

Article

An Innovative Copula in Maghrebi Arabic and Its Dialectological Repercussions: The Case of Copular *yabda*

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Abstract: Research on copulas in Arabic dialects has hitherto largely focused on the pronominal copula, and has also mostly ignored Maghrebi dialects. Drawing on published literature as well as fieldwork-based corpora, this article identifies and analyzes a hitherto undescribed verbal copula in dialects of Tunisia and northwestern Libya deriving from the verb *yabda* (“to begin”). We show that copular *yabda* occurs mostly in predicational copular sentences, with time reference including the habitual present and generic future. It takes nominal, adjectival, and locational predicate types. We also argue for broader inclusion of syntactic isoglosses in Arabic dialectology, and show how copular *yabda* crosses the traditional isogloss lines established on the basis of phonology, morphology, or lexicon, and therefore contradicts established dialect classifications such as Bedouin/sedentary or Tunisian/Libyan.

Keywords: Tunisian Arabic; Libyan Arabic; copulas; syntactic isoglosses; dialect classification



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1. Introduction

Arabic dialectology has largely focused until now on understanding the geographic distribution of varieties through socio-historical parameters. The traditional dialectological approach to the Arabic varieties of northern Africa (“Maghrebi” varieties) foregrounds a classification scheme which is organized not only along geographical lines, but one which also depends on ecological categories (“Sedentary” vs. “Bedouin”) as well as socio-historical ones (“pre-Hilali” vs. “Hilali”) (Caubet 2001; Palva 2006; Pereira 2011, 2018). While certain categories used for classifying Maghrebi Arabic varieties have recently been subject to critique from historical perspectives (Kosansky 2016 on “Judeo-Arabic”; Benkato 2019 on “Bedouin”), it has also been shown that the existing linguistic evidence does not necessarily support the utility of other categories.¹ Similarly, it can be pointed out that the existing classifications rely almost exclusively on phonological and morphological isoglosses, and to a lesser extent on lexical ones. Though neglect of morphosyntax for drawing isoglosses is typical of dialectology in general, the problem is particularly astute in Arabic dialectology in northern Africa. This is not only because morphosyntax is almost entirely ignored, but because regional variation in phonology and morphology can often be rather limited, meaning that dialect boundaries drawn on the basis of a handful of such isoglosses are not strong.

The dialectology of Maghrebi Arabic, therefore, could benefit not only from the continued interrogation of the traditional classification system but also from drawing on a broader set of data that includes previously unexamined linguistic features, particularly morphosyntactic ones. This study, by describing a syntactic feature and examining its consequences for dialectology, aims to show how such work has the potential to change the traditional map of Arabic in northern Africa. It opens by giving a brief overview of the copula in Arabic dialects (Section 2), before proceeding to the description of a hitherto unidentified copula in varieties of Tunisia and Libya (Section 3). The study then discusses

the neglect of syntax in Arabic dialectology and shows that syntactic isoglosses may conflict with isoglosses based on other linguistic features (Section 4).

2. Copulas in Arabic

Copula constructions are to be understood as constructions used to encode the identity of two participants and to express group membership, classification, location and the ascription of a range of properties to a participant and the element linking these is a copula. It is common to assume that the copula is lexically-semantically empty (Pustet 2003, p. 5) and that its main role is in semantic composition and in carrying tense/aspect (Roy 2013). The generally-accepted major types of copula construction are predicational, equative, specificational, and identificational (Higgins 1979, pp. 204–93; Mikkelsen 2011). For our purposes, an equative copula construction is one which equates the referents of the two elements besides the copula (Mikkelsen 2011, pp. 1807–8), while a predicational copula construction is one whose subject is referential and whose predicate is some non-verbal element, whether nominal, adjectival, or prepositional (Mikkelsen 2011, pp. 1808–9).

While languages vary greatly in terms of what elements provide copulas, and which constructions require overt copulas, we can state the following regarding how copula constructions in Arabic are *typically* viewed.² Predicational constructions with present reference usually use a zero copula (1–2). In Tripoli Arabic, copula constructions with zero copula describe facts and express general truths inthetic utterances, serving to present an entity, a proposal or a state of affairs that is new information.³ In such utterances, a state of being (an inherent or permanent characteristic of a being, as in the first example) or a current activity (including location, as in the second example), considered true by the speaker, is expressed.

(1)	Tripoli Arabic (Pereira corpus) ⁴		
<i>šaxšīyt-a</i>	∅		<i>dšīf-a</i>
personality-3SG.M	∅		weak-F
“His personality is weak”			

(2)	Tripoli Arabic (Pereira corpus)		
<i>šadnān</i>	∅	<i>f-əṣ-šahra</i>	<i>tawwa</i>
Adnan	∅	in-DEF-desert.F	now
“Adnan is in the desert now”			

In examples (1–2) above, the zero copula is employed in phrases in which the speaker validates the predicative relation. The zero copula thus expresses realis/indicative. Copula constructions of all types which have temporal reference to the non-present, however, require an overt copula, usually provided by a form of the verb *kān*/*ykūn* “be” (3a). Moreover, if epistemic modality is to be expressed, the overt copula *ykūn* is required (Pereira 2010, pp. 453–67): in copula constructions with *ykūn*, the predicative relation is to some extent uncertain and the construction thus expresses irrealis/potential (3b).

