

## Formal Treatment of Definiteness in Arabic

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### □ ABSTRACT □

This paper analyzes the views of transformational linguists on the definite article with special reference to how it is generated. It also gives a formal representation of the possible configurations in a DP with a definite article *al* in Arabic. It also tries to account for the generation of a DP that contains the definite article *al* and the indefinite article in Arabic.

**Key words:** definite article, definiteness, nunation, expletive article.

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## المعالجة البيانية للتعريف في العربية

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### □ ملخص □

يحلل هذا البحث وجهات نظر اللغويين التحويليين حيال أداة التعريف وخاصة كيفية إنتاجها وتمثيلها. ويقدم البحث كذلك تمثيلاً بيانياً للتراكيب الممكنة في عبارة اسمية محددة فيها أداة التعريف. وكذلك يحاول البحث تحليل إنتاج أداة التعريف وأداة النكرة في نفس العبارة المحددة.

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## 1. The Generative Approach: NP Analysis

Generative grammarians are mainly concerned with the correct derivation of articles and the rules that help the native speaker to do so. Studies in the transformational tradition are based on the semantic opposition between *definite and indefinite* supplemented by that between *countable and uncountable* nouns, and the difference between *singular and plural, specific and generic*, and between *common and proper* nouns. Vendler (1967), the philosopher of language who was very much influenced by the transformational theory, suggested that the definite article can be derived from an underlying restrictive relative clause. Perlmutter (1970) proposed the numeral *one* as a source for the indefinite article that precedes a singular noun, and *any one* as a source for generic indefinite noun. Thorne (1972) claimed that the definite article can be derived from the demonstrative *that*. Views on definiteness are widely divergent. Some writers (e.g. Smith, 1961a) think that the definite article *the* is directly inserted, while others such as Robbins (1962) and Annear (1965) contend that the definite article is the outcome of a transformational operation. Still others have added to the complexity of the situation by claiming that articles are decomposable lexical items and have bundles of features. Assuming that the definite article arises out of a transformation under the non-decomposable view, definitization consists of replacing *a* by *the*. For such linguists, definitization involves changing the specification of the feature  $[\pm\text{DEF}]$  to  $[\text{+DEF}]$ <sup>1</sup>.

In Chomsky (1957) and Lees (1960), articles are the final rewrite of a terminal category; they are handled exactly like other lexical items. In Chomsky (1965), articles are treated the same way as other lexical items; they are inserted into appropriate base P-markers from the lexicon. He added that the feature of the terminal node for the article is matched with those of the lexical items. The category *article* is introduced as a constituent of *Det* and then it undergoes the rule: *article*  $\rightarrow [\pm\text{Def}]$ . Allusion is then made to rules that realize *definite* as *the* and a non-definite as null before a non-count or plural noun, and presumably as *a/an* before a singular count noun<sup>2</sup>.

As far as proper names are concerned, Chomsky (1965:100) suggests that determiners may be taken as part of the proper name. He states, "the category [Det-] is simply the category of common nouns. The category [-] is the category of Proper Nouns, that is nouns with no determiner or, as in the case of 'The Hague', 'The Nile', with a fixed determiner that may just as well be taken as a part of the noun itself rather than as part of a freely and independently selected Determiner system...". Chomsky (1965: 79-86) suggests that as specific phonological properties are analyzed in terms of phonological features such as  $[\pm\text{nasal}]$ , specific grammatical properties can be analyzed in terms of grammatical features. He suggests that we can distinguish between common nouns and proper names in terms of the binary grammatical feature  $[\pm\text{common}]$  so that common nouns like *the capital* will carry the feature  $[\text{+common}]$  whereas a proper name like *London* will have the feature  $[\text{-common}]$ . Likewise, expressions, such as *The Hague*, and *the Himalayas*, will be marked as  $[\text{-common}]$ .

## 2. Proper Names as Definite NPs

Postal (1966) provides several diagnostic tests to show how proper names are like definite noun phrases. For instance, only an NP with a definite article or a proper name can occur in constructions with preposed adjectives, as in (1):

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| 1a. Big as <i>the boy</i> was, he could not lift it. | b. Big as <i>that boy</i> was, he could not lift it.    |
| c. Big as <i>John</i> was, he could not lift it.     | d. *Big as <i>some giant</i> was, he could not lift it. |
| e. *Big as <i>a dog</i> was, he could not lift it.   |   |

Similarly, only definite noun phrases could occur as subjects in constructions such as in (2):

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Stockwell *et al.*, 1973: 66ff.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Chomsky, 1965: 68, 106ff.

