Syntax of the Elative in Classical and Modern Written Arabic

La sintaxis del elativo en árabe clásico y árabe moderno escrito

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The paper attempts to present a diachronic view of some syntactic constructions with the Arabic elative. The point of departure is its early stage in Classical Arabic. Since then, it has undergone substantial development, resulting in modern syntactic uses unknown to traditional Arabic grammarians. Of special interest are the historical trajectories of and semantic relations between the three constructions conveying the meaning of the superlative that are in current use in Modern Written Arabic: (i) elative + indefinite singular noun in the genitive (e.g. *akbaru madīnatin*), (ii) elative + definite plural noun in the genitive (e.g. *akbaru l-muduni*), and (iii) elative used as an attribute of a definite noun (e.g. *al-madīnatu l-akbaru*) – all of them translatable as 'the largest city', but different from each other in certain respects. A tendency to create symmetry can be observed in the system of the syntax of the elative used in adjectival attribution on the one hand and the manner of expressing a gradation comparative-superlative by means of the same syntactic construction (adjectival attribution) differing only in (in)definiteness, on the other hand. In addition, a construction only marginally attested in CA, viz. elatives following the pattern $C_1uC_2C_3\bar{a}$ + definite plural noun in the geni-

El presente estudio ofrece una visión diacrónica de algunas de las construcciones propias del elativo árabe, partiendo de las etapas tempranas del árabe clásico. Desde entonces, el elativo ha experimentado un desarrollo notable y ha producido varios usos sintácticos desconocidos para los gramáticos árabes clásicos. Especialmente interesante es la evolución histórica y las relaciones semánticas entre las tres estructuras que expresan habitualmente la noción del superlativo en el árabe escrito moderno: 1) elativo + sustantivo singular indeterminado en genitivo (*akbaru madīnatin*), 2) elativo + sustan tivo ñural determinado en genitivo (*akbaru l-muduni*), y 3) elativo usado como atributo de un sustantivo determinado (*al-madīnatu l-akbaru*), todas ellas traducibles como "la ciudad más grande", pero diferentes entre sí en ciertos aspectos. Se puede obervar una tendencia a crear simetrías en el sistema sintáctico del elativo como atributo adjetival, por una parte, y, por otra parte, la forma de expresar una gradación comparativo - superlativo mediante la misma estructura sintáctica (atribución adjetival) que solo difiere en cuanto a la (in)determinación. Además, una estructura que solo se documenta de forma marginal en árabe clásico, es decir, los elativos de esquema $C_1uC_2C_3\bar{a}$ + sustantivo plural en

tive, turns out to be used widely in MWA. Its plural counterpart, $C_1uC_2C_3ayāt$, is an innovation whose expansive usage, especially in the journalistic style, can be attributed to the tendency of disambiguation.

genitive, pasa a ser usado de forma frecuente en el árabe escrito moderno. El plural que le corresponde, $C_1uC_2C_3ayāt$, es una innovación cuya expansión, particularmente en el lenguaje periodístico, se puede atribuir a la tendencia a la desambiguación.

Introduction

In Modern Written Arabic (MWA), as well as Classical Arabic (CA), nouns, in the broad meaning of this term, which are based on the $aC_1C_2aC_3$ pattern in the masculine singular can be divided into four groups depending on the form of their feminine form, as the following examples show:

masculine	feminine	
abyaḍ	*bayḍā’*	'white'
armal	*armala*	'widower' ~ 'widow'
akbar	*kubrā*	'great, greatest, major'
afqar	no special form	'poorer, poorest'

Group 1, a quite numerous closed class, containing the names of colours and physical and mental features, usually not gradable (although this is possible), and Group 2, containing very few substantives, will not be addressed in this paper. Of interest are nouns belonging to Groups 3 and 4, which in classical Arabic grammar are referred to as *ism al-tafḍīl* and as the 'elative' in Western philological studies[1]. As Wehr observes, this category of nouns in CA is neither substantive or adjective[2], which is visible in its specific behaviour as far as agreement in definite-

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[1] Although being formally an elative, *āḫar* (fem. *uḫrā*) 'other', is syntactically an adjective. By contrast, the pair *awwal* (fem *ūlā*) 'first' and *āḫir* (fem *āḫira*) 'last' shows some syntactic features of the elative, although their forms are not typically those of an elative (El-Ayoubi *et al.*, *Syntax*, p. 257). Also the words *ḫayr* 'better, best' and *šarr* 'worse, worst' show syntactic features of elatives.

[2] Wehr, *Der arabische Elative*, p. 42.

ness, gender and number are concerned. Fischer posited the existence of three nominal world-classes in CA, depending on the syntactic function they are predestined for: substantive, adjective and predicative ("Prädikativ"), with the elative being placed in the latter category[3]. In MWA, the elative has been more and more adjusted to the word class of the adjective, without, however, being fully integrated in it[4].

Usually, the words of Group 3 and 4, denote gradable properties. Group 3, containing elatives with the feminine form based on the $C_1uC_2C_3\bar{a}$ pattern, is a closed class: only some roots generate this form. On this formal criterion, Group 4 is distinguished comprising nouns with no special feminine form, which means that a form uninflected for gender, i.e. the same as the masculine, is used for speaking of feminine referents. Following Wehr, who referred to this form as 'genderless' ("geschlechtslos")[5], this uninflected form can be regarded as "neuter". Because of this formal identity between the "neuter" and masculine forms, only elatives referring to feminine (or non-personal plural, in which case the adjectives are formally identical with the feminine) referents will be chosen as examples in the discussion in the present paper, in order to be able to determine whether an elative inflects for gender or not (i.e. whether it belongs to Group 3 or 4)[6].

What will be examined in this paper is the difference between the syntax, and to a lesser extent, the semantics[7], of the elative in CA and MWA. The analysis is limited to two non-predicative constructions involving an elative and a substantive:

(1) annexation (genitive construction), in which the elative is used as the first term (*nomen regens*, *muḍāf*)[8] and

(2) adjectival attribution, in which the elative is the adjectival attribute.

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[3] Fischer, *Farb- und Formbezeichnungen*, pp. 142-155, in particular 147.

[4] El-Ayoubi *et al.*, *Syntax*, p. 253.

[5] Wehr, *Der arabische Elativ*, p. 9.

