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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Are Arabic Verbless Sentences 'Truly' Verbless? The Inadequacy of the Non-null Hypothesis

Imane Errguig[1]✉ and Malika Jmila[2]
[1]*Doctoral Researcher, Language and Society Laboratory, Faculty of Languages, Letters and Arts (FLLA), Ibn Tofail University (ITU), Kenitra, Morocco*
[2]*Professor, Language and Society Laboratory, Faculty of Languages, Letters and Arts (FLLA), Ibn Tofail University (ITU), Kenitra, Morocco*
Corresponding Author: Imane Errguig **E-mail**: imane.errguig@uit.ac.ma

| ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the controversial issue of Arabic null copular sentences or what is commonly referred to as 'verbless sentences' within a minimalist theoretical framework. Two Hypotheses are contrasted: the null copula hypothesis advanced by Fassi Fihri (1993), and the non-null hypothesis defended by Aoun et al. (2010) and Benmamoun (2000). Counterarguments to the 'zero' copula include (1) nominative case assignment, (2) an imperfective form of the copula in the present tense, (3) modal selection, and (4) minimality effects. A critical analysis allows alternative explanations refuting these counterarguments, hence reflecting the limitation of the non-null hypothesis. In this study, we aim to demonstrate the inadequacy of the non-null hypothesis and suggest a Revised Copula Spell-out Rule. The findings imply that the Arabic tense system proposed in non-null analyses is questionable and needs reconsideration.

| KEYWORDS

Verbless sentences, null-copula, non-null hypothesis, copular constructions

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

1.1 The issue of verbless sentences

The issue of Arabic verbless sentences is the object of long-standing controversy. These constructions are characterized by the absence of an overt verbal copula in the present Tense, and are generally labeled by early Arab grammarians (Sibawayh, 1849) as Nominal Sentences *al-Jumlah al-Esmiyah*. Many hypotheses have been postulated to account for the '*true nature*' of verbless sentences. These hypotheses are divided into two views: the null copula hypothesis first advanced by Bakir (1980) and refined by Fassi Fihri (1993) versus the non-null copula hypothesis advocated by Jelinek (1981) and later on adopted by Aoun et al. (2010) and Benmamoun (2000).

1.2 The null copula hypothesis

In his hypothesis, Fassi Fihri (1993) proposes a TMA (Tense, Aspect, and Mood) system or what he later describes as "a system of (under)specification of a three-valued TMA morphology" (Fassi Fihri, 2004, p. 141). The TMA system allows us to better account for the 'visibility of the copula' in stative and locative constructions and is formalized in the Copula Spelling Out Rule (Fassi Fihri, 1993, p. 156):

1. **Copula Spelling Out Rule:**
   Spell out the copula as *kwn* when Mood, Aspect, and/or Tense are specified, otherwise spell it out as zero.

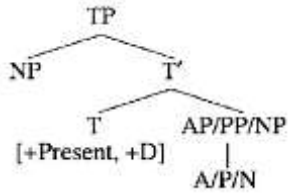
The copula spelling out rule is language-specific and is claimed to compensate for the descriptive inadequacy of the one-value Tense/Aspect view of Arabic, which leaves the issue of verbless sentences unsolved.

1.3 The non-null hypothesis

Building on Jelinek's (1981) dissertation on Colloquial Egyptian Arabic, Aoun et al. (2010) and Benmamoun (2000), among others, argue for a non-null copula in Arabic verbless sentences. Accordingly, the copula spell-out rule lacks sufficient explanatory power, as it does not account for the issues related to a 'zero' or 'deleted' copula. These issues can be avoided by accepting that verbless sentences do not have a verbal head; instead, only a TP is projected.

The structure under such an analysis would be as presented in (2):

2.



This paper argues for the inadequacy of the non-null hypothesis and suggests a refined model of the null hypothesis. The analysis demonstrates that counterarguments against the existence of an empty copula can be refuted based on Universal Grammar (UG) principles. Consequently, a Revised Copula Spell-out Rule provides a minimalist alternative to the 'zero' copula proposed in the previous analysis. This study is significant in that it raises questions about the adequacy of the Arabic T system proposed in the non-null hypothesis.

