

# "?i l ?akl i t-HaTT": The ideology of ergatives in ECA

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"It is indeed through language that people shape their experience of their surroundings and their memories. One's use of language does not only reveal how one sees oneself and the outside world - for the way one thinks about something influences the way one speaks about it - it also gives each person a unique (linguistic) identity." (Aspeshagh, 1999, WWW)

## 1. Introduction

This is an exercise in integrational semio-linguistic analysis. It is integrational in at least two senses. It combines theory (representing social action, impression management and passives and ergatives) and practice (an in-depth analysis of a single utterance in Egyptian Colloquial Arabic - ECA). On the other hand, the analysis of the sample utterance integrates syntax (Functional Systemics and Government and Binding), semantics and pragmatics (with a focus on politeness strategies).

The semiotic part of the analysis consists in a comparison between the sample utterance and some alternative, hypothetical structures that have the same content. Thus, in a considerable portion thereof, the paper is an exercise in selection and combination and the pragmatics and ideology of the different versions of the content/message.

The paper starts with a brief note on impression management and representing social action. Next, it moves on to a more elaborate discussion of ergatives and middles in English, Standard Arabic (SA) and ECA within a Systemic-Functional as well as Government and Binding framework. A necessary follow-up to this discussion is a short note on the ideology of passives and ergatives.

The mini-application section starts with a description of the context of the sample utterance from ECA. Then, the syntactic, lexical and pragmatic aspects of the utterance are discussed, followed by concluding remarks on how these features reflect contextual factors as well as ideological/psychological attitudes of the speaker.

## 2. Theory

### 2.1. (Re)presentation: self and social action

One of the basic tenets of critical linguistics and critical discourse analysis (CDA), and the analyses based thereupon, is that "different ways of representing social action encode different interpretations of, and different attitudes to, the social actions represented" (van Leeuwen, 1995:81). Social action is represented through, among other things and probably most importantly, language. More broadly, social action is represented through various semio-linguistic codes available for a speaker or a writer. Such codes subsume proxemics, kinesics, garment systems, color codes, suprasegmental and paralinguistic features, to mention only a few categories.

Semio-linguistic codes are crucial not only to any representation of social action, but also to any projection of the self in face-to-face as well as distant encounters. A lot of impression management and face-work goes on in any human interaction Goffman (1959) employs a 'dramaturgical' approach in dealing with impression management and concerns himself with "the mode of presentation employed by the actor and its meaning in the broader social context". Interaction is viewed as a "performance," shaped by environment and audience, constructed to provide others with "impressions" that are consonant with the desired goals of the actor. "The performance exists regardless of the mental state of the individual, as persona is often imputed to the individual in spite of his or her lack of faith in - or even ignorance of - the performance" (Barnhart, 1994, WWW).

Goffman's 'mode of presentation' is a function of semio-linguistic codes, of the combination between sign activities, verbal and nonverbal, and sign equipment - clothes, perfumes, accessories, and so on. Thus, the structure of a sentence/utterance, the lexical items used therein, the suprasegmental and paralinguistic features and the pragmatic aspects thereof are crucial to any understanding of how a writer/speaker manages others' impressions, manufactures his/her own image and establishes his/her own territory. That is partly why transitivity choices, for example, are ideologically significant and context-bound.

## 2.2. Ergative-middles and ergative-effectives

An alternative to the traditional model of transitivity is - the ergative model, which represents a process "not in terms of impact but in terms of causation". There is always at least one participant that is "most closely associated" with the process. This participant is the Medium, "since it is the medium through which the process is manifested". The basic option is whether to represent the combination of Medium + Process as being "externally caused" by an Agent or not. Thus, the combination 'door + open', can be represented as [Medium:] the door [Process:] opened, without specifying what brought the occurrence about, or as [Agent:]the wind [Process:] opened [Medium:] the door, with a specification of the Agent bringing about the occurrence. "A clause with Process + Medium without the Agent is known as middle, and a clause with an Agent (explicit or implicit) is known as effective" (Matthiessen & Halliday, 1997, WWW).