2a. Fido is John's    b. The horse is John's    c. That car is John's.    d. \* Some dog is John's.  
 e. \*A car is John's.

On the other hand, only indefinite noun phrases could occur in such contexts as in (3):

3a. It was a scandal that John spoke.                      3b. \* It was the/that scandal that John spoke.

The mechanism posited by Postal for generating the article is no longer relevant, but his two points need to be reiterated: (i) Definite articles occur in some contexts in which indefinite articles cannot occur, and, (ii) Proper names are like a noun phrase with a definite article. Moreover, Postal (1966:77) notes that some proper names have the overt definite article *the* in English, such as *the Hague*, *the Bronx*, etc. He also asserts that genitive expressions such as *John's nostrils*, *Sam's horse*, etc. are definite. He also claims that [+generic] nouns are [+definite] but concluded that some generics appear on surface as [-def], which is very clear from the co-occurrence of the definite article and non-occurrence of the indefinite article with a restrictive relative clause, as is shown in (4):

4a. Expensive as *the butter* that I had yesterday was, I am going to use it economically.  
 b. \*Expensive as *butter* that I had yesterday was, I am going to use it economically.

### 3. Restrictive Relative Clause as a Source for the Definite Article

Vendler (1967:52) claims that all definite articles arise through the process of relative clause formation<sup>3</sup>, and the existence of definite NPs without relative clauses is accounted for by postulating deletability of the relative clause that is identical with a preceding sentence. He claims that "*the* in front of a noun not actually followed by a restrictive clause is the sign of a deleted clause to be formed from a previous sentence in the same discourse containing the same noun". He further observes that a noun in the singular cannot take another restrictive clause, since such a noun phrase is a singular term as much as a proper noun or a singular pronoun is, as is obvious from the contrast between (5a) and (5b):

5a. I see a man. The man wears a hat.    b. I see a man. The man you know wears a hat.

Vendler explains that both sentences in (5) are continuous, and that *the* in *the man* is the sign of the deleted clause (*whom*) *I see*. In (5b) the possibility of this clause is precluded by the presence of the restrictive clause (*whom*) *you know*, and *the* in (5b) belongs to this clause and the possibility of positing any further restrictive clause is excluded.

Grannis (1972: 277ff) objects to Vendler's analysis, stating that the account of definite article on the basis of a restrictive relative clause fails to explain the difference between sentences with identical relative clauses but with the definite article in one and the indefinite article in the other, as in (6a, b). Nor does it account for the difference between (7a) and (7b):

6a. I saw *the man* who Ted told me about.    b. I saw *a man* who Ted told me about.  
 7a. I saw *every man* who Ted told me about.    b. I saw *that man* who Ted told me about.

### 4. The Demonstrative and the Definite Article

Thorne (1972: 562-63) claims that the definite article "*the*" is the unstressed form of the demonstrative *that* and that both forms are derived from an underlying structure containing a deictic sentence with the locative expression *there*. In his opinion, a phrase such as *the man* would be derived from an underlying structure such as *a man who is there*. He claims that the rules required for producing the appropriate surface structure by moving *there* to a position in front of the noun have the effect of deleting the relative clause and the verb *to be*. These rules, he claims, also change "*there* from the locative to the nominative form *the*". In his view, "taking the

<sup>3</sup> The proposal refers to the stage of Standard Theory (Chomsky 1965 and its elaboration by his colleagues) in which transformational grammar proposed to derive all attributive adjectives from relative clauses.

expression *which is there* as the meaning of the definite article provides the basis for an explanation of its use”, Thorne points out that his analysis parallels that of Perlmutter who takes the indefinite article *a/an* to be derived from the numeral *one*. He further demands that “the feature *definite* has no place in linguistic description” since the definite and indefinite article would be derived from *there* and *one* respectively.

