

The Placement of Nucleus in Arabic with Reference to English

Dr. Nawwaf Mohammed Abdulla Al-Mahjoob

Rudayna Mohammed Bidie

University of Tikrit - College of Arts - Department of Translation

ABSTRACT

The position of the nucleus is investigated in this paper. The nucleus plays an essential role in utterance meaning characterization. The speaker directs the listener's attention to the most important element in an utterance. They give more prominence to the element that he recognizes as the most informative one. The shift in the position of the nucleus from a word to another brings about a significant change in meaning. The speaker chooses an element as the nucleus according to certain factors like the focus of information, contrast, the old and new information, and astonishment.

1. Introduction

Speakers usually give emphasis to a certain syllable to make it more noticeable than others. This emphasized syllable is called the nucleus which helps the listener to understand the most significant element from the speaker's point of view. This process is referred to as accentuation. So, this study is confined to one component of the tone group which is the nucleus. The other components are the prehead, the head, and the tail. The nucleus is defined as the most contrastive element in the tone group around which other components cluster. The prehead refers to the

unstressed syllable preceding the first stressed syllable in the tone group. The head refers to the first stressed syllable and the following stressed and unstressed syllables preceding the nucleus . The tail refers to the stressed and unstressed syllable following the nucleus. (see Crysta,1969:207, O'connor & Arnold,1973: 16, and Brazil et. al, 1981:6). Hence, the nucleus is an important meaning indicator since the accented element is the most important element in an utterance. As far as informativeness is concerned, the nucleus is the most informative word in the tone group (Renalli, 2002:1 and Hishitani, 2003:2). Broadly speaking, there is no a clear-cut relation between the process of accentuation and sentence types. That is, the speaker usually accentuates the element that he/she believes to be most important irrespective of the form of that sentence (Crystal, 1969:263, and Ladd, 1996:161).

Languages differ in the extent to which they make use of the position of the nuclear syllable in the tone group structure. Some languages, like French, make no use of this position; other languages, like English, make an essential use of the place of the nuclear syllable. Most commonly, the nuclear syllable comes at the end of the tone group. This is, however, is not always the case. The nuclear syllable may vary its position according to what the speaker considers as the most significant element in the utterance. To the best knowledge of the writer, there is no any independent work that has investigated the position of the nucleus in Arabic. The position of the nucleus is referred to by accentuation.

2. Method

The data of the study comprise utterances taken from conversations on different topics. The point of reference is the

Received Pronunciation "RP". The variety of Arabic investigated is the Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). The utterances constituting the data of the study are analyzed perceptually. All the non-standard Arabic sentences that have been used in the conversations constituting the data of the study have been excluded from the study. The diacritic system is used to show the position of the nucleus. The tone group boundaries are marked by the double bar (/ /).

3. Data Analysis

The data of the study show that there are one of four positions the nucleus may occupy in any utterance. These positions are restricted by the meaning the speaker intends to convey. Hence, there is an interesting correlation between the position of the nucleus and the meaning of the utterance. Indeed, meaning is delicately influenced by the place of the nucleus since it is according to this nucleus that the speaker limits the message to be conveyed. However, there are no clear-cut rules according to which one can determine where to place the nucleus. The data of the study show that the speaker may accent a certain syllable according to one of the following factors:

1. Focus of Information

Dalton and Seidlhofer (1994:81) say that focus is " maybe the most important function of intonation, and almost certainly the most teachable one. The nucleus is used as a device to show the point of focus. What is meant by focus is the prominence that is given to a certain syllable in an utterance. The syllable receiving this prominence is the nucleus of the tone group. And, this prominent

syllable determines the message indicated by the utterance. So, it is clear from the following tone group that meaning is determined by the position of the nucleus in the tone group:

1. // ra'ʔaytu \ʔali //
(I saw Ali.)
2. // jalasat bi'jaanibi ʔa\xiiha//
(She sat beside her brother)

So, the meaning in example(1) , for instance, is that the speaker saw "Ahmed" and not another person. But, shifting the nucleus can dramatically change meaning:

3. // \raʔaytu 'ʔali //
(I saw Ali.)