Accordingly, this paper is organized as follows. Section two discusses the minimalist framework, sketching the principles that are key to our analysis. Section three discusses alternative explanations refuting the counterarguments to a null copula and providing supporting evidence for the existence of an empty [*e*] copula thus demonstrating the limitation of the non-null hypothesis. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of the study. It is the thesis of this paper that the non-null hypothesis, and the Arabic Tense system proposed therein, are inconsistent with UG principles despite being based on minimalist grounds. Questions arise concerning the stipulation that the deictic present tense in Arabic is specified solely for a [+D] feature thus the non-obligatoriness of a VP. Consequently, more research needs to be conducted for a more expressive and comprehensive model.

2. Theoretical Framework: The Minimalist Program

In this section, we discuss the framework adopted in this paper namely, the minimalist program (MP). The Principles and Parameters Theory (PPT) (Chomsky, 1981) was mainly a descriptive model that failed to account for some language phenomena like the pro-drop parameter. Minimalism came then as an ongoing '*program*' rather than a '*theory*' (Chomsky, 2015, p. 7). A program that is open for update and refinement (Chomsky, 1995) (Chomsky, 2008). MP can be described as a means to simplify and reduce language analysis (Radford, 2004). Economy principles such as *Last Resort*, *Procrastinate*, and *Full Interpretation* (FI) all result in minimal derivations and representations, making MP a minimally constrained linguistic model.

As such, we assume the economy principle of *procrastinate* and the idea of *Merge at LF* since both are key to our Revised Copula Spell-out rule. By p*rocrastinate* covert move is preferred over an overt one. Overt move is only applicable to save a derivation from crashing. The opposite is true for Merge basically, except for one case: Merge of an Empty Category (EC), i.e. "covert insertion of an item **α** lacking phonological features, necessarily at the root" (Chomsky, 2015, p. 268). Although by this definition, Chomsky is referring to the Complementizer C position having a [+declarative] feature, we suggest that this applies to the verb in null copular sentences in Arabic. Having no features to force its merge at overt syntax, the copula is spelled out as an EC. The core idea is that there can be no superfluous steps in derivations and no superfluous symbols in representations (Chomsky, ibid, p. 137).

We further assume the distinction between the Lexicon and the Computational System (C_{HL}). The C_{HL} selects lexical items from the lexicon; that is, items that are necessary to derive a given sentence. However, for Arabic, we assume Fassi Fihri (1993, p. 7) that lexical items "are not stems but are only consonantal roots. Moreover, they may be categorially unspecified in the lexicon (…), and may inherit category labels only when they enter into syntax". This assumption is highly significant, especially in analyzing Case assignment and agreement.

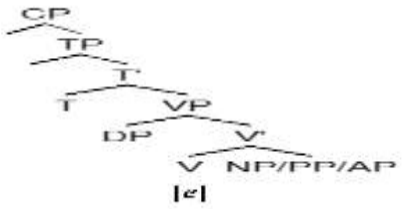
In this vein, this paper offers a critical analysis of Arabic null copular sentences in the light of MP. This study is mainly concerned with demonstrating the inadequacy of the non-null hypothesis by refuting the counterarguments against a null copula and proposing a Revised Copula Spell-out Rule. The latter departs from Fassi Fihri's (1993) rule but is formulated on minimalist grounds.

3. Alternative explanations

This section discusses the counterarguments postulated against the null copula hypothesis. Fassi Fihri's (1993) hypothesis has been criticized as lacking explanatory adequacy. Generally speaking, four issues are associated with the notion of 'zero' copula: (1) nominative case assignment, (2) an imperfective form of the copula in the present tense, (3) modal selection, and (4) minimality

effects. Each issue is analyzed in a separate subsection with the aim of highlighting the inadequacy of the non-null hypothesis and at the same time providing supporting evidence for the existence of an empty copula. We hence assume that the correct representation of the so-far called 'verbless sentences' is given in (3):

3.



Of course, intermediate nodes (Aspect, Mood) may project in concordance with the three-valued TMA model to which this paper adheres.

