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# The typology of negation across varieties of Arabic

Drawing primarily on the data collated by Alluhaybi (2019), this article first situates Arabic within the crosslinguistic typology of negative strategies put forward, among others, by Miestamo (2005). It then surveys the main parameters of variation among different varieties of Arabic in the expression of standard negation, non-verbal negation, and negative imperatives, with a particular focus on the issue of the single versus bipartite expression of negation. The article finishes by looking at some recent debates concerning the diachronic evolution of the observed patterns.

Standard negation; negative imperatives; Jespersen's cycle

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## 1 Preliminaries<sup>1</sup>

The bread and butter of linguistic typology is the comparison of large and representative samples of the world's languages with respect to a given linguistic feature (or cluster of related features), with a view to revealing worldwide tendencies or universals for the feature(s) in question. From this point of view, when we investigate in detail the realization of a particular feature, such as negation, in a single language (or language family), such as Arabic, we are not making a significant contribution to the broader typological enterprise.<sup>2</sup> What we can offer in this regard is a detailed and reliable description of the relevant data for the different varieties of our language, which typologists can then use with confidence in their larger comparisons.

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<sup>2</sup> This is not, however, to deny the potential for mutually beneficial integration of the disciplines of dialectology and typology (cf. Bisang 2004).

This is what we propose to do in this article. But the primary intended readership is not typologists, but those with a specific interest in Arabic in all its forms. This community, we suggest, stands to benefit considerably from the application of a more typological approach to the study of Arabic dialectal variation. As Woidich (1999: 355) pointed out over twenty years ago, while the grammar of a great many Arabic varieties has now been described in considerable detail, there are still very few works offering overviews of specific linguistic features across Arabic varieties (but see Mörrth 1997; Behnstedt & Woidich 2010–2021). It is hoped that the present article, along with the others in this special issue, goes some way to rectifying this situation, and advancing the project of disseminating the findings of decades of Arabic dialectology to a wider audience (cf. Lucas & Manfredi 2020).

The article is organised as follows. §2 outlines the fundamental concepts that underlie contemporary approaches to the typology of negation. §3 describes the major points of variation associated with the expression of negation within and between the different Arabic varieties. §4 looks in detail at dialectal differences in the forms of the negative elements themselves, with a particular focus on single versus bipartite expressions of negation. §5 is concerned with the historical evolution of bipartite negation. §6 concludes.

## 2 Key concepts in the typology of negation

In a large proportion of the world's languages, the expression of negation varies according to the morphosyntactic context in which it occurs. As we will see, Arabic varieties are no exception to this trend. Payne (1985) coined the term **standard negation** to refer to the negative construction a language employs in the most basic, unmarked context. Authors have differed slightly in exactly how they define this context. Here we follow van der Auwera and Krasnoukhova's (2020: 91) recent definition: standard negation is "the non-emphatic negation of a lexical main verb in a declarative main clause." In (1) we see that there is in fact considerable variation in the expression of standard negation across Arabic varieties, both in terms of exponence and syntax.<sup>3</sup> Classical and Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) are alone in employing the form *lā* for standard negation, as illustrated in (1)a. Almost ubiquitous in the dialects is a distinct preverbal negator *mā*, illustrated for Damascus Arabic in

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<sup>3</sup> Here we need to be wary of a potentially confusing overlap between the term *standard negation* and the completely distinct sociological phenomenon of language standardization, which, in the case of Arabic, gives us Modern Standard Arabic on the one hand, and the generally non-standardized dialects on the other. Since negation is a universal category, every language variety, whether standardized or not, will exhibit both standard negation ("the non-emphatic negation of a lexical main verb in a declarative main clause") and non-standard negation (negation in any other context).

(1)b. In most of the dialects of North Africa, adjacent areas of the southwestern Levant, parts of the southwestern Arabian Peninsula, and, more controversially, in southern Iraq,<sup>4</sup> this preverbal element is accompanied by a postverbal element derived from \*šay? ‘thing’, giving us the bipartite construction illustrated for Cairo Arabic in (1)c. Finally, in a few scattered locations this postverbal element can function as the sole expression of standard negation, as shown in (1)d for Urban Palestinian Arabic.<sup>5</sup>

(1) Standard negation in Arabic (‘I do not know’)

a. Classical/MSA

*lā ʔaʕrifu*

NEG know.IMPF.1SG.IND

b. Damascus Arabic

*mā baʕref*

NEG know.IMPF.1SG.IND

c. Cairo Arabic

*ma-ʕraf-š*

NEG-know.IMPF.1SG-NEG

d. Urban Palestinian Arabic

*baʕrif-iš*<sup>6</sup>

know.IMPF.1SG.IND-NEG

‘I do not know.’

A second distinction that has been influential in recent typological studies of negation is the one made by Miestamo (2000; 2005) between **symmetric** and **asymmetric** negation. Negation is symmetric when a negative clause is identical to its affirmative counterpart apart from the addition of the negator. This is the case for standard negation in virtually all Arabic varieties,<sup>7</sup> as exemplified in (2).

(2) Symmetric standard negation in Damascus Arabic

a. *baʕref*

know.IMPF.1SG.IND

‘I know.’

<sup>4</sup> See §4.3 for more detail.

<sup>5</sup> Examples for which no source is given are based on personal knowledge of the varieties in question. Otherwise data is drawn from published descriptions of any and all Arabic dialects, chiefly from the Arabic dialectological literature.

<sup>6</sup> While this postverbal construction is the most frequent option for negation of this verb form in this variety, in different contexts both the bipartite construction illustrated in (1)c and the preverbal construction in (1)b are also commonly attested in Palestinian Arabic. See Lucas (2010) for details.

<sup>7</sup> An exception is Abha Arabic, in which the negation of perfect-tense verbs is expressed by the negator *lim* together with the imperfect form of the verb (cf. Al-Azraqi 1998; Alluhaybi 2019: 148).

- b. *mā baʕref*  
 NEG know.IMPF.1SG.IND  
 ‘I do not know.’

Negation is asymmetric when, as well as the addition of the negator, some other change occurs with respect to the counterpart negative sentence. This is the case for standard negation in English (3), as well as negative imperatives in Arabic, as illustrated for Cairo Arabic in (4), where we see that negative imperatives are expressed by adding negation to the imperfect form of the verb, not simply to the bare form used in the affirmative imperative.