(3)	Tripoli Arabic (Pereira corpus)		
(a)	<i>šadnān</i>	<i>kān</i>	<i>f-əṣ-šahra</i>
	Adnan	be\PFV[3 SG.M]	in-DEF-desert
	“Adnan was in the desert”		
(b)	<i>šadnān</i>	<i>y-kūn</i>	<i>f-əṣ-šahra</i>
	Adnan	3M-be\IPFV	in-DEF-desert
	“Adnan may be in the desert”		

To explicitly situate the copula construction in the future, the preverb *hā-* precedes the verb *ykūn* (Benmofteh and Pereira 2019). In the following example (4), we can compare the use of the zero copula with a generic present reference and the verb *ykūn* with a future reference.

(4)		Tripoli Arabic (Pereira corpus)				
<i>ḡudwa</i>	∅	<i>yōm</i>	<i>ḡdīd:</i>	<i>ḡā-y-kūn</i>	<i>kull-a</i>	
tomorrow	∅	day	new	FUT-3M- be\IPFV	every- 3SG.M	
<i>našāṭ</i>	<i>u</i>	<i>bidāy-a</i>	<i>ḡdīd-a,</i>	<i>ya</i>	<i>ṛabb!</i>	
energy	and	beginning-F	new-F	VOC	Lord	

“Tomorrow is a new day: everything will be energy and a new beginning, oh Lord!”

Moreover, many dialects make use of copula forms in addition to the zero copula and *kān/ykūn* copula. For example, in some dialects, such as those in Egypt or Lebanon, present-tense equative constructions in which the complement is a definite noun phrase optionally use a copula based on the 3rd-person independent pronoun (Choueiri 2016) (example 5). Peripheral Arabic dialects go farther and employ the full range of the independent personal pronouns in these constructions (Akkuş 2018, pp. 459–62)

(5)		Lebanese Arabic (Choueiri 2016, p. 102)		
<i>Sami</i>	<i>huwwe</i>	<i>mudīr</i>	<i>l-madras-e</i>	
Sami	COP\3SG.M	director	DEF-school-F	

“Sami is the director of the school”

It is worth pointing out that essentially all literature on the copula in Arabic, theoretical or descriptive, has been devoted to either the “typical” copula situation or to the pronominal copula.⁵ Other types of copulas in Arabic dialects, especially ones which derive from verbs, have hardly been described. Only very recently have scholars begun to address the existence of other copulas, in particular the use of *ḡāʿīd*, formally the active participle of “to sit/to stay”, as a present-tense predicational copula in varieties such as Maltese and others (Camilleri and Sadler 2019, 2020) (example 6).

(6)		Maltese (Camilleri and Sadler 2019, p. 10)	
<i>omm-i</i>	<i>qiegħd-a</i>	<i>d-dar</i>	
mother-1SG	COP\PTCP.ACT-F	DEF-house.F	

“My mother is at home”

Here, we describe for the first time the existence of an additional copula occurring in Arabic varieties of Tunisia and northwest Libya. This copula, supplied by the verb *yabda* (lexically “to begin”) occurs in certain types of predicational constructions. In Section 3, we will analyze copular *yabda* on the basis of representative examples from the well-documented varieties of Tunis (northern Tunisia), Douz (southern Tunisia), and Tripoli (northwest Libya). Since the goal of our study is dialectological in nature, deeper discussion of the grammaticalization path undergone by *yabda* to become a copula will be left aside, and we will concentrate on describing and comparing its function in these three dialects.⁶ The geographical range of copular *yabda* and its importance for dialectology will then be discussed in Section 4.

3. Copular *yabda* in Maghrebi Dialects

A copular element consisting of the verb *yabda* in the imperfective conjugation occurs in predicational constructions, mainly those where an overt copula is required. Copular *yabda* mainly occurs in narrative or descriptive contexts to refer to a habitual action, event, or description. It can also be used to refer to a present state and to describe an event which is happening at the moment of speech. Moreover, *yabda* can have a future value. Finally, it is used in addition to *ykūn* as the auxiliary of the future perfect. So far as we can tell, *yabda* never has a past reference, that is, in the perfective conjugation it is used only as a lexical verb and not as a copula. From a modal point of view, copular *yabda* seems to be used, as opposed to *ykūn*, when the speaker considers the states and the situations to be true or when the speaker believes that the content of the interrogative sentence can be validated by the interlocutor.

While the dialects under discussion all have parallels in the syntax of *yabda*, it should be noted that the phonological or morphological particularities of each dialect do apply

to copular *yabda*, without affecting its meaning. For example, the variety of Douz marks gender in the plural verb while that of Tripoli does not; hence Douz has both a 3PL.M *yabdu* and a 3PL.F *yabdan* while Tripoli has only 3PL *yabdu*. Or, the morphophonology of the 3PL may differ: *yabdāw* in Tunis but *yabdu* in Tripoli.

3.1. Habitual Present

In the majority of our examples, copular *yabda* indicates the usual occurrence of a state or situation. In all the following utterances, copular *yabda* has a habitual present value. It can also be used to express a general truth. It appears in main clauses as well as temporal clauses and can occur with adjectival, nominal, or locational predicates.⁷

3.1.1. Adjectival Predicate

The predicate can be adjectival (including passive participles). In the following examples, *yabda* refers to actions or events that take place habitually: indeed, in the first example, it describes an event that takes place every year because of the change of seasons; in the second one, every time a meat dish is cooked according to a particular method; finally, in the third example, every time the family gets together.

