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The Arabic *mā ... min* construction:  
Rethinking the priority of restrictive relatives

Part I. Background

1. Background to the paper

- Developed out of research in Semitic historical syntax: the status and evolution of RelClauses in Semitic
- Involved a corpus study: the Koran (full collection of RelClauses)
- It turned out that restrictive RelClauses are not the dominant type of RelCl in Koranic Arabic
- And there is an alternative way to restrict reference with RelCls: the *mā ... min* construction

2. Will need to do three things:

- Discuss relative clauses in Arabic
- Discuss the *mā ... min* construction
- Discuss its importance for general linguistics ("Rethinking the priority of restrictive relatives")

3. Basic structural facts about Classical Arabic

- Prototypical VSO language
- Case-marking: Nom *-u*, Acc *-a*, Gen *-i*
- Preposed Def.Article *l-*, postposed Indef marker *-n*

[1]   banā       l-rajul-u       bayt-a-n                    "the man built a house"  
      he.built the-man-Nom house-Acc-Indef

- Verbs always marked for person/number/(gender) of Subject, either prefixally (in Imperfect) or suffixally (in Perfect)

      'a-ktubu "I write"                    katab-tu "I wrote"  
      1sg-write                               write-1sg

- Have pronominal enclitics, which can appear either:

   a. On Verb: as direct object        katab-tu-*hu* "I wrote *it*"  
   b. On Noun: as pron. possessor     baytu-*hu*   "*his* house"  
   c. On Prep: as Obj-of-Prep         min-*hu*     "from *him*"

- These clitics are often used as resumptive pronouns in RelCl

4. Relative clauses in Arabic: basic facts

- Postnominal: (HeadN) (Linker) RelClause
  - The headless option is extremely common (more below)
  - No formal distinction between restrictive and non-restrictive
- Resumptive pronoun within RelCl marks role of HeadN, for all oblique roles, and optionally for DirObj
- RelCl linker: an odd sort of "relative pronoun" (*(a)lladī*, inflecting for number and gender, and (only in Dual!) for case in *upstairs* clause

—RelCI linker exists only with Defi nite heads:

- a. No RelCI linker: •Indefi nite HeadNoun
- b. With RelCI linker: •Defi nite HeadNoun      OR  
•Headless

a. No RelCI linker: baytu-n      banaytu-hu      "a house I built"  
house-Indef I.built-it

b. RelCI linker:  
—Defi nite: al-baytu    *llaḏī*    banaytu-hu      "the house that I built"  
the-house Rel I.built-it

—Headless: *allaḏī*    banaytu-hu      "that-which I built"  
Rel I.built-it

### 5. Some Koranic examples (Headed; non-restrictive and restrictive)

[2] allā hu *llaḏī* nazzala    l-kitā ba  
Allah Rel he.revealed the-book  
"Allah, who reveals the scripture" (7:196)

[3] wa-*l-kitā bi*    *llaḏī*    nazzala    ‘alā    rasū li-hi  
and-the-book Rel he.revealed upon prophet-his  
wa-*l-kitā bi*    *llaḏī*    anzala      min qablu  
and-the-book Rel he.revealed from earlier  
"and the book which he revealed to his prophet, and the book which  
he revealed in former times" (4:136)  
—Two books are apparently being contrasted: the Koran, and earlier scripture

### 6. Relative clauses with *mā* "what", *man* "who"

—These are Wh-question words, which (as in English) may also introduce RelClauses  
—An alternate to the "Headless" construction, often near-synonymous

*allaḏī* [ banaytu-hu ]      "that-which I built"  
*mā*    [ banaytu-hu ]      "what/whatever I built"

## Part II. The *mā* ... *min* construction

### 7. Basic structure: *mā* ... *min* ["what ... from/of"]

—Variant: *man* ... *min* ["who ... from/of"]  
—Variant: *allaḏī* ... *min* ["that-which ... from/of"]

[4] "what I bought from/of books" =      "the books I bought"  
"who I saw from/of dancers"    =      "the dancers I saw"

—An extension of the type: replace the fully general *mā* "what"  
with a quantificational expression of some kind

[5] "all.that I bought of books"  
"everyone I saw of dancers" etc.

—The *mā ... min* construction is very common in Arabic, and very familiar to Arabists (cf. e.g. Reckendorf 1967[1895]: 622-30); it's a canonical part of Arabic grammar-study; but unfamiliar to non-Arabists

8. Analogous constructions exist in more "familiar" languages

—English: with "of" (stilted), or "by way of" (better).

[6] "what I bought of books" (stilted, but more or less OK)

[7] "all I've been able to get hold of by way of literature is sound tapes"  
(from *The Telling*, by Ursula Leguin, p. 11)  
= "all the literature I've been able to get"

—Dutch: (thanks to Frederike van der Leek, p.c.); German similar

[8] Ik heb op je bureau gelegd wat ik aan materiaal heb verzameld.  
I have on your desk put what I 'aan' material have collected  
"I have put on your desk what I have collected of material"

—French: (thanks to Denis Creissels, p.c.)

[9] Je n'ai pas aimé ce qu' il nous a servi comme vin  
"I didn't like what he served us as wine"  
= "I didn't like the wine that he served us"

9. This construction has the effect of restricting reference, but in a "backwards" way

—Garden-variety modification with a RelCl: start with a set defined by the HeadNoun, then restrict its reference further with the RelClause:  
books —> the books *that I bought*

—With *mā ... min*, it's the reverse: start with a set defined by a headless RelClause, then narrow down its reference further by specifying a particular noun  
what I bought —> what I bought *of books*

—The extensional result is the same, though arrived at by two inverse conceptual paths

—Note that, with this construction, the fact of "restriction of reference" is explicitly coded and built-in: "from Noun(s)" is a literal statement that you are taking entities "from" a given set, i.e. taking a subset of a specified main set

—By contrast, in many languages (e.g. German), normal Headed RelClauses don't tell you formally whether reference-restriction is involved

10. Important limitation: the entity which is the nominal "semantic head"

(i.e. the object of *min*) cannot refer to a singular count-noun (though it may have the form of a singular count-noun)

—It must be either plural, or a mass noun, or an abstract, or a generic, etc.

—*Mā ... min* is not normally available to express e.g. "the book that I bought"

11. Some examples of *mā ... min* from the Koran

- [10] *mā nansakh min ā yatin*  
what we.abrogate from sign  
"what we abrogate in the way of signs" = "the signs we abrogate" (2:106)
- [11a] *ba'da lladī jā 'a-ka min l-'ilmi*  
after Rel come-you from the-knowledge  
"after what has come to you of knowledge" =  
"after the knowledge that has come to you" (2:120)
- [11b] *min ba'di mā jā 'a-ka min l-'ilmi*  
from after what come-you from the-knowledge  
"after the knowledge that has come to you" (3:61)
- [12a] *mā anzala allahu min l-samā 'i min mā 'in*  
what he.brought.down Allah from the-sky from water  
"what Allah brought down from the sky in the way of water" =  
"the water which Allah brought down from the sky" (2:164)
- [12b] *mā anzala allahu min l-kitā bi*  
what he.revealed Allah from the-book  
"what Allah has revealed of scripture" =  
"the scripture that Allah has revealed" (2:174)
- [13] *fa-nkihū mā ṭā ba la-kum min l-nisā 'i*  
and-marry what is.good to-you from the-women  
"and marry what seems good to you of women" =  
"and marry the women who seem good to you" (4:3)
- [14] *muṣaddiqan li-mā bayna yaday-hi min l-tawrā ti*  
confi rming to-what between hands-his from the-Torah  
"confi rming what preceded him (lit.: what was between his hands) of the Torah" =  
"confi rming the Torah that preceded him" (5:46)
- [15] *'am-mā jā 'a-ka min l-ḥaqqi*  
of-what came-you from the-truth  
"of what has come to you of the truth" =  
"of the truth that has come to you" (5:48)
- [16] *qul li-man fī aydī -kum min l-'usrā*  
say to-who in hands-your from the-captives  
"say to whoever is in your hands in the way of captives" =  
"say to the captives that are in your hands" (8:70)
- [17] *ilā lladī na 'ā hadtum min l-mušrikī na*  
to Rel.pl you.made.treaty from the-idolators  
"to those whom you made a treaty with of the idolators" =  
"to those idolators with whom you made a treaty" (9:1)
- [18] *fa-kašafnā mā bi-him min ḍurrin*  
and-we.removed what in-them from adversity  
"and we removed what there was in them of adversity" =  
"and we removed the adversity they were in" (23:75)

[19] wa-qaḍimnā ilā mā ‘amilū min ‘amalin  
and-we.turned to what they.did from work  
"and we turned unto what they did of work" = "and we turned unto the work they did" (25:23)

• Note the cognacy of verb ‘amilū and object ‘amalin

[20] šara‘a la-kum min l-dī ni mā waṣṣā bi-hi nū ḥan  
he.ordained to-you from the-religion what he.commanded in-it Noah  
wa-lladī awḥaynā ilay-ka wa-mā waṣṣaynā bi-hi ibrā hī ma  
and-Rel we.revealed to-you and-what we.commanded in-it Abraham  
"he has ordained for you of religion what he commanded Noah, and  
that which we revealed to you, and what we commanded Abraham" =  
"he has ordained to you the religion which he commanded Noah, and  
which we revealed to you, and which we commanded Abraham" (42:13)

• Note reversal in order: min ... mā

• Also note the switch from mā , to alladī , to mā

[21] ja‘alnā -hu nū ran nahdī bi-hi man našā ’u min ‘ibā di-nā  
we.made-it light we.lead in-it who we.wish from our servants  
"we made it a light by which we lead those whom we wish of our servants" =  
"we made it a light by which we lead those servants of ours whom we wish" (42:52)

[22] wa-llā ’ī ya’isna min l-maḥī ḍi min nisā ’i-kum  
and-Rel.fpl they.despaired from the-menstruation from women-your  
"and those who despair of menstruation, of your women" =  
"and those women of yours who despair of menstruation" (65:4)

### Part III: The distribution and behavior of regular RelClauses in the Koran

12. Questions to ask: how often do headed RelClauses occur? How often do headed RelClauses restrict reference?

13. Headless use of alladī

[23] wa-la-ya‘lamanna llā hu lladī na ā manū wa-la-ya‘lamanna l-munā fi qī na  
and-Emph-he.knows Allah Rel.pl they.believed and-Emph-he.knows the-hypocrites  
"and Allah surely knows the believers, and he surely knows the hypocrites" (29:11)

—Some very rough statistics on alladī as found in 3 suras of Koran:

[24] Sura 2: Headless 80+, headed 8 (Al-Baqara, the longest in the Koran)  
Sura 8: Headless 20+, headed 0 (one case unclear)  
Sura 12: Headless 9, headed 2 (Yū suf, the most "narrative" sura)

—These figures are typical; huge dominance of headless RelClauses

—It is well-known that alladī RelClauses can be headless in Arabic;  
but the preponderance of headlessness in the Koran is massive

—Only 225 tokens of headed alladī RelClauses in entire Koran

—Possible objection: just an artefact of this genre?

—A religious text will often want to speak in generalities:

"they who believe", "that which Allah has given to you", etc.

#### 14. Headed Indef commoner than Headed Def with *alladī*

—Crude statistics on Headed RelClauses in Koran (token count)

- [25] IndefHead: 422 (or 537) \*\*  
DefHead with *alladī*: 225  
(DefHead without *alladī*: 99 or fewer  
—A non-canonical type; hard to identify clearly  
—"99" is surely too high, since I counted any case which  
in context, could conceivably be construed as a RelClause)

Note:

\*\* "422" excludes the 115 tokens of RelClauses on the two HeadNouns  
*qawm* "people" and *jannā t* "gardens", which are very repetitive

—So: indeed, Headed RelClauses in the Koran do occur preferentially with  
indefinite HeadNouns, by a factor of 2-to-1

#### 15. How often are Headed RelClauses with *alladī* in fact restrictive?

- In a language (Arabic) with no *formal* marking to distinguish restrictive  
vs. non-restrictive relative clauses, must examine RelClauses in context  
to determine restrictive vs. non-restrictive status  
—Typically, examination of a [HeadN + RelClause] unit in isolation will not  
allow you to decide if it is "restrictive" or not  
—The selfsame RelClause can be "restrictive" or "non-restrictive"

[26a] She looked up and saw a soldier approaching. The soldier, who had a scar  
on his forehead, looked very tired.

[26b] [Context: a group of soldiers has been staying in the town for some time  
and are known to everyone.] She looked up and saw the group of soldiers  
approaching. The soldier who had a scar on his forehead looked very tired.

- Another issue: proper names  
—RelClauses whose HeadNoun is a proper name are (normally) non-restrictive  
—But it isn't always clear what shall count as a "proper name"

[27a] He looked up at the Moon, which was shining so brightly overhead. [on earth]

[27b] He looked up at the moon which was shining so brightly overhead. [on Jupiter]

- In context, a common noun (here *moon*) can count as a quasi-proper name  
—In Koran: *the book* = "the Koran", *my Lord* = "Allah", *the garden* = "Garden of Eden", etc.

(Non)restrictive semantics of Headed Definite Relative clauses in the Koran  
(Subjective, approximate judgments)

	Restrictive	Unclear	Non- Restrictive	Other	Total
With <i>alladī</i>	47	35	140	3	225
Allah and epithets	0	0	48		
The prophet	0	0	3		
Proper names	0	0	8		
Participles (plural)	3	4	21		
All other nominals	44	31	60	3	
(N + Poss.suffi x	13	15	32)		
Without <i>alladī</i>	5	14	90	5	114

- Counts in the last group ("Without *alladī* ") are surely too high
- Unclear what is to count as "RelCl"

—Clearly, RelCls with non-restrictive semantics strongly outnumber those with restrictive semantics in the Koran

—There are relatively few clear-cut instances of restrictive semantics  
—See ex. [3] above, and the following:

[28] quḍiya l-'amru llaḍī fī -hi tastaftiyā ni  
be.judged the-matter Rel in-it you(Dual).inquire  
"(thus) is judged the matter about which you inquire" (12:41)

- By contrast, non-restrictive RelClauses are very common in Koran
- Many examples with "Allah" (or his epithets), or proper names, as HeadN (cf. [29])  
—Here a restrictive relative clause is logically excluded (even heretical!);  
the HeadN is already fully identifiable, and the RCl's function is to *describe* it
- Many examples where HeadN is a plural participle; here a general class is referred to, and the RelClause does not further restrict its reference (cf. [30])
- Many examples involve common nouns as heads, but clearly non-restrictive (cf. [31])

[29] *allā hu llaḍī nazzala l-kitā ba*  
Allah Rel he.revealed the-book  
"Allah, who reveals the scripture" (7:196)

[30] *li-l-mu'minī na llaḍī na yuqī mū na l-ṣalā ta*  
to-the-believers Rel.pl they.perform the-prayer  
"to the believers, who perform the prayer" (27:2-3)

[31] *li-'ibā d-ī llaḍī na ā manū*  
to-servants-my Rel.pl they.believed  
"to my servants(,) who believe" (14:31) (reference is to Allah's servants)

- And it is often unclear whether the RelCl is semantically restrictive or not
- In ([32]), is "garden" to be taken as a quasi-proper name? In context, it will be clear (to all readers) that "Garden of Eden" is meant

[32] *l-jannati* *llatī* *wu'ida* *l-muttaqū* na  
the-garden Rel.fsg was.promised the-devout(Nom.Pl)  
"the garden which the devout have been promised" (13:35)

#### Part IV: Rethinking the priority of restrictive relatives

16. Relative clauses in *English* divide into two types:

a. Restrictive

Formal: no comma

Semantic: typically restricts reference

b. Nonrestrictive

Formal: do have comma; must use "which", not "that"

Semantic: does not restrict reference

- Here, a formal distinction and a semantic distinction have pretty good overlap
- But NB: The overlap is by no means perfect, as any corpus study shows
- I made a collection of all RelClauses in Ursula Leguin's *The Telling*

[33] "There was a soft buzz of voices that did nothing but buzz in Satty's head" (178)

[34] "She felt a wave of hatred for him that frightened her" (87)

- Formally these are "restrictive" RelClauses ("that"; no comma)
- But there is no reference restricted; rather, the semantics is enriched
- Indefinite-head vs. Definite-head is an important parameter

- Some languages do have a formal distinction like this; some do not
- Open question: how common is such a formal distinction?

17. Restrictive relatives have been given conceptual priority in typological approaches to RelClauses

- "We will assume that restrictive relative clauses are more central to the notion of relative clause than are non-restrictives" (Comrie 1989:143)
- But no argument seems to be given to ground this assumption
- "We need a functional (semantic, cognitive) definition of relative clause" (143), in order to be able to approach the concept crosslinguistically
- Right; but what privileges "restrictiveness" as *the* definitional semantic concept?
- Restrictiveness is certainly relevant and important; but why is it so important as to warrant being built into a definition?

18. In principle, the same issue may arise for any adnominal modifier:

Adjective, Genitive, RelClause

- Any of these can be restrictive, or non-restrictive
- But for Adj and Gen, one doesn't generally consider "restrictiveness" as a major parameter at all, let alone a definitional one
- Any adnominal modifier may serve (at least) 2 major functions:
  - a. Restrict reference of HeadN (extensional narrowing)
  - b. Enrich semantics of HeadN (intensional expansion)



22. The alternative (though given here only as a programmatic suggestion):  
—Focus on the concept of "modification", without definitionally privileging any specific function of the modification  
—That is, a modifier may enrich the HeadN's semantics, or restrict reference, or both, or unclear, flexibly, depending on context and the HeadN's lexical semantics
23. This whole matter should be made an empirical issue  
—On the formal side: how many languages are there (and where?) in which "restrictiveness" is an important formal parameter of the grammar?  
—On the semantic side: in various languages, in various corpora, how often are RelClauses actually used to restrict reference?  
—In a given language (having a clear concept of RelClause), can look at texts, find out:  
• What subtypes of RelClauses actually occur?  
• How often does each subtype occur?  
• How often is "restricting reference" semantically present?
24. Return to Arabic  
—Looking at one language and one corpus, the Koran, I gathered data relevant to the above concerns  
—Of headed RelClauses, Indef-Head outnumber Def-Head  
—Indef-Head is intrinsically less prone to restriction of reference  
—Of RelClauses with the RelMarker *alladī*, the vast majority are headless  
—Of headed RelClauses with the RelMarker *alladī*, a strong majority are non-restrictive in semantics (e.g. "Allah" as HeadN)  
  
—Summary: RelClauses in the Koran are not used predominantly to restrict reference  
  
—If we do wish to restrict reference with a RelClause, we don't have to use a Headed RelClause (though Arabic sometimes does); instead, the *mā ... min* construction is available  
—Here reference is restricted, not by using a "restrictive RelClause", but by using a *headless* RelClause
25. The question of wider applicability  
—Speculate: this device (or some close analogue) may be widely available in many languages, notably languages featuring headless RelClauses, such as the North American and/or highly head-marking languages referred to above  
—Provides a device for restricting reference using a RelClause, but not a Headed "restrictive RelClause" in the classical sense

#### References

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