- (3) Asymmetric standard negation in English  
 a. *I know.*  
 b. *I **do** not know.*
- (4) Asymmetric negative imperative in Cairo Arabic  
 a. *rūḥ*  
 go.IMP.2SG.M  
 ‘Go!’  
 b. *ma-truḥ-š*  
 NEG-go.IMPF.2SG.M-NEG  
 ‘Don’t go!’

In addition to the parameters of standard/non-standard and symmetric/asymmetric, typologists have also considered the nature of negators themselves, as well as how they are ordered relative to other elements. For example, Dahl (1979) distinguishes morphological negation, where negation is a verbal inflection (e.g. an affix), from syntactic negation, where the negative element is phonologically independent of the main verb (e.g. particles or negative auxiliaries). Dryer (2013a) examines relationships between the position of negation and the order of subject, object, and verb. He finds, for example, that languages with verb–subject–object basic word order almost always have preverbal negation – a generalization which holds for MSA. We consider issues of this kind in §4.

## 3 Major loci of variation in Arabic

### 3.1 (A)symmetric negation and imperatives

As noted above, standard negation is essentially always symmetric across all Arabic varieties. If we choose to categorize the negation of periphrastic future constructions as standard negation (see §3.2 below for further discussion of these), then arguably some examples of asymmetric standard negation constructions can be found. One such is in the Ḥassāniyya example in (5). Here the normal negator for standard negation, *mā*, is insufficient to express negation in the context of the future particle *lāhi*, where it is obligatorily joined by an enclitic personal pronoun. Such examples are the exception rather than the rule, however.

(5) Asymmetric negative future in Ḥassāniyya (Taine-Cheikh 2011)

- a. *lāhi yəbki*  
FUT cry.IMP.3SG.M  
'He will cry.'
- b. *mā-hu lāhi yəbki*  
NEG-3SG.M FUT cry.IMP.3SG.M  
'He won't cry.'

Conversely, when it comes to negative imperatives, asymmetric negation seems to be universal across all Arabic varieties, as illustrated for Cairo Arabic in (4) above. This is even true of the Arabic-based creoles, such as Juba Arabic (6). However, here the change is not to the form of the verb (which does not inflect), but instead takes the form of a suffix on the negator, which in other contexts is a bare *mā*.<sup>8</sup>

(6) Asymmetric negative imperative in Juba Arabic (Miller 2011)

- a. *gèsimu badùm*  
divide each.other  
'Divide between yourselves!'
- b. *mà-ta gèsimu badùm*  
NEG-IMP divide each.other  
'Don't divide between yourselves!'

Another common (though far from universal) feature of negative imperatives in Arabic varieties is the use of reflexes of \**lā* as negator, where the negator for standard negation would be a reflex of \**mā*. This feature is rare in the dialects of

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<sup>8</sup> This suffix is notable for being the sole locus of number inflection in the verbal domain of Juba Arabic: singular *-ta* vs. plural *-takum*. These forms are grammaticalized the independent 2SG and 2PL pronouns *ita* and *itakum*, respectively (Manfredi 2017: 111–113).

North Africa, where the innovative bipartite negative construction is the norm,<sup>9</sup> but common elsewhere, as illustrated in (7).

- (7) Special negator for imperatives in Muslim Baghdad Arabic (Erwin 1963: 141)
- a. *ma-yšūf*  
NEG-see.IMPF.3SG.M  
'He doesn't see.'
  - b. *la-trūh*  
NEG-go.IMPF.2SG.M  
'Don't go!'

### 3.2 Verbal versus non-verbal clauses

A particularly salient distinction between standard and non-standard negation in Arabic dialects concerns sentences with verbal versus non-verbal predicates. Most dialects negate non-verbal predicates (a non-standard negative context), not with the same negator as in standard negation, but with a form that is either transparently a negated pronoun, (8)a, or a reduced frozen form of the same,<sup>10</sup> (8)b–(8)d, sometimes augmented with *-b* in dialects spoken in or near to the central Arabian Peninsula, (8)e.<sup>11</sup>

- (8) Negation of non-verbal predicates in Arabic dialects
- a. Ḥassāniyya (Francis & Hanchey 1979: 18)  
*mā-hu l-mudīr*  
NEG-3SG.M DEF-director  
'He is not the director.'
  - b. Muslim Baghdad Arabic (Erwin 1963: 331)  
*ha-l-quṣṣa mū ṣaḥīḥa*  
DEM-DEF-story NEG correct  
'This story is not true.'
  - c. Maltese (Korpus Malti v3.0 parl12135)<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> An example of a North African dialect which does use \*lā for negative imperatives is Ḥassāniyya. Probably relevant here is the fact that this variety also retains the conservative preverbal standard negative construction with \*mā, lacking the innovative bipartite construction.

<sup>10</sup> In the dialects of Morocco and Algeria the non-verbal negator is a form *māši* (Caubet 1996: 84), which appears to derive solely from the two elements of the bipartite negative construction, without an intervening pronoun.

<sup>11</sup> This *-b* suffix presumably derives from the preposition \*bi which was optionally prefixed to the predicate of a negative nominal sentence in earlier forms of Arabic.

*intom mhux biss union, imma assoċjazzjoni...*

2PL NEG only union but association

‘You are not just a union, but an association...’

- d. Cairo Arabic (Woidich 2006: 330)

*ir-rayyis miš hina*

DEF-boss NEG here

‘The boss isn’t here.’

- e. ṢUnayzah Arabic (Alluhaybi 2019: 218)

*Hind mūb ṭālbah*

Hind NEG student.F

‘Hind is not a student.’

There are dialects in which the same negator is used both for standard negation and routinely also non-verbal clauses, but these seem to be restricted to the eastern Sudanic region:

- (9) Verbal versus non-verbal negation in Khartoum Arabic (Dickins 2011)

- a. Standard negation

*ma btafham*

NEG understand.IMPF.2SG.M

‘You don’t understand.’

- b. Negation of non-verbal predicates

*inta ma rāḡil*

2SG.M NEG man

‘You are not a man.’

