

NEGATION IN YEMENI ARABIC

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0 Abstract

Negation in Yemeni Arabic, based on the dialect of *San'ā'*, includes negating perfect and imperfect forms of the verb by the particle /mā/ in pre-verbal position and the verb normally takes the suffix /-š/. /mā/ is also used in two verbal constructions joined by /wa/ 'and'. Such constructions are negated by /mā ... wa-mā .../ or /lā ... wa-lā .../. In constructions with /illa/ 'except' /mā/ is used to negate the verb, and such constructions have the meaning of 'nothing' or 'nobody ... except' or 'not ... anything or anybody except.' /mā/ also negates pseudo verbs: there is/are, 'to have', etc. /lā/ followed by the imperfect form of the verb negates an imperative. Nouns, pronouns, adjectives, particles, and prepositional phrases are negated by /miš/. /lā ... wa-lā .../ or /mā ... wa-lā/ is used with the meaning of 'neither ... nor'. There will be a lot of illustrative sentences, and some proverbial phrases.

1 Introduction

1.1 Informants and Material

The native speakers ("informants") whose speech served as the basis for the data selected for inclusion in this article are unsophisticated *bona fide* speakers of *ṣan'ānī* Arabic. They are male and their ages range between twenty and forty. A frequency word list of approximately 2,000 vocabulary items was compiled from native speakers in different situations, such as greetings, telephone conversations, comments, interviews, etc. On most occasions the informants talked to each other either in their homes during *gāt* sessions or in such places as office buildings, coffeeshouses, etc. There was a search for tales, fables, anecdotes and stories from story tellers, poets and informants. In informant interviews the question, "How do you say ...?" was avoided as much as possible for the sake of authenticity. Indeed, some of them had the tendency to emulate my dialect or other Arabic dialects, especially Egyptian and Palestinian¹. I have run across contrast of styles in the same speakers on different

¹ It should be pointed out that most of my informants have come in direct contact with a number of Arab immigrants working in *San'ā'*, especially Egyptians and Palestinians. I was on the lookout for "speech emulation", e.g., one informant said, *bakēt ṣagayir*, 'a package of cigarettes' on one occasion and *gafas ṣigayir* on another occasion. The latter is the SA form. In instances such as this one, I would check with the informant again, or another informant would contribute saying, "we do not use this in our

occasions. Because of limitations of time and for circumstances beyond my control no children or female informants were interviewed².

A limited but careful use was made of the following secondary data, including texts, word lists, grammars³, etc: Rossi (1938 and 1939), Nāmī (1946 and 1953), al-Akwa^c (1967), and Renaud (1977).

Rossi's *L'Arabo Parlato a Šan'a* (1939) is based on the speech of Šan'a^c and the immediate vicinity. It presumes to some extent a knowledge of literary Arabic. There is a good selection of text materials in transcript, which covers a wide range of phrases and dialogs on common subjects, proverbs, stories, popular songs, and poetry. A lexicon lists words under various headings, followed by a vocabulary of about 1,000 items. The major drawback of the book is that it is too short; the grammar part is only forty-six pages long. Only eight pages are devoted to phonology. The phonology part does not discuss the following topics, which are essential features in any study of the phonology of SA: phonological processes (such as pausal glottalization, pausal diphthongization, devoicing of voiced geminates, epenthesis, etc.), consonant clusters, diphthongs, and features of /r/, /l/, /g/ and /h/. The chart (on page 1) does not include the glides /w/ and /y/. It labels /s/, /z/, and /š/ as dentals, and the glottal stop, /h/, /ħ/ and /ʕ/ as laryngeals. The morphology also suffers from an inadequate treatment of verb forms, derivation and inflection of nouns, noun modification, pronouns and particles. Moreover, the book does not include any description of syntax, which includes negation.

The Šan'anī Arabic of today differs from that Rossi described. Rossi (1939) lacks a modern linguistic treatment and reflects theory and practice of some fifty years ago, in addition to its shortcomings. It is not a description of the speech of present urban semi-educated Šan'anīs.