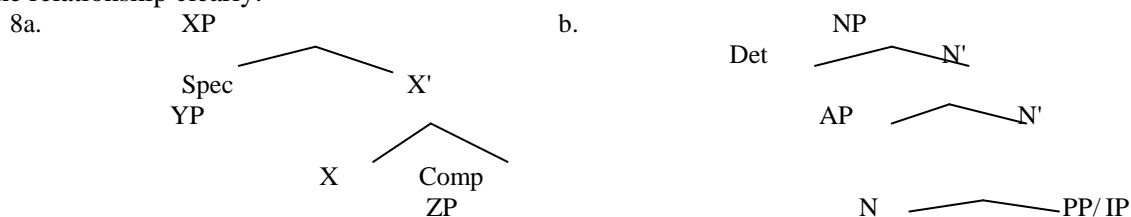
Lyons (1975: 61-62) claims that the definite article and the personal pronouns in English and other languages are “weak demonstratives”. His main concern is “to show how phrases like *this man*, *that man*, and *the man* can be derived in a syntactically and semantically revealing way, from underlying structures which contain neither a demonstrative adjective nor a definite article. In his view, the most obvious way of generating such phrases is by means of an “adjectivalization transformation, identical with that which derives attributive adjectives from predicative adjectives”. He claims that “all that is required in order to generate a definite article in English is a rule” which transforms it into “the”. Lyons adds that the word *this* is always marked [+ *proximate*], *that* is usually unmarked but can be marked [- *proximate*], and the definite article “*the*” is always unmarked

### 5. Grammaticalization of Definiteness

Definiteness, according to Lyons (1999: 274ff.), is not a semantic or pragmatic notion as assumed by some linguists, but rather a grammatical category at par with tense, mood, number, gender, etc. He (1999: 278) asserts that grammatical definiteness is the ‘grammaticalization<sup>4</sup> of semantic/pragmatic concept of definiteness’, which occurs widely even in languages that lack corresponding grammatical category for definiteness. For instance, in Mandarin Chinese, there is no overt definite marker but the noun phrase in the subject position is considered a topic and therefore ‘definite’, whereas a noun phrase in the existential construction is understood to be ‘indefinite’. He claims that in languages where there is no definite marker, the interpretation of definiteness depends on whether or not a referent is familiar to the listener because of being already established in the discourse. The use of the definite article invites the hearer to exploit clues in the linguistic or extra-linguistic context to establish the identity of the referent. It is for this reason that demonstratives are invariably treated as definite and ‘definiteness becomes the sign of grammaticalization of identifiability. Once identifiability is grammaticalized as definiteness, it develops other uses, such as its association with the generic.

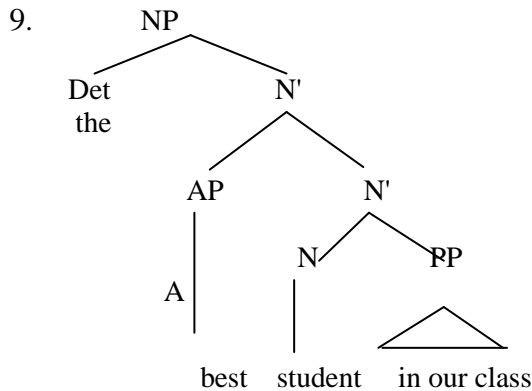
### 6. The DP Analysis

If definiteness is a grammatical category, it is important to consider how it is represented in the grammatical structure. Almost all current work on the noun phrase assumes the DP-analysis, but first we shall look at the representation of definiteness under the classical transformational style within the NP-analysis. The general view within generative syntactic theory is that the structure of phrases is determined by the principles of X-bar theory. According to the theory, an XP is projected by the head X. Between these two categories, there is an intermediate category called X'. XP immediately dominates both X' and the specifier of XP, i.e., the sister of X'. The head X may take one or more complements which may be occupied by other phrasal categories. X' theory defines the local relations of a head X with other constituents. Every head bears two local relations: the head is locally related to its Comp, and to the specifier of its projection. The diagram in (8) shows the relationship clearly:



<sup>4</sup> Grammaticalization is used by Lyons to denote the representation of a concept by a grammatical form or forms. The term was first used by Meillet (1912) to indicate a process of linguistic change whereby an autonomous lexical unit gradually acquires the function of a dependent grammatical category.

The traditional transformational view on NP-analysis (Chomsky 1970) is that the noun phrase is a maximal projection of the head N, with the determiner in the specifier position and adjectival expression and /or prepositional phrases or relative clauses adjoined to the N' as its complement, as in (9):

