form is a new morphological structure derived from adjectives in a (fixed) way that depends on the phonetic structure of the root adjective. It is usually called the *elative* in the study of Arabic, e.g. Abboud & McCarus (1983) and Ryding (2005).

<sup>2</sup>The transliteration of the examples from Hallman (2016) has been adapted, so that they are written in the same way as the examples I include. The transliteration of the Arabic data has been done as in Ryding (2005), and for the glossing, I have followed the Leipzig glossing rules (<https://www.eva.mpg.de/lingua/pdf/Glossing-Rules.pdf>).

the noun is syntactically derived from the other way that exhibits the canonical word order in Arabic. That is to say, there seems to be an optional movement.

The movement suggested is a *head* movement because semantically speaking the elative is a degree operator that heads the DegP (Degree Phrase). Being a syntactic head, it can move from its head position higher up to another head position. Depending on the systematic correlation of the absence of the definite articles and the appearance of the superlative-expressing elative in front of the noun,<sup>3</sup> the proposed movement is from the Deg head position to the D head position. Since a head movement takes place step by step, the elative operator moves through the lower D position to the higher one, hence the disappearance of both definite articles. See below the possible surface structure of the superlative DP in (1-b).

(4)



The reason for this optional movement is closely connected with the fixed phonetic structure of the elative: *'aCCaC* (Ryding (2005)), where *'* stands for *hamzah*,<sup>4</sup> i.e. the glottal stop [ʔ], and *Cs* stand for the root consonants of the source adjective. When the elative is combined with the definite article to convey the superlative meaning, the result is a marked phonetic structure in that a new consonant cluster is built. This consonant cluster is [l + ʔ]: [l] is the last sound of the attached definite article and the glottal stop [ʔ] is the first sound of any elative.

When the superlative-expressing elative is moved, the speaker gets rid of the resulted markedness, that is, the outcome of this movement is a more economical construction

<sup>3</sup>That is, the elative, as a degree head, and the definite articles, as D heads, seem to be in complementary distribution.

<sup>4</sup>Hamzah is one of the *lunar letters* in Arabic; if the word to which the definite article *al-* is added begins with a lunar letter, this letter lets the *l* in *al-* be pronounced, i.e. *l* does not get assimilated by it. A *solar letter*, on the other hand, assimilates *l*, and the result is a stronger pronunciation of this letter.

- (i) *al-qalam*  
the-pen
- (ii) *ash-shajara*  
the-tree

## References

that is easier to pronounce. What makes this reasoning plausible is a look at the quantitative information of corpus data. Instances with the prenominal elative are used more frequently than those exhibiting the canonical word order, which conforms to the observation that the informants in Hallman (2016) only produced the prenominal elative (Hallman, p.c.).

## References

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