1.2 Data Treatment and Limitations of the Study

This study is a descriptive analysis of major negative forms in SA; it is essentially synchronic⁴. No attempt has been made to refer to any diachronic facts. Features that are not mentioned in this presentation may be assumed to be either similar to those in other Arabic dialects or needing further investigation, which lies beyond the

dialect". See: Cadora 1970 for a detailed linguistic study of this phenomenon.

² It was almost impossible for me to hold a direct conversation with a woman. Only on two short occasions was I able to talk to a wife through her husband. She was very shy and conservative in her speech. Women in the YAR have their own livingrooms and their own *qat* chewing sessions.

³ None of those texts and grammars deals with the negation of SA. I have used a very small number of the vocabulary items in them if my informants accepted them as words being authentic SA words.

⁴ I was able to stay in Šan'a^c for approximately two months in 1985 and for another two months in 1986. The financial support for this research was provided by the U.S. Department of Education.

scope of this study, which is a sketch of the chief or salient features of negative forms in SA.

2 Negation in Yemeni Arabic

2.1 Negating Verbs

2.1.1 Perfect and Imperfect

The perfect and imperfect forms of the verb are usually negated by /mā/, which always precedes the verb; the verb normally takes the suffix /-š/:

limih mā ḥazzantš?	<i>Why didn't you (m.s.) chew qat?</i>
mā agdar aḡi sā'at ḥams.	<i>I can't come at five.</i>
mā sirnaš as-sūg al-yawm.	<i>We didn't go to the market today.</i>
wāllahi mā fihimtš.	<i>Honestly, I didn't understand.</i>
mā yišt iš.	<i>He doesn't want.</i>
mā yisbirš.	<i>It won't work; it is not suitable or proper.</i>
ibliš mā yḥarrib daymatih.	<i>No one harms oneself.</i>
iṅnayn mā yimšiš lahum markab.	<i>Too many cooks spoil the broth.</i>

Imperfect verb forms that denote a passive-potential sense are also negated by /mā ... -š/:

dayya mā yitḡayyarš.	<i>This cannot be changed.</i>
yitḡawwa walla mā yitḡawwāš?	<i>Can it be made stronger or not?</i>
mā yittammans.	<i>It cannot be priced; it is priceless.</i>
mā yigtara'.	<i>It cannot be read.</i>
mā yistantaḡš.	<i>He cannot be interrogated.</i>

Two verbal constructions with a perfect or an imperfect verb joined by /wa/ 'and' are negated by /mā ... wa-mā .../ or /mā ... wa-lā .../ or /lā ... wa-lā/ ... Examples:

mā yistantaḡš wa-mā yithākaš.	<i>He can neither be interrogated nor talked to.</i>
mā yistantaḡš wa-lā yithākaš.	
lā yistantaḡš wa-lā yithāka.	
mā yinfā'ak ma ma' aḥuk	<i>(lit., "What your brother has is of</i>
wa-lā sirāḡih yidī' lak.	<i>no avail to you; neither will his lantern give you</i>
	<i>light.") (Meaning: Depend on yourself.)</i>
lā sirt wa-lā ḡi't./	<i>I neither went nor came.</i>
mā sirtš wa-mā ḡi'tš.	

lā yinfa ^c ak mā mi ^c axūk	<i>Depend on yourself.</i>
wa-lā sirāḡih ydī' lak.	
lā ragad wa-lā ḥalla aḥad yurgud.	<i>He neither slept nor let anybody (else) sleep.</i>
mā taḡaddāš wa-mā ta ^c aššāš.	<i>He didn't have lunch; neither did he have dinner.</i>
lā šalla wa-lā šam.	<i>He neither prayed nor fasted.</i>
lā me' yirūb wa-lā ḡahbeh titūb.	<i>A leopard cannot change his spots.</i>

Note that if /lā ... wa-lā/ ... is used the particle /-š/ is not used and that /lā ... wa-lā/ may precede a noun.