The meaning in example (3) is that "I only saw Ali but I did not talk to him" . The same explanation applies to example (2) where the speaker wants to emphasize that " she sat beside her brother not beside any other person" .The usual place of the nucleus is on the last lexical word in the tone group. This generalization, however, may not always be true since the speaker can focus on any word in a tone group depending on the meaning they wants to convey e.g.

4. // \ʔana man ta'kallama//
(It was me who talked.)

In example (4), since the personal pronoun 'I' is the accented element, then the meaning is " it is me not any one else who talked". In fact, the focusing position of the nucleus is a very interesting area since a sentence can have different interpretations according to the position of the nucleus e.g.

5. // \ daxalal 'waladul bi'naayata//
(The boy entered the building.)
6. //'daxalal \waladul bi'naayata//

(The boy entered the building.)

7. //daxalal 'waladul bi\naayata//

(The boy entered the building.)

In example (5), the nucleus is on the first lexical word of the tone group and the meaning is that "the boy entered the building but he didn't, for instance, leave it". In example (6), the nucleus is shifted from the first word to the second one and hence the meaning of this tone group is that "It is the boy who entered the building and not, for instance, the girl". But, in example (7), the last word in the tone group is accented and hence, the speaker wants to emphasize the meaning that "the child entered the building and didn't enter any other place". Moreover, the above examples can be answers to different wh-questions. Hence, example (5) is an answer to the wh-question 'what did the boy do?. While example (6) is an answer to the question "who entered the building?". Finally, example (7) is an answer to the question "What did the boy enter?".

2. Contrast

The part of the utterance that is contrary to some other predicted or stated part may receive the nucleus (Schwarzchild, 1997:3). The difference between the nucleus of contrast and that of focus is that in the former the element that receives the nucleus is contrasted with another element that may not be stated or implied. But, in the nucleus of focus, there is only one element that receives the nucleus and which is not contrasted with any other element (Heusinger, 1999:31). In fact, a word contrasting with another may be the nucleus, whether it is a grammatical or a lexical word (Roach, 1983:130-143):

8. I 'want to 'know 'where he is 'travelling \to.

9. It was 'very \boring.

But, generally, the nucleus is the most important word in an utterance, e.g.

10.//"?aʕtinil ki'taabal \?azraq//

(Give me the blue book.)

11.// sa'?ashtaril 'nusxatal ja\deeda//

(I will buy the new copy)

The word "?azraq" in example (8) is the most important one in the tone group. As such, it bears the nucleus. The word "?azraq" is contrary with other words like "?asfar" (yellow) , "?ahmar" (red) and "?aswad" (black). So, the book meant is the blue one not the yellow, red or black one. The same is applicable to example (9) in which the speaker intends to buy the new copy contrasting it with the old one. A similar case is found in English as it is clear from the following example:

12.// I have got a \silver car //

In example (10), the word "silver" receives the nuclear syllable, and hence it is the most important word in the tone group which contrast all other potential colours (Cruttenden, 1997:82 and Heusinger, 1999: 28).

3. Old and new Information

The position of the nucleus signals the location of the new information in an utterance. Halliday (1985:275) defines the new information as the focal information which the speaker presents as not being recoverable from the preceding discourse; while he defines the old information as the given information which is either anaphorically or situationally recoverable. Generally, the nucleus is placed on the element that is not recoverable from the preceding

discourse and, hence, is placed on the new information. So, a sentence can be an answer of more than one question according to the position of the nucleus in the tone group. The following example:

13.// We bought a book //

can, for instance, be read in different ways according to the position of the nucleus:

14.// \We bought a book //

15.// We bought a \book //

In example (12), " we" is the accented word and hence represents the new information about which the co-participant asks. So, such an utterance is an answer to the following question :

Who bought a book?

