

The Structure of Copular Constructions: Perspectives from Language Variation and Change
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Arabic, like many of its Semitic relatives, is well known for a major asymmetry between present tense sentences and past and future tense sentences with non-verbal predicates. The latter must contain a verbal copula that carries agreement features, including person agreement, but the former does not, at least not overtly. This contrast holds across the major Arabic varieties and has been a prominent area of contention with important implications for the nature of clause structure and analyses of language variation. This talk will revisit the critical data and generalizations that have been central to the debate and introduce new data from understudied and endangered varieties of Arabic that have evolved different copulas with similar distribution or developed new ones with different properties and distribution. This additional data will help test the different approaches that have been advanced to account for the syntax of clause structure, the interaction between functional and lexical categories, and the properties and distribution of the copula.