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## On the Kind-denoting/Existential Reading and the Scope of Indefinite NPs in Arabic

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**Keywords:** Arabic, indefinite nouns, kind-denoting, existential, reading, semantics.

**Abstract:** The argument of this paper is two-fold. First, it argues that kind-denoting reading of common nouns in Standard Arabic requires an overt determiner specifically *ʔal*. By contrast, this determiner is not required to achieve existential reading; nunation may well suffice instead. Equally important, verb valency alternates semantic reading of common nouns between kind-denoting and existential reading. Second, it argues that indefinite nouns in Arabic tend to show both wide scope readings and narrow scope readings; it also assumes that standard quantificational reading cannot be achieved by indefinite noun phrases since nunation can be distributed with singular and plural indefinites.

## دلالة اللام النوعية والعهدية والبعد الدلالي لأسماء النكرة في اللغة العربية

صالح بن جارالله القحطاني

أستاذ التراكيب اللغوية المساعد، قسم اللسانيات ودراسات الترجمة، كلية اللغات والترجمة، جامعة الملك سعود

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**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الاسم النكرة، التنوين، الدلالة، اللام النوعية والعهدية، اللغة العربية.

**ملخص البحث:** يهدف البحث إلى دراسة حالتين لغويتين في اللغة العربية من منظور النظرية اللسانية الحديثة. الحالة الأولى هي دلالة اللام النوعية والعهدية وترى الدراسة أن الاسم يحتاج إلى محدد لكي يعطي دلالة نوعية ويتمثل المحدد في وجود اللام النوعية التي تسبق الاسم. وبالمقابل فإن الاسم الدال على نكرة موجودة لا يحتاج إلى وجود تلك اللام ويكتفى بإضافة التنوين إليه. كذلك تُستخدم خاصية تكافؤ الفعل المتعدي إلى التمييز بين الدلالة النوعية والعهدية (الوجودية). فهناك من الأفعال ما يدل على الدلالة النوعية بينما هناك أفعال أخرى تدل على الدلالة العهدية رغم تطابق الفعلين في خاصية التعدي. والحالة الثانية التي يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراستها هي البعد الدلالي لأسماء النكرة في اللغة العربية عند توظيفها في جملٍ مكتملة الأركان. وخلصت الدراسة إلى أن الأسماء النكرة في اللغة العربية لها بعد دلالي محصور وآخر شامل ويعتمد ذلك على تفسير القائل والمستمع. وبخلاف اللغات التي تدل أدوات النكرة فيها على قراءة كمية فإن ذلك لا ينطبق على اللغة العربية حيث أن التنوين لا يمكن أن يعطي قراءة كمية كونه يظهر مع المفرد والجمع.

### 1. Introduction

The semantic interpretation of common nouns has cross-linguistically been the focus of many studies (Alhailawani, 2019; Borik and Espinal, 2015; Fehri, 2007; Chierchia, 1998; Krifka, 2003; Levin, 2015; Longobardi, 1994; McNally, 2016; Paul, 2016; Zhang, 2018, ... among others). Focusing on Arabic, common nouns employed in noun phrases express different semantic readings as shown by the examples in (1).

- (1) a. Ali jekrahu ?al-qita?-a  
Ali hate the-cats-ACC  
'Ali hates cats.' (kind-denoting reading)
- b. Ali iftara qita?-a-n  
Ali bought cats-ACC-NUN  
'Ali bought (some) cats.' (existential reading)

Two different semantic readings follow from examples (1a&b) respectively: *i*) kind-denoting reading and *ii*) existential reading. It can be noticed that the type of the determiner results in different readings, more explanations to come in section (4).

Verb semantic valency can alter the semantic reading of kind-denoting and existential constructions. In this study, I argue that verb valency is not limited to the selection of the external and/or internal arguments (i.e., agent; theme). It can be extended to include the semantic interpretation of these arguments.

- (2) a. Ali jekrahu ?al-qita?-a  
Ali hate the-cats-ACC  
'Ali hates cats.' (kind-denoting reading)
- b. Ali ju?simu ?al-qita?-a  
Ali feed the-cats-ACC  
'Ali feeds the cats.' (existential reading)

Looking at the clauses in (2), we notice that the two verbs *jekrah* 'hate' and *ju?sim* 'feed' are both transitive verbs; they are obligatory two-argument valency. Although the two verbs syntactically have the same distribution and have identical subjects and objects (i.e., Ali; ?al-qita?), their objects have different semantic readings.