Outside of this region, participles, despite their verb-like properties,<sup>12</sup> are typically negated with the same elements used for non-verbal predicates, rather than with the standard negator:

- (10) Negation in Cairo Arabic

- a. Standard negation

*ma-ṣraf-š*

NEG-know.IMPF.1SG-NEG

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<sup>12</sup> Note that the symbol ⟨x⟩ in Maltese orthography represents the voiceless alveolar fricative otherwise transcribed here as ⟨š⟩. The Korpus Malti is a freely accessible 250-million word corpus of written and spoken Maltese, accessible at: <https://mlrs.research.um.edu.mt/>

<sup>13</sup> These include, in addition to expressing events/situations, taking direct object enclitic pronouns and, in the case of Damascus Arabic, hosting person as well as gender and number inflection (albeit limited to the 2SG.F; Cowell 1964: 268).

‘I don’t know.’

- b. Negation of non-verbal predicates

*ir-rayyis    **miš**    hina*

DEF-boss    NEG    here

‘The boss isn’t here.’

- c. Negation of participles

***miš**    šāyiz                    anām*

NEG    want.PTCP.ACT    sleep.IMPF.1SG

‘I don’t want to sleep.’

Many dialects have a range of preverbal particles with tense or aspectual functions, derived from participles. In most cases verbs preceded by these particles are negated, like the participles from which they derive, with the element used for negation of non-verbal predicates.

- (11) Negation of verbs with aspectual particles

- a. Hassāniyya (Taine-Cheikh 2011)

***mā-hu**                    lāhi    yābki*

NEG-3SG.M    FUT    cry.IMPF.3SG.M

‘He won’t cry.’

- b. Cairo Arabic

***miš**    ḥa-tirgaʕ*

NEG    FUT-return.IMPF.3SG.F

‘She won’t come back.’

- c. Maltese (Korpus Malti v3.0 culture2700)

*is-sewwieq    **mhux**    qed            ihares*

DEF-driver    NEG    PROG    look.IMPF.3SG.M

‘The driver isn’t paying attention.’

- d. Damascus Arabic (Cowell 1964: 387)

***mū**    šam    yāštāyel                    hallaʔ*

NEG    PROG    work.IMPF.3SG.M    now

‘He’s not working now.’

This suggests a diachronic sequence in which the grammaticalization of negated pronouns as non-verbal negators preceded the grammaticalization of certain active participles as aspectual particles, with latter retaining their earlier property of requiring the non-verbal negator. On this scenario, the original situation would have been the absence of any specialist non-verbal negator, as we still find today in eastern Sudanic dialects, shown in (9); the next stage is that the specialist non-verbal negator



grammaticalizes and is used in all non-verbal contexts, as in (10); then some participles grammaticalize as aspectual particles, but are still treated as participles for negation purposes, as in (11). The expected next stage would be that the requirement is dropped for verbs preceded by these aspectual participles to be negated with the non-verbal negator. This is indeed a frequent option in, for example, Damascus Arabic, as shown in (12), and from this point of view the Christian Arabic of Baghdad would appear to be particularly innovative, since it routinely uses the pronoun-based negator for all non-verbal predicates, as in (13)a, but verbs with aspectual particles are apparently always negated with the plain standard negator *mā*, as in (13)b.

(12) Damascus Arabic (Cowell 1964: 384)

*ana mā šam baštəyel ha-l-ʔiyyām*  
 1SG NEG PROG work.IMPF.1SG DEM-DEF-day.PL  
 ‘I’m not working these days.’

(13) Christian Arabic of Baghdad (Abu-Haidar 1991: 128–9)

a. Non-verbal negation

*mū ḥāməḍ yānu*  
 NEG sour 3SG.M  
 ‘It isn’t sour.’

b. Negation of verbs with aspectual particles

*ma yaḥ yətkallal*  
 NEG FUT marry.IMPF.3SG.M  
 ‘He won’t marry.’

Thus, with the exception of a minority of dialects like the Christian Arabic of Baghdad, the so-called non-verbal negator is in fact used in several synchronically verbal contexts. Similarly, many dialects which in general have distinct negators for verbal and non-verbal contexts, nevertheless use the so-called verbal negator in at least some contexts which are non-verbal, at least from an etymological point of view. The most obvious of these are straightforwardly non-verbal clauses in which negation appears affixed to a subject pronoun. As noted above, in a few dialects this is in fact the only option for negating non-verbal clauses (cf. (8)a), while in most of the rest the typical non-verbal negator is a reduced, frozen form of the negated 3SG.M pronoun (cf. (8)b–e). But even in these latter varieties, the option typically exists of negating the whole subject pronoun paradigm in nominal clauses, often with a contrastive effect. This is illustrated in (14).

(14) Negated pronouns

a. Cairo Arabic (Woidich 2006: 336)

*ma-huwwā-š*      *mawgūd*

NEG-3SG.M-NEG    present

‘He is not present.’

- b. Mazouna Algerian Arabic (Elhalimi 1996: 141)

*mā-hī-š*      *mṛīda*

NEG-3SG.F-NEG    sick.f

‘She is not sick.’

Likewise, in apparently all Arabic dialects, so-called pseudo-verbs (existential particles and etymologically prepositional phrases that function as predicates) are negated in the same way as regular verbs, as illustrated in (15).

- (15) Negated existentials and pseudo-verbs

- a. Moroccan Arabic (Harrell 1966: 52)

*ma-kayn-š*    *ṭriq*    *qaṣḍa*

NEG-EXS-NEG    road    direct.F

‘There is no direct route.’

- b. Maltese (Korpus Malti v3.0 academic10)

*M’-hemm-x*    *dubju*    *li*      *s-suq*      *globali*    *se*

NEG-EXS-NEG    doubt    COMP    DEF-market    global    FUT

*jkompli*      *jeżisti...*

continue.IMPF.3SG.M    exist.IMPF.3SG.M

‘There is no doubt that the global market will continue to exist...’

- c. Tunisian Arabic (Chaâbane 1996: 120)

*ma-šandī-š*      *barša*    *flūs*

NEG-POSS.1SG-NEG    much    money

‘I don’t have a lot of money.’

- d. Damascus Arabic (Cowell 1964: 327)

*mā*    *baddi*      *kūn*      *maṭraḥ-o*

NEG    want.1SG    be.IMPF.1SG    place-3SG.M

‘I wouldn’t want to be in his place.’

