

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 fiʃl aʃərt*/ “the clause of the conditional verb”, which contains a dependent verb, and a main clause, *dʒumlat dʒawab aʃərt* “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) لو أنصف الناس لإستراح القاضي

a. **law** anʃaf ənas la-straħ alqaði
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** anʃaf ənas” (If people were fair) represents the clause of the conditional verb whose dependent verb anʃaf (are fair) denotes the requirement of *fairness* (in this particular example) needed for the happening/occurrence of the main verb *straħ* (to be relieved) in the clause of the conditional answer.

All conditional clauses start with some conditional marker like **law** (as in 1a), *ʔinn*, *ʔiðə*, and/or a wh-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-muʔakkidaat* “the corroborative (or reinforcing) morphemes” which are used to reinforce the effect of an event.

- ¹(5) لو تاكل زين بتكبر (Masirah dialect MA; my own)
law ta- akel- \emptyset zein **ba**-tə- kbər- \emptyset
 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 eats 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.

- (1) لو أنصف الناس إستراح القاضي
 *b. **law** anṣaf ənas strah alqaḍi
 if be fair-past. people be relieved-past the judge
 If people were fair, the judge would have been relieved.

- (4) لو قمت قمت (al-Munjid dictionary)
law qumt- \emptyset - \emptyset - 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**, ʔinn , ʔiθə 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.

- (1) لإستراح القاضي لو أنصف الناس
 c. (**la**- strah alqaḍi {*laa laḅaḍiḅə*}) **law** anṣaf ənas
 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

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.

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 *laḫaḍībē* (would have been angry). Moreover, Rizzi's quantificational notion is understood when other alternatives like *lafarīḥē* (would have been happy), *latafarakē* (would have been jobless) to count but a few, come to the hearer's mind.

As to *f*-phrases *in-situ*, the phrase *lastrah alqaḍi* (would have been relieved) gives new information to the hearer because it answers questions like *maḍa law anṣaf ʿnas?* (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-muʿakkidaat" like *la* are genuinely used to reinforce or assert the effect of their following predicates.

4 CCODITIONAL CLAUSES AND TENSE

4.1 The Conditional markers: *law* and *ʔinn*

An interesting observation about the conditional structures is that they interact with tense depending on the type of conditional markers they have. According to Almunjid 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) لو قمت قمت (Almunjid dictionary)

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

??b. لو تقوم أقوم (Almunjid dictionary)

- *a. *law* tʔ- qum- ʔ- 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 (*lam*; the negative past marker)⁴ 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-qiraaʔat-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."

(7) لو لم يغادر زيد البلاد لزرته

law lam ju-ɣadir Zajdun əlbɪlad 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.

We turn now to the conditional complementizer ʔinn which means if or that depending on its context as in 8 and 9 respectively.

(8) إن تذاكر تتجح (from my native knowledge of MSA)

ʔinn tu- ɔakɪr-ø ta- ndzəħ- ø
 If present-study- 2MS present -succeed- 2MS
 If you study, you will succeed.

(9) سمعت إن الأولاد يلعبوا مع الخرفان (Awad, 1995, p.16)⁵

smɪʔna ʔinna l-wlaad bilʔabu maʔ il-xurfaan
 we heard that the children they play with the- sheep
 We heard that the children are playing with the sheep.

As the sentences in (8) and (9) illustrate, ʔinn is followed by a present tense verb contrary to what is happening in the case of *law*. In what follows, I try to account for the fact that it is always a past tense verb that follows the complementizer *law* using the Identification requirement (Ouhalla 1993).

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.

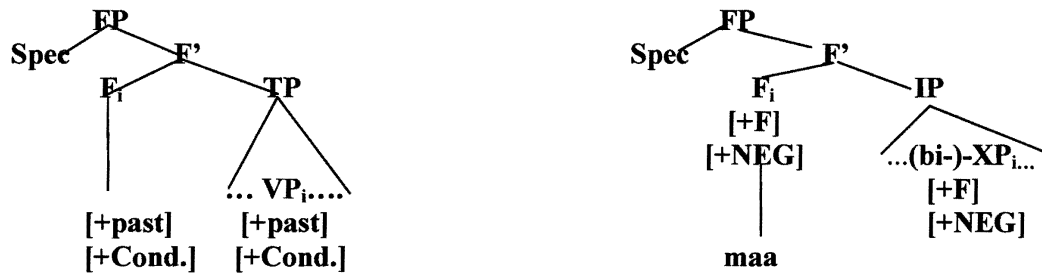
Ouhalla lists a number of mechanisms to achieve the identification of underlying features. These include phonetic, morphological and syntactic properties of sentences. For instance, the *wh*-morpheme can be seen as morphologically identifying the feature [+wh] associated with the *wh*-phrases. Similarly, 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*

