

On the Parataxis of Arabic Split Questions*

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Under review

Abstract. In a bisentential analysis of split questions drawn primarily from Spanish data, [Arregi \(2010: 540\)](#) notes that "(m)any of the Spanish judgments reported here can be replicated in other languages, but no systematic attempt has been made to check every claim made here cross-linguistically". I argue in this article that the elliptical analysis of split questions can be extended to Modern Standard Arabic if they are analyzed in a movement-free fashion by treating them as a constellation of two well-motivated operations in the grammar: ellipsis and coordination.

Keywords: Modern Standard Arabic, ellipsis, split questions, coordination.

1 Introduction

This article focuses on an underexplored structure of Modern Standard Arabic (henceforth Arabic), namely Split Questions (SQs). Arabic SQs as in (1) are characterized by there being a tag (boldfaced), which is both preceded by and related to a *wh*-word occurring in a *wh*-part (underlined).

- (1) maða iftra khalid-un, **kitab-n/** kitab-un
what bought.3SG. Khalid-NOM book-ACC/ *book-NOM?
'What did Khalid buy, a book ?

The example in (1) raises an important question concerning the derivational journey of the tag: how is the tag related to the *wh*-word in the *wh*-part? One possibility is to propose that Arabic SQs are analyzed as a monoclausal configuration, where the *wh*-phrase and the tag are generated in the same clause on a par with the analysis put forward by [Camacho \(2002\)](#). By contrast, [Arregi \(2010\)](#) presents a convincing case against the monoclausal approach to SQs by arguing at length that an SQ articulation is best analyzed as a biclausal structure.

I show in section 2 that the biclausal analysis meshes well with the peculiarity of Arabic SQs in that this analysis can nicely account for the perplexing nature of Arabic SQs: the fact that this construction simultaneously displays the properties of movement and base-generation. In section 2.1, I show that although illuminating, [Arregi's](#) biclausal analysis of SQs leaves unaccounted for what kind of the

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relation could underlie two clauses in a biclausal analysis. Moreover, the persisting claim made by [Arregi](#) is that the tag question, behaving as a fragment in the sense of [Merchant \(2001\)](#), undergoes focus fronting. Attractive as it may seem, this movement lacks for the motivation. Alternatively, I argue in section 3 that Arabic SQs need no special operations such as focus fronting, and that this construction is better understood to be an interplay of two operations in the grammar: ellipsis and coordination. Section 4 is the conclusion.

2 Arabic Split Questions: Clausal Juxtaposition

In the realm of the monoclausal approach to SQs, there is a possible binary option which suggests itself. On the one hand, it could be argued that the tag is related to the *wh*-word via a movement chain: the tag is initially generated in the thematic domain and then undergoes movement to a position in the skeleton of the clause. On the other hand, it could be argued as well that there is no derivational link between the tag and the *wh*-word, and hence both elements are externally merged where they appear in the clause. Both options, however, are not without shortcomings since Arabic SQs exhibit mixed properties as will be shown. More specifically, consider again the example in (1), where the tag shares the same case morphology and θ -role as the *wh*-word (i.e. both are case-assigned accusative, and marked thematically as a theme), pointing to the conclusion that Arabic SQs are derived by movement, under the assumption that connectivity effects entail there being a movement chain which has been activated ([Anagnostopoulou 1997](#)).¹ Likewise, parallel connectivity effects can be observed with Condition C as illustrated in (2): where establishing a binding relation between the null *pro* and the R-expression *Khalid* is illicit as per Condition C.

- (2) man ?laði *pro_i yð^funu bi?n Muhammad-an qud r?a sadigan-an fi al
 who who pro_i guesses that Muhammad-an MODAL SAW friend-ACC in the
 masʒdi, Khalid_i?
 mosque, Khalid.
 'who does he guess that Muhammad has saw a friend in the mosque, Khalid?'