(7)		Tripoli (Pereira 2010, p. 361) ⁸		
<i>f-faʃl</i>	<i>ər-rbīʃ</i>	<i>ta-bda</i>	<i>d-dənya</i>	<i>xadʒa</i>
in-season	DEF-spring	3F-COP\IPFV	DEF-world.F	green.F
“In spring (i.e., every spring), nature is green”				

(8)		Tripoli (Pereira corpus)		
<i>u</i>	<i>ya-bda</i>	<i>l-lham</i>	<i>hādākāy</i>	<i>mawʒūd</i>
and	3M-COP\IPFV	DEF-meat	DEM.DIST.M	exist\PTCP.PASS.SG.M
<i>f-əs-sīlvər</i>	<i>u</i>	<i>y-flawwaḥ</i>	<i>f-ūʃt</i>	<i>əl-ḥufʔ-a</i>
in-DEF-	and	3M-be_thrown	in-middle	DEF-hole-F
aluminum				
“And (each time you cook it) that meat is present in the aluminum foil and is thrown into the middle of the hole”				

(9)		Tripoli (Pereira corpus)			
<i>u</i>	<i>ʔabʃan</i>	<i>ta-bda</i>	<i>l-ʃəl-a</i>	<i>malmūm-a</i>	
and	of_course	3F-COP\IPFV	DEF-family-F	gather\PTCP.PASS-F	
<i>u</i>	<i>na-bd-u</i>	<i>n-hadʔrz-u</i>	<i>fi</i>	<i>m^awādīʃ</i>	<i>ʃāmm-a</i>
and	1-begin\IPFV-PL	1-talk\IPFV-PL	in	topic\PL	general-F
<i>u</i>	<i>m^awādīʃ</i>	<i>t-xuʃʃ</i>	<i>əl-ʃəl-a</i>	<i>u</i>	<i>kāda</i>
and	topic\PL	3F-concern\IPFV	DEF-family-F	and	so
“And of course (each time we go to my grandfather’s house) the family is reunited and we begin to talk about general topics and topics concerning the family and so forth”					

It is also the case in Tunis Arabic where *yabda* allows the expression of habitual facts. Without *yabda*, examples (10–11) would have an actual present meaning.⁹

(10)		Tunis (Singer 1984, p. 317)	
<i>el-farʃ</i>	<i>yə-bda</i>	<i>ʃāli</i>	<i>ʃa-l-aʔd</i>
DEF-bed	3M-COP\IPFV	high	above-DEF-ground.F
“The bed is high above the ground”			

(11)		Tunis (Singer 1984, p. 317)	
<i>tə-bda</i>	<i>d-dənya</i>	<i>bard-a</i>	
3F-COP\IPFV	DEF-world.F	cold-F	
“Nature (i.e., the weather) is cold”			

Copular *yabda* also appears in temporal clauses with a habitual present value. The conjunctions (*lamma*, *kīf* and *kī*) refer not to a single, but rather to the habitual, occurrence of an event. The three representative dialects agree in this usage.

- (12) Tripoli (Pereira corpus)
allāh *lamma* *ya-bda* *xrayyəf* *kif*
 god when 3M-COP\IPFV lamb\DIM just
madbūh *allāh*
 slaughter\PTCP.PASS.SG.M god
 “Oh god (i.e., what a delight) when a lamb is just slaughtered!”
- (13) Tripoli (Pereira corpus)
lamma *l-bāb* *ya-bda* *hākki* *abyaḍ* *w* *ʿalē-ha*
 when DEF-door 3M- COP\IPFV so white on-3SG.F and
l-alwān *hādu* *maʿnā-ha* *ṣāḥəb* *əl-ḥōš* *māši* *l-əl-ḥažž*
 DEF- DEM.PROX. meaning- owner DEF-house go\PTCP. to-DEF-
 color\PL PL, 3SG.F ACT.SG.M pilgrimage
 “When the door is like this white and (with) these colors on it, it means that the owner has gone to the pilgrimage”
- (14) Douz (Ritt-Benmimoun 2014, pp. 67, 195)
tawwin *ya-bd-an* *f-əblāš-a* *mā-ḥi-š* *milēh-a*
 when 3-COP\IPFV-PL.F in-place-F NEG-3SG.F- good-F
 NEG
 “When they are in a place which isn’t good”
- (15) Douz (Ritt-Benmimoun 2014, p. 203)
iš-šgīr *kī* *ya-bda* *māzāl* *šgīr* *māzāl*
 DEF-small when 3M- COP\IPFV still small still
kī *tkawwan* *y-tīh*
 just develop\pfv[3SG.M] 3M- fall\IPFV
 “When the child (lit. small one) is still small, still just developed, it is miscarried (lit. falls)”
- (16) Douz (Ritt-Benmimoun 2014, p. 203)
ʿanəz *kī* *ta-bda* *simḥ-a* *y-dīr-u* *fā-ha*
 goat.F when 3F- COP\IPFV pretty-F 3-do\IPFV-PL in-
 3SG.F
kammūn *aswad*
 cumin black
 “When a goat is pretty, they put black cumin on it”
- (17) Tunis (Singer 1984, p. 317)
el-kār *kif* *tə-bda* *məlyān-a* *ma-ʿād-š*
 DEF-bus.F when 3F- COP\IPFV full-F no_longer
t-āqef *bəlkull*
 3F-stop\IPFV at_all
 “When the bus is full, it no longer stops at all”

3.1.2. Nominal Predicate

The predicate can also be a nominal phrase and copular *yabda* allows to provide a comment on an event or a fact as they habitually occur.