[6] There are isolated instances of roots that generate feminine forms belonging to two categories: 1 and 3. For example, the root *ḥ-s-n* generates both *ḥusnā* 'beautiful' and *ḥasnā'* 'beautiful; a beauty'. The roots *s-w-'*, with the abstract meaning 'bad, wrong', and *b-'-s*, with the abstract meaning 'harm, wrong' show a similar behaviour.

[7] For a discussion of semantic changes cf. Bravmann, *The Arabic elative*.

[8] Constructions in which the elative does not denote a property of the entity denoted by the noun, i.e. in which it is used as substantivized, e.g. *aṭāyibu l-rīfi* 'country delicacies', lit. 'the delicacies of the country' are not taken into consideration.

For the data concerning the grammar of CA, the classicizing work by Ḥasan was relied on[9], which was confronted with real usage in selected classical texts. To this purpose, their digitized versions were searched by means of the Shamela program[10], and subsequently, the findings were in each case verified in a respective printed edition and cited with reference to it. As for MWA, the descriptions of the relevant constructions provided in its Western descriptive grammars were confronted with and complemented by observations concerning writing practice in the late 20th century and 21st century, with the focus being on the journalistic language, which tends to be less conservative than the literary style as far as grammar is concerned. To this aim, a number of media sites representing various parts of the world[11] have been searched by means of a web search engine. In less numerous cases, examples from literary sources are adduced. Well-known constructions are not evidenced with examples cited from real texts.

1. The elative in annexation

In the construction in which the elative is used as the first term (*muḍāf*) of annexation, the noun used as the second term (*muḍāf ilayhi*) can be indefinite or definite, as discussed in Sections 1.1. and 1.2, respectively.

1.1. With an indefinite noun in the genitive

This construction can be exemplified by the following sub-types: *akbaru madīnatin* 'the largest city', *akbaru madīnatayni* 'the two largest cities' and *afḍalu mudunin* 'the largest cities', all of which were used in CA[12]. As the translations reveal, the meaning is the superlative. The ela-

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[9] Ḥasan, *al-Naḥw*.

[10] Cf. its website http://shamela.ws/.

[11] The media websites are: al-Ahrām (Cairo), BBC Arabic (London), al-Ǧazīra (Doha), al-Ǧazīra (Riyadh), al-Riyāḍ (Riyadh), al-Ṣabāḥ (Casablanca) and al-Šarq al-Awsaṭ (London).

[12] According to a logicizing (and linguistically untenable) explanation provided within the classical Arab grammar for this seemingly illogical construction, constructions such as *akbaru madīnatin*, meaning literally 'the largest of a city', are a result of an ellipsis of *min kull* 'than any other' present in comparative constructions (Ḥasan, *al-Naḥw*, p. 422, citing al-Ṣabbān, an Egyptian grammarian of the 18th century). Thus, *akbaru madīnatin* would be based on *akbaru min kulli madīnatin* 'larger than every (other) city'.

tive is uninflected[13]. This construction has been inherited by MWA, where it is usual. In most cases, it is further specified by an adjectival attribute (e.g. *aqṣaru waqtin mumkinin* 'the shortest possible time', *afḍalu lāʿibin ifrīqiyyin* 'the best African player'), indefinite relative clause (*aġrabu šayʾin raʾat-hu hunāka* 'the strangest thing she saw there') or a prepositional phrase (*akbaru madīnatin bi-l-ʿālami* 'the largest city in the world')[14]. This specification is necessary because for pragmatic reasons the superlative meaning is usually only relatively superlative (Beeston calls this meaning 'limited superiority'[15]). To use the latter example, the expression *akbaru madīnatin* 'the biggest city' is communicatively deficient unless it is somehow specified, since the city may be the biggest one in the world, in a continent, in a country, etc. In cases with no explicit specification, it is usually inferrable from the context or general knowledge, e.g. *rabbat-hu aḥsana tarbiyatin* 'she gave him the best education', i.e. the best education possible or imaginable.

Although neither of the terms of the construction is formally definite, its referent is as known to the speaker and hearer as one referred to by means of a definite noun, as is visible in, for instance, the English translations with the definite article *the*[16].

1.2. With a definite noun in the genitive

This construction, too, is used for expressing the superlative meaning[17]. The elative may be uninflected or inflect for gender and number

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[13] However, the grammarian al-Farrāʾ (d. 822) allowed the inflection of the elative for gender with an indefinite noun in the genitive if this noun is approximated to definiteness (*al-mudnāt min al-maʿrifa*) by being specified by a relative clause or explanation' (*ṣila wa-īḍāḥ*), cf. his example *fuḍlā imraʾatin taqṣidunā* 'the best woman to come to us' (al-Ǧadba and Muhra, "Ṣīġat afʿal al-tafḍīl", p. 254-255, who cite al-Farrāʾs view from Abū Ḥayyān al-Andalusī, *Irtišāf*, p. 2323). The idea of being approximated to definiteness is crucial in this reasoning since it was claimed for CA (cf. Reckendorf, *Arabische Syntax*, p. 30) that if the elative is definite, it inflects (cf. his example *fuḍlā l-nisāʾi* 'the best of women'). However, constructions as the one adduced by al-Farrāʾ seem rather only theoretical. It was not possible to find any occurrence thereof in our corpus (cf. Section 1.2.2.).

[14] Cf., for instance, Badawi *et al.*, *Modern Written Arabic*, p. 251, El-Ayoubi *et al.*, *Syntax*, p. 262 and Buckley, *Modern Literary Arabic*, p. 636.

[15] Beeston, *The Arabic language*, p. 59.

[16] Beeston (*The Arabic language*, p. 58) puts this in the following way: "(…) the concept of distinctiveness (and hence lack of ambiguity) implied by the pattern itself gives the phrase a degree of logical definition".

[17] See, however, Bravmann, *The Arabic elative*, pp. 1-21, on its affective (emotional, hyperbolic) use.

to reflect the gender and number of the referent, as discussed in Sections 1.2.1. and 1.2.2., respectively[18].