On the other hand, an Arabic SQ as in (1) shows base-generation properties as well in that the *wh*-word is related to a full argument instead of a trace, which is unexpected in a run-of-the mill filler-gap configuration. Further, the fact that the tag as in (1) typically forms an intonational phrase on its own, which is flagged here by a comma, cannot follow from a movement analysis; see [Frascarelli \(2000\)](#) for a similar observation attested in dislocation structures. In addition to this, Arabic SQs do not give rise to Weak Crossover effects (WCO); a bona fide feature of constructions generated by a construal rule ([Postal 1971](#); [Richards 2014](#)).

¹One way to nullify a movement dependency is to argue that the tags can be case-assigned from a base-generated position in parallel to the proposals made in [Bošković \(2007\)](#) and [Villa-García \(2015\)](#), but see [Boeckx \(2008\)](#) and [Preminger \(2011\)](#) for a dissenting view.

- (3) mæn_i ?laði yð^sunu bi-ʔn ?uma-hu_i qud raa-ah fi ?l masʒdi, khalid_i?
 who who guesses that mother-hi_{MODAL} saw-her in the mosque, khalid.
 ‘Who does he guess that he saw his mother in the mosque, Khalid?’

Evidently, the main challenge for these approaches to SQs is the ambivalent status of the the tag, which seems to appear within and outside the *wh*-part.² To solve this paradox, I build on Alzayid (2022), similar in spirit to the analysis proposed in Arregi (2010), arguing that Arabic SQs can be elegantly treated as a biclausal configuration. According to this analysis, the tag appears in a separate root clause from the one hosting the *wh*-word. Further, the clause containing the tag is reduced by deletion at PF, which targets the whole clause *module* the tag.^{3 4} By way of illustration, consider the example in (4) featuring the elliptical representation of (1).

- (4) [CP₁ what_i bought Khalid_i] [CP₂ ~~Khalid_i bought~~ a book]

With this in mind, it is the time to cut the Gordian knot and see how the biclausal analysis can neatly explain the perplexing behaviour of Arabic SQs. As outlined earlier, the tag along with the *wh*-word share the same morphological case as well as the θ -role. This state of affairs, however, ceases to be surprising under the biclausal analysis: similar θ -role is expected since the tag and the *wh*-word are generated in two different, but semantically parallel clauses as a licensing precondition for ellipsis. Therefore, the tag and the *wh*-word receive the θ -role in their respective clauses as the example in (5) illustrates (repeated from (1)): they are marked thematically by the same predicate *iftra* ‘bought’, each in its own clause. The same logic can be extended to explain the invariant morphological case exhibited by the tag and the *wh*-word in Arabic SQs: both are case-assigned by the same predicate.

- (5) CP₁ [_{THEME/ACC} iftra maða] ... CP₂ [_{THEME/ACC} iftra kitaban]

The same holds true of the Condition C violation adumbrated earlier. Recall that

²Surveying the empirical landscape, it can be concluded that this behaviour is more or less reminiscent of the derivational paradox attested for constructions such as Left Dislocation and Right Dislocation which are thought to exhibit the same mixed properties. As succinctly summed by (Vat 1997: 67): “(t)he challenge which the construction of Left Dislocation (henceforth LD) [and Right Dislocation] presents to linguistic theory stems from the fact that it is difficult to determine whether it is purely base-generated or whether a movement rule-of some kind is involved.”

³Incidentally, this analysis has been the impetus for a plethora of proposals which maintain, with varying degrees of implementation, that an ellipsis-based analysis can account for a crosslinguistic family of dislocation structures, which are argued to have internal-clause properties, but at the same time they tend to favour an externally generated analysis. These structures include Clitic Left Dislocation (Ott 2015; Fernández-Sánchez 2020; Alzayid 2022), Clitic Right Dislocation (Ott and De Vries 2014; Fernández-Sánchez 2020; Alzayid 2022) and Contrastive Left Dislocation (Ott 2014).

⁴Nonetheless, there is a rival approach, contrary to the one argued for in the main text, maintaining that clausal ellipsis only involves non-sentential constituents (Stainton 2005; Progovac 2006); but see Merchant (2004) for a strong case against proposals along these lines. See also Algryani (2017) and Alzayid (2022) for a defense of the idea that a PF-reduced approach fares well with clausal ellipsis in Arabic.

