

## CLASSICAL ARABIC *NI'MA* AND *B'ISA*

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The two are called by the Arab grammarians 'verbs of praise and dispraise', *fi'lā l-madhī wa-l-damm*. But their status as verbs is distinctly questionable. An Arabic predicate may be either verbal or non-verbal, so that mere function as a predicate is not a sufficient indication of verbal status; nor is the time factor (often thought of as the main characteristic of European language verbs - hence terms like *Zeitwort*), for not all Arabic verbs are time-limited. The sole criterion that is available for defining an Arabic verb is its capability of person and number inflections which either express or echo the nature of the subject. But *n/b* have no first or second person forms, no dual or plural inflections; they are only capable of taking a feminine ending *-t*, and that is extremely rare. In the vast majority of instances they are wholly uninflected, *mabniyy*. Further, a 3p verb like *māta* can be understood as a complete sentence (*kalām*) "he died", whereas *n/b* cannot. In this respect they bear some analogy to the particle *la'alla* which is not inflectible, rather than *'asā* which has personal and number inflections, though both of them semantically modify the predicate in the same way, by the addition of the concept of 'dubiety'.

There is an English nursery rhyme about Little Jack Horner, who was greedily eating his Christmas pie and exclaimed "What a good boy am I!". This is an 'affective' variation (having an optional alternative "How good a boy am I!") on the basic non-affective statement "I am a good boy", where there are two predicates: in one he describes himself as a boy (not a girl or dog), in the other as good in the domain where a boy can be described as good/bad (different from the qualification 'good' used e.g. of a musician). He might perhaps more truly have said "What a pig am I", in which case the predication as 'pig' is in itself a term of dispraise, and does not need to be qualified as good/bad.

Arabic has one form exactly mirroring English "What a pig am I", namely *'ayyu hinzūrīn 'anā*, marked by inversion of theme and predicate, and prefixing of what was originally an interrogative.

For the non-affective form Arabic has a pair of verbs, *ḥasuna/sā'a*, used both for the simple evaluative "is good/bad" (e.g. *'aslama 'alā yadi fulānīn wa-ḥasuna 'islāmuhu* "he was converted to Islam by so-and-so and his conversion was a good one"), and also for a categorizing plus evaluative predicate, with the categorization expressed by a 'specifying' accusative (*taḥṣīṣ*), as in Q. 4.71 *ḥasuna 'ulā'ika raftīqan* "those are a goodly company" [Blachère (1949-50) has "Combien ceux-là sont bons comme compagnons", but the affective word 'combien' would be better omitted] or "those are good *qua* company".

In order to modify this by adding the affective overtone, one may use *n/b* for the good/bad antithesis, expanded by a statement of the domain in which it operates. But usage seems to dictate that this pair is not employed without statement of the domain of evaluation (e.g. *\*ni'ma 'islāmuhu* and *\*ni'ma 'ulā'ika* are not admissible), except in one type of sentence of frequent occurrence in the Q, where *n/b* is followed by a clause headed with 'relational' *mā* (*mā al-mawṣūla*); in these I cannot see any way

of avoiding analysis of the clause as theme of a simple evaluative predicate. Thus Q. 3.187 *bi'sa mā yaštarawna* "how evil is what they purchase!", 5.79 *bi'sa mā kānū yaf'alūna* "how evil is what they were doing!", 2.271 *nī'immā* [*<nī'ma mā*] *hiya* "how good is that which it [*scil.* almsgiving] is!"; and, with fronted main predicate and embedded clause predicate, 4.58 *'inna llāha nī'immā ya'izūkum bihi* "how good is that with which God counsels you".

Perhaps one should add parenthetically that in Q. 7.150 *bi'sa mā ḥalaftumūnt* "how evil is that which you took in succession to me", az-Zamaḥṣarī's glossing of the *mā* as equivalent to *hilāfa*, i.e. the *mašdar* of the verb, suggests the possibility of interpreting it here as a *mā al-mašdariyya* (*Kaššāf* II, 118)

A specially interesting passage with both *nī'ma* and *ḥasuna* in parallelism is Q. 18.31 *nī'ma t-tawābu wa-ḥasunat murtafaqan* "how good is the reward! And it [*scil.* Paradise] is excellent as a resting-place". At first sight this looks as if 'the reward' is a theme and *nī'ma* is a simple evaluative predicate, without statement of the domain, structured like *ḥasuna*: 18.50 *bi'sa li-z-zālimīna badalan* "how evil is it [*scil.* taking Iblis instead of Allah as a friend] as an exchange for the wrongdoers". This form is unique in Q, and equally rare in non-Quranic early Arabic, though it becomes commoner later.

