On the Syntax and Semantics of the Transitivity of Prepositional Verbs in Arabic

The notion of transitivity, which is well attested in natural language, is normally understood not only as a property of the verb but also of the entire clause (Hopper and Thompson, 1980, p. 294). The characterization of transitivity is generally, but not necessarily, based on parallel syntactic and semantic grounds. A clause is considered transitive if it involves a nominative subject and an accusative direct object; the former is a volitional, actively-instigating Agent, whereas the latter an inactive, affected Theme (see Lyons, 1968, Hopper and Thompson, 1980, Givón, 1995, and Kittilä, 2002). In traditional Arabic grammar, constructions may be classified as transitive if they involve verbs that assign accusative Case to their direct or cognate object (see Sibawayh, 1316/1898, Levin, 1979, Saad, 1979) or only to their direct object that is also a Theme argument (Ibn Jinni (as cited in Schapiro, 2000)). The delineation of transitivity, however, extends beyond the subject-direct object relation. This is manifested in Arabic prepositional verbs like those given in (1). (In the transcription system here, I use the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA); I only provide the meaning of the verbs because the prepositions are semantically vacuous.)

(1) a. juyi:r ʕala ‘invade, attack’
    b. janqa’di:d ʕala ‘attack’
    c. jaṣṭur ʕala ‘find’
    d. jaqdi:i: ʕala ‘kill, finish, destroy’
    e. jaqbidi: ʕala ‘capture, arrest’
    f. jut:i:h bi ‘overthrow’
    g. jaʃal bi ‘act upon, affect, have an effect on’

The above verbs are seemingly intransitive since they must be followed by prepositional phrases (PPs); however, such verbs are in fact transitive. In support of this argument, I offer an account of the transitivity feature of such verbs both syntactically and semantically by examining their structural configuration and thematic representation. I will show that such verbs not only project, but also require, an internal argument (embedded under a PP-complement) to which they assign Theme, and that the preposition is semantically vacuous but serves a grammatical function (Case licenser), namely that the Theme argument is assigned genitive Case, and therefore structurally licensed, by the preposition. There are several syntactic diagnostics that can be used to determine the transitivity feature of such prepositional verbs; such tests include checking the obligatoriness of the PP-complements of such verbs and their derivatives (cf. Carrier and Randall, 1992), considering the relative order of postverbal arguments and adjuncts (cf. Pollard and Sag, 1987), and considering the distribution of complement PPs as opposed to adjunct PPs (Pollard and Sag, 1987). I will show that such diagnostics, among many others, provide evidence that the prepositional verbs in (1) are transitive (namely that they syntactically project an internal argument). Moreover, I provide a unified treatment of transitive prepositional verbs in Arabic and of the criteria based on which such transitive verbs must be distinguished from verbs followed by adjunct PPs (e.g., yajlis ʕala ‘sit on’, yanaam ʕala ‘sleep on’).
References