However, there are also varieties, such as Cairo Arabic, in which the bipartite (supposedly verbal) construction may be used for the negation of clauses with straightforward, non-pseudo-verbal prepositional phrases, as illustrated in (16).

- (16) Negated prepositional phrases in Cairo Arabic (Woidich 2006: 335–6)

- a. *iḥna* *ma-šale-nā-š*      *id-dōr*

1PL    NEG-on-1PL-NEG    DEF-turn

‘It’s not our turn.’

- b. *ma-b-yadd-ī-š*                      *ḥīla*

NEG-in-hand-1SG-NEG    resource

‘I am powerless.’ (Lit. ‘There is no resource in my hand.’)

Furthermore, in varieties such as Moroccan, Libyan and southern Egyptian Arabic, even adjectival and adverbial predicates can be negated with the bipartite (or purely postverbal) construction:

(17) Negated adjectival and adverbial predicates

- a. Casablanca Arabic (Adila 1996: 104)

*had əd-dar      ma-kbīra-š*

DEM DEF-house    NEG-big.F-NEG

‘This house is not big.’

- b. Tripoli Libyan Arabic (Christophe Pereira, pers. comm.)

*əl-mudīr      mā-hnā-š*

DEF-director    NEG-here-NEG

‘The director is not here.’

- c. Qinā Egyptian Arabic

*ir-rājel      ma-nažīr-ši                      l-midrasi*

DEF-man    NEG-supervisor-NEG    DEF-school

‘The man is not the headmaster.’

## 4 The nature of Arabic negators

### 4.1 *laysa*

A curious feature of Classical and MSA is the use of the negative verb *laysa*. The well-known primary function of this highly irregular verb is as a negative copula in non-verbal clauses. It does, however, have a secondary function as a negative auxiliary, as illustrated in (18)b. This is a relatively rare negation strategy crosslinguistically (Dryer 2013b).

(18) MSA

- a. Non-verbal negation

*lastu                      ḥabīr-an*

NEG.1SG expert-ACC.INDEF

‘I am not an expert.’

- b. Negative auxiliary

***lastu***      *ʔadri*

NEG.1SG know.IMPF.1SG

‘I do not know.’

There is no sign of this item in virtually all contemporary Arabic dialects.<sup>14</sup> As shown in (19), however, a reflex is retained in Abha Arabic, where both the copular and auxiliary functions persist, the latter being inflected with dependent pronoun suffixes, rather than the normal verbal inflections as in MSA.

- (19) Abha Arabic (Al-Azraqi 1998: 56, 142)

- a. Non-verbal negation

***lis***      *hina*

NEG here

‘He is not here.’

- b. Negative auxiliary

***lis-ni***      *aʕrif*

NEG.1SG know.IMPF.1SG

‘I do not know.’

## 4.2 *mā*

As we have seen above, unlike *laysa*, reflexes of *mā* are almost ubiquitous in the Arabic dialects in the expression of standard negation. If we are to take the lead of Dahl (1979) and Dryer (2013b), we should ask whether the reflex of *mā* that appears in a given variety is a free word (particle) or an affix (or clitic). Even on the doubtful assumption that there are reliable and widely accepted definitions of these terms and the distinctions between them (cf. Haspelmath 2011; 2021), we do not at present have sufficiently detailed relevant information to answer this question for more than a small handful of dialects. Nevertheless, it is possible to sketch a typology of relevant phonological characteristics as follows. First, there are dialects in northeastern Arabia, in which *mā* always carries stress and the vowel is always long (Ingham 2005: 178–9). Presumably this represents the most conservative state regarding the phonology of *mā* crossdialectally. Second, in a great many of the dialects spoken across the Fertile

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<sup>14</sup> Written records of medieval Spanish Arabic, however, suggest that reflexes of *laysa* were previously more widespread in dialectal Arabic (cf. Corriente 1977: 144).

Crescent, the vowel is always (phonemically) long, and *mā* can be stressed, but need not be. Third, in Egypt and many of the North African dialects that maintain a phonemic length distinction for the low vowel in general, the vowel of this negator is always short and never stressed (Ḥassāniyya *mā* with its long vowel is an exception to this geographical generalization). Finally, a debuccalized variant *ʔa* (unstressed, with a short vowel) is attested sporadically in Lebanon and the Horan.

## 4.3 Bipartite negation

### 4.3.1 Basic data

The most salient and well-known negation-based split among Arabic varieties concerns its single versus bipartite expression (Diem 2014; Lucas 2007; 2009; 2018; 2020; Wilmsen 2014). In most dialects in which a bipartite construction is the expression of standard negation, the second element is an enclitic *-š* which follows all other clitics, as illustrated in (20).<sup>15</sup>

(20) Mazouna Algerian Arabic bipartite negation (Elhalimi 1996: 138)

<i>mziyya</i>	<b><i>ma-gāl-ha-lū-š</i></b>	<i>rāḡəl</i>
luckily	NEG-say.PRF.3SG.M-3SG.F-DAT.3SG.M-NEG	man
'Luckily it wasn't a man that told him it.'		

### 4.3.2 Geographical issues

The general picture regarding the geographical distribution of this bipartite construction is clear. It is the expression of standard negation in virtually all dialects in a contiguous region that includes all of North Africa – with the exception of Ḥassāniyya, Sudanic varieties, and some Bedouin varieties (e.g. in the Sinai Peninsula; de Jong 2011) – and also includes the southwestern Levant (Palestine, Amman and northern Jordan, southwestern Syria, southern Lebanon). It is also, separately, a feature of a number of western Yemeni varieties, including the dialect of the capital, Sanaa.

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<sup>15</sup> There are a very few instances of postverbal negators not derived from *šayʔ*, for example *-bu* in the Oujda region of northeastern Morocco (Lafkioui 2013), and *-lu* in the Šihhī Arabic variety of northern Oman (Bernabela 2011; see Lucas 2020: 655–6 for discussion).