3.1 Nominative Case assignment

The first issue with the 'zero copula' spelling out rule is related to Case assignment. Aoun et, al. (2010) and Benmamoun (2000) observe that the overt copula assigns accusative case to the predicate, while the same predicate is assigned nominative case when the copula is absent. This is claimed to be evidence for the non-existence of a copula since no verbal head can assign opposing Cases depending on whether it is overt or not.

The constructions (4) and (5) show this contrast:

4 a. kaana l-waladu mariiḍ-an Standard Arabic (SA)
be.past.3ms the-boy student-acc
(the boy was sick)

b. 1-waladu mariid-un
the-boy sick-nom
(The boy is sick.)

5 a. kaana ʔibnuh ṭaalib-an
be.past.3ms son.his student-acc
(His son was a student.)

b. ʔibnuh ṭaalib-un
son.his student-nom
(His son is a student.)

These facts can be "easily account [ed]" for (Benmamoun, 2000, p. 43) by positing that there is no verb to assign accusative case. Yet, a closer look into Case assignment reveals that there are some issues with this argument.

First, considering Chomsky (1986b), structural accusative and nominative Case is assigned in the syntax (i.e. S-Structure configuration). In contrast, inherent Case is assigned through θ-marking, "Inherent Case is assigned by **α** to NP only if **α** θ-marks NP" (Chomsky, 2015, p. 104). Furthermore, structural Case, in general, reflects a Spec-head relation, while inherent Case, being linked to θ-marking, is assigned by lexical heads. Let us take the (b) examples in (4) and (5) where the copula is absent. Aoun et al. (2010) claim that the predicates *mariiḍ-un* and *ṭaalib-un* carry a 'default' nominative Case attributed to nominals that are not 'structurally case marked'. Such a claim implies that the nominative case attributed to the predicate is distinct from the structural nominative case assigned to the NP in [Spec, TP] by T. We further assume Chomsky's (2015) proposal that case assignment is a result "a by-product" of an Agree relation (a proposal later argued by (Pesetsky & Torrego, 2012)). Neither T nor Case per se are involved in this Agree process, only ϕ-features are. Hence, nominative and accusative morphology reflect an agreement relation with T (subject agreement), or with v (object agreement) respectively. To better understand this contrast, compare the constructions in (6) and (7):

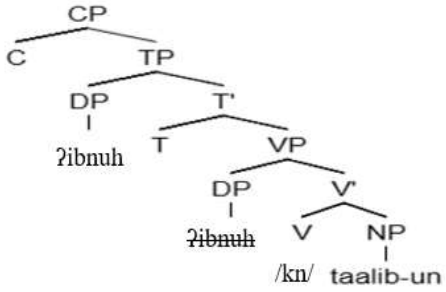
6. ʕumaru kaana ṭaalib-an/ * ṭaalibat-an/ *ṭṭullaab-a SA
Omar be.past.3m student.m.acc/* student.f.acc/* the student.m.pl.acc
'Omar was a student/* the students'

7. ʕumaru qaabala ṭaalib-an/ ṭaalibat-an/ ṭṭullaab-a
Omar meet.past.3m student.m.acc/ student.f.acc/ the student.m.pl.acc
'Omar met a student/the students'

In (7), the verb *qaabala* θ-marks its complement (Theme), thus assigning accusative case to it. Notice that in (7) the verb agrees with the subject but not with the complement. While in (6), there is an agreement relation between the subject, the verb and the NP in the complement position. In contrast, the verb *kaana* in (6) does not θ-mark the NP *taalib-an,* which implies that the

accusative case the NP carries does not come from a θ-relation but from an agreement relation with the verb. At first glance, one might think that this is evidence for the nonexistence of a copula in verbless sentences. A null copula would still enter an agreement relation with the NP (similar to the agreement of null subjects). However, we assume the copula is spelled out as a null consonantal root (Fassi Fihri, 1993) with no ϕ-features. As such the D-representation of (5b) will be as given in (8):

8.