In addition to the investigation of kind-denoting and existential readings, the study also aims to give an account of the semantics of indefinites in Standard Arabic (Arabic, henceforth). Before delving into the investigation of the semantic aspects of indefinite noun phrases (NP, henceforth), in this study, I will

assume that indefinite NPs in Arabic are syntactically headed by *nunation* (NUN) which encliticizes to common nouns in order to give an indefinite interpretation as shown by (3).<sup>1</sup> By contrast, definiteness is achieved by adding the prefixal definite article ?al to common nouns as represented in (4).

- (3) a. kitaab-u-n  
book-NOM-NUN  
b. kitaab-a-n  
book-ACC-NUN  
c. kitaab-i-n  
book-GEN-NUN  
'a book'
- (4) ?al-kitaab-u/a/i  
the-book-NOM/ACC/GEN  
'the book'

In the literature, two main opinions were proposed as far as the status of nunation is considered. The first view (Almansour, 2012; Fehri, 2007; Jalabneh, 2009) claims that the presence of nunation is attributed to phonological reasons; it has no syntactic or semantic interpretations. By contrast, the second view (Abu-Chacra, 2007; Acquaviva, 2008; AlQahtani and Sabourin, 2015; AlQahtani, 2016, 2020; Kremers, 2003) claims that nunation is a marker of indefinites. The current study adopts the latter view. In other words, it investigates the semantics of indefinites on the basis that nunation is an indefinite article, putting aside the claims that argue against its semantic and syntactic role. It is beyond the scope of this study to establish a fine-grained investigation in respect to the status of nunation (a brief discussion is introduced in section-3). However, there is a decisive fact that cannot be ignored. The idea is that the definite article ?al and NUN are in complementary distributions; if one appears, the other cannot. The ungrammaticality of (5) is due to the co-occurrence of both articles.

- (5) \*?al-kitaabu-n  
the-book-NUN

Building on this fact and on the second view as a theoretical framework, the current paper intends to

<sup>1</sup>The Case is supplied depending on the argumental position (Subject: Nominative; object: Accusative and the complements of prepositions take Genitive Case).

find out whether nunated nouns (indefinites) have a wide scope reading, a narrow scope reading and/or quantificational reading. To explore this, an analysis, analogous to the analyses proposed for indefinites in English, will be adopted.

The organization of this paper proceeds as follows: section (2) introduces the puzzle of the study; section (3) presents a brief discussion that argues that indefiniteness in Arabic is achieved by adding nunation to the common nouns; section (4) introduces the account of the study and section

Concludes the papers.

## 2. The puzzle

The semantic interpretations of Arabic NPs have not received adequate investigations in terms of kind-denoting/existential readings and semantic scope of indefinites. Cross-linguistically, the ambiguity of English indefinite NPs has been investigated by [Fodor and Sag \(1982\)](#), [Winter \(1997\)](#) and [Reinhart \(1997\)](#); different accounts have been proposed. Indefinites can show standard quantificational reading; i.e., indefinite NPs behave like any other quantificational NPs. They also have an existential reading: the indefinite can function as a 'special' pointing gesture within the mind of the speaker' ([Fodor and Sag, 1982](#), p. 381). In such reading, the indefinites are expected to semantically act like proper names. When we look at the variety of examples that I will shortly introduce, a crucial question arises. Do the (in)definite nouns that show up in the object position semantically behave in the same way? In other words, do they exhibit different readings? In this study, I focus on the NPs that appear in object positions only. I will not discuss the NPs that appear in subject positions for two reasons (one syntactic; one semantic). For the syntactic reason, indefinite nouns cannot occupy preverbal subject positions unless they are licensed; see (6). For the semantic reason, it is widely acknowledged that indefinite nouns that occupy subject positions are by default existential or at least unambiguous.

- (6) \*nemr-u-n hadʒama ʔal-ʕanam  
tiger-NOM-NUN attack the-sheep  
'intended to read: a tiger attacked the sheep.'

