

Morpho-Syntactic Features of Mosuli Arabic Dialect

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Abstract

Mosuli Arabic is a dialect of northern Iraq, primarily spoken in Mosul. It is still substantially underrepresented in current linguistic research, but it is important for morphosyntactic theories. This article is a detailed morphosyntactic study of Mosuli Arabic, focusing on verbal morphology and non-verbal clause structures. It deals with several phenomena: root and pattern morphology, aspectual distinctions, agreement, negation, and cliticization. It also deals with various nonverbal constructions, nominal, adjectival, locative, pronominal, and existential predicates, all of which have been extracted from data collected from local speakers. The research is theoretical in nature, based on a feature-based framework, where grammatical interpretation is based primarily on morphologically expressed features, rather than universally defined syntactic structures. The verbal complex of Mosuli Arabic provides rich grammatical information, which improves sentence economy. The dialect is characterized by verbless phrases and paratactic clause sequences. Conversations reveal interpretative and temporal relations rather than relying on syntactic markers. This means that meaning is conveyed through context and morphology, not through traditional grammar structures. These patterns challenge syntactic theories that depend heavily on projections and the universal availability of functional categories like tense phrases and obligatory copular structures. The results suggest that morphology and discourse can work together to bolster grammatical knowledge, reducing the need for massive syntactic projection. The work contributes to the field of Arabic dialectology with experimental methods and feeds into ongoing discussions about the relationship between morphology and syntax and the universality of functional categories.

Keywords: Mosuli Arabic, Iraqi Arabic, morpho-syntax, verbal morphology, non-verbal predication, feature-based grammar.

1. Introduction

Arabic dialectology has long recognized the diversity of spoken Arabic. Regional dialects have not been sufficiently studied in formal linguistic studies of Modern Standard Arabic, which has led to a gap in understanding the full linguistic richness and variation present in these dialects. Iraqi Arabic has a lot of internal variation due to some complex historical, geographical, and sociolinguistic factors. Mosuli Arabic is unique for the absence of morphosyntactic analysis. The northern Iraqi Mosul Arabic is very different from the southern Iraqi and the Levantine dialects. These differences are not only limited to phonology and lexicon, but also include the morpho-syntactic structure of the dialect. Mosuli Arabic speakers can communicate well without a clear verb, tense markers, or copula. Dialectal verbal morphology is complex and informative. This complexity reflects the region's unique linguistic heritage and how culture and society shape language, particularly in how Mosuli Arabic speakers use context and non-verbal cues to convey meaning rather than explicit grammatical structures. Linguists need to understand this in order to fully understand the morpho-syntactic patterns of Mosuli Arabic

compared to other dialects. It has aspectual, agreement, and polarity features that many other languages require syntactic support for, as in English and French, which mark aspectual distinctions differently through auxiliary verbs and syntactic structures. A theoretical analysis of Mosuli Arabic morphosyntax emphasizes verbal morphology and non-phrase structures. These areas are analyzed together because they show a dialect trait: morphological and pragmatic encoding of grammatical information rather than syntax. This article argues that in the absence of syntactic projection, the morphological saturation and discourse-based interpretation provide Mosuli Arabic with grammatical completeness. The syntactic structure of Mosuli Arabic is economical and feature-driven rather than rule-based. This result has implications for Arabic dialectology and theoretical accounts of functional categories such as Tense Phrase (TP), the Extended Projection Principle (EPP), and the universal nature of copular constructions. Northern Iraqi Mosuli Arabic is significantly different from southern Iraqi and Levantine dialects. Apart from phonological and lexical differences, these distinctions affect the morpho-syntactic framework of the dialect. Mosuli Arabic speakers express their messages using grammatical structures that do not involve verbs, tense markers, or copulas. The verbal morphology of the dialect is complex and informative. This complexity reflects the unique linguistic heritage of the language, and also reveals the influence of culture and society on language, especially with respect to how the speakers of Mosuli Arabic convey meaning without using grammatical elements like verbs or tense markers in the traditional sense. So linguists need to understand these morpho-syntactic patterns to fully understand the language of Mosuli Arabic relative to other dialects. Many languages require syntactic support for aspectual, agreement and polarity features, such as the way English and French mark aspectual distinctions differently, relying much more heavily on auxiliary verbs and syntactic structures. A theoretical discussion of Mosuli Arabic morphosyntax reveals the importance of verbal morphology and non-phrase structures. In these domains, there is a core dialectal property: a tendency to express grammatical information morphologically and pragmatically rather than syntactically. This paper argues that Mosuli Arabic achieves grammatical completeness through morphological saturation and discourse-based interpretation that reduces syntactic projection. Mosuli Arabic syntactic structure is feature-driven and efficient, not obligatory. This claim affects Arabic dialectology and theoretical discussions of functional categories such as Tense Phrase (TP), the Extended Projection Principle (EPP), and copular constructions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Arabic Dialects and Morphological Richness