While in example (13), the word "book" is accented and it is the word bearing the new information needed by the co-participant. So, it is an answer to the following question:

What did you buy?

What is said about English applies to Arabic. The nucleus tends to be on the element that bears the new information. Accordingly, the following utterance:

16. //qaalal 'waladul ha'qeeqa//

(The boy said the truth)

can be read in two different ways depending on the position of the nucleus in the two groups.

17. // 'qaalal \waladul ha'qeeqa //

(The boy said the truth)

18. //qaalal 'waladul ha\qeeqa //

(The boy said the truth)

Clearly, " waladul " in example (15) is the word receiving the nucleus and hence it introduces the new information the co-participant asks about. Depending on this, this example is an answer to the following question:

19. // man 'qaalal ha/queeqa//
(who said the truth?)

Whereas in example (16), the word "haqiiqa" receives the nucleus since it introduces a new piece of information the co-participant asks about. Accordingly, this example is an answer to the following question:

20.// maa 'qaala /saalim //
(what did Salim say?)

4. Astonishment

When surprised, the speaker usually accents the most astonishing element in an utterance. Accordingly, the surprise the speaker shows is reflected by the element they choose to accent. Take the following examples:

21.// 'baytuhu ja/meelun //
(His house is beautiful!)

22. // ?ijtaazal ?imti/haana //
(He passed the exam!)

So, in examples (19) and (20), the speaker shows his/her surprise about the idea that "his house is beautiful" and that "he passed the exam". In fact, such examples are called "?al?istifhaamul ?inkaari" (the denial question) in which the speaker will not ask for an answer; but, merely, shows a degree of surprise.

4. Conclusions

After analyzing the data of the study, the following points are concluded:

1. Like English, Arabic makes significant use of the position of the nucleus in conveying meaning. Some languages, however, make no use of such a position. In French, for instance, the nucleus is always restricted to a final position.
2. The position of the nucleus is solely determined by one of four interesting factors i.e. focus, contrast, old and new information, and finally surprise.
3. Different accentuation positions lead to different meanings of an utterance.
4. A word suggesting some contrast with another may be accented to exclude all opposing possibilities.
5. The most informative word is usually the accented one and the less informative words are usually deaccented.
6. When showing surprise, the speaker usually accent the element that mostly conveys their astonishment and surprise.

References

- Brazil D.C, Coulthard, M. and Johns, C. (1981). **Discourse Intonation and Language Teaching**. Harlow: Longman Group Limited.
- Cruttendn, A.(1997). **Intonation**. 2nd ed. Cambridge: CUP.
- Crystal, D. (1969) **Prosodic Systems and Intonation in English**. Camgridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dalton, C. and B. Seidlhofer. 1994. **Pronunciation**. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Halliday, M.A.K. (1985) **Dimensions of Discourse Intonation Grammar**, In: T. Van Dijk. (ed.). **A Handbook of Discourse Analysis**, London: Academic Press.pp(275-301)
- Heusinger, K. (1999). **Intonation and Information Structure**. Available at <http://www.ilg.uni-stuttgart.de>.
- Hishitani, k.(2003). **The Placement of Nucleus in English**. Available at <http://www.tatekoo.cool.ne.jp>
- Ladd, R.(1996) **Intonational Phonology**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- O'Connor, J.D and Arnold, G.f.(1973) **Intonation of Colloquial English**. London: Longman Group Limited.
- Roach, P. (1983). **Functions of intonation 2**. In English Phonetics and Phonology: A handbook for teachers (pp. 143-130). Reino Unido: Cambridge University Press
- Renalli, J.M. (2002) **Discourse Intonation: To Teach Or Not To Teach?**. Available at <http://www.cels.bham.ac.uk/>.
- Schwarzchild, R. (1997) **Interpreting Accent**. Available at <http://www.let.ru.nl/>.