Arabic SQs feed condition C in that a co-reference reading between a *wh*-word and a tag cannot obtain in a seemingly reconstruction effect: the fact the tag as in (2) is interpreted within the c-command domain of the null *pro*, resulting in a deviant string. This behaviour under the bisentential analysis straightforwardly falls out. More specifically, reconstruction effects arise in the elided clause, specifically the one hosting the tag, which is identical to the clause containing the *wh*-word as required by the parallelism condition of ellipsis.⁵ Reconstruction, therefore, is a misnomer in that there is no a c-command relation underlying the clause containing both the *wh*-word and the tag as in (2). By way of illustration, consider the example in (6) featuring the clause hosting the tag in a non-elliptical form⁶, repeated from (2):

- (6) [CP₂ *pro_i yǒ^sunu Khalid-an_i biʔn Muhammad-an qud rʔa sadigan-an fi al masʒdi.]

As can be seen, the R-expression *Khalid* stands in the c-command domain of the null *pro* for thematic reasons; nonetheless, it cannot be there since this move would induce a run-of-the mill Condition C violation. As it stands, the relevant Condition C violation obtains in the elided clause giving rise to the apparent impression that there is reconstruction into the *wh*-part, *viz.*, reconstruction effects arise in the elided clause (i.e. the one containing the tag).

Recall that Arabic SQs do not exhibit WCO effects. Although the literature on this recalcitrant phenomenon is replete with a wealth of proposals (Safir 2017), what matters for our current purposes is that the absence of such an effect is typically taken to be amenable to a construal analysis. But this is not a tenable solution, as shown earlier, given the fact that Arabic SQs cannot be based on the territory of either movement or base-generation. Note that WCO would ensue in case the tag crosses a coindexed pronoun. This crossover, however, is not a possibility under the biclausal analysis for independent reasons: since the *wh*-word and the tag are generated in different root clauses, then it is not expected that the tag would crossover a coindexed pronoun to begin with. This squarely explains the independent status of the tag: since the tag is independently generated in a different clause from the *wh*-part, it is not expected again that the tag would partake in the semantic and prosodic composition of the *wh*-part.

⁵The question of ellipsis identity is still a matter of debate, and whether the elliptical clause must be syntactically or semantically identical to the antecedent clause (Van Craenenbroeck and Temmerman 2019). For the purposes of this article, I assume in line with Merchant (2001) that the relation underlying the two clauses in an SQ articulation is one of a semantic relation, which can be recast in mutual entailment terms: CP1 must entail CP2 as illustrated in (a) for the example in (4.) (\Leftrightarrow denotes mutual entailment).

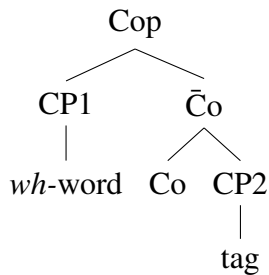
a. [CP1] iʃtra maʒa_i \Leftrightarrow [[CP2]] iʃtra kitaba_i A typical Arabic SQ

⁶It should be noted that ellipsis is not obligatory, but it is applied optionally to override a pragmatic oddity and discursive redundancy which are bound to arise if the non-elliptical form is pronounced.

2.1 Specifying Coordination

What is left unexplained under the analysis of [Arregi \(2010\)](#) is how the two clauses are syntactically related? Inspired by [De Vries \(2009\)](#), the relation between CP1 and CP2 in Arabic SQs is mediated by a relationship of coordination, dubbed by [De Vries](#) "Specifying Coordination": a syntactic relation which is argued to underlie a plethora of phenomena such as Clitic Left Dislocation, Clitic Right Dislocation, appositives and extraposition. According to this syntactic relation, the role of the second conjunct is to 'specify' the first conjunct. Stated in the realm of Arabic SQs, the tag is argued to specify or explicate the *wh*-word. The implementation of this type of coordination is translated by recourse to an X-bar scheme: the coordinator is a functional head projecting a Coordination Phrase (Cop), where CP1 and CP2 in Arabic SQs stand in a specifier-complement configuration. This is illustrated in (7) for an SQ articulation.