Research on Arabic dialects has shown over and over that morphology is very important for making grammatical relationships clear. Early descriptive studies, like those by Cowell (1964) and Ferguson (1959), focused on how root-and-pattern morphology was similar between Classical Arabic and modern dialects, while also showing important changes. Subsequent theoretical investigations have examined the distribution of grammatical information in Arabic dialects across morphology and syntax. Benmamoun (2000) claims that Arabic dialects differ in functional head tense and agreement. Brustad (2000) shows that spoken Arabic often deviates from Modern Standard Arabic syntactic patterns, especially in informal registers. Most in-depth studies of Iraqi Arabic have looked at Baghdadi Arabic (Erwin, 1963; Owens, 2006), while northern varieties have been mostly ignored. As a result, many generalizations about Iraqi Arabic morpho-syntax are based on southern data and may not extend to Mosuli Arabic.

2.2 Verbless Clauses and Non-Verbal Predication

The existence of clauses without verbs is one of the most talked-about topics in Arabic syntax. Eid (1993) presents a preliminary analysis of Arabic nominal sentences, claiming that they are true clauses and not reduced verbal structures. Further research has discussed whether these clauses contain a silent copula, a functional head, or no verbal structure at all. Verb clauses are especially rich and unrestrictive in dialectal Arabic. Holes (2004) observes that non-verbal predication is frequently used in Gulf and Iraqi dialects to express the present. However, the majority of studies have a tendency to treat such constructions as marginal or stylistic, and not as important components of the grammar. The Mosuli Arabic data in this article show that non-verbal predication is not just a stylistic choice, but a fundamental grammatical strategy. Nominal, adjectival, locative, and pronominal predicates manifest freely in main clauses without verbal mediation, contesting analyses that assume an underlying copular structure.

2.3 Tense, Aspect, and the Status of TP

Arabic tenses have been debated. The traditional correlates of perfective and imperfective are past and present tenses, respectively. Modern linguistic analyses have suggested that Arabic verb forms express aspect rather than tense (Comrie, 1976; Benhamou, 2000). Many dialects deduce future reference from context or indicate it with particles rather than verbal inflection. Some scholars argue that some Arabic constructions do not need TP. Mosuli Arabic gives this position strong empirical support. As shown later in the article, Mosuli Arabic clauses can be grammatical and temporally interpretable without tense projection, suggesting that TP is not necessary even within a language family.

2.4 Morphology–Syntax Interface

Theoretical linguistics has focused on the connections between morphology and syntax. Lexicists and scholars of distributed morphology hold differing views on the responsibility for clarification. Borer (2005) and Ackema and Neeleman (2004) argue that rich morphology can simplify syntax by encoding essential structural characteristics. The rich morphology and syntactic freedom of Arabic dialects provide a perfect testing ground for these ideas. Evidence from Mosuli Arabic supports the idea that morphology and discourse can collaborate to claim grammatical interpretation, allowing for syntactic ambiguity.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Feature-Based Grammar

This study adopts a feature-based approach to morpho-syntax, in which grammatical categories are defined in terms of feature bundles rather than fixed structural positions. Features are assumed to be interpretable at the interfaces with semantics and discourse, and syntactic structure emerges only when required for feature valuation. The core assumption is that features, not projections, are primary. Functional projections such as TP, CP, or Prep are not assumed to be universally present but are introduced only when necessary to support interpretation.

3.2 Features Relevant to Mosuli Arabic

The analysis focuses on the following feature types:

φ-features: person, number, and gender, realized morphologically on verbs and clitics

Aspectual features: perfective vs. imperfective

Polarity features: negation

Discourse features: topic, focus, definiteness

Crucially, many of these features are realized directly on lexical items rather than through independent syntactic heads.

3.3 Structural Economy

Structural economy is a guiding principle in this analysis. When features can be interpreted without projecting additional structure, Mosuli Arabic avoids doing so. This results in frequent null subjects, absence of copulas in present-time clauses, lack of obligatory tense marking, and reliance on discourse context for temporal and informational interpretation. This approach aligns with minimalist assumptions while allowing for significant cross-linguistic and intra-language variation.

4. Contribution and Scope of the Study

This article makes three main contributions:

Empirical contribution: It provides the first extensive morpho-syntactic description of Mosuli Arabic based on original data. Theoretical contribution: It offers new evidence against the universality of TP, EPP, and copular projections. Methodological contribution demonstrates the value of dialectal data in testing and refining general linguistic theory.