1.2.1. Uninflected elative with a definite noun in the genitive

Since in examples given for CA by classical grammarians, masculine nouns tend to be used, which makes it impossible to determine whether the elative inflects or not, CA examples with feminine nouns are provided here. The noun is usually plural (sometimes, a collective), as in (1) and (2), less frequently dual, as in (3):

(1) *wa-hiya akbaru muduni l-Ṣaʿīdi* (10th cent.)[19]

'and it [Aswan] is the largest city of the Upper Egypt'

(2) *wa-hiya min akbari l-muduni wa-aḥsani-hā wa-atammi-hā ǧamālan* (14th cent.)[20]

'and it [Samarkand] is one of the largest, best and utmost beautiful cities'

(3) *aṣ-ṣabru adhā l-muṣībatayn*[21]

'patience is the worst calamity', lit. 'the worst of the two calamities'

As can be seen from these examples, the elative used in this way is ambiguous as to the number of the referent: in (1) and (3), the meaning is singular, in (2) – plural. This construction has been taken over into MWA, in which, according to El-Ayoubi *et al.*, it is preferred if the genitive noun is to be qualified by another genitive noun (definite, let us add), as in (1), while it is used obligatorily if the entity is known from the communicative situation[22]. The article is then used as the indicator thereof, and no further specification is needed, as in (2), which speaks of cities in general, and in (3), which refers to the two major calamities that are known to human beings in general.

1.2.2. Inflected elative with a definite noun in the genitive

In contradistinction to the construction discussed in 1.2.1., in the present one the elative inflects for gender and number, depending on

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[18] Constructions with uncountable nouns in the genitive, such as *akbaru l-alami* 'the biggest [part] of pain', in relation to *al-alamu l-akbaru*, are not taken into consideration.

[19] al-Iṣṭaḫrī, *Masālik* p. 53.

[20] Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *Riḥlat*, vol. 1, p. 385.

[21] A proverb cited in Spitaler, *Al-qalamu*, p. 10, adduced here in his transcription.

[22] "Wenn die Determination auf bestimmte kommunikativ definierte Gegenstände hinweist", El-Ayoubi *et al.*, *Syntax*, p. 273.

the gender and number of the referents. This eliminates ambiguity as to the number of the referent which was typical of 1.2.1. The plural form of the elative is usually broken in the masculine (*afā'il*, rather than *af'alūn*) and suffixal in the feminine (*fu'layāt*, rather than *fu'al*)[23]. In CA, it is easy to find examples with masculine plurals, both for personal and non-personal referents:

(4) *min adānī l-buldāni wa-aqāṣī-hā* (9th-10th cent.)[24]

'from nearest and farthest countries'

(5) *wa-huwa min akābiri salāṭīni l-kuffāri* (14th cent.)[25]

'and he is one of the greatest sultans of the infidels'

However, occurrences of this type of elatives in the other gender (feminine) and number (dual) are difficult to find in CA. This is so because the number of roots that yield elatives inflectable for gender and/or number is limited and only some forms seem to be really used. For instance, *ḥusnayāt*, *kubrayāt*, *akbarā/akbaray* or *aṣġarā/aṣġaray* could not be found in real texts included in our corpus. Some examples seem to be invented by grammarians and repeated by others. Wehr observes that constructions with such elatives are in part difficult to attest and that the expression *fuḍlā n-nisā'i* 'the best woman', lit. 'the best one of the women' adduced by Reckendorf[26], as well other examples of this construction, are taken from grammarians[27]. Indeed, this is the kind of works in which it appears in the early books of the corpus. However, some real examples can be found there, which show that classical authors did use this construction, albeit infrequently, for instance:

(6) *ilā quṣwā l-ġāyāti* (9th cent.)[28]

'to the most remote goal'

(7) *'uẓmā l-saḥābi* (10th-11th cent.)[29]

'the biggest cloud'

(8) *fa-stuḫriǧat quṣrā aḍlā'i-hi* (11th-12th cent.)[30]

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[23] Paradela Alonso, *Manual*, p. 55.
[24] al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīḫ*, vol. 8, p. 600.
[25] Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *Riḥlat*, vol. 2, p. 492.
[26] Reckendorf, *Arabische Syntax*, p. 30.
[27] Wehr, *Der Arabische Elativ*, p. 8, footnote 1.
[28] Ibn Qutayba, *'Uyūn*, vol. 3, p. 63.
[29] al-Ma'arrī, *al-Lāmi'*, p. 1450, explaining al-Mutannabī's phrase *'uẓmā-hā* 'the biggest one of them'.
[30] Ibn 'Aṭiyya al-Andalusī, *al-Muḥarrar*, vol. 2, p. 486.

'the shortest of his ribs was taken out'[31]

This construction re-appears in MWA. Like in the case of CA, the masculine elatives based on the most roots that allow inflection for number are used. However, these elatives appear to be rather quotations from the CA rather than spontaneously created expressions. Examples:

(9) *anna l-Kawākibī min a'āẓimi l-riǧāli llaḏīna tafānaw fī sabīli…*[32]

'that K. is one of the great men who where selflessly devoted to the path…'

(10) *min asāfili l-nāsi*[33]

'among the lowest people'.

With feminine elatives, this construction has experienced a special development in MWA. In the singular, *kubrā* and its antonym *ṣuġrā* are normally used with reference to female persons with the singular meaning 'the oldest' and 'the youngest', and this can be considered as a continuation of CA usage, e.g.

(11) *kubrā iḫwatihā*

'the oldest of her brothers and sisters'[34]

(12) *ṣuġrā zawǧāti U.*

'the youngest of the U.'s wives'[35]

But a real expansion can be seen, especially in journalistic language, in constructions with *kubrā* and *kubrayāt* with usually non-personal

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[31] The phrase *fuḍlā l-nisā'i* occurs in an 11th century work, but with the singular *fuḍlā* being used unexpectedly in the plural meaning:

wa-kānat min fuḍlā l-nisā'i wa-'uqalā'i-hinna (Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, *al-Istī'āb*, vol. 4, p. 1935)

'and she was one of the noblest and wisest women'

It cannot be ruled out that the form *fuḍlā* is here as a result of a copyist's error instead of the phrase with the plural positive adjectives *min fuḍalā'i l-nisā'i wa-'uqalā'i-hinna*, frequently used in the passages of medieval literature devoted to important women of Islam. Note that the plural of these adjectives is masculine, instead of the feminine *fāḍilāt* and *'āqilāt*, an issue which will be returned to in this section. Curiously enough, in a footnote on the person whom this phrase concerns, the modern editors of Ibn Qudāma's *al-Muġnī* use the feminine plural form: *min fuḍlayāti l-nisā'i* (Ibn Qudāma, *al-Muġnī*, vol. 2, p. 139, footnote 13), as if not wanting to quote the singular form used in the sources.

