CONDITIONALS IN MODERN STANDARD ARABIC
(with some comments on the Masirah dialect of Omani Arabic)

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1 INTRODUCTION

In Modern Standard Arabic (MSA, henceforth) the complementizer law (if) has a very specific semantic function: conditionality. Awad (1995, p.16) maintains, “the choice of a complementizer is largely predictable from and triggered by the matrix verb”. This is indirectly compatible with Chomsky’s (1992) specification of verbs’ encoding the features of agreement and tense. However, it seems that law is actually a sentential complementizer whose selection depends on the sentence as a whole as law triggers the presence of another complementizer- la- which, as a matter of fact, also requires the presence of law only when la is preposed with its focus phrase to the initial-sentence position. Both complementizers require that the verb following them be in the past tense adding to the dependency relation between the two complementizers. The features [+Cond.] and [+past] on the conditional verbs must be identified from properties of surface structure strings according to Ouhalla’s (1993) proposal of the Identification Requirement.

The paper is divided as follows. Section two highlights the structure of conditional clauses with reference to their component parts. Section three sheds some light on the function of the conditional complementizer la as a contrastive focus marker. Finally, section four outlines the interaction between tense and conditional clauses through the identification of features, coindexation and the role of agreement.

2 THE CONDITIONAL SYSTEM IN ARABIC

2.1 The components of conditional structures

Each conditional clause in MSA consists of two clauses; a subordinate clause dubbed /dʒumlat firāl a’ʃerṭ/ “the clause of the conditional verb”, which contains a dependent verb, and a main clause, dʒumlat džawab a’ʃerṭ “the clause of the conditional answer”, which includes the main verb denoting the consequences of the event indicated by the first or the dependent verb in the clause of the conditional verb. The example in (1a) below shows the component clauses of conditional structures in Arabic.

(1)
a. law anṣaf ēnas la-strah alqaḍī
   if (Comp) be fair-past. people Comp-be relieved-past the judge
   If people were fair, the judge would have been relieved.

In the example above, the string “law anṣaf ēnas” (If people were fair) represents the clause of the conditional verb whose dependent verb anṣaf (are fair) denotes the requirement of fairness (in this particular example) needed for the happening/occurrence of the main verb strah (to be relieved) in the clause of the conditional answer.

All conditional clauses start with some conditional marker like law (as in 1a), ẓinn, ẓīṯ, and/or a whole element like who, which, where and when in the clause of the conditional phrase which is followed by the clause of the conditional answer, the latter of which may or may not start off depending on the context with an additional morpheme like la in MSA and ba in the Masirah dialect of Omani Arabic. These two morphemes are represented
in sentences (1a) above and 5) below. la and similarly ba belong to what Ouhalla (1993) names al-
mu?akkidaat "the corroborative (or reinforcing) morphemes" which are used to reinforce the effect of an event.

(5)  (Masirah dialect MA; my own)

law ta- akel-Ø  zein ba-ta- kber-Ø

If (Comp) present- eat- you+2MS² well Comp- grow up- you+2MS

If you eat well, you will grow up.

As a result, ba in (5) emphasizes and reinforces the fact that the person in question will grow up if he/she
casts just in the same way that la in (1a) reinforces the fact that the judge would have been relieved if people were
fair to each other. The optionality of the occurrence of the corroborative markers is dependent on the sentences
including them. For instance, a sentence like (1a) above necessitates the occurrence of la as a sentence without it,
like (1b), will be rendered ill-formed if no la is present. This is shown below in contrast to (4) where the sentence is
exempt from the presence of la ³ as it is understood from the context even if it is absent.

(1a)  (al-Munjid dictionary)

law qumt- Ø- Ø- qumt -u

If stand up-past +2MS Comp- stand up- 1S+past

If you stood up, I would have stood up.

2.2 Summary

The conditional structure consists of two phrases, namely "the phrase of the conditional verb" and "the
phrase of the conditional answer", conditional markers/particles like law, ?inn, ?idda and/or wh-elements (who,
what, when, where,. . . ) and corroborative morphemes attaching to the verb of the subordinate clause like la in MSA
and ba in the Masirah dialect of Omani Arabic which may or may not be present as discussed above in 2.1.

3 CONDITIONAL CLAUSE AND FOCUS

Ouhalla (1993) states that in MSA, focus phrases (f-phrases) can be found either in-situ ((1a) above) or
preposed to the beginning of the sentence (the bracketed clause in (1c) below). I return to the latter point in 4.3.