5. Methodology

5.1 Data Collection

The data examined in this study were obtained from eight native speakers of Mosuli Arabic, all of whom were lifelong inhabitants of Mosul before their displacement. The participants, aged 25 to 65, exhibited a diverse array of genders and educational backgrounds. No individual reported residing outside the Mosul region for an extended duration before reaching adulthood. Data were collected using three complementary methods: spontaneous conversation, semi-structured interviews, and targeted elicitation tasks. Spontaneous conversations yielded naturalistic discourse data, while the interviews permitted a controlled examination of specific grammatical constructions. Elicitation tasks were designed to test marginal structures, minimal pairs, and contrasts related to aspect, negation, and non-verbal predication. All sessions were audio-recorded with participant consent and later transcribed using a simplified phonemic transcription system. Glossing follows the Leipzig Glossing Rules. Judgments of grammaticality and acceptability were cross-checked among speakers to ensure reliability.

5.2 Analytical Framework

The analysis is qualitative and descriptive, based on a feature-oriented syntactic theory. Structures are analyzed in terms of the morphological realization and interpretation of features, rather than a strict syntactic template. Much attention is given to constructions that lack clear syntactic parts, but still convey a full propositional meaning.

6. Verbal Morphology in Mosuli Arabic

6.1 Root-and-Pattern Morphology

Like other Arabic dialects, Mosuli Arabic preserves the Semitic root-and-pattern morphological system. Verbal lexemes are based on consonantal roots, generally trilateral, combined with vocalic patterns to encode grammatical and semantic distinctions, e.g., the root $\sqrt{\text{K-T-B}}$ yields *katab* ‘he wrote’ (simple perfective), *kattab* ‘he made someone write’ (causative), *inkatab* ‘it was written’ (passive/reflexive). Derived patterns can modify argument structure without an additional syntactic projection. This demonstrates that valency alternations in Mosuli Arabic are primarily morphological rather than syntactic.

6.2 Aspectual Distinctions

Verbal morphology in Mosuli Arabic encodes aspect rather than tense. The primary distinction is between perfective and imperfective forms.

The perfective form signals completed or bounded events, typically interpreted as past:

ru□t il-sūg “I went to the market.”

The imperfective form is aspectual underspecified and receives its temporal interpretation from context:

yi-□kul kibāb kull yō “He eats kebab every day.” (habitual)

yi-□kul čibāb hassa “He is eating kebab now.” (progressive)

yi-□kul čibāb ba□dēn “He will eat kebab later.” (future)

These data confirm that Mosuli Arabic lacks grammaticalized present or future tense morphology. Temporal reference is inferred through adverbials and discourse context.

6.3 Agreement and Subject Encoding

Verbs in Mosuli Arabic obligatorily encode ϕ -features for person, number, and gender. Subject agreement is robust even when the subject DP is absent. For instance:

ru□-na “We went.”

The verbal suffix alone is sufficient to identify the subject. Overt subject pronouns appear primarily for discourse reasons, such as contrast or emphasis:

ana ru□t il-sūg “I (not someone else) went to the market.”

This supports the claim that Mosuli Arabic does not require a syntactic subject position for clause well-formedness.

6.4 Object Cliticization

Object arguments in Mosuli Arabic may be realized as full noun phrases or as pronominal clitics attached to the verb. Cliticization is highly productive and encodes person, number, and gender. Examples include:

šaaf-ni “He saw me.”

□a□ē-ha il-kitāb “He gave her the book.”

The placement of object clitics outside negation markers indicates their morphological integration into the verbal complex rather than syntactic independence.

6.5 Verbal Negation

Negation in Mosuli Arabic is expressed using the preverbal particle *mā*. This particle does not require auxiliary support or tense marking.

mā ruḥt il-sūg “I didn’t go to the market.”

Negation also applies freely to stative and non-verbal predicates, further supporting the absence of a required verbal projection.

7. Verbless Clauses

7.1 Nominal Predication

Nominal predicates occur freely in Mosuli Arabic without copular verbs:

axūy abīb “My brother is a doctor”.

Such clauses are not restricted to equational contexts and occur productively in main declaratives.

7.2 Adjectival and Locative Predication

Adjectival predicates:

il-bēt kabīr “The house is big”.

Locative predicates:

il-miftāḥ ind-ak “The key is with you”.

These constructions show no evidence of covert verbal structure. Tense interpretation is derived pragmatically.

7.3 Pronominal Predication

Pronominal elements may function as predicates:

hāḏa huwwa “This is him.”

Here, the pronoun encodes identity and definiteness without verbal mediation. Such constructions challenge analyses that restrict pronouns to argument positions.

8. Existential Constructions

Existential clauses are formed using the particle aku:

aku nās barra “There are people outside.”

Negation scopes over the existential predicate:

mā aku may “There is no water.”

The existential particle behaves as a predicate rather than a verb, further illustrating the prevalence of non-verbal clause types.