In constructions with /illa/ 'except' /mā / is used to negate the verb. Such constructions have the meaning of 'nothing or nobody ... except' or 'not ... anything or anybody except':

mā bigiy illa ladātih.	<i>Nothing remained except his personal effects.</i>
mā ligīš illa bagariy.	<i>He didn't find anything (i.e., any other kind of meat) except beef.</i>
mā yfarrig as-sahāb illa l-maṭar	<i>There is nothing that disperses clouds except rain.</i>
mā yiḡīš al-ḡayr illa karrah.	<i>(God's) blessing comes only once.</i>
mā tiksir al-ḡaḡar illa l-ḡaḡar.	<i>Nothing breaks a rock except its sister.</i>
mā ibsarhum illa 'abdalla.	<i>Nobody saw them except Abdalla.</i>
mā ibsaruw illa 'abdalla.	<i>They (m.) didn't see anybody except Abdalla.</i>

/mā/ may be followed by a prepositional phrase:

mā ysīruw illa fi l-layl.	<i>They do not go (at any time) except at night.</i>
mā tibsirišš illa fi bāb al-yaman.	<i>You will not see him except in Bab al-Yaman.</i>
mā yḡinn 'ala l-ūd illa ḡiṡrih.	<i>Nobody can do one's work as well as oneself.</i>

/mā/ and /lā/ are used to negate other parts of speech and express the meaning of 'there isn't; there aren't; you cannot find, etc.' /mā/ is used with 'illa' 'except' or /ḡayr/ 'other than'. Proverbs and sayings abound with such examples:

mā malih illa fih 'ayb.	<i>(lit., "There isn't anything good, but there is a defect in it.")</i>
mā fi d-dunya illa raḡmat allāh.	<i>There is nothing in this world except God's blessing.</i>
mā šay' sā ^c šay'.	<i>Your fingers are not the same. Different strokes for different folks.</i>
mā aḡad ḡana illa yaḡya.	<i>No one is here except Yahya.</i>

mā fi l-mudun ḡayr ṣanʿa *San'a is the best of cities and*
wa-fi l-bawādi ruṣābah. *Rusaba is the best of farm lands.*

Examples with /lā/:

lā mē' yirūb wala ḡahbeh (lit., "No water turns into yogurt, nor does a
titūb. prostitute repent." Meaning: You cannot make a silk
purse out of a sow's ear. A leopard cannot change his
spots.)

lā zḡayyir ymayyiz kabīr (lit., "There isn't a young person who respects an
wala kabīr yirḡam zaḡīr. older one, nor is there an old person who has compas-
sion for a young one.")

In classicisms /lā/ negates indefinite nouns, in which case it has the function of literary Arabic /lā/ of absolute negation:

lā ṣakk no doubt
lā ṣukr(a) ʿala wāḡib. (lit., "No thanks for one's duty.") You're welcome.
lā budd min as-safar. Travel is inevitable.
lā mafarr no escape

/wala/ can be used by itself in a pre-nominal position to express the meaning of 'and not, not even, not so much as':

walad ʿāṣi wala mābiṣ. *Something is better than nothing.*
ḡarak al-ḡarīb wala *Out of sight out of mind.*
aḡūk al-baʿīd.
ra's kabṣi wala ḡirarat ḡarād. *One today is better than two tomorrow. A bird in the
hand is worth two in the bush.*

2.1.2 Negating Pseudo-Verbs

Prepositional pseudo-verbs are negated by /mā/:

mā biṣ ḡāt hāna. *There isn't any qat here.*
mā ʿindahum ḡihhāl. *They don't have any children.*
mā ʿindiṣ dahab? *Don't you (f.s.) have any gold?*
mā ʿalayh duyūn. *He doesn't have any debts (lit., "Debts are not on
him.")*

Two prepositional pseudo-verbal constructions are usually negated by /lā ... wala .../ or /mā ... wala/ .../ 'neither ... nor':

lā lih awwal wala tāli.	(lit., "He does not have a beginning; nor does he have an end.") (Meaning: Everything should have a sound beginning.)
lā li wala lak.	neither mine nor yours
lā lih dayn wala ʿalayh dayn.	People do not owe him any money; neither does he owe any money.
mā ʿindah bayt wala zalat.	He has neither a house nor money.