(18) Douz (Ritt-Benmimoun 2014, p. 189)
amma kif ya-bda ʕām xēr, il-filā tu-kriuf-ha
 but when 3M-COP\IPFV year good DEF-plain 3F-
b-xašəm-ha in-nāg-a walla ž-žimal
 by-nose-DEF-camel-F or DEF-camel 3SG.F
 “But when it is a good year, the male or female camel sniffs the plain with its nose”

(19) Tripoli (Pereira 2010, p. 302)
hūwa ya-bda wāzīr w əl-buwwāb ʔmtāʕ-ah
 3SG.M 3F-COP\IPFV minister and DEF-doorman of-3SG.M
y-gaʕmz-u f-wagʔt lə-ğde yə-tğədd-u mʔ ʕābaʕd-hum
 3-sit\IPFV-PL in-time DEF-lunch 3-eat_lunch\IPFV-PL together-3PL
 “He is a minister, and his doorman, they sit at lunchtime and eat lunch together”

(20) Tripoli (Marwa Benshenshin, p.c.)
marṛāt ta-rzaʕ bə-ğğār u ta-bda
 sometimes 3F-return\IPFV by-small\PL and 3F-COP\IPFV
hādi l-muškil-a lə-kbīr-a t-tāny-a
 DEM.PROX.F DEF-problem-F DEF-big.F DEF-second-F
 “Sometimes she (viz. a divorced woman) is back with children and this is the other big problem”

In the following utterance, contrary to the previous examples, copular *yabda* is used in Tunis Arabic in an equative construction.

(21) Tunis (Sellami corpus)
fi š-šmāl əl-məsfūf yə-bda kisiksi žwayyəd abyad
 in DEF-north DEF-masfūf 3M-COP\IPFV couscous fine white
 “In the north, masfūf is fine white couscous”

This example shows that *yabda* is required because there is a semantic constraint, in this case the circumstantial *fi š-šmāl* “in the north”, which limits the applicability of the claim about what *masfūf* is to a particular region. Otherwise, the equative construction with no overt copula would be used: *əl-məsfūf Ø kisiksi* “*masfūf* (is) couscous”.

3.1.3. Locational Predication

Locational predication can also be expressed with copular *yabda*. In this case, the copula complement consists of a prepositional phrase or a locational adverb. The locational predication can have a habitual value (22–23).

(22) Tripoli (Pereira corpus)
l-ḥarār-a mā-t-žī-šši mən žīh-a wāḥd-a,
 DEF-heat-F NEG-3F-come\IPFV-NEG.3SG.M from direction-F one-F
ta-bda mən žamiʕ əl-žīh-āt
 3F-COP\IPFV from totality DEF-direction-PL.F
 “(Each time you cook it) the heat doesn’t come (to the meat) from one direction, it is from all directions”.

(23) Douz (Ritt-Benmimoun 2014, p. 117)
il-liḥ-a ta-bda fi huḥ-a lōṭa bārd-a
 DEF-viper-F 3F-COP\IPFV in hole-F below cold-F
 “The viper is in a cold hole below”

In the following example from Tunis, copular *yabda* expresses locational predication in a temporal clause.

(24)	Tunis (Singer 1984, p. 317)			
<i>kullma</i>	<i>yə-bda</i>	<i>f-ə-d-dār</i>	<i>i-walli</i>	
every_time	3M-COP\IPFV	in-DEF-house.F	3M-return\IPFV	
<i>i-šārek</i>	<i>fī</i>	<i>mart-u</i>		
3M-argue\IPFV	in	wife-3SG.M		
“Every time he is at home, he keeps criticizing his wife”.				

3.2. Future

Depending on the context, copular *yabda* situates an event or a state in the future, whether it is a question about location or state or a wish or hope about a situation. The three representative dialects agree in this usage.

(25)	Tripoli (Pereira corpus)			
<i>amta?</i>	<i>lamma</i>	<i>na-bd-u</i>	<i>ʕ^ale</i>	<i>ʕ^akākīz?</i>
when	when	1-COP\IPFV-PL	on	cane\PL
“When? When we will be on (i.e., walking with) canes?”				
(26)	Tunis (Singer 1984, p. 317)			
<i>fīn</i>		<i>tə-bda</i>	<i>ʕand</i>	<i>l-ūwəl?</i>
where		2-COP\IPFV	at	DEF-one
“Where will you be at noon?”				
(27)	Tunis (Sellami corpus)			
<i>škūn</i>		<i>yə-bda</i>	<i>hūni</i>	<i>fī</i>
who		3M-COP\IPFV	here	in
“Who will be here in August?”				
(28)	Douz (Ritt-Benmimoun 2014, p. 401)			
<i>šālla</i>	<i>ta-bda</i>	<i>hḏā-na</i>	<i>w</i>	<i>taww</i>
God_willing	2-COP\IPFV	near-1PL	and	FUT
<i>ti-tfarḡaž</i>				<i>taww</i>
<i>ta-šbaḥ</i>				FUT
2-see\IPFV				
“God-willing you will be near us and you will watch, you will see”				

3.3. Future Perfect

Finally, followed by a verb in the perfective, *yabda* is also used as the auxiliary verb of the future perfect, indicating a state or situation that is expected or planned to occur in the future. Here, however, *yabda* and *ykūn* can both be used with a variation in meaning that requires further study. This usage only exists in two of the representative dialects: Tripoli and Tunis.