⁵ ʔinn in (11a) and ʔinna 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*.

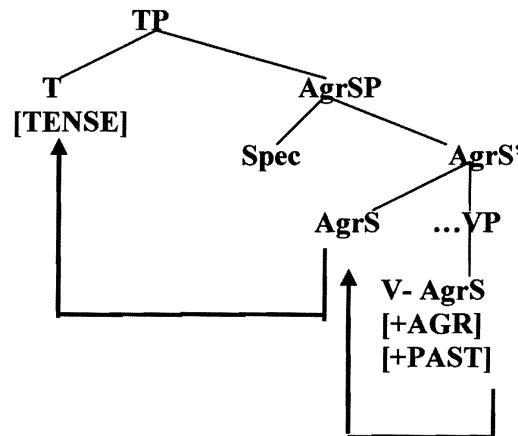
The relation of coindexation and scope marking dates back to Baker's 1970 proposal that "the scope of an operator can be encoded in terms of coindexation with F (alias COMP), and does not necessarily require movement of the operator to Spec-FP at some (covert) level of representation" (Ouhalla 1993,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

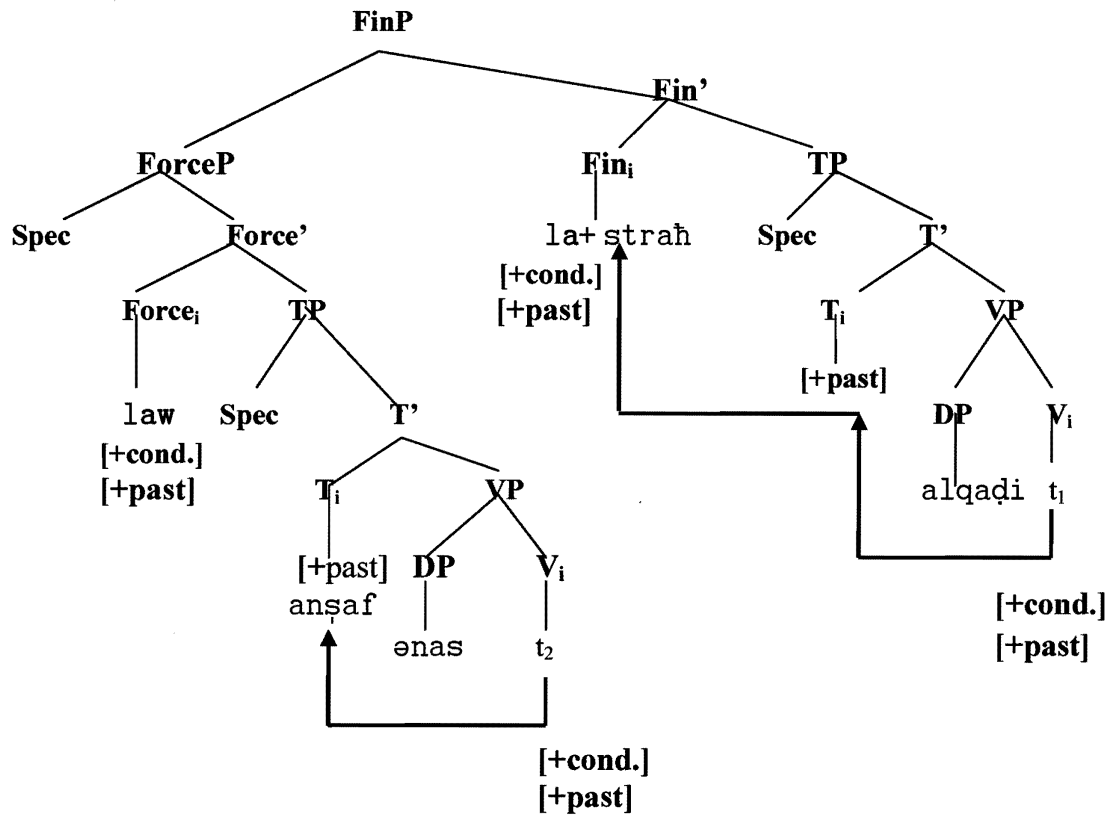


Now we turn to the issue of Arabic VSO order and its role in the identification of features. To understand this better, let's examine the representation of the conditional sentence in (1a) below.

- (1) a. *law anşaf ənas la-strah alqađi*
 if (Comp) be fair- past. people Comp-be relieved-past the judge
 If people were fair (not unfair), the judge would have been relieved.

In the tree structure below, figure (3) (using concepts from Rizzi (1997)), the main clause “*la-strah alqađi*” can be considered a finite phrase in Rizzi’s terms as it marks finiteness, because of its interaction with the past tense and it is at the bottom of the tree, whereas the embedded clause “*law anşaf ənas*” can be labeled as a force phrase ForceP because the conditional complementizer *law* is what specifies the whole clause’s type and has a wide scope- sentential- as argued before.

Figure 3 representation of conditional clauses in Arabic}.



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 *anşaf* (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**-straḥ alqaḍi **law** anṣaf ʿnas" as the main clause, which is an *f*-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 ʿnas"⁶.

Before closing this section, we need to mention that Fin_i m-commands ForceP which again backs up the dependency relation between the complementizer **la** and **law** as Force_i (**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 rule⁸.

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**). Coindexation is 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.

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⁶ The two phrases "**la**-straḥ alqaḍi" and "**law** anṣaf ʿnas" are constituents as they can be answers to the following fragment questions respectively, "maḍa **law** anṣaf ʿnas?" (what if people were fair?) and "mata straḥ alqaḍi?" (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).

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Appendix:

Affirmative conditional structures:

(1) لو أنصف الناس لإستراح القاضي⁹

a. law anşaf ʔnas la-strah alqađi
if (Comp) be fair-past. people Comp-be relieved-past the judge
If people were fair, the judge would have been relieved.

*b. law anşaf ʔnas strah alqađi
if be fair-past. people be relieved-past the judge
If people were fair, the judge would have been relieved.

c. (la- strah alqađi {laa laʔađıbe}) law anşaf ʔnas
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) لو إجتهدت لنجحت (my own)

law eđʔtahəđt lanadʔəħt
if study hard-perf. you succeed- perf.-will
If you studied hard, you would have succeeded.

(3) لو أنك إجتهدت لنجحت (my own)

law annaka eđʔtahəđt lanadʔəħt
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-medial/thdir-dros/m3/gwad/f1/7.htm>)

(4) لو قمت قمت (al-Munjid dictionary)

a. law qumt- ə- 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. لو تقوم أقوم (Almunjid dictionary)

*a. law tə- qum- ø- aʔ- qum
 If(Comp) present- stand up-3MS Comp -present+1S - stand up
 If you stood up, I would have stood up.

(5) لو تاكل زين بتكبر (Masirah dialect MA; my own)

law ta- akəl- ø zein ba-tə- kbər- ø
 if(Comp) present- eat- you+3MS well Comp- grow up-you+3MS
 If you eat well, you will grow up.

- Negative Conditionals

(6) لو لم يغادر زيد البلاد لزرته

law lam ju- ʔadīr Zajdun əlbrlad 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 ʔinn:

(7) إن تذاكر تتجح (from my native knowledge of MSA; Conditional clause)

ʔinn tu- ʔakīr-ø ta- ndʒəħ- ø
 If present-study- 3MS present -succeed- 3MS
 If you study, you will succeed.

(8) سمعنا إن الأولاد يلعبوا مع الخرفان (Awad 1995, p.16) (not a conditional clause)

smiʔna ʔinna l-wlaad bilʔabu maʔ il-xurfaan
 we heard that the children they play with the- sheep
 We heard that the children are playing with the sheep.