Leaving aside T and its features, the verb, being uninflected for agreement[1], does not have the means to discharge its uninterpretable Case feature (if any) on the NP (i.e. through an agreement relation). In addition, the copula is an unaccusative verb that selects one argument (Experiencer/Agent that is the subject), the NP *ṭaalib-un* is not θ-marked by the verb, and thus no θ-relation is established between V and the postverbal NP. The NP may simply take the 'default' nominative case to meet the Case Filter, as noted by Aoun et al. (2010). But this seems more of an easy way out. A more expressive explanation would be to posit that the postverbal NP takes nominative case from T. More precisely, the NP subject *ʔibnuh* (his son) raises from the VP-internal subject position to a position [Spec, Agr] and then to [Spec, TP]. By Last Resort, the ϕ -features of *ʔibnuh*, are checked. Nominative Case, being uninterpretable, is checked as a free rider. The subject thus enters into an agreement relation with the adjective (Chomsky, 2015, p. 260). Aoun et al. (2010) further argue that the nominative case on the predicate is not assigned by T. Evidence supporting this claim comes from negative and aspectual sentences as given in (9a) and (9b) respectively (p. 38):

9 a. laysa rraʒul-u muʃallim-an / *muʃallim-un SA
Neg the-man-Nom teacher-Acc/ *teacher-Nom
(The man is not a teacher.)

b. laazaala rraʒul-u muʃallim-an / *muʃallim-un
still the-man-Nom teacher-Acc/ * teacher-Nom
(The man is still a teacher.)

We assume that *laysa* (not) is the overt realization of the copula + neg, and *laazaala* (still) of the copula + Aspect. Hence, the accusative case on the predicate, in these constructions, comes from agreement with the copula (which is now overt) and not from an agreement with T. Fassi Fihri (1993, p. 166) refers to *laysa* as "a copular Neg", we rather refer to *laysa* and *laazaala* as negative copula and aspectual copula respectively.

Benmamoun (2000, p. 66) claims that the NP subject in 'verbless sentences' is merged as a specifier to the lexical projection which is AP i.e. in [Spec, AP] where it "gets its thematic-role". It is unclear, however, under a 'verbless' analysis, how the NP 'gets' θ-marked given that functional categories do not enter into θ-marking relations (Chomsky, 2015, p. 49). Case assignment, given its close relation to agreement, rather serves as evidence in favor of the null copula hypothesis.

3.1 An imperfective form of the copula in the present tense

A second argument against the null copula hypothesis concerns the fact that some present tense constructions, be it in SA or MA (Moroccan Arabic), display an imperfective form of the copula as illustrated below. What prevents this form from appearing in verbless sentences then is an unsolved question (Al-Horais, 2006) (Aoun et al., 2010) (Benmamoun, 2000).

10. ta-y-kun 1-ʒaww sxun f-ṣṣif (MA)
asp-3m-be the-weather hot in-the-summer
(The weather is hot in the summer.)

11. ʕumar (ta-y-kun) dima waqəf təmma
Omar (asp-3m-be) always standing there
(Omar always stands there.)

12. ʕumar *(ta-y-kun) ṭwiil
Omar *(asp-3m-be) tall (Benmamoun, 2000, p.47).

Benmamoun (ibid) distinguishes between two types of present tense: a generic present with a stage-level predicate, and a deictic present with one level-predicate. The generic present (10 and 11) describes situations with no temporal specifications (i.e. situations

[1] uninflected for agreement but inflected for finiteness

that are true in the past, true in the present, and that are expected to be true in the future, (p. 47). The second type, the deictic present (12), describes permanent state of affairs. In other words, the temporal interpretation of the sentences must refer to a state that is true at the moment of speech. Accordingly, the imperfective copula is realized in generic present sentences but not in deictic present ones.