A more elaborate comparison between the transitive and the ergative models is provided by Aspeslagh (1999, WWW), based on Halliday's Introduction to Functional Grammar (1985) and Davidse (1992). The transitive model is a "linear one", describing an action that originates in one very clear energy-source, the Actor. If "the action stops there and includes only an actor and a process, the construal is called the transitive: middle" (intransitive), e.g., "She jumps." However, "the activity can be extended onto a second participant", which is called the Goal, and which the activity generated by the Actor is performed upon. This type of construal consisting of Actor, Goal and Process is called the transitive: effective, e.g., "She picks berries." A structure consisting of Medium + Process only is called the ergative: middle. This construal can be characterized by its "voice-neutralization", in other words, "it incorporates both the passive and the active form". The ergative: middle elicits the question about who or what the origin of the action is: although it is obvious that the Medium co-participates in the activity, it is not clear whether the activity is self-or externally instigated, e.g., "The twig drops." The question about the instigating force is resolved when a second participant is added, viz. the Instigator, thus forming the ergative: effective construal, e.g., "She dropped the twig." This participant is revealed as the force that sets into motion the event. Although the Medium does not instigate the event, it is still "actively involved and co-participates", clearly setting it apart from the Goal-participant of transitive: effective construal. One of the main recognition criteria for the ergative construal is that every middle construal should allow for its effective counterpart and vice versa, a rule which clearly

does not apply to the transitive model: "She slept": (Transitive: middle); "\*Someone slept her"; "She pulled his hair": (Transitive: effective) "\* His hair pulled."

### 2.3. Ergatives in ECA

- 1a. "?il baabi (masc- sing - 3rd) ?it-  
fataH - ti"  
(The door got/was opened.)
- 1b. "?il baab fataH"  
(The door opened.)
- 1c. "futiHa al baab/ ?il baabi futiHa -  
ti"  
(The door was opened.)

From a Government and Binding (GB) viewpoint, the argument structures of (1a) and (1b) are not identical. The verb in (1b) is a one-place verb and it subcategorizes only one external argument; in (1a), it is a two-place verb and it subcategorizes two arguments of which the external one is implicit. From a Systemic-Functional viewpoint, (1b) is an ergative-middle clause, because, although it has a transitive-effective counterpart in which the transitive object corresponds to the ergative subject: "?il walad fataH ?il baab" ("The boy opened the door"), there is no Actor or Instigator. (1a) is an ergative-effective clause, because the Instigator or Actor is there, implicit, yet indicated by the trace (t) that is co-indexed with "?il baab". (Co-indexing is indicated by the lower script i). Another difference between (1a) and (1b), from a GB perspective, is that the former can take a Circumstantial of Manner, e.g., "?amdan" ("deliberately"), while the latter cannot. The Circumstantial implies agency and volitionality, and consequently the presence of an Actor or Instigator. That is why John "?it?atal ?amdan" ("John was killed deliberately") is grammatical, while "?il ?arD niDfit ?amdan" ("The floor cleaned deliberately") is not (Agameya, 1994). The third sentence, a transitive-effective clause, is the (SA) equivalent of the first. It is not used in ECA, except at its highest and most formal varieties (see below) and in the context of humor and fun, e.g., in pop songs and monologs that parody SA.

In SA, a trilateral transitive verb such as "kasara" (broke - masc- sing - 3rd) may passivize either through the process of the vocalic ablaut "u-i": "kusira" (was broken), or through the use of the prefix "?in/?it": ?in-kasara" (broke/was broken). Not all verbs allow the "?in" prefixation, however. To arrive at a rule for the "?in" prefixation in SA, Mahmoud (1991) suggests the change-of-state as a criterion: if the object of a verb undergoes a change-of-state, then the verb can allow the "?in" prefixation. This rule may apply to SA, but not to all levels of ECA. One verb that he rules out from the category of verbs that allow "?in" prefixation is "dhakara" ("He mentioned" - masc- sing - 3rd) can occur as "?it-dhakar" or "?idh-dhakar" in formal, educated varieties of ECA. A verb such as "Taraqa" ("He knocked" - masc- sing - 3rd), on the other hand, does not involve a change-of-state, but it allows the two processes of passivization: "Turiqa" and "?in-Taraqa" in SA. In ECA, the options are "?in-Taraq/ ?in-Tara?" and "?iT-Taraq/ ?iT-Tara?" (see below).