[32] al-Ǧazīra (Doha), *'Abd al-Raḥmān*.

[33] al-Ǧazīra (Doha), *Falsafat*.

[34] Maḥfūẓ, *Bayna l-qaṣrayn*, p. 26. According to Danecki, the "superlative" in such constructions is "treated as a substantive" (1994: 317), with the meaning 'the oldest sister among the brothers and sisters'. However, such elatives are always used with a noun, whether anaphorically or cataphorically, and we do not normally find, for instance, *ṣuġrā-hu* 'his youngest daughter', which would clearly show substantivization.

[35] al-Šarq al-Awsaṭ, *Zawǧat*.

plural nouns in the sense 'biggest, largest, major' (their antonyms *ṣuġrā* are not used in this way to this degree). *Kubrā* is used with feminine nouns in the genivitive, e.g.

(13) *tuʿaddu min kubrā muduni l-Yamani*[36]

'it is among Yemen's largest cities'

(14) *fī l-ġāliyati l-īṭāliyyati llatī kānat ṯāniya kubrā l-ġāliyāti l-ūrubbiyyati fī l-bilādi, baʿda l-ġāliyati l-yūnāniyyati*[37]

'in the Italian minority, which was the second largest European minority in this country, after the Greek one'

But masculine nouns in the genitive can be used as well, e.g.:

(15) *tanaqqala Ḫaṭṭāb bayna stūdiyūhāti l-fanni fī kubrā l-buldāni l-ūrūbbiyyati*[38]

'Khattab moved around between various film studios in the largest European countries'

(16) *l-duwali llatī tušakkilu kubrā l-iqtiṣādāti fī l-ʿālami*[39]

'of the countries which are the biggest economies in the world'

This was already observed by Girod, who is probably right in supposing that "it is not the object's gender which determines the agreement in the feminine singular (…), but rather the fact that [this object] is a non-human being [non-personal – M.M.] noun plural"[40].

In comparison to CA, a yet greater development can be observed in the use of *kubrayāt*, the feminine plural of *akbar*, used, canonically, with personal nouns. In MWA, it is used very often with non-personal nouns. For instance, two phrases occurring commonly in the press are *kubrayātu l-šarikāti* 'big companies' and *kubrayātu l-muduni* 'big cities'. Other nouns that frequently occur in the genitive after *kubrayāt* in journalistic language are: *l-ṣuḥuf* 'newspapers', *l-duwal* 'states, countries' and *l-muškilāt* 'problems'[41]. *Kubrayāt* referring to persons, exemplified in (17), is used less frequently.

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[36] al-Šarq al-Awsaṯ, *al-Mutamarridūn*.
[37] al-Ahrām, *Dīwān*.
[38] al-Ahrām, *Min "Kurbāǧ"*.
[39] BBC Arabic, *Wazīr*.
[40] Girod, *Faits*, p. 78, cited in Girod, *Elative*, p. 15.
[41] Less frequently, *kubrayāt* is used with pronominal suffixes, for instance:
wa-bi'-anna mu'assasāti l-qiṭāʿi l-ḫāṣṣi wa-hāḏā l-banku min kubrayāti-hā laysat... (al-Ǧazīra [Riyāḍ], *Bank*)
'and that the institutions of the private sector, with this bank being one of the largest of these, are not…'.

(17) *wa-hiya min kubrayāti l-mumaṯṯilāti l-bākistāniyyāti*[42]

'and she is one of the greatest Pakistani actresses'.

The reason for the form *kubrā* being replaced by the explicitly plural form *kubrayāt*[43] when non-personal plural referents are spoken of[44] may be that it is ambiguous with respect to number: *kubrā l-muduni* can be interpreted as singular ('major city') or plural ('major cities'), while *kubrayātu l-muduni* has only the plural interpretation.

Like *kubrā*, *kubrayāt* is used with masculine nouns. In some cases, the reason may be that the referent of the entire phrase is feminine, for instance:

(18) *wa-hiya* [= *šarikatu N.*] *min kubrayāti l-mustaḥdimīna li-n-niṭāqāti l-taraddudiyyati*[45] (*hiya* 'it, feminine', *mustaḥdim* 'user, masculine')

'and it [the company N.] is one the biggest frequency-domain users'

(19) *bi-anna l-Hinda min kubrayāti l-buldāni l-mulawwiṯati baʿda l-Ṣīni*[46] (*al-Hind* 'India, feminine', *balad* 'country, masculine')

'that India is one of the biggest polluting countries, second only to China'

But in many other instances, the referent of the entire phrase is masculine, e.g.

(20) *iṯnay ʿašara min kubrayāti l-maṣārifi*[47]

'twelve of the biggest banks'

(21) *maǧmūʿatan min kubrayāti l-mahraǧānāti s-sīnimāʾiyyati l-ʿarabiyyati*[48]

'a group of the biggest Arab film festivals'

Other masculine nouns used in this way which can be easily found in journalistic language include: *buyūtāt al-azyāʾ* 'fashion houses', *fanādiq* 'hotels', *bunūk* 'banks', *mawāqiʿ al-intirnit* 'web sites',

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[42] al-Šarq al-Awsaṭ, *al-Barāmiǧ*.

[43] Cf. Wehr, *Der arabische Elativ*, p. 33.

[44] In MWA, adjectives ending in *-āt* are used to qualify feminine *personal* nouns. In the case of *kubrayāt*, it seems that a CA practice was resorted to according to which *non-personal* plural nouns can be qualified by adjectives ending in *-āt*, for stylistic reasons. Thackston (*Introduction*, p. 27) observes that this was the general tendency in Koranic Arabic, illustrating this with *āyātun bayyinātun* 'evident signs', as opposed to *āyātun bayyinatun* of the post-Koranic classical Arabic.

[45] al-Šarq al-Awsaṭ, *Nihāyat*.

[46] al-Šarq al-Awsaṭ, *al-Raʾīs*.

[47] al-Šarq al-Awsaṭ, *Mūdīz*.

[48] al-Ṣabāḥ, *al-Sīnimā*.

iqtiṣādāt 'economies'. Quite asymmetrically, the antonym of *kubrayāt*, *ṣuġrayāt*, exemplified in (22) and (23), is much less frequently used.