2.1.3 Negating Imperatives

A negative command (or request), which is used to tell s.o. not to do s.th. consists of the negative particle /lā/ followed by the imperfect of the verb.

lā trāḡim an-nās wa-baytak min zuḡāḡ!	(lit., "Do not throw rocks at people if your house is made of glass.") (Meaning: Those who live in glass houses should not throw stones.)
lā titzawwaḡ wa-ʿād garguṣ ummak fi t-ṭāḡah.	(lit., "Do not get married and your mother's cap is still in the window.") (Meaning: Haste makes waste.)
lā tsīrayn as-sūḡ!	Don't go (f.p.) to the market!
lā tḡazzinu hāna!	Do not chew (m.p.) qat here!
lā tḡūli mā biṣ.	Do not say (f.s.): "There isn't."
ida ṣāḡbak ʿasal lā tilḡasih kullih.	Don't use up your credit all at once.

Two negative commands are joined by /wa/ 'and':

lā tusrug wa-lā tḡāf.	(lit., "Do not steal and do not be afraid!") (Meaning: If you do not steal, you should not be (or you do not have to be) afraid.)
lā tḡaddihum wa-lā tʿaṣṣihum.	Do not give them lunch and do not give them dinner!

2.2 Negating Other Parts of Speech

Nouns, pronouns, adjectives, particles, and prepositional phrases are negated by /miṣ/:

huw miṣ ḡawwit.	He is not a qat dealer.
miṣ ḡudweyh, al-yawm	not tomorrow, today
miṣ as-sabt, al-ḡamīs	not (on) Saturday, (on) Thursday
miṣ hin, antayn	not they (f.), you (f.p.)
ana miṣ ḡawiʿ.	I am not hungry.
hin miṣ ḡahināt.	They (f.) are not smart.

huw miš ġarig.	<i>He is not mad.</i>
miš hākada?	<i>Isn't it so?</i>
hin sārāyn, miš hāna.	<i>They (f.) left; they are not here.</i>
hna miš mirtāhīn hānāk.	<i>We are not comfortable there.</i>
miš nāhiy?	<i>Isn't it good?</i>
miš dala-dale, fīsa ^c	<i>not slowly, quickly, at once</i>
miš hākada	<i>not in this manner</i>
miš sā ^c at tintayn	<i>not at two o'clock</i>
miš sā ^c ma huw	<i>not like him</i>
miš ^c ala sibbih	<i>not because of him</i>
miš min šan ^a	<i>not from San'a</i>

Either /lā ... wa-lā/ or /mā ... wa-lā/ is used with the meaning of 'neither ... nor':

lā bayt wa-lā zalaṭ	<i>neither a house nor money</i>
lā ^c ātiš wa-lā ġāwi ^c	<i>neither thirsty nor hungry</i>
mā šay' sā ^c šay' wa-lā š-šabāh	<i>(There is) nothing like anything else</i>
sā ^c al- ^c āšiy.	<i>and the morning is not like the evening.</i>
mā kull sawdeh tamrah	<i>(lit., "Not every piece of charcoal is a</i>
wala kull šahmeh lahmeh.	<i>date, and not every piece of fat is meat.") Meaning: Do not judge people by their appearance.</i>

The negative form of /aḥad/ 'somebody, someone' is /maḥad/ 'nobody, no one'. It is usually used as the subject of a sentence:

maḥad ibsarih.	<i>Nobody saw it/him.</i>
maḥad yudḥul hāna.	<i>Nobody enters here.</i>
maḥad māṭ min al-ġū ^c .	<i>No one died of hunger.</i>
but:	
mā ibsart aḥad.	<i>I did not see anybody.</i>
*ibsart maḥad.	
mā labagṭš aḥad?	<i>Didn't you hit anybody?</i>
*labagṭš maḥad?	

When /mā/ negates a noun or a phrase and is followed by /'illa/ or /ġayr/ 'except' the meaning expressed in English is usually 'there isn't any + N (that can be found) except':

mā fi l-mudun ġayr šan ^a .	<i>There isn't any other city except San'a. (i.e., San'a is the best of cities.)</i>
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mā sadīg illa sā'at ad-dīg.	<i>There isn't any friend except at the time of distress (i.e., A friend in need is a friend indeed.)</i>
mā fi l-ḥanaš illa rāsih.	<i>There isn't anything in the snake except its head. (i.e., The head of a snake is its most important part.)</i>

/mā/ by itself may negate a noun or a phrase and expresses the meaning of 'there isn't any + N':

mā mareh ṭhibb mareh.	<i>There isn't any woman who likes (another) woman.</i>
mā minhum darar.	<i>There isn't any harm they can do.</i>