The ungrammaticality of (6) is due to initiating the clause by an indefinite noun. This phenomenon is not only attested in Arabic, but also in Romance

languages. However, if the noun is modified by a modifier, it renders a grammatical clause; the structure in (7) is a modified structure of (6).

- (7) nemr-u-n ʔasswad-u-n hadʒama ʔal-ʕanam  
tiger-NOM-NUN black-NOM-NUN attack the-sheep  
'A black tiger attacked the sheep'

Having been modified by the adjective 'black', the noun 'tiger' became licensed in the subject position and a well-formed structure has been spelled out; for a full discussion, see [AlQahtani \(2016\)](#). The well-formedness might be due to the specific reading that the adjective 'black' adds to the noun. It might be plausible to claim that the heavier the NP the more specific reading it has ([Fodor and Sag, 1982](#)). Let's begin with the following examples; they appear to show different readings. In other words, they semantically behave differently.

- (8) a. raʔait-u nemr-a-n fi ʔal-waadi  
saw-I tiger-ACC-NUN in the-valley  
'I saw a tiger in the valley.'
- b. kull-u raʕjul-i-n raʔaa nemr-a-n  
every-NOM man-GEN-NUN saw tiger-ACC-NUN  
'Every man saw a tiger.'
- c. kull-u taalib-i-n jextaar-u ostaatā-a-n  
every-NOM student-GEN-NUN he-choose professor-ACC-NUN  
'Every student chooses a professor.'
- d. lam ʔara nemr-a-n fi haʒaati  
never I-saw tiger-ACC-NUN in life-my  
'I never saw a tiger in my life.'
- e. ʔarrsala ʔal-ostaað-u talmecð-a-n min qisim-i ʔat-tareex  
sent the-professor-NOM student-ACC-NUN from department-GEN the-history  
'The professor sent a student from the History Department.'
- f. ʔarrsala ʔal-ostaað-u talmecð-a-n min talameeð-i-hi  
sent the-professor-NOM student-ACC-NUN from students-GEN-his  
'The professor sent a student from his students' = 'The professor sent one of his students.'

It can be noticed that the indefinites introduced in the previous examples behave differently. Some of them might have wide scope; others might have narrow scope. Some neither have wide nor narrow scope; they may not be referring expressions since they denote empty sets such as kind readings. In section (4), I present an analysis that helps in teasing out the different readings and reduces the ambiguity that indefinites may express. I exploit the analyses that have been used to investigate their counterpart examples in English in previous studies, and see if they can be applied to the indefinites in Arabic. Within the folds of the investigation, I show that nunation can semantically act like 'a/an' in English;

i.e., it has a syntactic and semantic role in building Arabic NPs.

#### Research questions

The puzzling questions which this study is trying to answer are:

- How are kind-denoting and existential readings of common nouns are achieved?
- Do nunated common nouns (indefinites) in Arabic show wide scope, narrow scope or quantificational reading?

### 3. Arabic indefinites

There are different contemporary linguistic views on nunation. I argue here against the view that contends that nunation is not a marker of indefinites. As far as the status of nunation is concerned, Almansour (2012) argues that the presence of nunation is due to phonological reasons and not syntactic ones. I believe that his claim is based on the notion that nunation is sometimes phonologically suppressed specifically when the nunated noun is in a sentence final position. I argue that this silence is due to nunation being always in a coda position; this position is the weakest position in the phonological structure of the word. Another claim is introduced by Lyons (1999) in which he argues that nunation can co-occur with the definite article *ʔal* in the case of masculine sound plurals thus he concludes that nunation can be classified like a quasi-indefinite article due to its partial complementary distribution with the definite article *ʔal* as shown by (9a).

- (9) a. ʔal-muslimōn  
'the-Muslims'  
b. muslimōn  
'Muslims'

I assume that Lyons builds his argument on the notion that the ending -n, *NUN*, is present in both forms (definite and indefinite). To remove the ambiguity of this ending -n, we should differentiate between the masculine sound plural morpheme and nunation an issue that Lyons' argument is not aware of. If we add nunation to the indefinite form of a masculine sound plural, we end up with an ungrammatical word as shown by (10) below.