9. Parataxis and Clause Chaining

Paratactic structures are common in narrative discourse in Mosuli Arabic, alaḥt min il-bēt, il-šāri fāi “I left the house; the street was empty. Temporal and causal relations are inferred rather than grammatically marked. This strategy reduces syntactic complexity while allowing interpretive richness.

10. Discourse and Information Structure

Mosuli Arabic syntax is highly sensitive to discourse factors. Topic–comment structures are often expressed through word order variation rather than morphological marking. Overt pronouns signal contrast or emphasis, while null arguments are default. This indicates that information-structural features are largely external to narrow syntax and are resolved at the discourse interface.

11. Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study have several implications:

Against universal TP, fully grammatical clauses exist without tense projection. Against obligatory copulas, non-verbal predication is structurally complete. For feature-driven grammar, morphology, and discourse can license interpretation without syntactic elaboration. For dialect-based theory, microvariation within Arabic challenges strong universalist claims.

12. Broader Implications for Morphology–Syntax Interaction

The Mosuli Arabic data in this study provide additional evidence that the relationship between morphology and syntax is not consistent across languages. In many languages, grammatical interpretation relies heavily on syntactic structure, with functional projections such as TP, As prep, and prep assumed to be necessary components of clause architecture. However, the Mosuli Arabic system demonstrates that a substantial portion of this interpretive work can instead be carried out by morphological marking and discourse inference. In particular, the verbal complex in Mosuli Arabic encodes agreement, aspect, and argument structure in a way that significantly reduces the need for independent syntactic projections. The ϕ -features are morphologically realized, which makes the overt subjects optional, and the temporal interpretation of events is possible through the aspectual morphology without the need for grammatical tense marking. The non-verbal predication also shows that propositional relations such as identity, attribution, and location can be expressed without a copular verb or an explicit predication head. These findings are consistent with theoretical accounts that emphasize the autonomy and interpretative potential of the morphological features. The data from Mosuli Arabic suggest that languages have a large degree of variability in the distribution of grammatical information among grammatical components, rather than having a rigid universal syntactic structure. In languages with rich morphology, syntactic structure may therefore be comparatively reduced while still supporting full semantic interpretation. Consequently, dialectal Arabic varieties such as Mosuli Arabic play an important role in evaluating claims about grammatical universals. They show that grammatical systems can be functionally complete using different structural strategies. This shows that we need theoretical models that let grammar's architecture be more flexible.

13. Conclusion

This study has been concerned with the verbal morphology and the non-verbal clause types in Mosuli Arabic. The study shows that Mosuli Arabic keeps grammatical information in its morphology, which makes its syntactic structure easier to understand. Inflectional morphology gets the subject directly without noun phrases, while verbal morphology has aspect and agreement variations. This dialect allows nouns, adjectives, locatives, pronominals and existential structures without copular verbs. These patterns indicate minimal syntax projection in Mosuli Arabic. Speech context and morphology are central to understanding grammar. Aspectual morphology specifies event structure, agreement morphology identifies participants, and pragmatic inference supplies temporal context in the absence of tense. All necessary information is provided in minimal syntactic clauses. These findings are inconsistent with theoretical grammatical models asserting the universality of functional projections, e.g. Tense Phrase or obligatory copular structures. Mosuli Arabic suggests that morphology and discourse can provide enough interpretive direction. This evidence helps feature-based grammars that decide

features only based on syntactic structure. The study adds to Arabic dialectology by documenting the grammatical properties of a relatively little-studied northern Iraqi dialect. Baghdadi Arabic has led to a better understanding of the structure and function of Iraqi Arabic. The present study demonstrates that Mosuli Arabic and Baghdadi Arabic are quite different, especially with regard to the conjugation of verbs and the agreement of nouns and adjectives. These differences underscore the importance of using dialectal micro-variation to test grammatical theories. The findings highlight the importance of including dialects that are often ignored in theoretical linguistic research. A more holistic view of grammatical theory should include complex morphology and flexible syntactic structures that can either reinforce or challenge universal principles across different languages and dialects. The influence of morphology, discourse, and minimal syntactic structure on grammatical understanding is demonstrated in the case of Mosuli Arabic. Many research directions can expand this study. The first quantitative corpus analyses of natural Mosuli Arabic discourse revealed the frequency and location of non-verbal clauses. Second, comparison of Mosuli Arabic with other varieties of Iraqi and Levantine Arabic may reveal whether the simplification of syntax is a regional phenomenon or is unique to the dialect. Speaker judgment and processing studies may reveal the role of morphological and discourse cues in online interpretation, especially in distinguishing meaning and intent in conversational contexts. Finally, the morphology and discourse of Mosuli Arabic syntax are incorporated as systems to be taken into account in the development of a more flexible and evidence-based grammatical theory.

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