(29)	Tripoli (Pereira corpus)			
<i>na-bd-u</i>	<i>mšē-na</i>	<i>l-ḥōš</i>	<i>žədd-i</i>	<i>matalan</i>
1-COP\IPFV-PL	go\PFV-1PL	to-house	grandfather-1SG	for_example
<i>u</i>	<i>malmūm-īn</i>	<i>m^aʕa-baʕḏ</i>	<i>fa</i>	<i>n-ākl-u</i>
and	gather\PTCP.PASS-PL.M	together so	1-eat\IPFV-PL	<i>m^aʕābaʕḏ</i>
			together	<i>bāzīn</i>
“We will have gone to my grandfather’s house, for example, so gathered together we eat bazin together”				

(30)				Tripoli (Pereira corpus)		
<i>ʕādatan</i>	<i>maʕa</i>	<i>s-sāʕa</i>	<i>tnīn</i>	<i>n-kūn-u</i>	<i>ʕawwəh-na</i>	<i>mən</i>
normally	with	DEF-hour	two	1- be\IPFV- 1PL	return\PFV- 1PL	from
<i>əṣ-ʕle</i>	<i>maʕnā-ha</i>	<i>maʕa</i>	<i>t-tlāta</i>	<i>u</i>	<i>ʕubəʕ</i>	<i>n-kūn-u</i>
DEF- prayer	meaning- 3SG.F	with	DEF-three	and	quarter	1- be\IPFV- 1PL

kəmməl-na
finish\PFV-1PL
“Normally around 2 pm we will have returned home from prayer, so around 3:15 pm we will have finished (eating lunch)”.

(31)				Tunis (Sellami corpus)		
<i>lā</i>	21	<i>mā-n- nəžžəm-š</i>	<i>bāš</i>	<i>nə-bda</i>		<i>rawwəh-t</i>
no	21	NEG-1- be_able\IPFV- NEG	FUT	1-COP\IPFV		return\PFV- 1SG

“On the 21st I can’t I will have gone back home”.

(32)				Tunis (Sellami corpus)		
<i>ʕhāb-ək</i>	<i>l-qdom</i>		<i>l-koll</i>	<i>y-kūn-u</i>	<i>ʕarrs-u</i>	<i>w</i>
friend\PL- 2SG	DEF-old\PL		DEF-all	3-be\IPFV- PL	marry\PFV- 3PL	and
<i>ənti</i>	<i>lā</i>					
2SG.F	no					

“All of your old friends will have gotten married but not you”.

In Douz neither *yabda* nor *ykūn* can be used for the future perfect, but instead *ywalli* (lexically “to become”) is used.

(33)				Douz (Ritt-Benmimoun, p.c.)		
<i>n-walli</i>		<i>rawwəh-t</i>	<i>min</i>		<i>il-qrāya</i>	
1-become\IPFV		return\PFV-1SG	from		DEF-study	

“I will have returned home from school”.

In Tripoli, the use of *yabda* or *ykūn* for the future perfect seems to break down along the following lines: *yabda* is used when the speaker considers the future state or situation as certain to occur, while *ykūn* in contrast allows for the addition of modality, expressing a supposition or a fictional or probable hypothesis. This aligns, in fact, with the use of *ykūn* for expressing epistemic modality in the present (Pereira 2010, pp. 453–67).

(34)				Tripoli (Pereira 2010, p. 460)		
(a)	<i>y-kūn</i>		<i>bne</i>		<i>hōš-a</i>	
	3M-be\IPFV		build\PFV[3SG.M]		house-3SG.M	
	“He will have built his house” ¹⁰					
(b)	<i>mumkən</i>	<i>y-kūn</i>	<i>bne</i>		<i>hōš-a</i>	<i>tawwa</i>
	maybe	3M-be\IPFV	build\PFV[3SG.M]		house-3SG.M	now
	“He may have built his house now”					

The distinction between *yabda* or *ykūn* seems to be similar in Tunis as well, though this requires further study.

4. Copular *yabda* as Isogloss and the Problem of Syntactic Isoglosses

As shown in the preceding section, copular *yabda* exists in both “northern” and “southern” Tunisian varieties, as typified for this study by the areas of Tunis and Douz, respectively. More generally, according to Tunisian colleagues and colleagues working on other Tunisian varieties, it can be considered a pan-Tunisian feature.¹¹ In Libya, the

only location where copular *yabda* has been documented is Tripoli, though it would be unsurprising if other varieties of northwestern Libya, about which there is little published, also had the feature. The total geographic extent of copular *yabda* is not yet known; but it does not exist in Benghazi or eastern Libyan varieties generally, and there is essentially no documentation of eastern Algerian varieties available for comparison. It is unknown in areas of central coastal Algeria, such as Algiers or Dellys, however.¹² According to the existing information, therefore, it is a shared feature of the varieties of Tunisia and Tripoli (see Table 1).¹³

Table 1. Domains of copular *yabda*.