(22) *ša'nu ṣuġrayāti d-duwali fī l-'ālami*[49]

'the situation of the smallest countries of the world'

(23) *wa-sa-tataṭalla'u l-šarikātu kubrayātu-hā wa-ṣuġrayātu-hā naḥwa…*[50]

'and companies, both big and small, will aspire to…'

One can also find similar uses of *ūlayāt* 'first'. All occurrences have feminine referents (in contrast to a co-functional *awā'il*, which occurs with both genders). The construction is usually specified by a relative clause or *tamyīz*, i.e. an accusative specifying the sphere of activity in which the referent was first. Examples with personal referents:

(24) *wa-bayna-hunna ūlayātu n-nisā'i llawātī 'amilna fī…*[51]

'and among them are the first women who worked in…'

(25) *min ūlayāti l-muslimāti islāman*[52]

'among the first Muslim women to embrace Islam'.

Examples with non-personal referents:

(26) *anna-hā min ūlayāti l-duwali fī l-Šarqi l-Awsaṭi llatī…*[53]

'that they are among the first countries in the Middle East to…'

(27) *hiya iḥdā ūlayāti l-dawā'iri l-ḥukūmiyyati llatī qāmat bi-ta-bannī…*[54]

'they were the first government agencies to adopt…'

Finally, there is *'uẓmayāt* 'greatest, more important, major', but it is very rare, exemplified in (28). Note that the referent is masculine (*amr* 'issue').

(28) *fī l-ta'āmuli ma'a 'uẓmayāti l-umūri*[55]

'in dealing with the major issues'.

Kubrayāt is not the only elative which is used at odds with the CA rules for gender: *awā'il* and *ṣiġār* are both masculine, but occur with feminine referents, as the following examples show:

[49] al-Ahrām, *Yūtūbiyā*.
[50] al-Riyāḍ, *al-Qiṭā' al-mālī*.
[51] al-Šarq al-Awsaṭ, *al-Muḫriǧāt*.
[52] al-Tūnǧī, *Mu'ǧam*, p. 22.
[53] al-Šarq al-Awsaṭ, *80 malyūn*.
[54] al-Šarq al-Awsaṭ, *Aǧindat*.
[55] al-Šarq al-Awsaṭ, *D. Manṣūr Ḫālid*.

(29) *tuʿaddu l-mamlakatu min awāʾili l-duwali l-ʿarabiyyati wa-l-ifrīqiyyati llatī...*[56]

'the Kingdom is one of the first Arab and African countries to…'

(30) *K. tuʿaddu min awāʾili l-faransiyyāti llawātī ġādarna bilāda-hunna*[57]

'K. is one of the first French women to leave their country'

(31) *ṣiġāru l-duwali l-ūrūbbiyyati*[58]

'lesser European countries'[59]

Perhaps using masculine plural forms for feminine referents should be considered a continuation of the classical usage illustrated in footnote 31. Pragmatically, it may be a manifestation of the tendency to use the masculine forms as more concise.

Summing up, using *kubrayāt* with masculine referents, which is at odds with its original feminine meaning, as well as the fact that no other elative, even its antonym *ṣuġrayāt*, is used so much in this way is an indication that this word has detached itself from the original meaning and began a life as a new separate lexicalized category.

2. The elative in adjectival attribution

In constructions in which the elative is used as an adjectival attribute of a noun, two morphosyntactic models are possible: both constituents are either definite, with the elative having the definite article, or indefinite, with the elative having no definite article, as discussed in 2.1. and 2.2. respectively.

2.1. Definite adjectival attribution

In CA, if the elative used in adjectival attribution is definite, it agrees in gender and number with the noun it qualifies[60]. This is pos-

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[56] al-Ṣabāḥ, *Balāġ*.
[57] BBC Arabic, *Aḫtar faransiyya*.
[58] al-Šarq al-Awsaṭ, *Ṣiġār Lubnān*.
[59] Cf. also the attributive use of the masculine *ṣiġār* with a feminine personal noun in: *ʿan aḫawātin ṣiġārin tazawwaǧna qabla l-kibāri* (Maḥfūẓ, *Bayn al-qaṣrayn*, p. 204) 'about younger sisters who got married before the older ones'
[60] Ḥasan, *al-Naḥw*, p. 412; Wehr, *Der arabische Elativ*, pp. 20-34.

sible for elatives belonging to Group 3, whose feminine forms, following the pattern $C_1uC_2C_3\bar{a}$, are derived only from a closed class of roots[61]. Examples which are usually adduced by grammarians often come from the Quran and are quite frequently used, e.g. *al-yadu l-ʿulyā* 'the upper hand', *al-ḥayātu l-dunyā* 'the earthly life', lit. 'the closer life', *al-ʿurwatu l-wuṯqā* 'the firm bond'. A less known instance is *al-qudmā* 'most ancient', used by early grammarians to refer to the more ancient dialect of Arabic, e.g. Sībawayhi says: *wa-l-ḥiǧāziyyatu hiya l-luġatu l-ūlā l-qudmā* 'and the Hijazi is the first and most ancient dialect'[62]. According to Ḥasan, there are more than a hundred elatives of this type, although some, for instance, *ar-ruḏlā* 'the vilest, the most vile' or *al-kurmā* 'the noblest, the most noble' can only be found as examples given by grammarians, while others can be created by analogy[63]. However, one must agree with Wehr, who found many of these feminine forms "non-Arabic" because he never read them anywhere[64], and with Grotzfeld's observation that the pattern $C_1uC_2C_3\bar{a}$ was "no longer productive" already "[i]n the earliest stage of Arabic documented by texts" and that the list of such adjectives "was already closed, so to say, in pre-classical Arabic"[65].

In CA, the meaning of definite elatives used in adjectival attribution is always non-comparative, hence they cannot be qualified by a phrase with *min* 'than'[66]. In Western linguistics, it has been described as 'absolute superlative', translatable with 'very', 'extremely', 'utmost'. Cantarino defines it as follows (for MWA):

The absolute superlative states an attribution of excellency or superiority in an absolute manner without implying any comparison while the relative superlative always implies a comparison of superiority in relation to all others[67].

[61] Cf. Wehr, *Der arabische Elativ*, p. 21.

[62] Sībawayh, *Kitāb*, vol. 3, p. 278.

[63] Ḥasan, *al-Naḥw*, pp. 413-414. He observes that the Arabic Language Academy in Cairo allowed the creation of the feminine form following this pattern by analogy in 1967 (pp. 414-415, footnote 2), a decision which, however, remains merely ink on paper.