ECA does not use the vocalic ablaut process for passivization - except at the High Standard Colloquial level as in: "?il maada bi-tudarras" ("The subject is being taught/ is taught"), where "bi" indicates habituality and continuity (Badawi, 1973, 168). Instead, it relies on the "?in/ ?it" prefixation. (The remarkable absence of the vocalic ablaut process in ECA passivization is consistent with its more general tendency toward minimization of case-marking.) The boundaries between "?in" and "?it" are not clear-cut. "?it" seems to be more informal and less educated than "?in". However, the two prefixes are not always semantically interchangeable. The difference between "?in- HaTT" and "?it-HaTT" is a case in point (see below).

In ECA (trilateral) transitive verbs that begin with a pharyngealized consonant, or an alveolar, the /n/ and /t/ sounds of the passive prefixes "?in" and "?it" are assimilated into the initial sound of the verb, e.g., "Tabb" (He "descended" as well as "cured" or "treated"): "?iT-Tabb";

dabb" (He "hit" as well as "drove bananas"): "?id-dabb"; "gahhiz/ jahhiz" ("He prepared"): "?ig-gahhiz/ ?ij-jahhiz"; "sallim" ("He handed in/ submitted"): "?it-sallim/?is-sallim". In these examples, the sounds /n/ and /t/ become /T/, /d/, /g/ and /s/, respectively. In other words, such verbs passivize by geminating their initial consonants and dropping the /n/ and /t/ sounds from the passive prefix.

## 2.4. Ideology of Passives and Ergatives

Transitivity and ergativity choices have important ideological implications. For example, there are many stylistic and ideological consequences of passivization. The immediate result of this transformation is deleting the Agent and thematizing the Patient/Goal. The Agent is deleted when it is known, when it is redundant and when it is totally unknown. It is also deleted when the speaker/writer chooses to cloud the responsibility of a certain action because of fear of, respect for or care for the real agent (Yaakoub, 1988, p. 497). Ergativity has similar effects. It deletes agency without deleting tense or modality.

Such choices are a tool and an index at one and the same time: a tool for the writer or speaker in representing reality and an index for the analyst in decoding this representation. The answers of the questions of who does what to whom where when and why are very important indicators of the distribution of power in a given context. They are also indicators of how people perceive reality. This is especially the case in material process clauses. "Material processes give a very good indication of how a character perceives actions and the causal links between events in the outer world" (Aspeslagh, 1999, WWW).

It is through these choices, on the other hand, that many ideological transformations and modes of operation are realized. For example, deactivation may be realized in the form of objectivation. One way of achieving objectification is prolepsis: talking about the result/ product of the action (van Leeuwen, 1995:93). Another device for deactivation is deagentialization. "Actions and reactions can be agentialized, represented as brought about by human agency, or de-agentialized, represented as brought about in other ways, impermeable to human agency - through natural forces, unconscious processes and so on" (p. 96).

In the remaining part of the study, an ECA utterance is examined in detail. First a skeletal sketch of the context of the utterance is given. Then the syntactic, lexical and pragmatic aspects of the utterance are discussed.

## 3. Context

A long domestic quarrel resulting from a mutual misunderstanding between the husband and the wife. In the middle of shouting and screaming, the husband repeatedly requests lunch. No response, except for more anger and more confrontation. The more imperative the husband sounds and the more negative responses he receives from the wife, the more insulted both of them feel. The storm of anger is over. The couple is calm and steamingly silent for a long while - the husband to his office and the wife between the bedroom and the kitchen. Unasked this time, she prepares lunch; somehow distant, she calls on him: "?il ?akl it-HaTT". No follow-up on either side.

## 4. Text

"?il ?akl it-HaTT" (Lit. "the food has been put/laid"; in the context of the utterance: "lunch is ready.")

## 5. Analysis

### 5.1. Syntax

The utterance made by the wife is a nominal sentence - "?ismyyah"- since it starts with a noun, a definite theme constituent, "?il ?akl". At the level of combination (the syntagmatic axis), an

alternative structure can be "?it-HaTT ?il ?akl" ("was put/laid the food"), which is a verbal sentence. Although identical at the zero semantic level, these two structures are not pragmatically interchangeable. The second seems like a continuation of an already started dialogue. The island-like utterance "?il ?akl ?it-HaTT" is more likely to give a sense of finality and less likely to elicit any further dialogue, especially as it ends with a pharyngealized stop.