Dialect	Habitual Present	Future	Fut. Perf.
Tunis	Yes	Yes	Yes (<i>yabda/ykūn</i>)
Douz	Yes	Yes	No
Tripoli	Yes	Yes	Yes (<i>yabda/ykūn</i>)

That these dialects share a linguistic feature, in particular an innovation, is unexpected given the categories and isoglosses typically used in Arabic dialectology. Copular *yabda* crosses not only national boundaries (Tunisia/Libya) but also the pseudo-typological ones most prominent in Arabic dialectology, in particular the categories of “pre-Hilali/Hilali” or “sedentary/Bedouin”. Besides the fact that these categories are outdated and problematic from a socio-historical point of view, it must also be pointed out that the collection of features on which they are based almost never includes syntactic features. In Arabic dialectology, syntax plays very little role in discussion of dialect classification. For example in a recent handbook, the authors note that “syntax will, and we do not constitute an exception in so doing, only be taken into account in a restricted manner, although in this area too significant differences between dialects are present” (Behnstedt and Woidich 2005, p. 68). More generally, recent large projects of regional dialectology, such as the *Wortatlas der arabischen Dialekte* (Behnstedt and Woidich 2011–2021), include phonology, morphology, and lexicon, but not syntax. Even the most recent overviews of Maghrebi dialects (e.g., Aguadé 2018) do not treat syntax. Syntax has received slightly more attention from sociolinguists and contact linguists, but is typically not used as the basis for regionally-organized dialect groupings nor has it been studied as part of intra-dialect variation in ways comparable to phonology or morphology.¹⁴

Syntax seems to be neglected in dialectology in general regardless of language. Even recently, scholars have gone as far as stating that “there is no doubt that syntax has been the most neglected linguistic subsystem in classical dialectology” (Berger et al. 2012, p. 93). On one hand, this goes back to the fact that traditional dialectological methods, such as the word list and questionnaires, can be unsuitable for describing syntax; on the other, syntax does not necessarily fit the diachronic documentation goal of traditional dialectology, which concentrated on phonological and lexical criteria (Glaser 1996; Werlen 1994). However, this state of affairs has changed quite significantly in certain fields, such as Germanic and Romance dialectology (Kortmann 2010; Berger et al. 2012; Glaser 2013).

Arabic dialectology has largely shared the traditional dialectological emphasis on uncovering archaisms, partially due to its goal of answering questions about the historical origin of Arabic dialects. As with other languages, Arabic dialect groupings have been made primarily on the basis of phonological, morphological, and lexical isoglosses.¹⁵ For example, of the 73 isoglosses used by De Jong (2000, pp. 39–48) to group the Arabic dialects of the Sinai peninsula, only 4 can potentially be characterized as (morpho-)syntactic. Meanwhile, some of these traditional non-syntactic isoglosses may not withstand scrutiny: Embarki (2008) argues, for example, that some of the isoglosses traditionally considered to be strong markers of dialect type, such as the interdental consonants, exhibit too much variation within a single dialect to really be useful discriminants (and see again Guerrero, forthcoming).

This being the case, attention to syntax as part of dialectology has the potential to complexify and even complicate the typical dialect groupings. Indeed, it has been noted that syntactic isoglosses often cross and contradict the established isoglosses based on phonology or lexicon (Poletto 2013). As Glaser (2013, p. 204) puts it, “that geographically conditioned syntactic variation indisputably exists does not entail, however, that the distribution of syntactic variants is identical to the distribution of phonological or lexical variants”. For the Arabic varieties under discussion here, this crossing and contradiction can easily be illustrated with a quick look at only a few isoglosses (Table 2).

Table 2. Selected Isoglosses in Tunis, Douz, Tripoli Arabic varieties.

Feature	Tunis	Douz	Tripoli
1. q	q	g	g
2. Interdentals	yes	yes	no
3. Final -ā	-ā	-ē	-ē
4. Gender in PL	no	yes	no
5. 3SG.M suffix	-u	-a	-a
6. “do”	yaʕmal	ydir	ydir
7. “want”	yhabb	ydawwir	yabbi
8. “a lot”	barša	yāsər	hālba
9. COP <i>yabda</i>	yes	yes	yes

The above table considers three phonological, two morphological, three lexical, and one syntactic variable. Each of these categories yields different isogloss lines: in some cases Douz and Tripoli agree (nos. 1, 3, 5, 6), in other cases Tunis and Douz agree (no. 2). An isogloss grouping Tunis and Tripoli can even be found, namely the lack of gender marking on plural verbs (no. 4). Of course, many of these features are shared with dialects beyond these three and so only serve to connect two of the three with each other, but not to separate them out from surrounding dialects. Copular *yabda* not only is an isogloss connecting Tunis, Douz, and Tripoli, but also one which separates them out from other Maghrebi dialects.