(1c)  (Masirah dialect MA; my own)

law anṣaf enas strah alqadi

Comp- be relieved-past the judge Neg. become angry if (Comp) be fair-past. people The judge would have
been relieved (not would have become angry) if people were fair.

As Moutaoukil (1989) argues, f-phrases in-situ in a sentence like (1a) bear a different meaning or
"pragmatic function" when compared with its preposed counterpart in (1c) That is, f-phrases in-situ provide the
hearer with new information whereas preposed f-phrases reflect "contrastive focus" where the hearer understands
the answer as being contrasting or in conflict with existing possible information. Rizzi (1997) refers to contrastive

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1 The example numbers reflect the order in which examples appear in the appendix.
2 MS stands for Masculine Singular
3 It is unclear why a sentence like (1b) (without the corroborative morpheme la) is ungrammatical whereas (4) is
perfectly grammatical without it. This asymmetry is beyond the scope of the current work and needs future
research.

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focus phrases as being quantificational where the hearer would understand the given answer as a possible item of a set.

To be more concrete, in (1c) the response lastrah (would have been relieved) using Moutaoukil’s argument is in conflict with the understood response laaqaribeh (would have been angry). Moreover, Rizzi’s quantificational notion is understood when other alternatives like lafaribeh (would have been happy), latafarahe (would have been jobless) to count but a few, come to the hearer’s mind.

As to f-phrases in-situ, the phrase lastrah alqaçi (would have been relieved) gives new information to the hearer because it answers questions like maṣra law aŋṣaf anas? (what if people were fair?). Ouhalla notes that contrastive focus is a form of assertion (which by extension implies certainty) and hence serves as an instance of “epistemic modality”. This idea is enhanced when recalling that “al-muʔakkidaat” like la are genuinely used to reinforce or assert the effect of their following predicates.

4 CONDITIONAL CLAUSES AND TENSE

4.1 The Conditional markers: law and ?inn

An interesting observation about the conditional structures is that they interact with tense depending on the type of conditional markers they have. According to Almunjidd dictionary (1987), the conditional marker (complementizer) law in MSA requires that the verb coming after it be in the past tense, as in (4a) below. Despite the ban of the present tense of verbs after law in MSA, a reading like (4b), being marginal, might be possible in some Arabic dialect, like in the Masirah dialect of Omani Arabic.

(4) (Almunjidd dictionary)

a. law qumt- ø- ø qumt -u
   If(Comp) stand up-past +2MS Comp -stand up- 1S+past
   If you stood up, I would have stood up.

b. law te- qum- ø - aʔ- qum
   If(Comp) present- stand up-2MS Comp -present+1S - stand up
   If you stand up, I will stand up.

We could hypothesize that the tense of the following verb of the conditional complementizer law in Arabic is a matter of parameter setting in the following way.

a. Modern Standard Arabic allows only a past tense verb after the complementizer law and never a present tense one.

b. Some dialects (if not all) of Arabic allow both a past and a present tense verb after law.

A piece of evidence from MSA sustaining that the past tense is always required on the verb following the conditional complementizer law comes from the negative conditional constructions where the negative particle immediately following law has to be in the past tense (law; the negative past marker) as in (7) below.

4 There are two temporal variants of the negative marker lam= past negative marker. These are laa= present negative marker and lan= future negative marker, as shown below. The examples come from Ouhalla (1993).

a. laa y-uḥibbu Zayd-un al-qiraat-a
   NEG+PRES 3M-like(IMPERF) Zayd-NOM the reading- Acc
   “Zayd does not like reading.”

b. lan t-usaafira Zaynab-u
   NEG+FUT 3F-travel(IMPERF) Zaynab-NOM
   “Zaynab will not travel.”
4.2 Identification of features

4.2.1 Identification requirement (IR)

According to Ouhalla (1993), “the abstract features encoded in the functional heads of Structural Descriptions must be identified” (p. 284). Following this principle, structural descriptions are specified with certain abstract features, the latter of which can be viewed as commands or instructions to the performance system (Chomsky 1992). Hence, the feature [+Cond.] marks types (Cheng 1997) a given structural description as being conditional. The identification requirement checks the recoverability of underlying features from the properties of surface strings. To put it differently, the presence of the features [+Cond.] and [+past] for example, must be overtly indicated from the properties of the surface strings so that the resulting structure can be interpreted as being a conditional clause whose verb has to be in the past.