From a GB point of view, the sentence is syntactically identical with (1a) in 2.3 above. The verb "?it-HaTT" is a two-place verb. It subcategorizes two external arguments of which the external one is implicit - it must be "?ana" ("I") or any of its allomorphic substitutes, referring to the wife. Mixing GB with Halliday's Systemic-Functional Grammar, we find that the sentence is ergative-effective, because the Instigator or Actor is there, implicit yet indicated by the trace (t) that is co-indexed with "?il ?akl":

"(?ana) HaTTeet ?il ?akl"  
(I past - put/prepare the food)

The application of the move-a results in:

"?il ?akl i pass - ?it-HaTT t i "

As already suggested, this movement is not obligatory for two reasons well-documented in the literature on Arabic. First, Arabic is a pro-drop language. Second, word order is not as important in Arabic as it is in such languages as English. Moreover, even in SA, passive morphology does not result in case-absorption and a passive verb can still assign Nominative Case to the subject-substitute, "naaa?ib ?il faa?il".

The verb "?it-HaTT" is the nucleus of a Material process, a process of doing. The Medium is "?il ?akl" and the Actor or Instigator is implicit as already explained. The Material process is de-agentialized, objectified and thus deactivated, "represented as brought about in other ways, impermeable to human agency" - probably through an "unconscious process". The husband in the situation examined here is aware of the real Actor. This is probably one reason why the wife does not mention herself as Actor. Yet, this does not seem to be the most important reason. Given the context of the utterance, it is safe to assume that the wife does not wish to express responsibility of the action. She does not want to indicate a conscious effort on her part to satisfy the husband. The entire utterance is depersonalized and dehumanized. "(?ana) HaTTeet ?il ?akl" would have been more personal and would have laid more emphasis on the speaker, which the wife does not seem to want to do. The lexical choices intensify the sense of impersonalization and dehumanization, as shown below.

## 5.2. Lexis

The root "HaTT" has the denotations of "put", "laid", "rested" and "settled": "HaTT ?il kitaab" (masc- sing - 3rd - "put the book"); "?iTaa?ir HaTT ?ala ashshagara" ("The bird rested/settled on the tree"); "HaTT il akil" (masc- sing - 3rd - "laid the table"). However, the verb is extensively used metaphorically and idiomatically in both SA and ECA. The following ECA examples are taken from El-Batal (2000:37): "HaTT Sawab?u il ?ashara fishshaqq/ fishsha??" ("throw up one's hands/arms"); "HuTT fi baTnak baTTiixa Seefi" ("You can bet your bottom dollar"); "HaTT manaXiir ... fil ?arD" ("put someone's nose out of joint").

Other examples can be found in Spiro (1973:140-141): "HaTTaha waaTi" (masc- sing - 3rd - "humbled himself"); "HaTT ?eenuh ?ala ..." (masc- sing - past - 3rd - "coveted ..."/ "kept an eye on ..."); "HaTTeena il fuluus" ("We paid the money"); "HaTHaT" (masc- sing - 3rd - "has become very weak"); "?in-HaTT" ("declined/deteriorated") - together with "?in-HaTT" in the sense of "was/has been put/placed/prepared", this constitutes a homophonic, homographic pair; "munHaTT" ("mean", "low", "base"); "HaTT li ... maHaTT" (masc- sing - 3rd - "hinted something against ..."); "di HiTTa fi Haqqak/Ha??ak" ("This is disparaging to your honor"); "maHaTTah" ("railway station"). The verb is frequently 'sexified' to have slangy, erotic uses that are not relevant to the present study. In Classical as well as Standard Arabic, the expression "HuTTa ?anna ?awzaarana" is a prayer to God

that He may forgive our sins.

The denotations and the connotations of the verb are thus mostly about settling, lack of motion, end of a journey and about humiliation and decline and relief as well. It is apparently less sophisticated, less refined than "?it-?amal" ("has been made") and "gihiz /jihiz" or "?it-gahhiz/ ?ig-gahhiz"/ ?it-jahhiz/ ?ij-jahhiz" ("is ready/ has been prepared"). The Medium of the ergative clause, "?il ?akl", is similarly less sophisticated and more indiscriminate than "?il ghada" ("lunch"). Both words - "?it-HaTT" and "?il ?akl" - demonstrate a semantics of negligence and indifference, of impersonalization, indiscrimination, and lack of attention to details.