This raises the question of how much weight a syntactic isogloss should have as part of a group of multiple different isoglosses. While phonological and lexical isoglosses are typically more valued by dialectologists, and more frequently available in the published literature, Chambers and Trudgill (2004, pp. 96–100) note that there is evidence that “grammatical variables stratify speech communities much more sharply than do phonological and lexical variables”, suggesting that regions delimited by grammatical isoglosses will be more strongly regarded as different dialect areas than regions separated by mostly phonological and lexical ones.¹⁶ Moreover, there seems to be agreement that grammatical isoglosses delimit larger areas than phonological or lexical ones. In this regard, one would think that copular *yabda* and other syntactic isoglosses should actually have a fair amount of weight when it comes to drawing up-to-date subgroups of Maghrebi Arabic.

Proponents of the traditional dialectological view might note that *yabda* is relatively new in the history of the Arabic varieties in question and that, as an innovation, only represents the spread of a particular feature in very recent history and therefore does not affect the traditional classification. But we would counter that copular *yabda* is not necessarily all that new, as it is already attested in Tripoli at the end of the 19th century.¹⁷ Moreover, an innovative feature that is well-attested in a fairly significant region should be the concern of dialectologists and future research should attempt to account for its history and present distribution. For example, did copular *yabda* jump between urban areas, slowly spreading into the rural areas between them? Or did it radiate out from a particular area where it was first innovated? Why has it, seemingly, not been accompanied by the spread of non-syntactic features?

If we are dealing with the spread of a syntactic innovation in the Arabic varieties of a particular region, then we indeed have to think less about the traditional classifications, which attempt to explain how the distribution of Arabic may have looked centuries ago, and more about processes of inter-dialectal contact and diffusion. And it is here that copular *yabda* may also make a contribution, since studies of inter-dialectal contact in Arabic have typically focused on what happens when different dialects come into contact in urban environments, rather than looking at the diffusion of a feature over a large region. These studies also typically focus on phonological and morphological variables, rather than syntactic ones. Meanwhile, general studies of convergence do typically focus on morpho-syntax, though in most cases they deal with totally different *languages* rather than different *varieties* of a language. Copular *yabda* may represent a case of a syntactic innovation being spread through dialect contact over a large region, giving rise to a dialectal version of a “linguistic area”, that is, the “outcome of diffusion of structural ‘patterns’ across language boundaries” (Matras 2011, p. 146). In that case, it may be one example of area formation in Arabic dialects, and indeed one that does not follow national boundaries but instead crosses them. And again here, syntax is important, since, as is clear from Table 2 above, the diffusion of copular *yabda* seems, so far as can be seen, not to have been accompanied by the diffusion of other linguistic features. It thus speaks to interaction *between* Maghrebi dialects that can not be seen simply by looking at areas like phonology or lexicon. Future research should therefore look to morphosyntax in search of other features which (unexpectedly) link Tunisia and northwest Libya, or characterize other dialect areas in general.

5. Conclusions

In this study, we have attempted to describe the occurrence of a verbal copula in certain types of predicational, and less frequently equative, constructions in dialects of Tunisia and northwest Libya. This copula is provided by the verb *yabda*, lexically meaning “to begin”, and occurs in predicational constructions which require an overt copula, both in the present and future, including constructions with temporal or modal implication. This can be illustrated succinctly with a final example, taken from social media, where the generic predicational construction with zero copula (35a) contrasts with the temporal construction requiring an overt copula (35b) which is supplied with a form of *yabda*.

(35)		Tunis Arabic		
(a)	<i>umm-ək</i>	∅	<i>tūnsīy-a</i>	
	mother-2SG	∅	Tunisian-F	
	“Your mother is Tunisian”			
(b)	<i>kī</i>	<i>ta-bda</i>	<i>umm-ək</i>	<i>tūnsīy-a</i>
	when	3F-COP\IPFV	mother-2SG	Tunisian-F
	“When your mother is Tunisian...”			

Importantly, however, the *yabda* copula is attested in a number of dialects, including three dialects—Tunis, Douz, and Tripoli—which are not closely linked in the traditional dialectological classifications. As a syntactic isogloss, *yabda* crosses the isoglosses drawn from other linguistic levels, ignoring national and typological boundaries, exhibiting behavior seen in syntactic isoglosses more generally. While our study has only been able to use currently existing material to suggest what the rough area contained by the *yabda* isogloss may be, additional data from locales in between these three representative locations may be able to help us define that area more precisely, and, in addition, potentially show if there are transitional areas as well. More importantly, copular *yabda* requires explanations that do not draw on the traditional historical classifications for Arabic dialects, but look to diffusion, area formation, and above all contact. We suggest that syntactic features should play a larger role in Arabic dialectology, and including more of them in the lists of isoglosses drawn on for classification has the potential to complexify and even reshape our understanding of the distribution of Arabic dialects and the processes which continue to shape them.