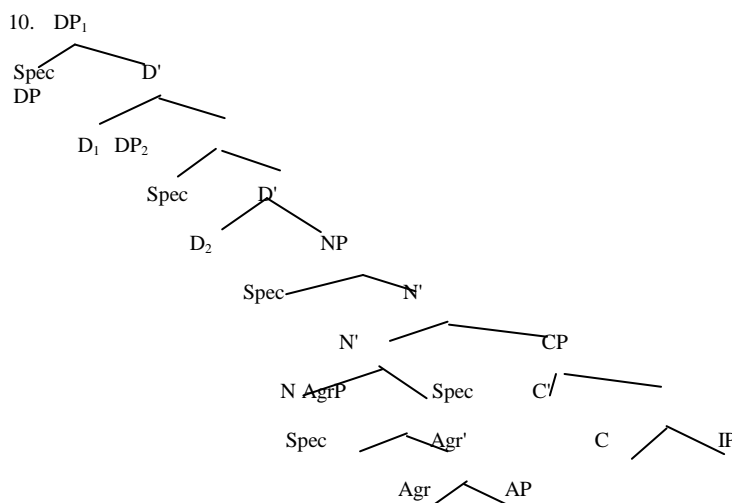


Another account of noun phrases that has come into prominence and is known as the DP analysis, (Abney 1987), claims that the NP is included within a DP; i.e., though NP is projected by N, it is a complement of the head D which is the head of a DP.

The DP-analysis assumes D as the head of DP which is a functional category; it is like Tense and Agr, other functional categories. Just as a clause is taken to be headed by a category I(nflection), expressing Tense and Subject-Verb agreement, a DP is considered to be headed by D(eterminer). The DP-hypothesis differs from the NP analysis in the sense that in the latter the determiner and possessive occupy the same NP-specifier position while in the former the determiner is under the head D, while the possessive is taken to be a specifier, and occupies a position distinct from that of the determiner<sup>5</sup>. According to Abney (1987), the class of elements generated in D consists of determiners and agreement features. Agr in D assigns case to the possessor in Spec-DP in the same way that Agr in I assigns case to the subject in Spec-IP.

### 7. Structural Schemata under DP Analysis

To account for the description of noun phrases within the DP-analysis framework, we may posit the following structural schemata, as in (10):



<sup>5</sup> See Abney, 1987: 75, 270ff.

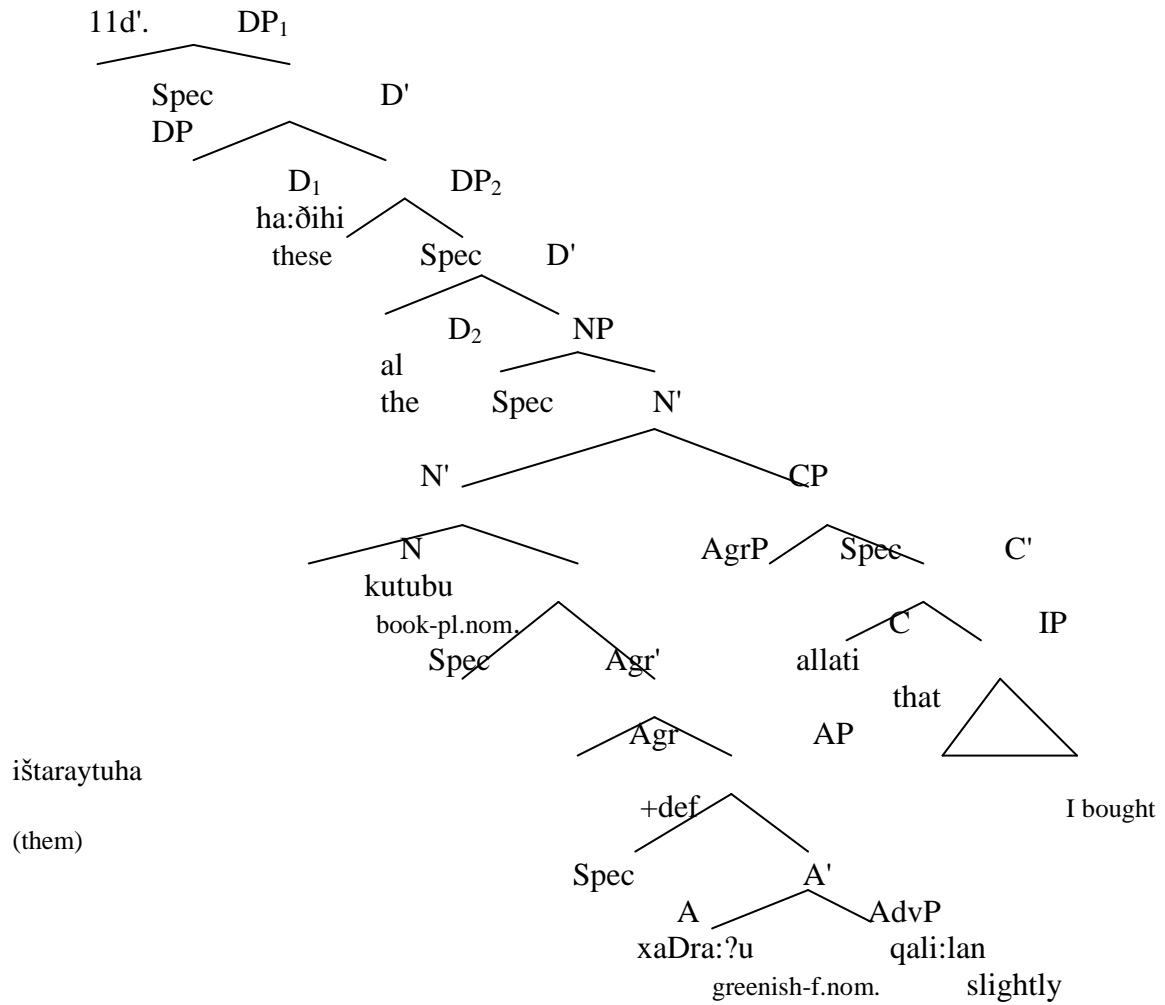
That the Spec of DP could also be a DP is proven by the grammaticality of both (11a) and (11b):