However, the grammarians claim that the common early form (*nī'ma t-tawābu*) is elliptical for a full form where *n/b* is followed by two nominals. Since both are nominative, *marfūʿ*, Reckendorf (1921:16-22, §12) calls them 'näheres Subjekt' and 'ferneres Subjekt'. This is a not very helpful terminology ('näheres/ferneres Nominativ' would have been better), since clearly no sentence can have two subjects on a syntactic level with each other; though certainly Arabic has sentence forms like *zaydun 'abūhu kabīru s-sinni* "Z has an elderly father", where Z is the principal theme, having as its predicate the embedded clause which itself consists of a secondary theme 'abū- plus predicate. I suspect that something of this kind may be what Reckendorf had in mind when he wrote (1921:16) the rather perplexing, 'Der Form nach ein Satz, bildet dieser Ausdruck [*n/b* plus 'nearer' nominative] jedoch seiner Bedeutung nach eine attributive Verbindung, die sich zu weiteren Satzteilen verschieden verhält'.

If we understand Reckendorf's 'ferneres Subjekt' as the principal theme of the total sentence, there would be no difficulty in accepting its elision (as claimed by the grammarians); provided that Little Jack Horner has been in the forefront of the thought of the speaker and hearer, it is a linguistic commonplace that elision can delete from the surface structure the allusion to him, and say "What a good boy!" implying "What a good boy he is" [or, of course, if he is the speaker "... am I!"] In this way, one might be inclined to gloss Q. 2.206 *ḥasbuhu ḡahannamu wa-bi'sa l-mihādu* as 'his lot shall be Hell - and what a bad resting-place!'

But when we examine the non-elliptical structures as well as the elliptical ones, a central problem that arises is, in what way does *bi'sa l-mihādu* differ from *bi'sa badalan*? Translators have in fact almost always rendered the two structure identically. Yet they evidently call for some explanation of the contrasts, *rafʿ* versus *naṣb*, and definition by means of the article *versus* indefiniteness. Normally speaking, a nominal predicate is only *marfūʿ* if it is the sole predicative element; as soon as it is subordinated to a verbal modifying element, e.g. *kāna* and its sisters, it becomes *manṣūb*, *huwa faqīrun* → *kāna/āda* etc. *faqīran*. One might have expected the same

to happen with *n/b*. The grammarians get round this difficulty by assigning to Reckendorf's 'nearer' nominative the status of agent, *fā'il*, of the alleged verb *n/b*, to account for its *raf'*. This would tend to make the structure analogous (in some degree) to *zaydun qad kabura 'abūhu* "Z has an aged father", where 'abū- is certainly a *fā'il*, even though it is not the principal theme of the total sentence, which is Z. The analogy is not quite complete, since the embedded clause normally requires an anaphoric pronoun linking it to the main theme; in the *n/b* structure, the affective inversion (*taqḍīm wa-ta'hīr*) with the ordering predicate + theme would mean that a referential pronoun would be cataphoric and not anaphoric, a thing which is strongly disliked in Arabic.

The main residual problem is the *taḥīya* (attachment of the article) of the 'näheres Subjekt'. *az-Zamaḥṣarī* says (e.g. in his comment on Q. 72.39) that the article is generic, *lām al-ġins*, a very surprising assertion at first sight. The usual function of the generic article is to mark that one is not speaking of any one specific member of the *ġins*, but every member: *al-'insānu fānin* "man is mortal" is equivalent to "every man (*kullu 'insānin*) is mortal". This is obviously inapplicable to our structures: *bi'sa l-mihādu* does not qualify every 'resting-place' as bad, which would be absurd. But there is a usage of the article which does fit our case: *aṭ-Ṭabarī (Annales II, 1503 last line)* cites a verse containing the expression *al-Burġumiyyu huwa l-la'īmu*: this incorporates the core-message *al-Burġumiyyu la'īmun* "B is a despicable fellow", but the addition of the article (and the entailed insertion of the *fā'ila*) must imply an extra semantic element. What I suggest is that it may imply a 'pre-eminence', *tafāḍil*, "he is *the* (pre-eminently) despicable fellow (more so than anyone else)", and that it could have been transposed into *bi'sa l-la'īmu l-Burġumiyyu* "how far the most (pre-eminently) despicable fellow is B". In this case the epithet is itself a term of dispraise (as with "what a pig I am" *supra*), but there is little difficulty in seeing a shading-off of the structure into neutral terms. Reckendorf (1921:17, §12.1b.α) cites *nī'ma l-fatā ḥalafun* with the rendering "welch herrlicher Held [*sic*] ist X", probably rightly, although *fatān* is not an unambiguous praise word, but can also be neutral; similarly, *'innahu nī'ma l-ḥalīlu* "er ist ein trefflicher Freund". An unmistakably neutral term, demanding the categorization as good/bad, is Q. 18.29 *bi'sa š-šarābu* "the most horrible drink it is!", and another way of expressing the sentiment would be to use the *naṣb at-ta'aġġub* (accusative of surprise), *aš-šarāba s-sayyi'a!*

It has here been contended that the 'remoter nominative' is the principal theme of the whole sentence, which is what Reckendorf (1921:19) says: 'Verbum und näh. Subj. bilden das Prädikativum des fern. Subj.', though in the examples which immediately follow, this principal theme is a pronoun incorporated in an inflection of *kāna*. This merely adds a preterital modification of the basically timeless structure which would have been expressed by an independent pronoun (*nī'ma 'aḥū l'islāmi 'anta > nī'ma 'aḥū l'islāmi kunta*). Similarly with sisters of *kāna*, e.g. Zuhayr *Mu'allaqa* v. 17 (Arnold 1850:75) *nī'ma s-sayyidāni wuġḍtumā* "how much the finest pair of sayyids you were found to be".