All of the aforementioned the literature which attempts to map the full geographical extent of this construction (Diem 2014; Lucas 2007; 2009; 2018; 2020; Wilmsen 2014), states that it occurs only in these two contiguous locations. However, two recent works (Hassan 2016; Albuarabi 2021) suggest that it is also the expression of standard negation in at least some parts of southern Iraq. Hassan (2016) deals with what he calls “South Iraqi Arabic”. He does not provide further details concerning the localities in which the dialect he is describing is spoken, nor does he give precise information regarding the sources of his data, referring only to “public poetry and recordings of spontaneous speech with informants in the southern *gilit* dialect area” (2016: 301). Albuarabi, in her (2021) doctoral dissertation, reports that the normal (and apparently only) way to express sentential negation in the dialects of the southern Iraqi provinces of Basra, an-Nāṣiriyya and al-ʿAmāra is with the bipartite *mā...-š* construction. Albuarabi does not provide any details in the body of the dissertation regarding the provenance of her data, but we are told in the acknowledgments section that the work “could not have been accomplished without the support of Dr. Qasim Hassan [the author of the aforementioned (2016) work], a professor at the University of Basra in the south of Iraq, and my other friends in Iraq who all verified the data used in this dissertation.” Against this background, it is important to note that the only other major description of an Arabic dialect of southern Iraq – Mahdi’s (1985) doctoral dissertation on the dialect of Basra – which treats negation in some detail, gives no indication that a *-š* suffix ever occurs as part of any negative construction. Moreover, in her (2002) survey of negation in Iraqi Arabic, which includes data from two individuals from an-Nāṣiriyya, Abu-Haidar similarly makes no mention of an *-š* suffix as a marker of standard negation.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, Ingham (2000: 128) does mention bipartite negation with *-š* as occurring in this region, but he lists it as a distinctive feature of the dialect of the Miṣdān (marsh Arabs) specifically, in contrast to the dialects of the rest of southern Mesopotamia, which he implies lack it (in agreement with Mahdi 1985 and Abu-Haidar 2002). As we will see below, it is clear from Ingham’s data that inclusion of this suffix even in Miṣdān Arabic is merely optional, such that, in this variety at least, bipartite negation also cannot be characterized as the expression of standard negation.

Some degree of skepticism is therefore warranted with respect to the claims about negation in the works of Hassan and Albuarabi. To illustrate bipartite negation in southern Iraqi Arabic, Hassan (2016) gives only the two examples in (21).

(21) Southern Iraqi Arabic possible bipartite negation (Hassan 2016: 304)

- a. *mā-hū-š*                      *hnā*  
      NEG-3SG.M-NEG    here

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<sup>16</sup> On the negative existential form *mākuš*, see further below in the current section.

‘He is not here.’

b. *mā-ākil-hū-š*

NEG-eat.IMPF.1SG-3SG.M-NEG

‘I do not eat it.’

Albuarabi (2021) gives various examples that appear to be constructed and cannot therefore be investigated further. One exception is the example given in (22), which Albuarabi labels as “adopted from a Basrawi poem”. In several places online,<sup>17</sup> it is possible to view a performance of a variation on this poem by a poet named Qāsim ʕIlwān al-Luhēbi. In this performance there are multiple other instances of negation that follow the one in (22). All but one of these (see (23)) has no trace of a -š suffix. If nothing else, this tells us that it is at least possible in this dialect to negate solely with preverbal *mā*, and that the bipartite construction cannot straightforwardly be described as the marker of standard negation. This being the case, we should also consider the possibility that (22) does not, in fact, involve bipartite negation plus an unexpressed theme argument of the predicate *ʕi(n)d-* ‘to have’, but rather involves single preverbal negation with the theme argument being expressed by -š, here an indefinite pronoun ‘(any)thing’.

(22) Basra Arabic possible bipartite negation (Albuarabi 2021: 73)<sup>18</sup>

*ṣaḥḥ faqara mā ʕadnā-š bass namlək əḥsās*

true poor NEG have.1PL-NEG(?)but have feeling

‘True we are poor; we do not have anything, but we have feeling.’

The same analysis suggests itself for the one other instance of suffixed -š in this poem, shown in (23).

(23) Basra Arabic possible bipartite negation (from *Dārmiyyāt Qāsim ʕIlwān*)

*rakk ḥēl-i mā bəyyā-š albas ʕəbāt-i*

weaken.PRF.3SG.M strength-1SG NEG in.1SG-š wear.IMPF.1SG cloak-1SG

‘My vigour has diminished. I am too weak to put on my cloak.’

Apparent literal translation: ‘...in me is nothing such that I can put on my cloak.’

There is independent evidence from related dialects that the indefinite pronoun *šī* can, in fact, be reduced to a clitic, especially in the context of negation of pseudo-

<sup>17</sup> For example at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r-x\\_i09zVI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r-x_i09zVI) (accessed 06/01/2022).

<sup>18</sup> We have retained Albuarabi’s gloss and translation (with correction of one clear glossing error) but adapted her transcription.

verbs, without necessarily losing its function as an indefinite pronoun. This is the case, for example, in the dialect of the Qaṣīm region of Saudi Arabia. Although this has not, to the best of our knowledge, been documented in published academic work, it is well known to students of the dialects of this region,<sup>19</sup> and Yousef Al-Rojaie of Qassim University, a native speaker of this variety, has confirmed to us in personal communication that the indefinite pronoun can take the form of the clitic *-š* with the negation of several pseudo-verbs. He gives the following examples.

(24) Qaṣīm Arabic negation (Yousef Al-Rojaie, pers. comm.)

- a. *mā hnā-š*  
NEG here-anything  
'There is nothing here.'
- b. *mā šindī-š*  
NEG POSS.1SG-anything  
'I don't have anything.'
- c. *mā bū-š*  
NEG EXS-anything  
'There is nothing.'

Al-Rojaie also notes that, just with the existential *bū*, and only in questions, the string *mā bū-š* can co-occur with an explicit argument, as in (25), suggesting that in this isolated instance we can in fact talk about bipartite negation in this variety.

(25) Qaṣīm Arabic possible bipartite negation (Yousef Al-Rojaie, pers. comm.)

- mā bū-š ḥubz*  
NEG EXS-š bread  
'Isn't there any bread?'