A negative response to a yes- or no-question is either /lā/ or /'abadan/ (lit., "never")

ant ṭhazzin?	<i>Do you chew qat?</i>
lā.	<i>No.</i>
tišrab šigāyir?	<i>Do you smoke cigarettes?</i>
lā abadan.	<i>No, never.</i>

The phrase /miš ḥakada/ 'isn't it so' is appended to a statement to form what is known in English as a tail question; it is usually known as a question tag; it is invariable. The phrase /miš ḥakada/ occurs more frequently.:

al-gāt ḡali, miš ḥakada?	<i>Qat is expensive, isn't it?</i>
al-ḡihhāl sāru l-madrasesh, miš ṣaḥīḥ?	<i>The children went to school, didn't they?</i>
'a-yiḡi ḡudweh, tamām?	<i>He will come tomorrow, won't he?</i>
ant miš ḡāwiḥ, ṣaḥīḥ?	<i>You are not hungry, are you?</i>

2.3 /mā gad/ + independent pronoun + /š/

The particle /gad/ in a pre-verbal position has the meaning of 'already', or it indicates the termination of an action:

gad (hiy) sārat.	<i>She has (already) left.</i>
gad antayn ṣtabaḥtayn.	<i>You (f.p.) have already had breakfast.</i>
gad bigiy mi'ī zalat.	<i>I do have money left with me.</i>

In an equational sentence /gad/ is used for emphasis or 'not yet'.

gad huw ḥāna.	<i>He is here.</i>
gad mi'ī zalat.	<i>I do have money with me.</i>

When the negative particle /mā/ precedes /gad/ with a following personal pronoun, stem change takes place:

mā gad + ana	→ mā gadanāš	<i>I (certainly) am not ...</i>
mā gad + hna	→ mā gad-i-hnāš	<i>We (certainly) aren't ...</i>
mā gad + ant	→ mā gadantš	<i>You (m.s.) aren't ...</i>
mā gad + antu	→ mā gadantūš	<i>You (m.p.) aren't ...</i>
mā gad + antiy	→ mā gadantiš	<i>You (f.s.) aren't ...</i>
mā gad + antayn	→ mā gadantaš	<i>You (f.p.) aren't ...</i>
mā gad + huw	→ mā gaduš	<i>He isn't ...</i>
mā gad + hum	→ mā gadumš	<i>They (m.) aren't ...</i>
mā gad + hiy	→ mā gadiš	<i>She isn't ...</i>
mā gad + hin	→ mā gadanš	<i>They (f.) aren't ...</i>

Examples:

mā gadanāš tā'ib	<i>I am not yet tired. I am certainly not tired.</i>
mā gadantš bālig.	<i>You (m.s.) aren't an adult.</i>
mā gadantiš ḥarēweh.	<i>You (f.s.) aren't a bride.</i>

If /mā gad/ precedes the pseudo-verb /bih/ 'there is,' the resultant negative form of the whole phrase is:

mā gad bihš → mā gadbiš → mā gabbiš → [mææ gæppi'š].
<i>There isn't anything left. It's all gone.</i>

2.4 Assimilation of /-h/ of the third person masculine singular suffix /-ih/ on to a following negative particle /-š/:

šallaytih.	<i>I (you) took it.</i>
*mā šallaytiš → mā šallaytišš.	<i>I (you) didn't take it.</i>
ibsarih.	<i>He saw it.</i>
*mā ibsariš → mā ibsarišš.	<i>He didn't see it.</i>
šannatih.	<i>She filtered it.</i>
*mā šannatiš → mā šannatišš.	<i>She didn't filter it.</i>
gālitih.	<i>She told him.</i>
*mā gālatiš → mā gālatišš.	<i>She didn't tell him.</i>

If the verb ends with a long vowel, simultaneous shortening occurs when the verb is negated:

ligih	<i>He found it.</i>
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- *mā ligīhš → mā ligišš. He didn't find it.
 yilgāh. He finds it.
 *mā yilgāhš → mā yilgāšš. He doesn't find it.
 ligyūh. They (m.) found it.
 *mā ligyūhš → ma ligyūšš. They (m.) didn't find it.

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