[64] Wehr, *Der arabische Elativ*, p. 21, footnote 1.

[65] Grotzfeld, *Rabīʿ*, p. 9. Grotzfeld convincingly argues that the inflecting elatives emerged earlier than the non-inflecting ones (p. 13). What is known from the early written period of CA could be thus considered some kind of recession stage of this form.

[66] Ḥasan, *al-Naḥw*, p. 412, footnote 4.

[67] Cantarino, *Syntax*, II, p. 472, footnote 89.

Similarly Beeston, who, using the term 'absolute superiority', adds:

Absolute superiority is often associated with cliché expressions which have to all intents the unique value of a substantive of single application marked in English by the use of capitals: *lḥarbᵘ l'uẓmā* is 'the Great War', not 'the greatest war (within some special group of wars)' which is *'a'ẓamᵘ ḥarbⁱⁿ* or *'a'ẓamᵘ lḥurūbⁱ*; *lmasjidᵘ l'aqṣā* is 'the Far Mosque', a designation applied only to the mosque adjacent to the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, not to e.g. 'the farthest mosque from the city centre' (…)[68].

In other words, this construction is used to refer to unique entities which are known to the speaker and hearer by virtue of their general knowledge about the world rather than by virtue of their having been mentioned before in conversation. Cantarino also observes that "[i]n many instances, however, the meaning is only an emphatic attribution of the idea which it expresses"[69]. Many elatives of this category form antonymous pairs, in which case there does exist some sort of dychotomic comparison, e.g. *al-kubrā* 'big, major' vs *al-ṣuġrā* 'small, minor', *al-suflā* 'lower' vs *al-'ulyā* 'upper'[70]. For some, however, clear antonyms do not exist, e.g. *al-fuṣḥā* 'pure' (said of language), *al-muṯlā* 'ideal', *al-wuṯqā* 'firm, strong'.

MWA inherited this construction and uses it for creating names for modern concepts, e.g. *al-sur'atu l-quṣwā* 'maximum speed', and, frequently, for personal and geographical names, e.g. *kātrīn al-'uẓmā* 'Catherine the Great'[71] or *brīṭāniya l-'uẓmā* 'Great Britain', and historical events, e.g. *al-ḥarb al-kubrā* 'the Great War'[72].

But it also developed a construction which goes against classical rules: definite adjectival attribution in which the elative does not inflect for gender and number and has a superlative meaning (with the exclusion of *awwal*, which always inflects in this construction, e.g. *al-ḥarbu*

[68] Beeston, *The Arabic language*, p. 59.
[69] Cantarino, *Syntax*, II, p. 472, footnote 89.
[70] Cf. Reckendorf, *Die syntaktischen Verhältnisse*, p. 26, footnote 1; Wehr, *Der arabische Elativ*, pp. 20-34.
[71] al-Tūnǧī, *Mu'ǧam*, p. 145.
[72] Describing its use in MWA, Badawi *et al.* refer to this class of elatives (whether definite or indefinite, see below) as "intermediate", placing them between comparative and superlative (*Modern Written Arabic*, p. 249). Unfortunately, they do not explain how they understand this.

l-ūlā 'the First War'). Wehr did not record it in CA[73] and I was unable to find instances of its use with frequent elatives such as *al-akbar*, *al-aṣġar*, *al-aqrab* etc in the corpus. Although difficult to overlook, these constructions are not mentioned explicitly by many descriptions of MWA[74]. They are particularly frequent in journalistic language, while the language of literature seems to resist this innovation. Examples:

(32) *'an-i l-muškilati l-a'ẓami llatī sa-tuwāǧihu l-iḫwāna fī ḥukmi Miṣr*[75]

'about the biggest problem which is going to face the Brotherhood in governing Egypt'

(33) *faḍlan 'an-i l-madīnatayni l-akbari fī Turkiyā, Isṭanbūl wa-l-'āṣimati Anqara*[76]

'apart from the two biggest cities in Turkey, Istanbul and Ankara, the capital'

(34) *ḫaǧmu ḏākirati l-hawātifi l-arḫaṣi*[77]

'the memory capacity of the cheapest phones'

The definite adjectival construction with an uninflected elative can also have a comparative meaning in MWA. This can be visible from the *min*-phrase or the context, as shown in the two following examples, respectively[78]:

(35) *al-ṭā'iratu l-asra'u min al-ṣawti* (my transcription)[79]

'the supersonic aircraft', lit. 'the aircraft quicker than sound'

(36) *ilā l-kuṯbāni l-sawdā'i, wa-l-buyūti l-akṯari sawādan 'inda l-safḥi*[80]

'towards the black dunes, and the even blacker houses at their foot'

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[73] Wehr, *Der arabische Elativ*, p. 8.

[74] E.g. Beeston, *The Arabic language*, pp. 57-60; Abu-Chacra, *Arabic*, pp. 186-188; Kouloughli, *Grammaire*, pp. 114-117; Danecki, *Gramatyka*, pp. 316-317; Ryding, *A reference*, pp. 250-252.

[75] al-Šarq al-Awsaṭ, *Min Ḥarūdz*.

[76] al-Ǧazīra (Doha), *Dawlat*.

[77] al-Ṣabāḥ, *Ābl*.

[78] Western linguists claimed to have found in CA definite elatives used with the comparative meaning, as suggested by a *min*-phrase, in non-attributive functions, but traditional Arab grammarians (e.g. al-Zamaḫšarī, *al-Mufaṣṣal*, p. 103) interpreted the meaning of the preposition *min* used there as partitive, equivalent to *min bayni* (Wehr, *Der arabische Elativ*, p. 28), and thus the meaning to be superlative.

[79] Example adduced by Beeston, *The Arabic language*, p. 58, quite common in MWA. See also Badawi *et al.*, *Modern*, p. 247.

[80] al-Sa'dāwī, *al-Ḥubb*, p. 172.

However, as El-Ayoubi *et al.* rightly observe, sometimes the necessity of choosing between the comparative or superlative meaning is only partly justified by the Arabic syntax, while in reality it is rather required only by the target language (*Syntax*, p. 261).