In his brief article, Ingham (2000: 128) gives two examples of bipartite negation with verbs in the Miṣdān dialect from the area of al-ṢAmāra: *ma yfūtīš* 'it will not go through', and *ma arūḥāš* 'I will not go'. Since these are both intransitive predicates, we do seem to be dealing with genuine bipartite negation here, as opposed to a reduced and cliticized reflex of the indefinite pronoun *šī*. Ingham also gives an example of the copular verb *čān* negated only with *ma*, however, demonstrating that

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<sup>19</sup> It is the topic of the following WordReference forum post, for example:  
<https://forum.wordreference.com/threads/gasseemi-arabic-final-negation-with-sh.2751217> (accessed 06/01/2022).



there is no straightforward equivalence between bipartite and standard negation in this variety.<sup>20</sup>

Turning to Baghdad Arabic, this is of course a well-described variety that is plentifully attested in the media. There is no question that this variety entirely lacks the bipartite negative construction, and expresses standard negation with just preverbal *mā*, as in (7) above. Abu-Haidar (2002), however, notes that alongside the normal negative form of the existential *aku – māku* – there is an alternative form with a final *-š*: *mākuš* (without lengthening of the final vowel of *aku*). Regarding the provenance of this final *-š*, Diem (2014: 5, fn. 10) makes a rather dubious suggestion: “*mākuš*... might be a calque on the ubiquitous *ma-fī-š* (*aku : fī = māku : x; x = mākuš*).”<sup>21</sup> A more likely scenario is suggested by the fact, pointed out by Abu-Haidar (2002: 10), that “[a]lthough *mākuš* negates nominal clauses, it is more frequently encountered as a negative answer to a question beginning with *aku*.” An example she gives to illustrate is reproduced in (26).

(26) Muslim Baghdad Arabic (Abu-Haidar 2002: 10)

*aku yarāḏ zēna b-əš-šōrġa l-yōm? mākuš*

EXS wares good.F in-DEF-PN DEF-day NEG.EXS

‘Is there good merchandise in the Shorja market nowadays? No, there isn’t.’

Note that across the Arabic dialects existential questions are frequently answered, as in (26), just with the negative existential (often preceded by *lā* ‘no’). That is, the subject of the existential predicate is unexpressed in the reply, as it is so easily recoverable from the immediately preceding context. It is also very common for existential questions to be answered with the negative existential plus an indefinite pronoun (‘Is there any good merchandise in the market? No, there’s nothing’). We also know from the preceding discussion that the indefinite pronoun *šī* can reduce to a clitic (while retaining its argument status) in at least some dialects of the wider region. Our suggestion, then, is that this reduced, cliticized reflex of *šī* was reanalysed as a semantically empty part of the preceding existential stem in the context of negative answers to existential questions. That is, in this context, *mākuš* underwent a shift from meaning ‘there is nothing’ to ‘there is not’, with the subject of the existential being unexpressed, and understood as identical to its counterpart in the preceding question.

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<sup>20</sup> Although Ingham (1982; 2000) reports having done fieldwork in the late 1970s with the marsh Arabs, he doesn’t include an authentic text in this variety in either of these two works, only a text from a neighbouring variety in which the speaker imitates the Miṣdān dialect. Although this is clearly not a reliable guide to the authentic features of the dialect, it is perhaps worth noting that this imitation contains several instances of negation, none of them bipartite.

<sup>21</sup> Presumably what was intended here was: *fī : aku = ma-fī-š : x; x = mākuš*.

That this final *-š* is not felt to constitute part of a bipartite negative construction is demonstrated by its occasional extension to affirmative sentences, as in (27).

- (27) Baghdad Arabic (Leitner & Procházka 2021: 158, from al-Karmalī 2009)  
 w-akuš b-əl-əMšaððam farəd mukān ʔəsm-a qalʕat l-əMšaððam  
 and-EXS in-DEF-PN INDEF place name-3SG.M castle DEF-PN  
 ‘In al-Mušaððam there is a place named al-Mušaððam Castle.’

Taken together, all of the above data presents a mixed picture. Undoubtedly a clitic *-š* can appear on negated verbs in some of the dialects spoken in and around southern Iraq. In some cases it seems likely that it has the function of an indefinite pronoun, but it is clear that sometimes this function is absent and we do appear to have bipartite negation, albeit apparently never obligatorily. Hassan’s (2006) and Albuarabi’s (2021) claims of widespread bipartite negation in southern Iraqi Arabic therefore look to be overstating the case, but more research is needed to be certain on this point.

When it comes to non-verbal negation, however, the situation is rather different. In contrast to the purported examples of bipartite verbal (or copular) negation in (21), for non-verbal negation Hassan (2006) provides copious apparently non-constructed examples with a negator *mūš*, in addition to an example of the expected form for Iraq, *mū* (cf. (13)a), as illustrated in (28).

- (28) Southern Iraqi Arabic non-verbal negation (Hassan 2006: 303, 305)  
 a. *mūš āna l-b-wağh-a l-bāb yinsadd*  
 NEG 1SG REL-in-face-3SG.M DEF-door shut.PASS.IMPF.3SG.M  
 ‘I am not the one in whose face the door is shut.’  
 b. *mū ḥazzūra hāy itrīd tafsīr*  
 NEG puzzle DEM want.IMPF.3SG.F interpretation  
 ‘This is not a puzzle that needs interpreting.’

Independent corroboration that at least this form *mūš* occurs in dialects of this region comes from Leitner’s (forthcoming) monograph on Khuzestani Arabic, as well as from Ingham (2000: 128). Although Khuzestani Arabic lacks a bipartite expression of standard negation, it does exhibit this same non-verbal negator *mūš*. Leitner says of this item that it “occurs in my corpus only in recordings of people from Ḥuwayza, Ḥamīdīya, and Tustar”, that is, west of Ahvaz near the Iran–Iraq border, and not far from al-‘Amāra and Basra. For his part, Ingham (2000: 128) also notes *mūš* as a form that occurs in the Mišdān dialect of southern Iraq.

Though far from conclusive, this is relevant to the question of bipartite negation in southern Iraq because, as far as it is possible to tell, every Arabic variety with a bipartite expression of standard negation also exhibits a negator for non-verbal clauses featuring the same suffix *-š(i)*, as illustrated in (29).

(29) Negation of non-verbal predicates in Arabic dialects with bipartite standard negation

- a. Cairo Arabic (Woidich 2006: 330)  
*ir-rayyis miš hina*  
 DEF-boss NEG here  
 ‘The boss isn’t here.’
- b. Maltese (Korpus Malti v3.0 parl12135)  
*intom mhux biss union, imma assoċjazzjoni...*  
 2PL NEG only union but association  
 ‘You are not just a union, but an association...’
- c. Moroccan Arabic (Heath 2002: 248)  
*ana maši kbir*  
 1SG NEG big  
 ‘I am not old.’

It is important to stress that the reverse is not true, however: there are some dialects which lack bipartite standard negation, but which nevertheless feature an *š*-final non-verbal negator. Examples include the dialects of Beirut (Naïm 2011), northwestern Sinai (de Jong 2000: 224, 244), and the Negev (Shawarbah 2012: 325).<sup>22</sup> These are all varieties neighbouring others with both an *š*-final non-verbal negator and bipartite negation. The obvious explanation for this state of affairs is that the *š*-final non-verbal negator tends to diffuse between dialects in contact earlier and more readily than does bipartite verbal negation.

The question, then, is whether we should also see *mūš* in southern Mesopotamian Arabic as having spread there from some contact dialect, or whether we should instead consider it an internal innovation. This is not a question that it is possible to answer one way or the other with any confidence at this time. We can, however, offer some circumstantial evidence that dialect contact might have played a role. If this was the case, the most plausible origin would have been the southern Arabian Peninsula, mediated by Shia migration via the Gulf coast. Note in this connection that non-verbal negation with *mūš* is also attested in the Gulf dialect of al-

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<sup>22</sup> In the same vein, the element *muš* occurs in Sudanese Arabic, where it functions as a tag-question marker, and we also find in these varieties the existential *mafiš* (Stefano Manfredi, pers. comm.). Both of these elements must represent borrowings from Egyptian Arabic.

Aḥsāʔ, Saudi Arabia (Alluhaybi 2019: 223). This is a region for which Shia migration from the south is amply attested in the historical record, leaving clear linguistic traces such as an -š reflex of the 2SG.F pronoun (not to be confused or conflated with negative -š! Cf. Al-Mubarak 2016). For evidence that a chain of dialect contact originating in the far south stretches even further north and west than southern Mesopotamia, note that in the Shawi dialect of Urfa, Turkey, the existential predicate is *ši* (also not to be confused with negative -š! Stephan Procházka, pers. comm.). This form for the existential is otherwise only attested in the southern Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf (cf. Lucas 2020 : §2.1.2).

Clearly further research is needed before we can be certain about the full extent of negation involving a suffixed -š in southern Mesopotamia and other regions where it is generally believed to be absent. But at this point we can no longer state with confidence that bipartite negation is an exclusively North African–Levantine and Yemeni feature.

### 4.3.3 Variation in -š dropping

A significant axis of variation among the Arabic dialects in which the bipartite construction is uncontroversially the expression of standard negation concerns what we might call -š *dropping*: namely, the phenomenon of negation in these varieties being expressed with preverbal *mā* alone in certain grammatical contexts. As pointed out by Diem (2014), this happens more frequently and more often in western Maghrebi dialects than it does in dialects spoken further to the east, especially the dialect of Cairo. Thus Caubet (1996: 86–92) notes that in the dialects of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia described in Chaker & Caubet (1996), -š is always absent with oaths invoking God, when a verb co-occurs with an indefinite nominal object, and when the clause contains any other kind of indefinite item, such as an indefinite pronoun, adverb, or relative clause complement:<sup>23</sup>

#### (30) š-dropping in Maghrebi Arabic

- a. With oaths; Casablanca Arabic (Adila 1996: 105)

wə-llāh **ma** nəḥdər mʕa-h

by-god NEG speak.IMP.F.1SG with-3SG.M

‘I swear I won’t talk with him.’

- b. With indefinite nominal objects; Tunis Arabic (Caubet 1996: 87)

<sup>23</sup> A further context in which -š is often dropped across many different varieties with bipartite negation is that of negative coordination. It seems that in most, if not all such varieties, š-dropping is optional, however.

*ma klīt ħubz*

NEG eat.PRF.1SG bread

‘I didn’t eat bread.’

- c. With indefinite pronouns; Casablanca Arabic (Adila 1996: 111)

*l-yōm ma ža ħætta ħədd*

DEF-day NEG come.PRF.3SG.M even anyone

‘No one came today.’

- d. With indefinite adverbs; Mazouna Arabic (Elhalimi 1996: 147)

*šumr-i ma nəħdər fə-l-yēr*

ever-1SG NEG speak.IMPF.1SG in-DEF-other

‘I never speak about others.’ (i.e never criticize others)

- e. With relative clause complements; Tunis Arabic (Caubet 1996: 92)

*ma fəmma ʕl-āš yži*

NEG EXS about-what come.IMPF.3SG.M

‘There’s no reason for him to come.’

In Maltese the postverbal element is similarly obligatorily absent in the context of indefinite pronouns and adverbs, but obligatorily present in the other contexts given in (30) (cf. Lucas forthcoming). In Cairo Arabic, there do not appear to be any contexts in which *-š* is obligatorily absent, though it is very frequently omitted in the context of oaths and with *šumr-* ‘never’ (Woidich 2006 ch. 6). In Levantine dialects matters are more complex, as most varieties in this region that feature bipartite negation also have the option of single preverbal negation in any context. However, it does seem to be the case that, in Jordan at least, *-š* is always dropped when negation co-occurs with *šumr-* ‘never’ (Alqassas 2015: 102).

## 4.4 Single postverbal negation

As noted in §2, a handful of widely dispersed dialects exhibit single postverbal negation with an element derived from \*šay? at least as an option for standard negation. The best known and studied of these are the dialects of historic Palestine and surrounding areas (Jordanian and Syrian Horan, southern Lebanon), in which single postverbal negation is the norm for non-perfect verbs, as illustrated in (31).

With verbs in the perfect (suffixing inflection), single postverbal negation is largely excluded and bipartite negation is the norm. See Lucas (2010) for details.<sup>24</sup>

(31) Palestinian Arabic single postverbal negation (Seeger 2009: 106)

*bišūf-lī-š*                                      *zuqm*  
 see.IMPF.3SG.M-DAT.1SG-NEG    mouth  
 ‘He doesn’t see me at all.’