Ouhalla lists a number of mechanisms to achieve the identification of underlying features. These include phonetic, morphological and syntactic properties of sentences. For instance, the wh-morpheme can be seen as morphologically identifying the feature [+wh] associated with the wh-phrases. Similarly, the conditional marker/complementizers law and la are morphological morphemes which overtly identify the feature [+Cond.] associated with their predicates (VP) where this feature originates. Linked to the observation that the morpheme la is optional (mentioned in 1.1) is the fact that another mechanism of identifying the feature [+Cond.] is available, namely tonic accent (Ouhalla 1993, p. 284) (Brody 1990).

It was mentioned in the preceding paragraphs that the [+Cond.] and [+past] features originate in the VP which is the predicate of the conditional complementizer as represented in figure (1). The tree in a. below is analogous to Ouhalla’s (1993) treatment of the negative marker maa as shown in b.

Figure 1

a. FP refers to force phrase: specifying the clause type.  
b. (Ouhalla, 1993) maa

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5.:m: in (11a) and 2inn in (11b) are the same. I represent them differently because I use examples from different sources.
4.2.2 Role of Coindexation

Coindexation between the conditional markers (both law and la) and their predicates is very important in reflecting that they share the same features of [+Cond.] and [+past]. In other words, this feature sharing mechanism marks the Head Complement Agreement (HCA) between the complementizer and its complement.

In addition, coindexation marks the scope of both complementizers as la has a narrow scope over its predicate (f-phrase) and law has a wide scope over the whole conditional clause, given that it is law actually that types the whole clause as being conditional and not la which gets it only through a dependency relation with law.

The relation of coindexation and scope marking dates back to Baker's 1970 proposal that "the scope of an operator can be encoded in terms of coindexation with F (alias COMP), and does not necessarily require movement of the operator to Spec-FP at some (covert) level of representation" (Ouhalla 1993, p. 285).

4.3 Tense and agreement

Pending still is the question of how the past tense feature [+past] is realized on the complementizers law and la. It is true that the IR ensures the identification of the feature [+past] as discussed in 3.2.1; however, the fact that Arabic is a language of the VSO order has to be taken into consideration.

Before addressing this important issue, we need to discuss the role of agreement in conditional constructions. Ouhalla (1993) considers the tense phrase TP as being higher than AgrS. Figure (2) below is parallel to figures a. and b. in 3.2.1. In the diagram below, the verb is shown to be lexically specified for both agreement and tense features (Chomsky 1992). In order for these features to be realized at SS, the verb complex (V+ AgreementS) has to move first to the medial AgrS position and then to T under the Identification Requirement.

Figure 2 Agreement and Tense (Ouhalla 1993)
Now we turn to the issue of Arabic VSO order and its role in the identification of features. To understand this better, let’s examine the representation of the conditional sentence in (1a) below.

(1) a. **law anṣaf ənas la-strah alqaḍi**
    If people were fair (not unfair), the judge would have been relieved.

    The conditional clause in (1a) shows that verbs come immediately after the conditional markers **law** and **la**. Since Arabic is a head initial language of the order VSO, the verbs anṣaf (be fair) and strah (be relieved) have to move to the T position under TP moving along with them the features [+cond.] and [+past]. Hence, it is not the IR that triggers the movement of verb complexes but rather the VSO order of Arabic.

    A second movement of the verb strah to Fin_i is triggered by the fact that the complementizer la is a bound morpheme that requires a verbal lexical category to attach to. Coindexation is shown on every complementizer and its predicate to ensure feature sharing (Head-Complement Agreement relation). Another issue
which has been mentioned briefly in a previous section is the inter-dependency relation between the two complementizers law and la. The complementizer la in a conditional construction like the one in (1a) depends on the other complementizer (law) and vice versa. This is captured in the tree by the fact that both complementizers have the same features of [+cond.] and [+past] and that the ForceP where the complementizer law resides, is in the Spec position of Fin’ which includes the other complementizer (la). Hence, the two are bound by a Spec-Head Agreement relation which explains their dependency in addition to their sharing the same features.

The tree in figure (3) shows that ForceP can be flipped to the other side of the tree, accounting this way for the sentence “la-strah alqaḍî law anṣaf anas” as the main clause, which is an ι-phrase, as discussed in section 3, which moves to the sentence-initial position due to the postpositioning of the other half of the clause “law anṣaf anas” ⁶.

Before closing this section, we need to mention that Fin,m-commands ForceP which again backs up the dependency relation between the complementizer la and law as Force (law) receives the same head value feature of its mother ForceP through the Head Feature Principle (HFP) ⁷.