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Notes

- 1 For example, [Taine-Cheikh \(2017\)](#) argues that linguistic criteria do not necessarily support the existence or utility of the subdivision of “Bedouin” into “Hilali”, “Sulaymi”, and “Ma’qil” subgroups. [Guerrero \(forthcoming\)](#) argues that one of the traditional isoglosses separating sedentary/bedouin or pre-Hilali/Hilali dialects, the presence or absence of the interdental consonants (t̪, d̪, ɖ̪), is not well-founded. In addition, the applicability and characteristics of the category of “village” or “rural” dialects has continued to provoke discussion ([Mion 2015](#); [Guerrero 2018](#)).
- 2 Linguistic examples in this paper are drawn from the published literature as indicated. We have supplemented these with unpublished examples kindly provided by Zeineb Sellami from their personal corpus of Tunisian Arabic (these are marked ‘Sellami corpus’) and with examples drawn from the personal corpus of Christophe Pereira (marked ‘Pereira corpus’). In addition, the TUNICO corpus, representing the Tunis area, includes a number of examples of copular *yabda* which can be viewed at the following address: https://tunico.acdh.oeaw.ac.at/corpus.html?query=*ibd*&startRecord=51 (accessed on 21 October 2021). For published examples we use the published transcription with modifications to diacritics and segmentation for glossing as needed.
- 3 As opposed, for instance, to utterances where the pragmatic marker *rā* is used to focus the predicate or the entire predicative relation ([Caron et al. 2015](#), pp. 105–7), such as *šaxšīy-t-a rā-hi dšīf-a* “his personality, it really is weak” and *šadnān rā-hu f-əṣ-šahra* “Adnan, he is indeed in the desert”.
- 4 The syntax of glosses is largely inspired by the *Moroccan and Libyan Arabic list of glosses* developed by Dominique Caubet, Ángeles Vicente, Alexandrine Barontini, and Christophe Pereira for the CorpAfroAs project. This list of glosses can be viewed at the following address: http://corpafroas.tge-adonis.fr/fichiers/Moroccan_Libyan_Arabic_Glosses_final.pdf (accessed on 21 October 2021).
- 5 Such as ([Aoun et al. 2010](#), pp. 35–44; [Alharbi 2017](#); [Alotaibi 2018](#), and many others).
- 6 The grammaticalization of “begin” into a copula seems unusual, and is not mentioned in the typological literature on grammaticalization or non-verbal predication (e.g., [Heine and Kuteva 2002](#); [Hengenveld 1992](#); [Pustet 2003](#)).
- 7 The copular forms of *yabda* will be glossed as COP rather than etymologically as “begin” in order to avoid confusion with the lexical usage of *yabda*.
- 8 Example 7 can be considered as a general truth and this precisely is why the use of *yabda* is required. To express a change taking place, the verb *ywəlli* “become” would have to be employed.
- 9 [Singer \(1984, p. 317\)](#) provides an additional number of examples which confirm the use of *yabda* with adjective predicates, but which are hard to discuss because they do not include any context besides the copula and predicate. His translations (e.g., *təbda rīda* “sie ist breit” or *yibdaw fārḥin* “sie sind froh”) suggest that *yibda* is to be understood as a normal present copula, but this is not the case as far as we can tell. In contrast, it should be noted that the examples from ([Ritt-Benmimoun 2014](#)) are based on her published text corpus ([Ritt-Benmimoun 2011](#)), and the context can always be checked.
- 10 Note that this sentence also means “he has built his house” in Tripoli Arabic. The use of *yabda* instead of *ykūn* avoids confusion since *yabda* + suffixed conjugation only expresses the future perfect.
- 11 Zeineb Sellami, p.c. It is also attested in the areas of Chebba (Luca D’Anna, p.c.), Mahadhba ([Marçais and Viré 1981, p. 375](#)), and Susa ([Talmoudi 1984, p. 63](#)), though because the published attestations are very few, it is not known if these areas align completely with the Tunis or Douz usages or not.
- 12 Lameen Souag, p.c.
- 13 Interestingly, copular *yabda* is attested in the materials from the Fezzan collected mainly by Philippe Marçais in the 1950s and published posthumously ([Marçais 2001](#)). These materials are problematic, however, as for the most part it is not clear where or from whom any given text was collected (materials were gathered not only in the Fezzan, but also in Tripoli and in Algiers, and only one text has the name or any personal details of an informant). There is thus no way to be sure that *yabda* in these materials represents an actual usage of a Fezzani dialect rather than the usage, say, of someone who was originally from the Fezzan but had been living in Tripoli for some time. What also casts some doubt on a copular *yabda* in the Fezzan is that of the nine attestations, seven are attributed to the “Gwayda tribe”, suggesting that they may all come from a single informant (the other two have no

attribution). We have therefore left these attestations out of our analysis. This is not to suggest, however, that copular *yabda* has not now spread to some regions of southern Libya; but there are unfortunately no studies which can confirm this as of yet.

¹⁴ See the recent handbook chapters (Camilleri 2019; Choueiri 2019).

¹⁵ See (Magidow 2016) for an example of dialect classification based on morphological forms. For some broad comparative studies of syntax, see Ritt-Benmimoun (2017, pp. 324–32) on object and aspect marking with *fi*, or Bettega (2019) on gender agreement.

¹⁶ See also Behnstedt and Woidich (2005, pp. 83–92) for Arabic specifically. Note also that whether or not a given isogloss affects mutual intelligibility is a separate question, and the answer may not actually correspond to the isoglosses valued by dialectologists, see (Čéplö et al. 2016).

¹⁷ (Stumme 1898, p. 65); also attested in the mid-20th century in Douz (Boris 1951, pp. 212–5).

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