- (10) \*muslimōn-n  
muslimōn-*NUN*

It can be argued that nunation and the plural morpheme are suppressed into one -n. The accumulation of two morphemes after the Case marker is impossible in Arabic as stated by Arab traditional grammarians. The prevention of the accumulation of two -ns is not due to phonological environments. Similar environments where the accumulation is possible on condition that the preceding sound (-n) is part of the stem, for example:

- (11) a. ʔal-ʕiyōn  
the-eyes  
'the eyes'  
b. ʕiyōn-u-n  
eyes-*NOM-NUN*  
'eyes'

Looking at (11b), we find that the last part of the word *ʕiyōn* 'eyes' rhymes with the word *muslimōn* 'Muslims'. Nevertheless, the former *ʕiyōn* accepts nunation in the case of indefinite state but the latter, *muslimōn*, does not. This is a strong clue against the idea that argues that nunation is suppressed due to phonological reasons. A similar case is presented by Zwicky (1987). He investigated the possessive

- (12) a. the bus's doors  
b. the dogs' / \*dogs's kennel (Zwicky, 1987, p:140)

Zwicky argues that the possessive 's' is suppressed in (12b) by the plural morpheme; by contrast, the possessive morpheme in (12a) is not. In the case of (12a) the final sound 's' in bus is a part of the stem; thus, it does not affect the possessive 's'. However, in (12b) the two 'ss' are not part of the stem and they are inflectional morphemes. Zwicky contends that this phenomenon should be handled in syntax. Indeed, in the nunation case, I argue that nunation must be treated as a syntactic category (functional element) that has an important role in building indefinite DPs. Evidence provided in my argument casts doubts on the views that attribute the presence of nunation to phonological reasons. To support this argument, nunation shares most of the salient properties of functional categories suggested by Alexiadou et al. (2007). She proposes the following properties of functional categories, these categories:

1. constitute closed classes.
2. are generally phonologically and morphologically dependent and stressless.

3. can be clitics or affixes or phonologically unrealized.
4. are usually inseparable from their complement.
5. lack descriptive content when they stand alone. (Alexiadou et al., 2007, p:15)

To sum up, following AlQahtani (2012, 2013) and Kremers (2003), I assume that nunation is an indefinite marker in Arabic.

#### 4. The account

This section includes two subsections. Section (4.1) presents an account of kind-denoting and existential readings. Section (4.2) is designated to investigate the semantic scope of indefinites in Arabic.

##### 4.1 Kind-denoting reading vs. existential reading

This subsection argues that the semantic interpretation of kind-denoting/existential readings relies on two different factors, namely the type of determination and the verb semantic valency.

##### Type of determination

The presence of definite/indefinite determiner (*ʔal*; *NUN*) significantly contributes to the semantic reading of NPs. That is to say, the semantic reading, kind-denoting or existential of an NP, can be demarcated by the type of the determiner which accompanies the NP. The examples listed in (1), repeated below as (13) illustrate the argument.

- (13) a. Ali jekrahu ʔal-qitaʔ-a  
Ali hate the-cats-ACC  
'Ali hates cats.' (kind-denoting reading)
- b. Ali iftara qitaʔ-a-n  
Ali bought cats-ACC-NUN  
'Ali bought (some) cats.' (existential reading)

Taking a close look at (13a), we notice that the reading of the NP *ʔal-qitaʔ* is interpreted as a kind-denoting reading; this reading is attributed to the presence of the Arabic definite determiner *ʔal*. Interestingly, when the determiner *ʔal* is substituted by the indefinite determiner *NUN* as shown by (13b), the interpreted reading is existential.

From a cross-linguistic point of view, there is a difference between Arabic and English. For example, kind-denoting reading in Arabic is achieved

by adding the definite determiner to common nouns as illustrated above by (13a). By contrast, English does not require the presence of the definite determiner *the* in order to derive kind-denoting reading; instead, bare plurals, 'cats' so called by Carlson (1977, 2002), are used to express this type of reading; see (14) below.

(14) John hates cats

(15) \*John hates the cats

Unlike Arabic, English may not use the definite determiner to give kind-denoting reading. The example in (15) is ungrammatical if it is intended to express kind-denoting reading.