- 11a. al-kutubu  
       the-book-pl.nom.  
 ‘The books’  
 b. ha:ðihi al-kutubu  
       these-f. the-book-pl.nom.  
 ‘These (the) books’

We may note that in English we can say *the books* or *these books* but not *\*these the books*. The same tree diagram can account for both the Arabic and English data, the only difference being that in English, if the Spec DP contains a lexical item, the head of D' in D will be zero, i.e., it cannot be lexically realized. Likewise, if D is a lexical item, the Spec DP position will have a zero. Using the DP-analysis iteratively, we can say (11d).

11. ha:ðihi al-kutubu al-xaDra:?u  
       these-f. the-book-nom. the-green-f.nom.  
 ‘These green books’  
 d. ha:ðihi al-kutubu al-xaDra:?u qali:lan allati ištara:tuha  
       these-f. the-book-pl.nom. the-green-f.nom. slightly that-f. buy-pst.1sg.nom.3f.pl.acc  
 ‘These slightly greenish books that I bought’

(11d') is the representation of (15d) within the DP-analysis, which show that there is a DP within a DP:

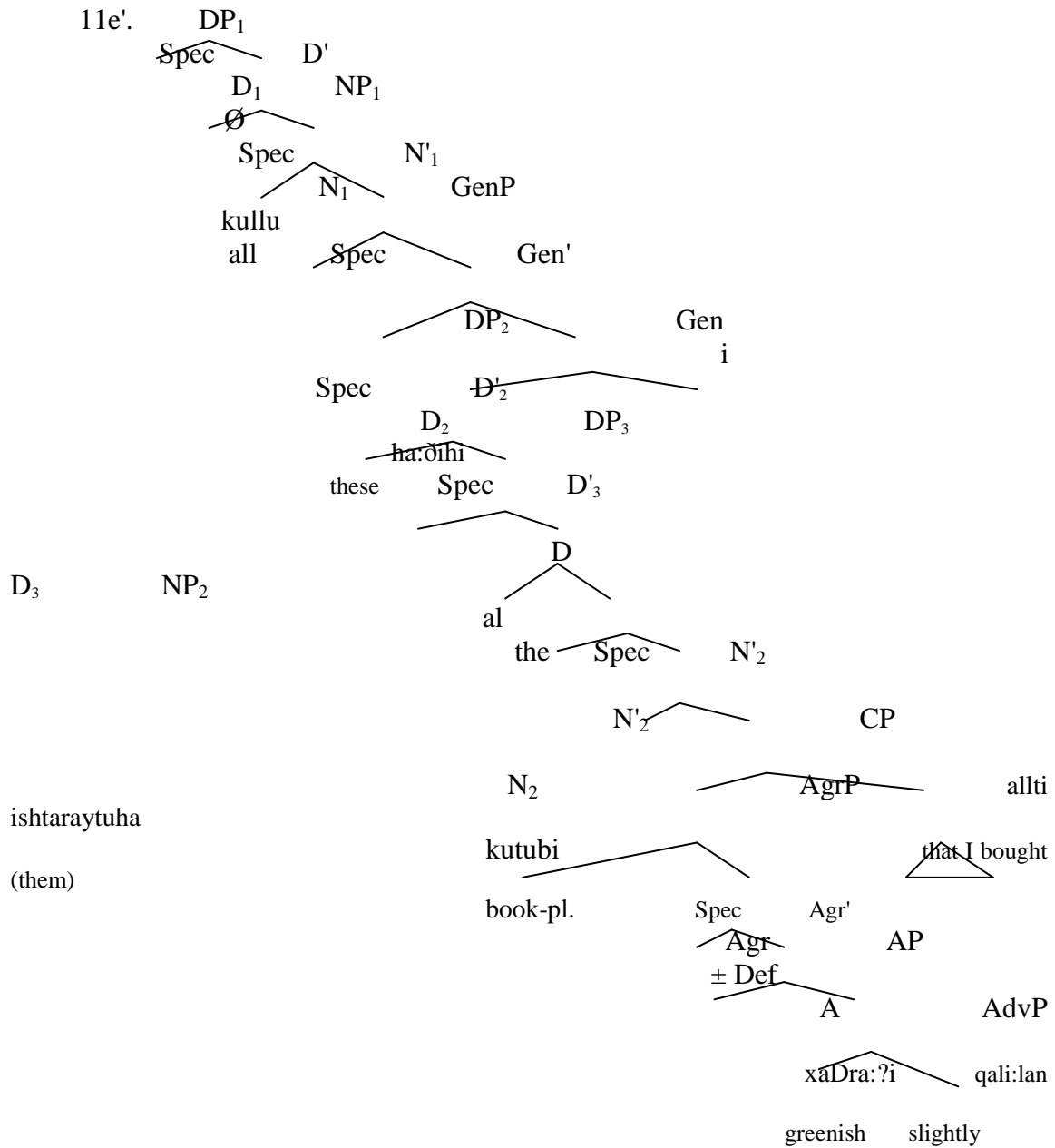


The need for an AgrP may be justified on the ground that there is an agreement relation between the noun and its attributive adjective in terms of person, number, gender and definiteness. In other words the  $\Phi$ -features percolate to the attributive adjective.

In addition to (11a-d) we can have (11e) where *kull* 'all' makes the DP in the non-Spec position an *iDa:fa* 'NP with a genitive construction'; hence the need for a genitive phrase for the formal representation of the *iDa:fa*, as in (11e):

- 11e. kullu ha:ḏihi al-kutubi al-xaDra:?i qali:lan allati iṣṭaraytuha  
 all-nom. these-f.gen the-book-pl.gen. the-green-gen. slightly that-f. buy-pst.1sg.nom.-3f.pl.-  