Fronting of the main theme (without theme-predicate inversion) is found in some of the extra-Quranic examples. These instances mostly involve pronouns, presented either as independent pronoun forms, or incorporated in a form of *kāna* etc., or affix-pronoun governed by *'inna*. Fronting of a substantival theme seems to be relatively rare.

It is a little puzzling that the grammarians fail to identify the 'remoter' nominative as a theme (or even as *fi manzilati l-mubtada'*), but term it *al-mahṣūṣu bi-l-madhī 'awi ḡ-ḡammī*; this is obviously a correct description, but not a very helpful one, because every predication of a quality 'singles out' the theme for possession of that quality, and applies just as much to the 'nearer' nominative as to the 'remoter' one - the 'domain' is being qualified as good/bad equally with the main theme.

If my memory is not at fault, I was taught by D. S. Margoliouth in 1932 that in the 'canonical' *n/b* structure with double nominative, the remoter one is obligatorily either a proper name *ism 'alam*, or a pronoun *ḡamīr*, or a demonstrative *mubham*. This excludes a common noun *ism ḡāt* (both indefinitum and *muhallan*). Exclusion of the indefinitum is simply part of the general rule that a true indefinitum can never function as theme [provided that one accepts my contention that in *fi waṣṭi l-madīnati qaṣṣun* the last word is *ḡabar* and not *mubtada'*, despite the grammarians]. Since the *lām at-ta'rif* is semantically similar to a demonstrative, one could envisage that in the *n/b* structure, with its 'affective' note, the demonstrative was preferred. But if it is really true that a generically defined noun does not occur in this position, thus making *\*ni'ma l-mutaḡakkiru l-fīlu* unacceptable ("how fine a memory has the elephant!"), it would seem odd and inexplicable.

Reckendorf (1921:18) cites one highly anomalous example from Ibn Hiṣām, in which both positions (nearer and remoter nominative) are occupied by a noun-clause: *bi'sa mā 'abda'u 'islāmī bihi 'an...* "as wäre ein schlechter Anfang meines Islams, daß...". But this is certainly a rarity.

#### The *Qurānic statistics*

##### *ni'ma:*

1/ 'nearer nominative' represented by an *ism muhallan* and ellipsis of 'remoter' nominative, 11 examples (3.173, 8.40 twice, 18.31, 22.78 twice, 37.75, 38.30, 38.44, 51.48, 77.23)

2/ 'nearer nominative' represented by a *mudāf* to an *ism muhallan* and ellipsis of a remoter nominative, 5 examples (3.136, 13.24, 16.30, 29.58, 39.74)

3/ followed simply by a *mā* clause, 2 examples (2.271, 4.58)

##### *bi'sa:*

1/ 'nearer nominative' represented by an *ism muhallan* and ellipsis of 'remoter nominative', 22 examples (2.126, 2.206, 3.12, 3.162, 3.197, 8.16, 9.73, 13.18, 14.29, 18.29, 22.13 twice, 22.72, 24.57, 38.56, 38.60, 43.38, 57.15, 58.8, 64.10, 66.9, 67.6 [but note two further examples 11.98, 99 b. *al-wird al-mawrūd et sim*, where the last word is probably adjectival and not a 'remoter' nominative].

2/ 'nearer' nominative represented by a *mudāf* to an *ism muhallan*, 5 examples (3.151, 16.29, 39.72, 40.76, 62.5)

3/ followed simply by a *mā* clause, 9 examples (2.102, 3.187, 5.62, 5.63, 5.79, 5.80, 2.90, 2.93, 7.150)

4/ non-elliptical form with two explicit nominatives, 1 example (49.11)

5/ anomalous (for the Qur'ān) form with accusative specification, discussed above, once only (18.50).

## ADDENDA

In the discussion following the presentation of this paper, several colleagues made valuable observations. N. Kinberg pointed out that al-Farrā' does in fact describe the 'remoter nominative' as a subject, as Reckendorf does. M.G. Carter further remarked that the general linguistic principle, that in equative sentences the predicate term is necessarily less defined than the subject, affords justification both for the restriction of the 'remoter nominative' to proper name, pronoun or demonstrative (all having a high degree of definition), and for the description of the article in the 'nearer nominative' as generic, which has a lower degree. R. Talmon was inclined to question the propriety of dissecting 'is a good boy' into two categorizing predicates, instead of a single sub-categorizing one; here I must say that this dissection is needed if one wishes to add an affective overtone to the goodness, rather than to the good-boyishness of the subject, and further that (in my view) every attributive adjective is in fact a predicate, albeit one subordinated to the main predicate (e.g. "they sat down on the green grass" = "they sat down on the grass, which was [at that time] green [and not dry]"). A. Roman remarked that the feminine marker in *nīmat* / *bi'sat* could be seen as having some analogy with the marker in the vocative particle *'ayyatuhā*.

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