

Purely postverbal negation in Palestinian and Cairene Arabic: A reconstruction

Christopher Lucas

School of Oriental and African Studies

cl39@soas.ac.uk

A well-known feature of many north African and some Levantine Arabic dialects is their innovative bipartite negative construction, composed of the original preverbal negator *mā* and a newly grammaticalized suffix *-š* (< *šay?* ‘thing’). Less well known is that in Palestinian and, to a lesser extent, Cairene, *mā* has become optional in some contexts, such that the innovative element *-š* can express negation alone – a development familiar from European languages, which has been labelled Jespersen’s Cycle (after Jespersen 1917).

In this paper I present original fieldwork data on the complex set of lexico-syntactic restrictions on this construction in Palestinian, and contrast these with very different restrictions operative in Cairene, arguing that the precise nature of the restrictions in each case holds the key to reconstructing the acquisitional processes through which this construction came to be possible in both varieties.

Concerning Palestinian, there are several mutually contradictory suggestions in the previous literature regarding the distribution of the purely postverbal construction (PPC). Some (e.g. Shahin 2000: 37) have pointed out that it is common with the present tense but not the past. Others (e.g. Blau 1960, Hoyt 2006) have suggested that the distribution is phonologically motivated. Hoyt (2006: 118) states that the PPC is only possible with stems beginning with labial obstruents. This statement, if true, would explain why it is associated primarily with present tense verbs, since these have a characteristic *b-* prefix in Palestinian. Finally, Obler (1975: 107) suggests that the so-called ‘pseudo-verbs’ are in “free variation with respect to the optionality of *mā*”. The pseudo-verbs are a small class of very frequent and highly irregular verbs, most of which derive from original preposition + suffix pronoun complexes, and which have no non-periphrastic past tense-forms. The commonest pseudo-verbs in Palestinian are *šind-* ‘to have’, *maš-* ‘to have (on one’s person)’, *bidd-* ‘to want’ and the existential *fi*. Obler’s (1975: 107) claim is thus inconsistent with Hoyt’s (2006: 118), since *šind-* starts with a pharyngeal, while Hoyt’s (2006: 118) claim suggests, contrary to Shahin’s (2000: 37), that past tense verbs beginning with labial obstruents should be able to take the PPC.

To obtain more information on these points I compiled an acceptability judgment questionnaire which was administered to a range of speakers in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. 96% of respondents judged the PPC odd or unacceptable with past tense verbs, whether beginning with a non-labial, as in *akal*

‘he ate’, or a labial, as in *mesah* ‘he wiped’. A similar proportion judged the PPC to be normal with the pseudo-verbs *bidd-*, *fī* and *maʕ-*, but unacceptable with *ʕind-*. Given that the PPC is also very common with *t*-initial prohibitives (Obler 1975: 109), which have present-tense morphology but no *b*-prefix, there seems to be no straightforward synchronic phonological or morphosyntactic rule which can explain the distribution of the PPC in Palestinian. This suggests that a diachronic account, in which these synchronic irregularities follow naturally from earlier regularities, could be more illuminating.

The fact that Cairene also has a PPC in at least some contexts suggests that this might have been an earlier development in an unrecorded variety ancestral to both. It turns out, however, that the distribution of the PPC in Cairene is so different from its Palestinian counterpart as to make this implausible. The PPC is regularly possible with past-tense verbs in Cairene, and with all pseudo-verbs including pharyngeal-initial *ʕind-*, but only in interrogative and conditional clauses, not in declarative clauses (Woidich 1968, 2006). At the same time it is well known that a non-negative suffix *-š* (also < *šay?* ‘thing’) also appears in these non-assertive contexts in Cairene as well as in many other Arabic dialects (including those with only preverbal negation), roughly with the sense of English ‘at all’.

Taken together, these data suggest two separate scenarios for the development of the PPC in Palestinian and Cairene respectively. In Cairene, before the grammaticalization of the bipartite negative construction, non-negative *-š* appears in all non-assertive sentences (including negative ones) with the meaning ‘at all’. Once the bipartite negative construction grammaticalizes, however, *-š* is increasingly felt to be inherently negative. Thus it becomes able to express negation wherever it can appear, but maintains its restriction to non-assertive contexts, i.e. questions and conditionals. In Palestinian, by contrast, the PPC first develops through a form of haplology operative only with the highest-frequency labial-initial verbs (i.e. *maʕ-*, *bidd-* and *fī*, but not *ʕind-*). Later generations take this lack of *mā* in their PLD at face value and make a conservative generalization of the distribution of this new construction consistent with their input data: the set of all verb-forms with non-past morphology, excluding *ʕind-*.

References

- Blau, Joshua. 1960. *Syntax des palästinensischen Bauerndialektes von Bīr-Zēt, auf Grund der "Volkserzählungen aus Palästina" von Hans Schmidt und Paul Kahle*. Walldorf, Hessen: Verlag für Orientkunde Dr H. Vorndran.
- Hoyt, Frederick. 2006. ‘An Arabic Wackernagel clitic? The morphosyntax of negation in Palestinian Arabic’. In Mustafa Mughazy (ed.), *Perspectives on Arabic Linguistics XX*, 105–134. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Jespersen, Otto. 1917. *Negation in English and Other Languages*. Copenhagen: A. F. Høst.
- Obler, Lorraine. 1975. Reflexes of Classical Arabic *šay'un* ‘thing’ in the modern dialects: A study in patterns of language change. PhD dissertation, University of Michigan.
- Shahin, Kimary. 2000. *Rural Palestinian Arabic (Abu Shusha Dialect)*. Munich: Lincom Europa.
- Woidich, Manfred. 1968. Negation und negative Sätze im Ägyptisch-Arabischen.
- Woidich, Manfred. 2006. *Das Kairenisch-Arabisch: Eine Grammatik*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag.