Arabic Word Order: A Descriptive Account.

- To what family Arabic belongs?
- Arabic is one of the Semitic Languages that form a branch of the Afro-Asiatic family. The Semitic languages include: Arabic, Amharic, Maltese, Tigrigna, Hebrew, and Phoenician are some of the examples.

- Main Types of sentences in Arabic:
  Arabic is said to have two main types of sentences:

  (a) Verbal (that which starts with a verb)
  Wrote the pupil-nom the letter-acc
  The student wrote the letter.
  
  And
  (b) a nominal (that which starts with a noun):
  ?al-shams-u mushriqat-un
  the sun-nom rising-nom
  The sun is rising

  However, this could be a simplification of word order in Arabic. Let us have a few sentences and see if we can decide on one basic word order.

  1. Qara?-a ?al-tulaab-u ?al-kitaab-a
     Read-past the students-nom the book-acc.
     The students read the book.

     (1) enjoys a (VSO) order.

     However, (1) allows, through permutation of its word order, the following sentences to be constructed:

     (2)

        Read-past the book-acc. the students-nom
        The students read the book. (VOS)

     b. ?al-kitaab-a qara?-a ?al- tulaab-u
        The book-acc read-past the students.
        The book the students read (OVS)

     c. ?al-tulaab-u qara?-uu ?al-Kitaab-a
        The students-nom read-past-clitic (they) the book-acc.
        The students read the book. (SV+clitic-nom O).
What is noticeable is that we have permutations in (2.a, b), while there are clitics on the verb ending in (2.c, d) indicating the theta role of the initial NP. These observations should be taken into account in any serious analysis of basic word order in Arabic.

Suggestions in the literature about Arabic basic word order:

(3)

a. Arabic is a VSO language.
b. Arabic is SVO language.
c. Arabic is a free word order language.

(3.a) is the commonly held word order for Arabic. It is to be found among the traditionalists as well as among some modern syntacticians.

According to (3.a) Arabic will have a flat structure, and (1) will have the following structure:

(4)  S → V  NP  NP

1. Qara?-a  ?al-tulaab-u  ?al-kitaab-a  
   Read-past  the students-nom  the book-acc.  
   The students read the book.

In (4), the transitive verb will govern both NPs and assigns them accusative cases. Although we want the 2nd NP to be accusative because it is the object, we want the 1st NP to be nominative because it is the subject of the sentence. There is nothing to prevent such a conclusion.

Another point regarding this word order is the existence of other available word orders as in (2.b,c,d) and the existence of clitics on the verb ending?

**A word on clitics:** "I assume that clitics are the spelling out of case features". (Aoun, Y. 1981: 693).

**Arabic is a SVO language:**

This word order is suggested for Arabic by many Western linguists. (James Snow (1965), Nancy Killeen (1966), Joseph Emonds (1980) just to name a few.

Assuming this word order, Arabic would have the following basic structure:

(5)  S →  NP  VP
(5) might give a deceptive solution to (2.c,d). But then how can account for the clitics? This word order cannot help on this point especially if clitics are the result of movement. This means this word order cannot be taken to be the D-structure.

**Arabic is a free word order language:**

This is the easiest to suggest for Arabic but the most difficult to maintain. If this word order is adopted, then everything should be possible. But this is not the case. Just one example:

(6) Qara?-a ?al-tulaab-u ?al-kitaab-a
   Read-past the students-nom the book-acc.
   The students read the book.

If we front either the subject or the object into preverbal position, the result is ungrammatical:

    the students-nom Read-past the book-acc.

    The book-nom read-past the students-nom

Both (7.a, b) are ungrammatical because the sentences start with an NP without clitics on the verb.

**A suggestion for one basic deep word order for Arabic**

I suggest that Arabic may have the following categoric basic deep word order:

(8) S → VP NP

According to (8), the verb (qara?a) will govern the NP (al-kitaab-a) and assigns it an accusative case as required; and then the VP+infl will assign a nominative case to the subject NP (al-tulaab-u)

To account for all the other available word orders, we need two types of movements: Syntactic, which works on the S-structure. This movement will move any NP from postverbal position into preverbal position resulting in sentences that start with nominative NPs at the start of the sentence, and a clitic like pronoun on the inflectional ending of the verb forming a chain for theta relation. We find in such sentences a nominative NP but with a theta role as patient being the object of the verb like in (2.d)

   The book-nom read-past-clitic-acc the students-nom
   The book read-past-it the students (OV+clitic S).

Or even in (2.c)
The students read the book. (SV+clitic-nom O).

The other movement works on the phonetic level which moves an NP from postverbal position to preverbal position but without changing its case or theta role as in (2.b)

(10)

?al-tulaab-u qara?-uu ?al-Kitaab-a
The students-nom read-past-clitic (they) the book-acc.

The students read the book. (SV+clitic-nom O).

Through these two simple movements, we can account for the entire different surface structures in Arabic. The basic underlying word order could be (VOS).

Thank you for listening.