 cc.  
 'All of these slightly greenish books that I bought'





The fact that *kullu* can also be used in the DP position is attested by the fact that we can say (12a) as well as (12b):

12a. kullu ha:ðihi al-kutubi al-xaDra:ʔi qali:lan  
 allati  
 all-nom. these-f.gen. the-book-pl.gen. the-green-f.gen. slightly that-

f. ištaraytuha jayyidatun  
 buy- pst.1sg.nom.-3f.pl.-acc. good-f.nom.  
 ‘All these slightly greenish books that I bought are good’

12b. al-kullu jayyidatu:n

the-all-nom. good-f.nom.  
‘All are good’

We may note that when *kullu* occurs in the Spec position of the main DP, it affects the DP, including the AP attached to the N in such a way that they occur only in *ida:fa*, in the genitive form, as in (12a). (12b) can be taken as a small clause, the first phrase of which is a DP and the second, an AP. Other words that act like *kullu* ‘all’ are *jami:u* ‘all’ and *ba<sup>c</sup>Du* ‘some’, as in (13):

13. ya<sup>c</sup>rifu      al-ba<sup>c</sup>Du      ma<sup>c</sup>na      al-Hubi  
know-prst. the-some-nom. meaning-acc. the-love-gen.  
‘Some (people) know the meaning of love’

We have seen above how the structural schemata given in (10) can generate a DP in Arabic. However, we are still left with two problems which must be dealt with before we are sure of generating all the grammatical DPs in Arabic or before checking that the definite article, D, the head of the DP, has merged with its NP complement correctly. The first phenomenon involves the use of *al* with proper names which are not used attributively (e.g. *al-bakistan*) and the second involves the use of *al* with an NP which has nunation.