5 CONCLUSION

This paper aimed at examining the conditional construction in Modern Standard Arabic with special emphasis on the complementizers law and la, the latter of which occurs in the same construction as law. The two complementizers are always followed by past tense verbs in MSA though they can be followed by present tense verbs in some dialects. This can be seen as a parametric difference with the past tense being the basic tense and the present tense being inserted at the end of derivation by a default rule ⁸.

The analysis used relied heavily on the principle of the Identification Requirement, that the abstract features in structural descriptions must be identified from properties of surface strings. Hence, the conditional reading for a construction with law can be interpreted as encoding the feature [+Cond] as well as the feature [+past] both in VPs where they originate and the functional heads (i.e., complementizers law and la). Coincidence in what IR uses to identify these features. The Spec-Head Agreement between FinP- where the complementizer la is and the ForceP which is the mother of Force (complementizer law)- amounts to reinforcing the interdependency relation between the two complementizers as they both share the same features.

REFERENCES


⁶ The two phrases “la-strah alqaḍî” and “law anṣaf anas” are constituents as they can be answers to the following fragment questions respectively, “ma’a law anṣaf anas?” (what if people were fair?) and “mata strah alqaḍî?” (when will the judge be relieved?).

⁷ The Head Feature Principle (in the framework of the HPSG) stipulates “in any headed phrase, the Head value of the mother and the Head value of the head daughter must be identical.” (Sag, Wasaow and Bender 2002, p.88)

⁸ Many authors, including Ouhalla (1993) and Fassi Fehri (1982), maintain that the present tense is derived via a default mechanism as it results from eliminating the future tense reading (when the future modal is absent) and the past tense reading (when the perfective form of the verb is absent).


Appendix:
Affirmative conditional structures:

أَنْفِضْ فِي أَيْضَاءَ الْجَدِّ: (1)

a. law anṣaf ṣonas la-strah alqaḍi
   if (Comp) be fair-past. people Comp-be relieved-past the judge
   If people were fair, the judge would have been relieved.

*b. law anṣaf ṣonas strah alqaḍi
   if be fair-past. people be relieved-past the judge
   If people were fair, the judge would have been relieved.

c. (la-strah alqaḍi (laa lawadrba)) law anṣaf ṣonas
   Comp-be relieved-past the judge Neg. become angry if(Comp) be fair-past. people The judge would have been relieved (not would have become angry) if people were fair.

(2) لَوْ أَجْهَدْتُ لَنَجْحَتْ (my own)
   law ẓaghαhαt ṣonas
   if study hard-perf. you succeed-perf.-will
   If you studied hard, you would have succeeded.

(3) لَوْ اَنْتَ أَجْهَدْتُ لَنَجْحَتْ (my own)
   law annaka ẓaghαhαt
   if have-pres.-you study hard-perf. you succeed-perf.-will
   If you have studied hard, you would have succeeded.

9 This example comes from the web, (On-line: http://www.khayma.com/tutor-medial1/thdir-dros/m3/gwad/fl/7.htm)
(4) (al-Munjid dictionary)
a. law qumt- ø- ø- qumt -u
If(Comp) stand up-past +2MS Comp- stand up- 1S+past
If you stood up, I would have stood up.

-Sentences with present tense verbs
??(4) b. (Almunjid dictionary)
*a. law te- qum- ø- a2- qum
If(Comp) present- stand up-3MS Comp -present+1S - stand up
If you stood up, I would have stood up.

(5) (Masirah dialect MA; my own)
law ta- akel- ø zein ba-te-kber- ø
If(Comp) present- eat- you+3MS well Comp- grow up-you+3MS
If you eat well, you will grow up.

-Negative Conditionals
(6) لولم يفاضر زيد البلد لوزنه
law lam ju- ḥadir Zajdun elbrilad la-zurt-uh
If NEG+ past 3MS-leave(present) Zayd (NOM) the country-acc. visit-3MS (past)
If Zayd didn’t leave the country, I would have visited him.

-Clauses with ٌ:nn:
(7) (from my native knowledge of MSA; Conditional clause)
ٌ:nn tu- ḥakir-ø ta- ndṣeh- ø
If present-study- 3MS present -succeed- 3MS
If you study, you will succeed.

(8) (Awad 1995, p.16) (not a conditional clause)
smrīna ٌ:nnal-wlaad bil?abu ma? il-xurfaan
we heard that the children they play with the- sheep
We heard that the children are playing with the sheep.