Fassi Fihri (1993) argues for the inadequacy of the one-valued Aspect / Tense model. He suggests that treating the present tense as Aspectual only leads to unsatisfactory results as it obstructs a descriptive generalization for the Arabic temporal system. Instead, a dual-value Tense and Aspect approach, within a revised Reichenbachian model (Reichenbach, 1947), provides a better explanation. Temporal morphology reflects a relation between S (speech time), event time (or E), and R (reference time, or relative time) which is a distinct time provided in the sentence. Fassi Firhri concludes that the copula is visible only when Tense and Aspect are specified or T is [+ past]. Furthermore, Mood distinctions also seem to affect the copula visibility. Mood is a suffix that merges with the verbal stem. Verbs in the imperfective form express different Moods (indicative, subjunctive, jussive, conditional, energetic, etc.). Thus, when Mood is specified, the copula must be visible:

13. Kun walad-an mutafaaʔil-an - Imperative mood SA
    be.m.s. boy-acc optimistic.acc
    (be an optimistic boy)
14. laa takun mutaʃaaʔiman - Prohibitive mood
    not be.m.s pessimistic.acc
    (don't be pessimistic)

Updated to minimalist terminology, the following generalizations for the Arabic Tense are proposed:

T = [-V] [- aspect] ➔ null copula [*e*]
T = [+V] [- aspect] ➔ overt copula
T = [- V] [+ aspect] ➔ overt copula
T = [-/+ V] [+ Mood] ➔ overt copula

Supporting evidence comes from Chomsky (2015, p. 268) who assumes that 'procrastinate holds for Merge as well as Move'. Although Chomsky was mainly concerned with merger of a [+declarative] C in a main clause, Wakabayashi (2002, p. 38) assumes that "Procrastinate requires Merge after Spell-Out in general" in the absence of a feature that forces an overt merger operation. Drawing on these stipulations, we propose a Revised Copula Spell-out Rule:

15. Revised Copula Spell-out Rule
Copula is spelled out as [*e*] iff T is [-V] [-Asp] [- Mood].

Unless a feature forces Merge in overt syntax, the copula is spelled out as an empty category (EC).

3.3 Modal selection

The third counterargument the non-null hypothesis provides concerns the selectional property of Modal heads. Modals, cross-linguistically, select a verbal complement. However, the insertion of a modal in a 'verbless' sentence leads to ungrammaticality as can be observed from the contrast in (16) and (17) (Aoun et al., 2010, p. 39):

16 a. yə-qdər yə-mʃi MA
    3m-may 3m-go
    (He may/can go.)
  b. lazəm yə-mʃi
    necessary 3-go
    (He must go.)
17 a. *ʕumar yə-qdər muʕəllim
    Omar 3-may teacher
  b. *ddar tə-qdər kbira
    the-house 3f-may big
  c. *lə-ktab yə-qdər fuq l-məktəb
    the-book 3-may on the-desk

the fact that the constructions in (17) are ungrammatical can only be explained by the nonexistence of a verbal projection. This becomes more evident since the same constructions become grammatical if we insert an imperfective form of the copula (Aoun et al., 2010, p. 40):

18 a. ʕumar yə-qdər y-kun muʕəllim MA
    Omar 3-may 3m-be teacher
    (Omar may be a teacher.)
  b. ddar tə-qdər t-kun kbira
    the-house 3f-may 3f-be big
    (The house may be big)

c. lə-ktab yə-qdər y-kun fuq l-məktəb
the-book 3-may 3m-be on the-desk
(The book may be on the desk)

Fassi Fihri (1993) suggests that Modals denoting possibility, probability, or necessity, etc., select a verbal projection that is headed by Mood markers (i.e., Mood phrases). The selectional requirements are not met without these Mood phrases. Modal particles may also influence the interpretation of the reference time indicated by the verbal inflection. As such, the realization of the copula in (18) can be explained within the three-value TMA model, which expresses Tense and modality interaction.

We assume that the phonetic realization of the copula in Modal constructions is accounted for in our revised copula spell-out rule, repeated here for convenience:

19. **Revised copula spell-out rule**:
Copula is spelled out as [*e*] iff T is [-V] [-Asp] [- Mood].

