

THE PREVERBAL NEGATION PARTICLES IN ARABIC

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Abstract: This article discusses the use of negative particles in Arabic, specifically the so-called "Modern Standard Arabic" (MSA). This variant of Arabic is commonly used in written form in newspapers, magazines, and journals; and in oral form in academic seminars and formal meetings. Results of analysis indicate that negative particles in Arabic negate not only words in a sentence, but sometimes they also negate the whole sentence.

Key words: preverbal negation particles, Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), International Phonetics Association (IPA).

The language described in this essay is Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), also known as Modern Written Arabic and Modern Literary Arabic, which is the uniform variety of Arabic used all over the Arabic speaking world as the medium of written communication in books, periodicals, journals, magazines, newspapers, signs, business and personal letters (Saad, 1982). MSA is also used as the medium of oral communication in radio and television broadcasts, in formal speaking, public and university lecturers, learned debates, conferences, and in general on occasions accompanied by some degree of formality and solemnity.

Throughout this essay, transliteration of the Arabic writing system is given in appendix (Bateson, 1967). An articulatory phonetic chart of Arabic consonants and vowels (based on IPA) is given as well in the same appendix (Saad, 1982). Also, the definite article will always be transliterated as *al-* (ال)

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in spite of the fact that it has a *hamza* ((ء) *Glottal Plosive*) in the Arabic system of writing. Another thing is that long vowels are described as *double dots*, for example *a:*, *i:* and *u:*.

The aim of this article is to describe the distribution of MSA preverbal negation particles; *la:* (لا), *lam* (لم), *lan* (لن), and *ma:* (ما). The distribution of these particles will be elaborated in perfect and imperfect tense of the MSA. The following points will be analyzed within article; they are (1) the preverbal negation particles in Arabic, (2) the negative focus, and (3) the particle *ma:* (ما) in Imperfect Tense. Also, in the beginning and the end of it, introduction and conclusion are articulated.

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It is well known that languages differ in the light of how they mark sentence negation overtly. For example, West Flemish (Haegeman, 1995) marks sentence negation with two particles, whereas Italian (Belletti, 1990) and English mark it with only one particle. This second type is also found in MSA.

The MSA has four preverbal negation particles; those are *ma:*, *la:*, *lam* and *lan*. *The negative particle ma: is usually used to negate perfect tense as illustrated below:*

(1) <i>ma:</i>	kataba	zaid	risa:lata-n
Neg	wrote-3SgM ²	Zaid	letter-a
	<i>Zaid did not write a letter</i>		
	ما كتب زيد رسالة		

In contrast, particle *la:* is employed to negate progressive imperfect tense as can be seen in the following:

(2) <i>la:</i>	yaktubu	zaid	risa:lata-n
Neg	write-3SgM	Zaid	letter-a
	<i>Zaid is not writing a letter</i>		
	لا يكتب زيد رسالة		

² 3 = third personal pronoun, Sg = Singular, M = Masculine, F = Feminine

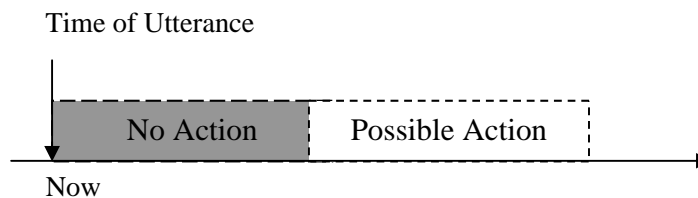
The semantic meaning of negatives *ma:* and *la:* will be explained clearly later on, because these two particles have another meaning, such as *topicalization*, dependent on their position in sentences.

The next two particles; *lam* and *lan* are always used to negate imperfect tense, particularly activities that will be done in the future. The negative *lam* carries a meaning in which a possible activity is planned for the future but the exact time of the action is not decided. To clarify the explanation, examples below illustrate the use of *lam*:

(3) *lam* *yazhab* *zaid* *ila* *astra:liya:*
 Neg go-3SgM Zaid to Australia
Zaid has not gone to Australia yet
 لم يذهب زيد إلى أستراليا

(4) *lam* *tazhab* *maryam* *ila* *ja:mi'atin*
 Neg go-3SgF Maryam to university
Maryam has not gone to university yet
 لم تذهب مريم إلى جامعة