In the southern Egyptian dialect of Qinā governorate described by Khalafallah (1969), the standard-negation construction seems to be single postverbal *-ši* (with an utterance-final allomorph that Kalafallah transcribes *šey*), as illustrated in (32), though a bipartite construction *ma...-ši* always seems to be an alternative (perhaps emphatic) possibility.

(32) Qinā Arabic single postverbal negation (Khalafallah 1969: 101)

*l-kalb*      *haššal-ši*                                      *l-šadma*  
 DEF-dog    reach.PRF.3SG.M-NEG    DEF-bone  
 ‘The dog didn’t reach the bone.’

A similar situation seems to obtain in at least some parts of the southern Tihāma region of Yemen (an area whose dialects generally have bipartite standard negation; Behnstedt 1985: 172–3; 2016: 348). For the dialect of the village of Ḥsī Sālīm south of Ḥōḥa, Simone-Senelle (1996: 213–4) gives several examples of single postverbal negation, as illustrated in (33), though she states for all the dialects of this region that she surveys that the bipartite construction is the “most common construction, and the most neutral from an expressive point of view” (1996: 209).

(33) Ḥsī Sālīm Arabic single postverbal negation (Simeone-Senelle 1996: 213–4)

*fāṭma*    *w-nūr*      *raḍiyū-š*                                      *ištayilū*  
 PN            and-PN    accept.PRF.3PL-NEG    work.PRF.3PL

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<sup>24</sup> The varieties described in this section are those for which we have the most detailed, relatively recently published descriptions of single postverbal negation. This is not to say that single postverbal negation does not exist in other varieties. For example, although we are not aware of this being described in the published literature, those familiar with Tunis Arabic will be aware that single postverbal negation is an option for at least some speakers of this variety in at least some contexts (Christophe Pereira, pers. comm.). Single postverbal negation is also obligatory in Maltese, but only in the context of imperatives (see Lucas forthcoming for details). It is of course also possible that single postverbal negation was once possible or obligatory in certain Arabic varieties that are no longer spoken. One such example that we know of is the variety of Omani Arabic described by Reinhardt (1894). Finally, note that a suffixed *-š* without negative meaning occurs in a range of Arabic varieties. See Lucas (2010; forthcoming) for details.

‘Fatima and Nur were not willing to work.’

## 5 Diachronic considerations

Much has been written over the past decade and a half on the origin of the *-š* negative morpheme, with monographs by Wilmsen (2014) and Diem (2014), and various articles by Lucas (2007; 2010; 2018; 2020) and Lucas & Lash (2010). Wilmsen’s idiosyncratic proposals have by now been shown to be untenable by a range of authors (Al-Jallad 2015; Pat-El 2016; Souag 2016; Lucas 2018; 2020).<sup>25</sup> In contrast, Diem’s and Lucas’s approaches share significant points of agreement: that the grammaticalization of *\*šay?* as a negator is an instance of Jespersen’s cycle (cf. Jespersen 1917; Dahl 1979; van der Auwera 2009),<sup>26</sup> and that Egypt at the end of the first millennium was the main point of origin for this grammaticalization. The key difference between the two is that Lucas (and Lash) argue for a role for contact in triggering this instance of Jespersen’s cycle, whereas Diem sees it as a purely internal change. Looking primarily at Judaeo-Arabic texts from the Cairo Genizah between the tenth and nineteenth centuries, Diem (2014) charts the gradual increase in frequency in negative clauses of reflexes of *\*šay?* in its function as a reinforcing adverb (like English *at all*) in these texts. On this basis he proposes that negative *-š* is the result of grammaticalization of *\*šay?* exclusively in this function.

Diem (2014: ch. 2) presupposes that this eminently plausible proposal (also outlined by Lucas 2007; 2009) excludes the possibility of *šī* in its older indefinite pronoun function representing an additional, parallel pathway in the grammaticalization of *-š*. He also assumes that neither of these pathways is compatible with a role for language contact as a catalyst for the grammaticalization, which he rejects in any case because of “the extremely small number of Coptic loanwords in the Arabic dialects of Egypt” (2014: 12). There is no reason to make any of these assumptions *a priori*, however. As argued at length by Lucas & Lash (2010), the proponent of a purely internal account of Jespersen’s cycle in Arabic needs to explain the geographical distribution of bipartite negation in the contemporary dialects: if the grammaticalization took place in Egypt at the end of the first

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<sup>25</sup> These include: that purely postverbal negation with *-š* predates bipartite negation with *mā...-š*; *šay* ‘thing’ derives from the indefinite determiner use of *šī*, not vice versa; and all these forms derive ultimately from the Proto-Semitic 3rd person pronouns based on *s<sup>l</sup>* (*\*[s]*).

<sup>26</sup> Jespersen’s cycle is the name given to a crosslinguistically common diachronic process whereby an original negator is joined by a newly grammaticalized form in a bipartite construction, with the original negator then typically being omitted or lost altogether, so that the new element then suffices as the sole expression of negation (see Breitbarth, Lucas & Willis 2020).





It seems likely that structures such as *ma maṣnā-š(i)* ‘we don’t have anything’ would have served as an additional bridging context for the grammaticalization of *š(i)* as a pure negator, especially in fragment answers, along the lines argued in reference to (26) above for Baghdad Arabic *mākuš*.<sup>28</sup>

## 6 Conclusion

In this article, we have sought to synthesize the scattered information that exists in the Arabic dialectological literature concerning the most notable features of negation in the different varieties of Arabic. It is hoped that the information thus collated can serve as a reference both for Arabists and typologists. Notwithstanding this aspiration, it is also quite clear from the above that there remain many unanswered questions in this domain, as regards both synchrony and diachrony, most notably concerning the precise nature and extent of apparent cases of bipartite negation in southern Mesopotamia and the Arabian Peninsula.

## Abbreviations

1, 2, 3	1st/2nd/3rd person
ACC	accusative
ACT	active
COMP	complementizer
DAT	dative
DEF	definite
DEM	demonstrative
EXS	existential
FUT	future
IMP	imperative
IMPF	imperfect
IND	indicative
INDEF	indefinite

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<sup>28</sup> For an account of the emergence of single postverbal negation in Palestinian Arabic, see Lucas (2010).

NEG	negative
MSA	Modern Standard Arabic
PASS	passive
PN	proper name
POSS	possession
PRF	perfect
PROG	progressive
PTCP	participle
REL	relative
SG	singular

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