Modals, in general, express a semantic interpretation like possibility, futurity, or necessity (Radford, 2004). These semantic interpretations are part of the C-I (Conceptual-Intentional) level of the language performance system i.e. LF interface. Chomsky (2015) argues that the complementizer C reflects mood or force i.e. declarative, interrogative, and so on. Therefore, we compare (16) and (18) to the construction in (20):

20. ʕumaru filbayti SA
Omar in-the-house
(Omar is at home)

In (20), C has an indicative force that implies factual information, while C in (16) and (18) is indicative of a probability (and necessity in (16b)). We suppose that Modals have a matching feature and that the copula is overtly merged as a result of the procrastinate principle.

3.2 Minimality effects

Finally, the Minimal Link Condition is the evidence *par excellence* upon which non-null grammarians build their strongest counterargument. Accordingly, the minimality effect prevents the movement of one head across another (Rizzi, 1990). Aoun et al. (2010, p. 41) appeal to minimality to justify the ungrammaticality of (21b) in contrast to the well-formed structure of (21a):

21 a. ʕumar ma-kan-ʃ mriḍ MA
Omar neg-was.3ms-Neg ill
(Omar was not ill.'
b. *ʕumar ma- mriḍ -ʃ kan
Omar neg-ill-neg was.3ms

Minimality does not seem to affect the grammaticality of the 'verbless sentences' in (22):

22 a. ʕumar ma- ʃi mriḍ MA
Omar neg-neg ill
(Omar is not ill.)
b. ʕumar ma- mriḍ-ʃ
Omar neg-ill-Neg
(Omar is not ill.)

Earlier, Benmamoun (2000, p. 46) had raised the same issue upon observing the grammaticality of the 'verbless sentences' in (23):

23 a. ʕumar ma-ʃi muʕallim MA
Omar neg-neg teacher
(Omar is not a teacher.)
b. ʕumar ma- muʕallim -ʃ
Omar neg-teacher-neg
(Omar is not a teacher.)
c. ʕumar ma-ʃi f-d-dar
Omar neg-neg in-the-house
(Omar is not in the house.)

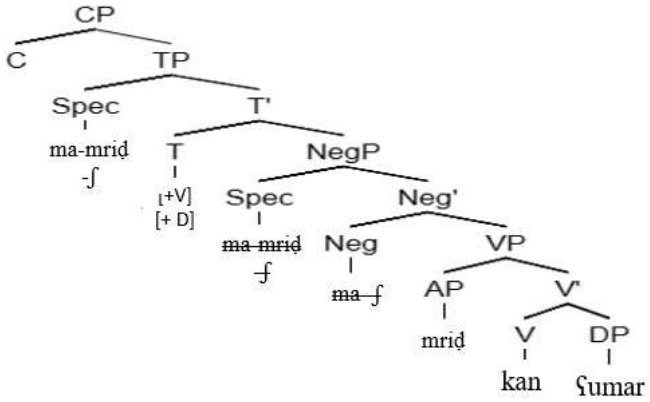
Assuming there is a null copula in (22) and (23), these sentences should be ungrammatical as they instantiate a violation of minimality. However, a deeper analysis reveals the opposite.

Let us first start with the construction in (21a), the copula being in the past tense merges with the negative morphemes and raises to T to check the [+V] feature, the [+D] feature is checked as a free rider by agreement. Raising the DP *ʕumar* to [Spec, TP] is discursively driven (scope). Thus, the grammaticality of a VSO order:

24. ma-kan-ʃ ʕumar mriḍ MA
Neg-was.3ms-Neg Omar ill
(Omar was not ill)

The situation in (21b) is somehow different. Moro (1997) refers to this as an Inverse Copular Sentence[2]. As such, the features in T have two potential checkers: the past verb *kan* (was) or the adjective *mriḍ* (ill). By the minimality condition, while the verb merges with negation in a (head, head) relation, the adjective merges with negation in a (spec, head) relation and raises to T checking its features [+V, +D]. This is illustrated in the D-structure in (25):

25.