(7)



This specificational property of tags in a SQ articulation is triggered by a broad information-structural notion; viz., cotranstiveness. More specifically, I assume that tags in Arabic SQs are interpreted as (identificational) contrastive focus in the sense of [Kiss \(1998: 245\)](#) according to which tags in Arabic SQs "represent a subset of the set of contextually or situationally given elements for which the predicate phrase can potentially hold; it is identified as the exhaustive subset of this set for which the predicate phrase actually holds". The mechanism underlying this move is so-called 'Question Under Discussion' ([Roberts 2012](#)), which is informally can be defined in the context of Arabic SQs as those implicit questions which are uttered prior to tags. One crucial aspect of contrastive foci is to provoke an alternative set in the sense of Roothian alternatives ([Rooth 1992](#)), which is in turn regulated in terms of delimitation by an exhaustive identification.

That being said, all instances of Arabic SQs are interpreted by postulating that the *wh*-part raises an implicit question which must be addressed. Put otherwise, the sole presence of the *wh*-part as in (8) creates a communicative lacuna in the hearer's Common Ground in the sense of [Stalnaker \(1978\)](#) which consequently triggers an implicit QUD as illustrated in (9a). This implicit question in turn is resolved in (9b) by uttering a fragment which is typically accompanied by a disbelief intonation ([Arregi 2010](#)).

(8) maḏa iftra khalid-un
 what bought.3SG Khalid-NOM

‘What did Khalid buy ?

- (9) a. maḏa iftra
what bought
'what did he buy?'
- b. kitab-an,
book-ACC

That Arabic SQs are an instance of identificational focus, supplemented by an exhaustive identification, is much clearer when considering those questions with predicates which happen to hold of others as the example illustrated in (10b).

- (10) a. maḏa iftra
what bought
'what did he buy?'
- b. #kitab-an, qalam-an
book-ACC, pen-ACC

In particular, the infelicity of (10b) is attributed to the claim that the predicate in this instance does hold of others. As it stands, this runs counter to the ontology of contrastive focus according to which there is a need to identify a subset, meaning that the predicate in the context of contrastive focus never hold of others.

3 Split Questions: To move or not

Note, finally, that an important tenet in [Arregi \(2010\)](#)'s biclausal analysis is that ellipsis feeds movement. In other words, the tag must undergo movement before the ellipsis operation is applied to the whole clause as in (11), repeated from (1).

- (11) [CP₁ what_i bought Khalid_i] [CP₂ a book_i ~~Khalid bought t_i~~]

The original observation is that this movement is necessary so as to satisfy what seems to be a standard assumption in current syntactic theorizing: syntactic operations operate on constituents ([Merchant 2004](#)).⁷ This is known as the Move and Delete Approach (MADA). One trigger for this movement is the claim that there is a discrepancy in sluicing between interrogatives (12a) and relative clauses (12b): while sluicing is fine for interrogatives, it is ruled out in relative clauses.

- (12) a. Someone has talked to me, but I do not know who ~~talked to me~~.
- b. *Someone has talked to me, but I do not know the person who ~~talked to me~~.

To go about this discrepancy, [Merchant \(2001\)](#) stipulates that this is explained by recourse to a feature-based analysis: while ellipsis feature in interrogatives is specified for strong features [WH] and [Q], relatives are only specified for [WH]

⁷Interestingly, there is growing literature arguing that non-constituent does not exist, and thus the apparent non-constituent ellipsis can be derived via carrying out successive constituent ellipsis ([Sailor and Thoms 2014](#); [Griffiths 2015](#)).

feature rendering them opaque to movement. As noted by many authors (Murphy 2016; Thoms 2010), this is a stipulated treatment since it relies on the unsubstantiated claim that there are functional heads licensing elision by merely having an ellipsis feature. Another rationale behind this movement is that it is triggered by focus feature in the left periphery. This is however untenable solution since there are elements in Arabic which can behave as fragments but they cannot be fronted in a non-elliptical form as in (14), pointing to the unexpected result that there is a discrepancy between elliptical forms and their parallel non-elliptical ones.