### 8. The Expletive *al*

There are proper names which are referential and not attributive at all, such as *al-bakistan* ‘Pakistan’, *al-yuna:n* ‘Greece’, *al-burtugal* ‘Portugal’, *al-baragway* ‘Paraguay’, *al-brazil* ‘Brazil’, *al-beru* ‘Peru’, where *al* has no semantic content. An interesting piece of evidence can be drawn from the fact that some Arabic books refer to *Pakistan* as *al-bakistan*, i.e. with the definite article, other books refer to it as *bakistan*, i.e. without *al* and even in the same book *Pakistan* is referred to once with *al* and another time without *al*<sup>6</sup>. We may recall that we can never say *hind* for *al-hind* ‘India’, *yamen* for *al-yamen* ‘Yemen’ or *ni:l* for *al- ni:l* ‘The Nile’. In order to account for them we look at the concept of expletive definite article as developed by Longobardi (1994). He claims that the definite article of many European languages can be shown to have two different functions, a substantive and an expletive one. He observes that singular mass nouns, bare plural count nouns and “in some rare cases”, singular count nouns in Italian occur in argument position, as in (a, b, c):

14a. bevo      sempre      vino  
I always drink wine  
‘I always drink wine.’  
b. mangio      patate  
I eat potatoes  
‘I eat potatoes.’  
c. non      c'era      studente      in gira  
there wasn't student around  
‘There wasn't any student around.’

Longobardi (1994: 616) also observes that bare nouns in Italian are usually excluded from pre-verbal subject position, but he admits in argument position, as in (15).

15a. \* *aqua*      viene      giù      dolle      colline  
water comes down from the hills  
‘Water comes down from the hills.’  
b. viene      giù      *aqua*      dolle      colline

<sup>6</sup> See al-Munjed, Appendix p. 22-26, and *Atlas al-Watan al-<sup>C</sup>Arabi wa al-a:lam*, 1990: 69,70, 79, 100. .

comes down water from the hills  
 ‘Water comes down from the hills.’

On the basis of these observations, he claims that an ‘empty category’ D is present in Italian and its occurrence is restricted to plural or mass head nouns, because “A nominal expression is an argument if it is introduced by a category D”

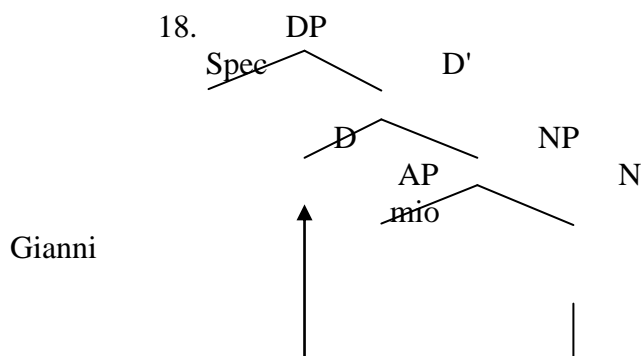
When faced with proper names, such as *Gianni*, which occur in argument position, and are not plural or mass nouns, but “refer rigidly”, Longobardi (1994: 622) claims that a D-position introducing bare subject arguments “must be syntactically present and cannot be empty” and that the only possible element that can occupy such a D-position is the proper name itself. In support of this argument, he observes that ‘several varieties of Romance languages display free or stylistically conditioned alternations between the presence and absence of the article with proper (first or last) names of human beings,’ as in (16a, b):

- 16a. Gianni mi ha telefonato  
 Gianni me has telephoned  
 ‘Gianni has telephoned me.’  
 b. Il Gianni mi ha telefonato  
 the Gianni me has telephoned  
 ‘(The) Gianni has telephoned me.’

He observes that *Gianni* in (16a) occupies the D position and that there is a transformational relation between (16a) and (16b) established through the movement of *Gianni* in (16a) from  $N^0$  to  $D^0$ . He claims that this is so because proper names must be base-generated in  $N^0$  position and optionally allowed to remain there in order to account for those cases in which they occur after being introduced by an article. Longobardi (1994: 623) points out that *my John* can be expressed in three ways in Italian, as in (17a, c, d) but not (17b):

- 17a. Il mio Gianni                      b. \* mio Gianni  
 c. Gianni mio                              d. Il Gianni mio

He claims that the two surface-order possibilities, A N and N A are preserved when the proper name is introduced by the determiner, but an unexpected gap in the paradigm appears with “articleless names” such as in (17c) where *Gianni* appears with no article in N A configuration. He assumes that “the proper name needs to move from  $N^0$  in order to fill in the empty  $D^0$  position, thus crossing over the adjective”. Longobardi (1994: 623-5) claims that postnominal possessives tend to be “strongly contrastive” in Italian in the sense that *mio* ‘mine’ can only be interpreted with contrastive reference to another person whose name is also *Gianni* present in the domain of discourse and who is not mine but related to someone else, while (17 a) and (17 c) are not so interpreted. Once again, Longobardi claims that this difference in meaning can be explained if we assume that *Gianni* has moved in (17c) to D position crossing over *mio* ‘mine’, as in (18):