### 5.3. Pragmatics

#### 5.3.1. General

The sample utterance is superficially a Representative speech act. The illocutionary force could be that of a Directive - an invitation or a request. Representatives are arguably less personal, more detached, than Directives. The focus is on the message or content, not on the addresser or the addressee, thus resulting in less involvement and more distance.

The complete absence of deontic as well as epistemic modality does not render the utterance "unmodalized" or "neutral"; this absence itself expresses the highest degree of certainty. It does communicate an ideological position, a position of certainty (Cf. Badran, 2001:50). On the other hand, the explicit modal 'colorlessness', as it were, signals a remarkable lack of involvement or engagement on the part of the addresser. For modality is "the grammaticalization of speakers' (subjective) attitudes and opinions" (Palmer, 1986:6).

#### 5.3.2. Politeness

An alternative utterance - "(?ana) HaTTeet ?il ?akl" - would have been not only more personalized, but also more polite as it maximizes cost-to-self, to use Leech's (1983) terminology. Adding "lak" or "liik" ("for you") would have been a maximization of benefit-to-other as well. The imperative alternative "(yalla) qum kul" ("Come on, get your lunch"), using suitable intonation, would have increased benefit-to-other and made the implicit invitation explicit and urgent. In other words, the mismatch between the locution and the illocution would have considerably diminished.

Moreover, the implicit 'you' in this hypothetical imperative structure, very much like the pronominal clitic in "lak" and "liik", in addition to further personalizing the utterance, would have been an exploitation of a positive politeness strategy, namely, the Attend to the hearer strategy. Positive politeness minimizes distance, by expressing friendliness and solid interest (Brown & Levinson, 1978:108) - which the wife in the present situation does not seem to want to do.

The wife, in fact, fails to use another politeness strategy: use in-group identity markers, e.g., "ya Habiibi" ("love", or "honey"). However, she obviously manipulates the presupposition of H (earer)'s - her husband's - wants. (One cannot make much out of this because, as already indicated, the husband has already asked for lunch a long while prior to the utterance.)

Given the context of the utterance, it might be safe to assume that the act of stating or reporting performed thereby is an F(ace)T(hreatening) A(ct). In fact, the very act of speaking in the present context seems to be a psychological burden. To handle an extremely sensitive situation, the wife resorts to an ergative effective construction, thus avoiding reference to the persons involved and downplaying the effort she may have put into the preparation of lunch. She seems to be minimizing the cost to self and at the same time minimizing benefit to other, defocusing both the Agent and the Beneficiary and giving priority to the Action and the Medium instead.

In this manner, the wife uses the "Impersonalize S[peaker] and H[earer]" Negative Politeness strategy (Brown & Levinson, 1978:194): "One way of indicating that S does not want to impinge on H is to phrase the FTA as if the agent were other than S, or at least possibly not S or not S alone, and the addressee were other than H, or only inclusive of H."

Thus, the overall pragmatics of the utterance is a pragmatics of impersonalization and lack of involvement - a pragmatics consistent with the lexical as well as the syntactic choices therein.

## 6. Concluding remarks

The analysis of the sample utterance from ECA reveals an overall attitude of impersonalization and lack of involvement. The wife does not seem to be willing to give credit to herself and at the same time she does not want to express care for the husband's needs and wants. This is evident in the transitivity choices: an ergative-effective is used to delete agency and volitionality and at the same time to keep the Actor in the background of the utterance. The action is not agentless, but she wants to maintain a minimum of involvement and self-praise.

The lexical and pragmatic choices made by the wife intensify the sense of detachment and objectification that is already conveyed by the ergative construction. The amount of metalinguistic and metapragmatic knowledge available for the wife while making the utterance is irrelevant to the interpretation thereof. For language is ideological whether or not its users are aware of the ideologies and attitudes imparted by their utterances/sentences.