- (13) a. həl kənt tʔlbasu fustan.an as^ffar.an
 Q was wear cloth.ACC yellow.ACC?
 'Was she wearing yellow dress?'
 b. laa, [bal] asswad-an
 No, [evidently] black.ACC

- (14) *asswad-an_i kaant tʔlbasu fustan.an i_i

Moreover, focus in Arabic needs not be fronted across the board, since it can appear in clause-final, clause-internal and clause initial position rendering obligatory focus fronting obsolete (Alzayid 2022: 147).⁸

- (15) hal aʕtyita al-faiz-a syarat-an?
 Q give the-winner-ACC car-ACC
 'did you give the winner a car?'
 a. Laa. Aʕtyitu alfaiza **BAYTA-AN**
 No. (I) gave the winner-ACC house-ACC
 'No. I gave the winner a house'
 b. Laa. Aʕtyitu **BAYTA-AN** li alfaizi
 No. (I) gave house-ACC to the winner-GEN
 'No I gave the winner a house'
 c. Laa. **BAYTA-AN** Aʕtyitu alfaiza
 No house-ACC (I) gave the winner-ACC
 'No. I gave the winner a house.'

On the analysis of Arregi (2010), movement is epitomized by two diagnostics: Preposition Stranding (PS) and islands sensitivity. Attending first to the PS generalization which is taken as symptomatic of movement of fragments (Merchant 2001), it has been argued that there is a correlation between the (non)availability of PS and a regular wh-movement. More specifically, English allows PS under sluicing, meaning that this language allows PS under a regular wh-movement. German,

⁸Although Arregi (2010) notes that his analysis does not hinge on this detail, he nonetheless proposes that the tag, flagged by a focal import, undergoes movement to the left periphery in line with the cartographic approach to information structure. As it stands, the Arabic example in (15) casts doubts on the cross-linguistic validity of the cartography approach to information-structural notions according to which there is a one to one correspondence between interpretation and syntactic positions. Arabic is not a quirk though, since the incompatibility of the cartographic approach to information-structural notions has been noted from a cross-linguistic perspective. See, among others, Bakir (2011), Van Craenenbroeck (2009), Pereltsvaig (2004) and Neeleman et al. (2009).

by contrast, is not a PS language, and hence the preposition must be pied piped; see [Merchant \(2001\)](#) for a list of cross-linguistic examples. Several counterexamples to the PS generalization, however, have been noted in the literature with the Arabic varieties being the notable ones in the current context. For example, it has been noted that the PS generalization does not apply to Libyan Arabic ([Algryani 2012](#)), Emirati Arabic ([Leung 2014](#)) and Jordanian Arabic ([Albukhari 2016](#)).⁹ As far as Modern Standard Arabic is concerned, [Algryani \(2017\)](#) puts forward an argument which apparently seems to furnish a piece of evidence in favour of the PS generalization: MSA is a non-PS language, and hence PS is not allowed in fragments (16) and full sentences (17).

- (16) maʕa man tahadaθat Hind-un?
with who talked.3SGF Hind-NOM
'With whom did Hind talk?'
a. *Zayid-en
Zayid-GEN
- (17) *Zayid-en tahadaθat Hind-un maʕa
Zayid-GEN talked.3SGF Hind-NOM with
'Hind talked with Zayid'

As argued by [Alzayid \(2022\)](#), MSA is not a non-PS language in all contexts, pointing out that PS is blocked in non-elided clauses, but possible in fragmentary answers (cf. 18b) when they involve in contrast contexts. Once this confound is controlled for, prepositionless fragments are possible in MSA, indicating that MSA is still anathema to the PS generalization.

- (18) a. maʕ man tahadaθt Hind-un? maʕ Ali-en?
With how talked-3SG Hind-NOM? with Ali-GEN
'with whom did Hind talk'
b. [bʔl] (maʕ) Khalid-en
[evidently] (with) Khalid-GEN

Locality conditions seem to be a straightforward matter as far as Arabic SQs are concerned: SQs straddled by islands give rise to an ungrammatical string as in (19) featuring Complex NP Constraint (for convenience, the island domain is put in brackets).