Generalizing based on these observations, Longobardi argues that all “articleless proper names” in Italian involve movement of the noun to Det position; in this way, the noun itself plays

the role of the article, so that the phrase is structurally equivalent to one containing a definite article. He also claims that when a definite article does not appear overtly with a proper name or a generic, it is merely pleonastic or expletive. Longobardi (1994: 648) claims that “the N position is interpreted as referring to universal concepts ... the D position, instead, determines the particular designation of the whole DP, either directly, by being assigned reference to a single individual object, or indirectly, by hosting the operator<sup>7</sup> of a denotational (operator-variable) structure”. Thus, for Longobardi, the specific readings of count nouns are obtained by letting the variable bound by the operator in the D position range over the extension of the kind referred to by the N position, while the specific definite reading of “determinerless proper names” is obtained by raising the head noun to D at some level of representation and leaving the foot of the chain i.e., N position uninterpreted. For this reason, Longobardi argues that DP headed by proper names can be correctly understood as not referring to a kind but just directly designating the individual object the name refers to. In so far as the interpretation of generics is concerned, he claims that they also create a chain at LF between D and N but only N position is interpreted, in this sense only D is left uninterpreted. He (1994: 650) claims that these instances of the definite article which are used to introduce proper names in Italian need not be considered as having substantive semantic content but can rather be regarded as instances of expletive articles, which explain the fact that Romance languages display free or stylistically conditioned alternations between the presence and the absence of the article with proper (first or last) names of human beings as in *Gianni*, and *il Gianni*. Longobardi thinks that expletive articles are not exclusive to Romance, but are also found in English, when they are used with singular generics as in (19).

19a. The lion has four legs.

b. \* Lion has four legs.

He claims that the non-mass interpretation can never be expected through the empty determiner. There are independent reasons to use *the* in English when the expression has a count reading.

### 9. Arabic *al* and Nunation

Longobardi's approach enables us to account for the presence of *nunation* (i.e., *-n* marking indefiniteness in Arabic) in proper names which, like count nouns, are cited with nunation, as in (20a):

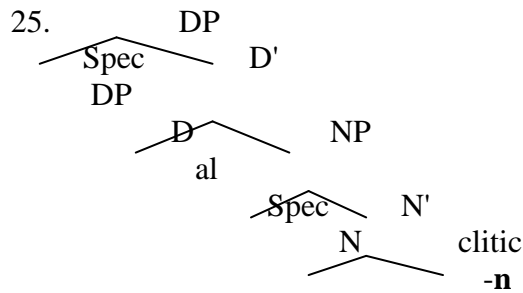
20a. *kataba*                      *Bila:lun*                      *risa:latan*  
       write-pst.3m.sg.    Bilal-nom.indef.    letter-acc.indef.  
       ‘Bilal wrote a letter.’

We may note that in (20a) in both *Bila:lun* ‘Bilal’, *risa:latan* ‘letter-acc.indef.’ the indefinite article *-n* is present though the former is a proper name and the latter, common noun. However, to say that proper names are indefinite is completely wrong, for the simple reason that they are considered inherently definite and/ or specific referring to a particular object. Thus, the presence of the indefinite article in proper names is pleonastic, unless the speaker uses the name as an attributive definite description. We may recall that the use of the definite article with Arabic proper names in Arabic, unlike Italian, is not stylistically conditioned but rather semantically functional. In other words, the use of *al* with proper names turns the latter into a definite description; they both refer to the object in question, and assign an attributive to it.

If the proper name has *al* with it, *nunation* is not possible, as is obvious from the ungrammaticality of (19b) and the grammaticality of (20c).

<sup>7</sup> Longobardi claims that determiners are semantically understood as operators binding a variable, whose range is always the extension of the natural kind referred to by the noun.





(25) is relevant if and only if the head of the NP is not followed by *iDa:fa*, i.e., a genitive construction or a defining relative clause.

## 11. Summary

To sum up, we have tried to account for the generation of a DP with *al* when it is followed by a relative clause or a genitive construction and when it has *al* as well as nunation. Following Longobardi (1994), I have argued why in some cases *al* is expletive. Following Uriagereka, we have further argued that *al* can occur in a DP that has nunation when there is no attributive reference in a definite description. We have also discussed the co-occurrence restrictions (i.e., c-selection properties) of elements inside the DP so that all and only well-formed DPs are formed. In case these restrictions are not kept in view while elements merge, they crash; in case they are adhered to, they converge.

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