Sentence 3 indicates that at the time of utterance, Zaid has no activity, namely “going to Australia”, but it will be take place after a few hours, days, weeks, months, or even years. In other words, it is possible for Zaid to go to Australia in the future, despite the fact that the time has not yet been decided. Similarly in sentence 4, Maryam does not go to university now, today, this week or possibly even this month, but she will go at some time in the future. In other words, Maryam has the possibility of going to university, although the time of action is not yet decided. So, the negative particle *lam* indicates an important message in a sentence where there is the possibility of a certain activity taking place in the future, regardless of exactly when in the future as illustrated in the time line below:

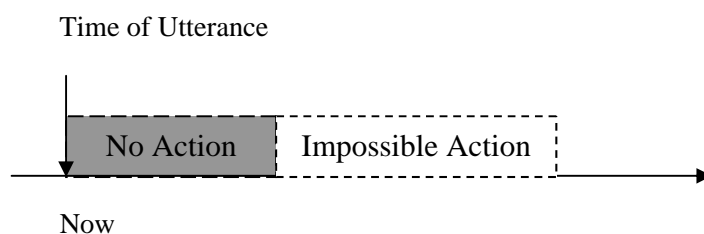


In contrast, the preverbal negative *lan* carries the meaning of impossibility. The following two sentences illustrate the case:

(5) *lan* *yazhaba* *zaid* *ila* *astr:liya:*
 Neg go-3SgM Zaid to Australia
Zaid will not go to Australia
 لن يذهب زيد إلى أستراليا

(6) *lan* *tazhaba* *maryam* *ila* *ja:mi'atin*
 Neg go-3SgF Maryam to university
Maryam will not go to university
 لن تذهب مريم إلى جامعة

In sentence 5, it is the case that it is impossible for Zaid ever to go to Australia. Similar to 5, sentence 6 shows an impossibility of ever “going to university” and that is because the preverbal negative particle *lan* precedes the sentence. In other words, the negative particle *lan* shows an important message in a sentence where there is the impossibility of a certain activity taking place from the time of utterance to in the future as illustrated in the time line below:



NEGATIVE FOCUS

In relation to the MSA negation particle *ma:*, the scope of *ma:* is consistently restricted to the category immediately following it. Moreover, constituents negated by *ma:* must appear in the sentence initial position that corresponds to the position usually occupied by proposed focus phrases. Constituent negation seems to be an instance of focus or to be a negative focus.

The examples below will clarify this point:

(7) *ma:* zaid qara/a al-kita:ba
 Neg Zaid read-3SgM the-book
 Zaid did not read the book
 ما زيد قرأ الكتاب

Sentence 7 indicates that it is not Zaid who read the book, but possibly someone else. The negation particle *ma:*, in this case, focuses on the subject Zaid. However, in order to focus on the object or what is read, the object *al-kita:ba* in sentence 7, should immediately follow the negative *ma:* as illustrated below:

(8) *ma:* al-kita:ba qara/a zaid
 Neg the-book read-3SgM Zaid
 Zaid did not read the book
 ما الكتاب قرأ زيد

Sentence 8 negates the object and then carries a meaning in which Zaid did not read this particular book, but may have read another book. In terms of focusing on the activity in sentence 8, the verb *qara/a* should immediately follow the negative particle *ma:*. This is also a method to negate meaning in which the whole sentence is absolutely negative. The case is illustrated in the sentence following:

(9) *ma:* qara/a zaid al-kita:ba
 Neg read-3SgM Zaid the-book
 Zaid did not read the book
 ما قرأ زيد الكتاب

Sentence 9 means that it is not the case that Zaid read the book, but he may have glanced at it, written it or looked at pictures. In addition, these three sentences 7, 8, and 9, should be produced with a flat intonation (--). If it is produced, however, with rising falling rising intonation (~), these sentences will carry an interrogative meaning such as in sentence 10:

- (10) *ma:* al-kita:ba qara/a zaid
 Interrog the-book read-3SgM Zaid
 Which book did Zaid read.
 ما الكتاب قرأ زيد

Thus the negative particle *ma:* functions as meaning focus and as an interrogative marker. In imperfect tense, particle *la:* is also employed to stimulate a negative focus. The scope of *la:* is similar to *ma:* only if particle *la:* is immediately followed by a verb such as in example 11 below:

- (11) *la:* yaqra/u zaid al-kita:ba
 Neg read-3SgM Zaid the-book
 It is not the case that Zaid reads the book
 لا يقرأ زيد الكتاب

However, in relation to the position of *ma:*, if particle *la:* is immediately followed by either subject or object, the negative meaning focus still appears, and significantly, differs not only in tense but also in focus as illustrated below:

- (12) *la:* zaidan yaqra/u al-kita:ba
 Neg Zaid read-3SgM the-book
 Nobody, called Zaid has read the book
 لا زيداً يقرأ الكتاب

- (13) *la:* kita:ba-n yaqra/u zaid
 Neg book-a read-3SgM Zaid
 Zaid has not read any book at all
 لا كتاباً يقرأ زيد

In addition, particle *la:* also occurs in nominal sentences to restrict focus on a constituent (subject in general), which immediately follows it as illustrated in the following:

- (14) *la:* tilmi:zan fi al-ida:rati
 Neg student in the office

None of the students are in the office
لا تلميذا في الإدارة

In order to indicate the tense, sentence 14 should be followed by an adverb of time such as *al-amsi* ‘yesterday’ or *al-jauma* ‘today’. Therefore, sentence 14 would be:

(15) *la: tilmi:zan fi al-ida:rati amsi/al-jauma*
Neg student in the office yesterday/today
None of the students were in the office yesterday/today
لا تلميذا في الإدارة أمس / اليوم

In imperfect tense, tone or intonation does not play a role in differentiating meaning between focus and interrogative as it does with the particle *ma:.* Thus tones or intonation such as a flat (--) or rising falling rising (~) in producing sentences 11, 12, and 13, does not result in interrogative sentences. In contrast, the last two particles; *lam* and *lan*, cannot be used in to focus meaning. So, these following sentences are unacceptable in MSA.

- *(14) a. *lam zaid yaqra/ al-kita:ba*
Neg Zaid read-3SgM the book
لم زيد يقرأ الكتاب
- b. *lam kita:ba-n yaqra/ zaid*
Neg book-a read-3SgM Zaid
لم كتابا يقرأ زيد
- c. *lan zaid yaqra/a al-kita:ba*
Neg Zaid read-3SgM the book
لن زيد يقرأ الكتاب
- d. *lan kita:ba-n yaqra/a zaid*
Neg book-a read-3SgM Zaid
لن كتابا يقرأ زيد

The negative particles *lam* and *lan* are meaningful only if they occur before verbs within sentences as illustrated in 3, 4, 5, and 6.

THE PARTICLE *MA*: IN IMPERFECT TENSE

In addition to the negative and interrogative interpretation of the particle *ma*: (if it occurs in perfect tense), it also occurs in imperfect tense, but it does not specify a negative meaning. In imperfect tense it becomes an interrogative marker. In this situation, particle *ma*: is only acceptable if an object immediately follows it, otherwise it is ungrammatical as illustrated in the following:

- (10) a. *ma*: kita:ba-n yaqra/u zaid
 Interg. book-a read-3SgM Zaid
Which book is Zaid reading
 ما كتابا يقرأ زيد
- *b. *ma*: yaqra/u zaid kita:ba-n
 Interg. read-3SgM Zaid book-a
 ما يقرأ زيد كتابا
- *c. *ma*: zaid yaqra/u kita:ba-n
 Interg. Zaid read-3SgM book-a
 ما زيد يقرأ كتابا

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have shown the distribution of MSA preverbal negation particles. The particle *ma*: with flat intonation (--) is usually used to specify a negative meaning in perfect tense. It is also used as an interrogative particle with rising falling rising intonation (~) tone either in perfect or imperfect tense. However, the particle *la*: is usually employed in progressive imperfect tense and intonation does not effect its interpretation. It is also used to restrict focus on a constituent (subject in general) in both perfect and imperfect tenses. Furthermore, I have also described the negative particles *lam* and *lan* that are usually used in future imperfect tense. These last two particles cannot be employed to focus on either subject or object. They only function to

negate the predicate or verb and thus lead the whole sentence to be interpreted as absolutely negative.

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Appendix: The Arabic Writing System and The MSA Consonants and Vowels (based on IPA)

Consonant	Bilabial	Labio-Dental	Dental	Alveolar	Post-Alveolar	Retroflex	Palatal	Velar	Uvular	Pharyngeal	Glottal
Plosive	ب		ض	ت د			ج	ك ق	ق		ع
Nasal	م			ن							
Trill				ر							
Fricative		ف	ث ذ	س ز	ش ص	ظ		خ غ	هـ	ع	ح
Lateral				ل							
Approx.	و						ي				

Vowels	Front	Central	Back
Close	كسرة		ضمّة
Close-Mid			
Open-Mid			
Open	a	فتحة	

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