Of course, it is difficult to make generalizations on the basis of the analysis, however detailed, of a single utterance. Yet, the sample utterance analyzed in this paper is an interesting case of the encoding of contextual influences and psychological attitudes in discourse. Further evidence for some aspects of ergatives and middles in ECA is given in Appendix 2.

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I am grateful to the couple who allowed this "domestic" quarrel to be "aired".

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## Appendices

### A. 1. Transcription Conventions

#### Phonetic Alphabet

.ʔ	Voicelless glottal stop
ʔ	Interdental voicelless fricative
j	Voiced palatal fricative
H	Voicelless pharyngeal fricative
X	Voicelless uvular fricative
dh	Interdental voiced fricative
sh	Voicelless palatal fricative
S	Voicelless pharyngealized fricative
D	Voiced pharyngealized plosive
T	Voicelless pharyngealized plosive
Z	Voiced pharyngealized fricative
!	Voiced pharyngeal fricative
gh	Voiced uvular fricative
q	Voicelless uvular plosive
y	Voiced palatal semi-vowel

The sounds /g/ and /j/ correspond to the initial sounds in the English words "good" and "general",



respectively. The sounds /q/ and /ʔ/ are the Upper Egyptian and the Cairene allophones of the /q/ (qaaf) phoneme. Long vowels and emphatic consonants are shown by doubling the relevant symbol. Every transcription is immediately followed by a translation into English in brackets ( ). The translations are as literal as they could be. A slash / divides two alternative translations. For phonological reasons, "ʔit" and "ʔin" may appear as "it" and "in", in which case the 'hamza' - the glottal stop - is said to be used conjunctively, not disjunctively.

## A. 2. Further evidence from ECA

Further evidence for the association of ECA ergative-middles and ergative-effectives with the ideology of impersonalization, lack of involvement and objectification, lack of agency, volitionality and control, in the senses detailed in the body of this study, can be found in such formulaic and idiomatic expressions as (The expressions and the non-literal translation thereof are taken from El-Batal, 2000):

- "fuula w in- qasamit/w it-qasamit nuSseen" ("as like as two peas in a pod"), where "ʔin-qasamit/ʔit-qasamit" is the ergative-effective from the trilateral root "qasama" ("divided" - masc -sing - past - 3rd). It does not matter who or what divided the peas.

- "qalbuḥ/ʔalbuḥ bi yit-ʔaTTaʔ" ("His heart goes out..."), where "bi yit-ʔaTTaʔ" is the ergative-effective from "ʔaTTaʔ/ qaTTaʔ" ("cut into pieces" - masc -sing - past - 3rd), the aspectual prefix "bi" indicates continuity and "y" anaphorically refers to "ʔalbuḥ". The heart is the Senser and the Medium as well. The Instigator could be any Phenomenon that triggers sadness or sympathy.

- "ʔalbuḥ wiʔiʔ fi riḡleeh/ qalbuḥ wiqiʔ fi riḡleeh" ("He has his heart in his boots"), where "wiʔiʔ / wiqiʔ" is an ergative-middle: the Instigator is not there, but it could be fear or astonishment.

- "law ʔiddonya it-ʔalabit/it-qalabit" (Lit. "even though the world got upside down"; "come rain or shine", "whatever happens"), where "it-ʔalabit/it-qalabit" is the ergative-effective of "qalab/ʔalab" ("He turned ... upside down"). "Whatever happens" says it all: the speaker does not pay any attention to external Instigators or Actors.

- "deel il kalb ʔumru ma yit-ʔiddil" (Lit. "a dog's tail can never get straight"; "a leopard cannot change its spots"). The tail, an animal body-part, cannot be the Actor.

- "ʔiddonya it-Xalaqit/it-Xalaʔit fi sabaʔ ti yaam" (Lit. "The world/ universe was created in seven days"; "Rome was not built in a day"), where "it-Xalaqit/it-Xalaʔit" is the ergative-effective of the root "Xalaʔ/Xalaq". The Creator is too well-known to be mentioned here.

- "ʔiddonya it-saddit fi wiḡshuḥ" (Lit. "The world got blocked in his face"; "He was blocked at every turn"), where "it-saddit" is the ergative-effective from "sadda" ("blocked" - masc - sing - past). Because they are too many or because they are not the most important part of the story, the Instigators are not there.