Very rarely, no inflection for gender and number can be found even when the absolute meaning is intended and inflection would be required by CA rules or, as in the case of the two examples below, by the expressions being set phrases:

(37) *bi-taṣawwurāti l-qiyādati l-aʿlā li-l-quwwāti l-musallaḥati*[81]

'with the expectations of the supreme command of the armed forces'

(instead of *l-qiyādati l-ʿulyā*)

(38) *bi-ilġāʾi l-ḥudūdi l-aqṣā li-l-saḥbi wa-l-īdāʿi*[82]

'by cancellling the maximum withdrawal and deposit amounts', lit. 'the furthest limits for withdrawals and deposits'

(instead of *l-ḥudūdi l-quṣwā*, which is used 7 lines further on in the same text)

Such constructions are much less frequent than those with inflection. It is hard to tell if they are merely errors or careless usage or if their existence points to a new tendency.

2.2. Indefinite adjectival attribution

Finally, we arrive at the issue of indefinite elatives used in adjectival attribution. In CA, the indefiniteness of an elative was correlated with it being uninflected[83]. In such a construction, the meaning is comparative, e.g. *madīnatun akbaru* (*min…*) 'a city bigger (than…)', an issue which does not concern us here. Rather, we are interested in elatives which are indefinite and, nonetheless, do inflect (not visible in masculine singular elatives), e.g. *madīnatun kubrā* 'a great/major city'[84]. Being indefinite, this construction does not imply the uniqueness of a

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[81] al-Ǧazīra (Doha), *Dawr*.

[82] al-Ahrām, *al-Dūlār*.

[83] Fischer, *Farb- und Formbezeichnungen*, p. 146. Originally, such constructions with no inflection were treated as loose appositional combinations (Wehr, *Der arabische Elativ*, p. 42; cf. also Fischer, *Farb- und Formbezeichnungen*, pp. 143-146).

[84] The word *āḫaru/uḫrā* functions in this way, also in the Quran, but, as already mentioned, it is not considered an elative from the syntactic point of view.

referent, in contrast to its definite counterpart, but only conveys the meaning of intensity.

Such a construction was not allowed by the classical Arab philologists[85]; for instance, the poet Abū Nuwās (d. 813) was criticized by them for using it in his description of wine: *ka-anna ṣuġrā wa-kubrā min faqāqi'ihā…* 'as if the small and big of its bubbles…'[86]. According to Wehr, the article-less use appears only in later stages of Arabic ("erst in der späteren Sprache"), which he illustrates with an example adduced by Fleischer: *dārun 'uẓmā*[87]. However, considered in its entirety, هذه دار عُظمَا ايش اعمل فيها 'Das ist ein sehr grosses Haus, was soll ich damit machen?'[88], this phrase shows non-classical traits, viz. *ēš* 'what' and the spelling of the final *ā* in *'uẓmā* as a long *alif* (I was unable to establish the source and date of this occurence). But in any case, pertinent examples of this construction can be easily found in quite early CA. Hence, it can be argued that although Wehr sees in this usage a "post-classical tendency"[89], it can be considered to have originated already in CA. Below are two examples, with (40) involving ellipsis:

(39) *ka-annahā ġamāmatun kubrā*[90] (10th cent.)

'it was like an enormous cloud'

(40) *wa-maʿa kulli wāḥidin min-hum quffatāni: kubrā wa-ṣuġrā*[91] (14th cent.)

'and each of them had two baskets, a bigger one and smaller one'

In MWA, such constructions can be found quite often. On the one hand, expressions which were always definite in CA are used as indefinite here; on the other hand, new expressions are freely created, mostly with *kubrā*, *ṣuġrā* and *'uẓmā*. The former case is exemplified in (41):

(41) *bi-ʿtibāri-hā ḥalaqātin tarbiṭu bayna-hā 'urwatun wuṯqā*[92]

'considering them links united by a firm bond'

[85] E.g. al-Zamaḫšarī, *al-Mufaṣṣal*, p. 102.
[86] Ḥasan, *al-Naḥw*, p. 410; Wehr, *Der arabische Elativ*, p. 34.
[87] Wehr, *Der arabische Elativ*, p. 33.
[88] Fleischer, *Kleinere Schriften*, p. 266.
[89] Wehr, *Der arabische Elativ*, p. 34.
[90] Ibn Faḍlān, *Risālat*, p. 126.
[91] Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *Riḥlat*, vol. 1, p. 162.
[92] al-Ahrām, *25 yanāyir*. and even predicative:
wa-l-ʿilāqatu wuṯqā bayna l-baladi l-ḥarāmi wa-bayna l-tawḥīdi (al-Šarq al-Awsaṯ, *Salmān al-Ibn*)
'the bond between the Holy Land and monotheism is firm'.

Examples of freely created expressions, this time from literary style:
(42) *yamnaḥu-nī quwwatan ʿuẓmā*[93]
'[it] gives me a great power'
(43) *fa-fariḥa bi-hi farḥatan ʿuẓmā*[94]
'and he rejoiced over him greatly', lit. 'with great joy'

In Wehr's view, one should see in this diachronic development a tendency, operating already in the post-classical stage, to continue the adaptation ("Angleichung") of the uninflected form to the syntax of the normal adjective[95]. It is difficult to agree with him here because it is the inflected form which undergoes a change, by being adapted to, or integrated into, the symmetrical system based on the opposition definite vs. indefinite.

3. Functions of the innovation

At this point, the question about the advantages of the syntactic innovation, the definite attributive construction with an uninflected elative as opposed to the other constructions with the relative superlative meaning inherited from CA, or in other words, about the reasons for its being introduced into MWA, should be asked[96]. In an attempt to answer it, the phrase *al-muškilatu l-aʿẓamu* 'the biggest problem' will be

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[93] Saʿdāwī, *Imra'a*, p. 92.

[94] Maḥfūẓ, *Bayn al-qaṣrayn*, p. 396.

[95] Wehr, *Der arabische Elativ*, p. 34.

[96] This question entails another question, that about the mutual relations between all these constructions. Descriptions tend to mention them as if functionally equivalent. For instance, Corriente says that they all have the meaning of "superlativo relativo" (*Gramática*, pp. 244-245, points a-c). Similarly, Badawi *et al.* (*Modern Written Arabic*, pp. 247-252) and Cantarino (*Syntax*, p. 476), who considers definite annexation "as equivalent to an absolute superlative". Sometimes a difference in the frequency of use is pointed to: according to Danecki (*Gramatyka*, p. 316), annexation is the most frequent means of expressing the superlative meaning in MWA.