- (19) *ʕn yʔa muθuʕn smʕta ʔ sysyʔ ʔlað yatahadθu, ʕn ʔl
about which topic heard the politician who talk, about the
bat^ʕlah
unemployment?

⁹In an attempt to rescue the PG generalization, [Albukhari](#) and [Algryani](#) flesh out an analysis by which the offending cases can be reanalyzed as cases of pseudosluicing where a regular *wh*-movement is not involved. This is untenable, however, since case-matching is characteristic of pseudosluicing, a property which is not found in Arabic dialects, rendering the reanalysis inapplicable. See [Alzayid \(2022\)](#) for relevant discussion

(20) about the unemployment; ~~about [which topic heard the politician who talk,~~

At first blush, this lends credence to the analysis of [Arregi \(2010\)](#) according to which islands constraints would apply if the tag undergoes movement to escape the domain of ellipsis as depicted in (20). Nonetheless, I propose that locality constraints can be explained by invoking pragmatics, specifically by exploring how congruent QUDs are. In particular, locality conditions attested for (20) can receive an alternative non-syntactic analysis by probing into the make-up of the implied questions involved in Arabic SQs, which are regulated by a QUD-based scheme as shown earlier. Therefore, the source of deviance in (20) is not attributed to the claim that the tag undergoes movement, but to the argument that QUDs are syntactically ill-formed to be accommodated by congruent answers. To appreciate this point, consider a reconstruction of the example in (19) depicted in (21).

- (21) a. *ʔn yʔa muðuʔn smʔta ? sysy? ʔlað yatahadðu, ʔn ʔl
 about which topic heard the politician who talk, about the
 batʔlah
 unemployment?
 b. *maða yatahadðu ʔn
 what talks about
 'what does he talk about?
 c. #ʔn ʔl batʔlah
 about unemployment.

As can be seen, the fragment in (21c) is infelicitous in this context given the fact that both the explicit question in (21a) and the implicit question in (21b) are not syntactically well-formed in Arabic to begin with, rendering the tag semantically uncomputable, and the tag pragmatically infelicitous. As it stands, the tag does not move in Arabic, but it stays in situ, and the locality constraints can receive a principled account by provoking pragmatics and exploring how questions are formed in Arabic.¹⁰ Given the fact the tags in Arabic behaving as fragments are not an easy pass for the tests typically garnered in favour of focus fronting, the current analysis treating tags in Arabic SQs as unmoved ones capture a recurrent regularity underlying the behaviour of Arabic SQs, thereby obviating the need to look at Arabic SQs as a fragmented mosaic. For a related, not identical though, analysis arguing that the locality conditions attested for clausal ellipsis can receive a principled account by recourse to pragmatics, see [Griffiths and Lipták \(2014\)](#); [Griffiths \(2019\)](#).

¹⁰It could be maintained as well that this is a corollary of the assumption that focus phrases are island-sensitive. See [Krifka \(2006\)](#) and [Reich \(2002\)](#) for relevant discussion.

4 Conclusion

In this article, I have shown that the bisentential analysis of SQs as motivated by [Arregi \(2010\)](#) can be applied to Arabic, but with introducing a crucial caveat which aims at cancelling a movement dependency argued by [Arregi](#) to underlie the derivation of SQs. Under this approach, an SQ is analysed as a biclausal configuration, where the clause containing the tag is reduced by ellipsis at PF, thereby eschewing the need to enrich the syntax of Arabic SQs with a two-pronged account, which proves to be a suspect from a minimalist perspective. This connects to a prime advantage for the analysis defended here by maintaining that the tags in Arabic SQs do not undergo an exceptional movement, *pace* [Arregi \(2010\)](#), and hence nullifying this operation which is argued to be construction-specific ([Boone 2014](#)). If this analysis is on the right track, this ultimately means that the grammar is relieved of a constructional residue, thereby decomposing peripheral phenomena, such as SQs, into irreducibly core principles of the grammar ([Chomsky 1993](#)).

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