The features in T [+D, +V] are now checked and deleted and no further movement is allowed, thus the ungrammaticality of (21b). Relating this to null copular sentences, in (22) and (23) (a) examples, the DP *ʕumar* (Omar) raises to [Spec, TP] to check the [+D] feature under the EPP. The present tense having a [-V] feature does not force verb movement, thus the covert merge of the copula in the V position. Considering the (b) examples, (22b) is similar to the Inverse copular sentence in (21b). As per (23b), a native speaker of MA would judge this sentence as awkward[3]. Indeed, the NP *muʕallim* (teacher) cannot merge with negation because the latter is inaccessible for a second merger (after it merges with the DP *ʕumar*)[4]. Furthermore, while the AP in (21) and (22) can be inversed (inverse copular sentence), the NP in (23) cannot. The reason is that indefinite NPs cannot be preverbal in Arabic (Fassi Fihri, 1993) (Rahhali, 2003), and this in itself is evidence for an empty copula:

26 a. * muʕallim ʕumar / mri:ḍ ʕumar MA
teacher Omar / ill Omar
meaning (Omar is a teacher) / (Omar is ill)
b. muʕallim ʕumar ja
teacher Omar come.3m.past
(Teacher Omar came)

Finally, we consider the construction (23c). Once again, the DP *ʕumar (Omar)* raises to [Spec, TP] and the copula is merged at LF since T is [-V]. Given that PPs (prepositional phrases) have the categorial features [-N, -V], the PP *f-ddar* (in the house) cannot check the features in T, and merger with negation violates minimality:

27. *! ma-ʃi f-ddar ʕumar / *ma- f-ddar -ʃ ʕumar MA
neg-neg in-the-house Omar/ neg- in-the-house -neg Omar

The only case where this is possible is when the copula is aspectual[5] hence overt as in (28):

28. ma-kayən-ʃ f-ddar ʕumar MA
neg-be.3m.Asp.neg in-the-house Omar
(Omar is not in the house)

In conclusion, this section successfully demonstrates the limitations of the main four counterarguments to the null hypothesis. The arguments are descriptively inadequate as the grammaticality judgment is highly questionable. This grammaticality judgment seems to be related to some degree of language interference between Amazigh and MA[6]. Furthermore, our analysis provides a minimally constrained grammar for copular sentences irrespective of whether the copula is overt or not.

4. Conclusion

[2] We only adopt the appellation here as Moro (1997) proposes a different treatment of Inverse Copular Sentences

[3] Data source: Introspection (as a native speaker of MA), and interviews with native speakers of MA and Amazigh.

[4] The first is the merger of the DP *ʕumar* with neg on its way up to [Spec, TP] position (cyclic movement), evidence comes from sentences like "ma-na-ʃ muʕallim" (neg-I-neg teacher (I am not a teacher))

[5] We skip going into the details of Existential sentences such as these for space limitations.

[6] This observation is made upon interviewing native speakers of MA and Amazigh, and noticing that a construction like "ʕumar ma-muʕallim-ʃ" (Omar is not a teacher) is judged unacceptable (more precisely, awkward) by the former while it is accepted by the latter.

It emerges from this discussion that the non-null hypothesis shows serious limitations and that a refined null copula hypothesis allows for strong arguments in the debate of verbless sentences. We have succeeded in providing alternative explanations for the issues linked to a 'zero' copula, and in proposing the Revised Copula Spell-out Rule which accounts for the existence of an empty copula [*e*]. The fact that the counterarguments are refuted leads to doubts about the validity of the non-null hypothesis and the Arabic Tense system proposed therein. Advocates of the non-null hypothesis argue that the deictic present tense in Arabic is specified solely for a [+D] feature. Having no [V] feature, there is no need for a verbal copula thus no need for a VP (Aoun et al., 2010) (Benmamoun, 2000). Moreover, positing that the deictic present T only has a [+D] feature explains word order preferences. We raise the question here about the extent to which the non-null hypothesis (being based on minimalist grounds) abides by UG principles. Chomsky (2015) describes the category T as being specified for two features [±D] and [±V]. Stipulating that T does not have a VP as its complement is also problematic. This is inconsistent with Universal Grammar principles regarding clause structure. A CP has an optional specifier and an obligatory TP complement, which, in turn, has an obligatory VP complement (Chomsky, ibid). Consequently, further research is needed to come up with a linguistic model capable of explaining the particularity of Arabic within the theory of UG.

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