##### Verb semantic valency

Verb valency is a fundamental linguistic notion. Syntactically speaking, it determines the distribution of syntactic objects in the external and/or internal argument positions (subject; object). At the semantic level, verb valency assigns thematic roles to NPs according to their syntactic positions; i.e., NPs occupying external argument positions are generally assigned agent role. By contrast, NPs occupying internal argument positions are often assigned theme role. However, I contend that verb valency can be extended to account for semantic interpretation of kind-denoting and existential readings; the examples listed in (2) which are conveniently repeated below as (16).

- (16) a. Ali jekrahu ʔal-qitaʔ-a  
Ali hate the-cats-ACC  
'Ali hates cats.' (kind-denoting reading)
- b. Ali juʔʕimu ʔal-qitaʔ-a  
Ali feed the-cats-ACC  
'Ali feeds the cats.' (existential reading)

Looking at the structures in (16), we notice that the two verbs *jekrah* 'hate' and *juʔʕim* 'feed' are both transitive verbs; their syntactic and semantic valency requires two arguments (external argument: subject/agent; internal argument: object/theme). The two verbs syntactically have the same distribution and have identical subjects and objects (i.e., Ali; ʔal-). However, their objects, *ʔal-qitaʔ*, strikingly have different semantic readings. In (16a), *ʔal-qitaʔ* perceived as a kind-denoting reading whereas *ʔal-qitaʔ* in (16b) is interpreted as an existential reading.

#### 4.2 Scope of Arabic indefinite NPs

Indefinites have been an intriguing problem to the semantic theory. The problem of indefinites resides in the free scope they may show. In the free scope analysis, indefinites are traditionally dealt with as existential quantifiers. Fodor and Sag (1982) argue that indefinites are ambiguous. The idea is that, in addition to the standard quantificational reading, indefinites can exhibit a existential reading: the indefinite can function as ‘a’ ‘private’ pointing gesture within the mind of the speaker. In this reading the indefinites are expected to behave semantically like proper names. As far as indefinites are considered, a crucial proposal was put forth by Heim (1982) in which she proposes that NPs can be semantically subdivided into quantifying and quantifier-free NPs. She classifies indefinite NPs ‘a book’, definite NPs ‘the book’ and the pronoun ‘it’ as a non-quantifying (quantifier-free) NPs whereas ‘every book’ and ‘no book’ as quantifying NPs. In the absence of the quantificational force, Heim argues that another semantic criterion must emerge. She introduces *descriptiveness* and *±definiteness*. The former distinguishes full NPs like ‘a book’ and ‘the cat’ from pronominal ones like ‘it’; the latter, definiteness, sets ‘the book’ and ‘it’ apart from ‘a book’. She also argues that definiteness plays a role in her theory. Both, definites and indefinites, are similar in their lack of quantificational force (Heim, 1982, p:175). My proposal is a reconciliation of Fodor and Sag (1982) and Heim (1982). Now, let’s turn to indefinite NPs in Arabic and try to see if both proposals can work for them. In this section, each example from Arabic is followed by its counterpart from English. As far as plurals are considered, it is worth mentioning that there is a difference between Arabic and English. Unlike English which has bare plurals, Arabic indefinite plurals are not bare. They are followed by nunation as the case with singular nouns; consider (17a&b) respectively.

- (17) a. kutub-u-n  
books-NOM-NUN  
‘books’  
b. kitaab-u-n  
book-NOM-NUN  
‘a book’

In the following example, I intend to see whether indefinites in Arabic are quantificational, existential or which I would call specific indefinites. They may

show different readings. In other words, they semantically behave differently.

- (18) raʔait-u nemr-a-n fi ʔal-waadi  
saw-I tiger-ACC-NUN in the-valley  
‘I saw a tiger in the valley’

Looking at (18), we find that ‘a tiger’ is followed by a locative prepositional phrase which modifies the noun ‘tiger’ by adding more information. Two questions emerge here. First, does the indefinite noun ‘tiger’ have the same semantic value when it is not followed by such a modifying phrase? In other words, are (18) and (19) semantically identical?