As far as the choice between indefinite and definite annexation is concerned, El-Ayoubi *et al.* (*Syntax*, p. 273) write that there is no difference in content between them. For instance, *aʿlā ǧibāli l-ʿālami* (partitive) means the same as *aʿlā ǧabalin fī l-ʿālam* (quantitative). But, they observe, if the genitive noun is to have some attribute, then the indefinite construction is used (counterexamples can be easily found). By contrast, if the genitive noun is to be specified by other genitive nouns, then partitive is preferred. If the entity is known from the communicative situation, then only partitive can be used.

used as an example and compared with the two types of annexation: *aʿẓamu muškilatin* and *aʿẓamu l-muškilāti*[97], with the three constructions being referred to here as (44), (45) and (46), respectively. Let us consider the following respective examples with relative clauses:

(44) *ʿan-i l-muškilati l-aʿẓami llatī sa-tuwāğihu l-iḫwāna fī ḥukmi Miṣr: al-azmati l-iqtiṣādiyyati l-kubrā*[98]

'about the biggest problem which is going to face the Brotherhood in governing Egypt: the great financial crisis.'

(45) *inna aʿẓama muškilatin tuwāğihu l-šabāba fī Miṣra laysat…*[99]

'The biggest problem which faces young people in Egypt is not…'

(46) *inna aʿẓama l-muškilāti llatī tuwāğihu taʿlīma-nā l-muʿāṣira yatamaṯṯalu fī…*[100]

'the biggest problem which faces our contemporary education lies in…'

All of these three constructions make it possible to express the same meaning and allow further modification by a RC. However, (44) has some specific features which might have favoured its origin and spread:

In contrast to (45), it allows the superlative construction to be definite, which creates a symmetrical and distinctive relationship with the indefinite comparative construction (*muškilatun akbar* 'a bigger problem'). In addition, it allows the noun to be specified by a genitive noun in annexation or for possession by adding a pronominal suffix, e.g. *muškilatu-humu l-aʿẓamu* 'their biggest problem'. If construction (45) were to be used, this meaning would have to be expressed by means of a prepositional phrase: *aʿẓamu muškilatin la-hum*, which appears to be rather rarely resorted to.

Sometimes, however, it is difficult to identify the reason why one of these two constructions was chosen by a language user rather than the other. For instance, the meaning 'the award of the best African player' is normally expressed by means of (45), viz. *ğāʾizatu afḍalu lāʿibin ifrīqiyyin*, only rarely construction (44) is used: *ğāʾizatu l-lāʿibi*

[97] The construction with inflected elatives, such as *al-muškilatu l-ʿuẓmā* 'the very great, major problem', conveys an absolute superlative meaning and is therefore not comparable.

[98] al-Šarq al-Awsaṭ, *Min Harūdz*.

[99] Manṣūr, 59.

[100] al-Riyāḍ, *Ġiyāb*.

l-ifrīqiyyi l-afḍali, although pragmatically, the latter, being definite, could seem to be a better choice for the official denomination of a prize. In many cases, idiomaticity plays a decisive role; for instance, to say 'at least' one uses construction (45), *'alā aqalli taqdīrin*, lit. 'on the least estimation', not (44) *'alā l-taqdīri l-aqalli*.

In contrast to (46), (44) is unambiguous with respect to the category of number and does not require a context to determine it. Finally, in contrast to both (45) and (46), (44) allows the use of a demonstrative pronoun, e.g. *hāḏihi l-muškilatu l-'akbaru llatī*…'this biggest problem, which…'.

Conclusion

What MWA inherited from CA and/or developed in the non-predicative syntax of the elative can be summed up as follows.

1. As far as adjectival attribution is concerned, although the Cairo Academy allowed the derivation of feminine elatives by way of analogy, MWA has not followed this path and, instead, has allowed non-inflection in definite attribution: *al-muškilatu l-akbaru*. This construction, however, seems to be accepted more in journalistic language, while literary style seems to be more conservative in this respect. In addition, indefinite attribution with inflected elatives, e.g. *muškilatun kubrā*, is used in MWA, although this usage can be be attested quite early. One can thus speak of a tendency to create symmetry in the formal system of adjectival attribution. In CA, it was asymmetrical (typical meanings are given in parenthesis):

	non-inflected	**inflected**
indefinite	*muškilatun akbar* (comparative)	***
definite	***	*al-muškilatu l-kubrā* (absolutive)

MWA has developed a system which is formally (albeit not semantically) symmetrical and complete, as shown below:

	non-inflected	**inflected**
indefinite	*muškilatun akbar* (comparative)	*muškilatun kubrā* (absolutive)
definite	*al-muškilatu l-akbaru* (superlative)	*al-muškilatu l-kubrā* (absolutive)

2. By developing the construction *al-muškilatu l-akbaru* to express relative superlative, this meaning has been transferred from annexation (genitive construction) to adjectival attribution. By this, another symmetric relationship has been created: the one between two adjectival attributions, the inherited indefinite *muškilatun akbaru* for the comparative and the innovative definite *al-muškilatu l-akbaru* for the superlative[101].

3. In CA, if a definite substantive with an adjectival attribute is qualified by a relative clause, this relative clause is normally non-restrictive, e.g.

(47) *ṣāra 'inda mulūki l-'ağami 'alama-hum-u l-akbara llaḏī yatabarrakūna bi-hi*[102]

'it became for the Persian kings the chief sign, from which they used to seek blessing' (rather than: 'the greatest sign from which they used to seek blessing')

In contrast, in MWA, a relative clause can be restrictive, cf. (44), which means that the noun is specified in more than one way: by the definite article (or a pronominal suffix) and relative clause.

4. MWA has witnessed a strong revival and expansion of *kubrā* as the first term of annexation, especially in the journalistic style. The innovative construction with its plural *kubrayāt* is even more expansive, probably due to the fact that it is not ambiguous with respect to number, in contrast to *akbar* and *kubrā*. *Kubrayāt* has loosened its connection with its original feminine meaning and appears to have gained some semantic independence (with *ṣuġrayāt* and *'uẓmayāt* being much less frequently used).

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[101] This is reminiscent of the pair existing, for instance, in Romance languages, cf. French *un problème plus grand* y *le problème le plus grand*. It would be interesting to examine possible influence of French or English on this fragment of MWA syntax.

[102] al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīḫ*, vol. 1, p. 198.

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