- (19) raʔait-u nemr-a-n  
saw-I tiger-ACC-NUN  
‘I saw a tiger’

In my viewpoint, they are not the same; in (19), there is novel information that is introduced by the indefinite ‘tiger’, of course semantic novelty is a trait of indefinite nouns. I assume that there is no focus. By contrast, in (18), the indefinite ‘tiger’ and the modifying prepositional phrase ‘in the valley’ provide two different semantic environments. The first semantic environment is the presupposition ‘tiger’; the second semantic environment is the prepositional phrase ‘in the valley’ which adds a kind of focus to the presupposed noun ‘a tiger’. This observation is noticed by Kolliakou (2004) in Greek. The second question, can the indefinite noun ‘a tiger’ move overtly (syntactic movement) or covertly (LF movement; quantifier raising: QR)? If it can move, then it can be claimed that indefinites in such a position are assumed to have a quantificational reading. (18) is repeated below as (20) but with QR.

- (20) \*nemr-a-n raʔait-u fi ʔal-waadi  
tiger-ACC-NUN saw-I in the-valley  
‘I saw a tiger in the valley’

Raising the indefinite noun ‘a tiger’ results in the ungrammaticality of (20). Assumingly, the notion of raising the indefinites to a position higher than their subject positions implies that they have wide scope; however, in (20), it seems it is not the case. It must stay in situ; consequently, it has a narrow scope reading but with specific reading. It is neither fully existential nor quantificational. Does this analysis work for (20)’s counterpart in English; (21).

- (21) ? A tiger, I saw in the valley

If the proposed analysis works for (21), then I can tentatively argue that nunated common nouns in Arabic (indefinites) can semantically behave in a similar way to their counterparts in English. Another intriguing question is *how do indefinites behave when they are syntactically c-commanded by universal quantifiers?* Looking at (22) which shows Arabic indefinites occupying an object position.

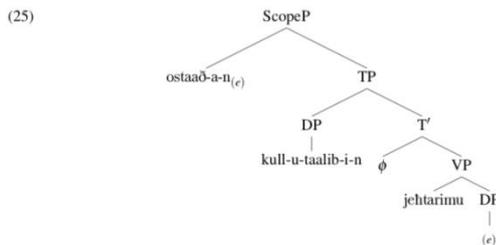
- (22) kull-u taalib-i-n jehtarimu ostaað-a-n  
 every-NOM student-GEN-NUN he-respect professor-ACC-NUN  
 'Every student respects a professor'

In the literature, two analyses were proposed for (22)'s counterpart in English. The first one suggests that there is a certain professor that every student respects (wide scope reading). The second proposal suggests that every student is mapped to a different professor. The two readings can be formulated by (23) and (24) respectively.

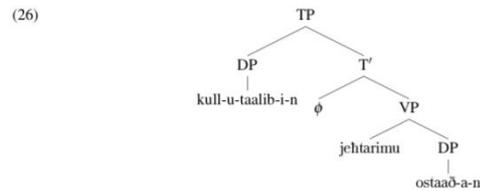
- (23)  $\exists y[\text{professor}(y)](\forall x[\text{student}(x)](\text{respect}(x,y)))$

- (24)  $\forall x[\text{student}(x)](\exists y[\text{professor}(y)](\text{respect}(x,y)))$

It can be noticed that (23) shows a wide scope reading since the indefinite noun *ostaað-a-n* 'a professor' takes scope over its subject (covert LF movement) as can be represented by (25).



By contrast, if the indefinite noun 'a professor' in (22) denotes a narrow scope reading, we expect it (the indefinite) to obey the syntactic linear order; i.e., the LF covert movement does not take place as represented by (26).



The structure in (22) can be identical in both languages (Arabic and English). In other words, the proposal that indefinites can show a wide scope reading by moving covertly to a position higher than their subjects (LF movement) or they remain in situ showing a narrow scope reading is appropriate for both languages. The narrow scope reading, for Arabic, might be perceived more than the wide scope reading as the case for English. This behaviour of Arabic and English being identical supports the argument that nunated nouns can be classified as indefinite nouns.

## 5. Conclusion

I have argued that the presence of definite/indefinite determiner (*ʔal*; *NUN*) plays a significant role in the semantic reading of NPs. The semantic reading, kind-denoting or existential of an NP, can be distinguished by the type of the determiner that appears with the NP. Another fundamental factor that teases out kind-denoting reading from existential reading is the semantic of verb valency. I have shown how verb valency alters the reading of Arabic NPs from kind-denoting to existential reading and vice versa. I have proposed that indefinite nouns in Arabic tend to show both wide scope readings and narrow scope readings. Finally, it is assumed that Arabic indefinite nouns do not express quantificational reading.

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