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Arabic and Indonesian Prepositional Phrase Predicate: A Contrastive Analysis and Pedagogical Implications for *Nahwu* Instruction

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Abstract

Prepositional phrases in Arabic and Indonesian both occupy the predicate position in nominal sentences, yet the two languages differ in their systems of predication. This difference is predicted to cause syntactic interference for Indonesian-speaking learners of Arabic, and it calls for a contrastive description of how prepositional phrase predicates are formed in each language. This study describes the syntactic structure of prepositional phrase predicates in Arabic and Indonesian nominal sentences, identifies their similarities and differences, and formulates the implications of these findings for the teaching of *nahwu* (Arabic syntax). This qualitative study uses a content analysis design, operationalized through an Applied Contrastive Analysis procedure in four stages: description, selection, contrast, and prediction. The data comprise 60 Arabic items from *al-Ḥikam* by Ibn ʻAṭāʾillāh al-Sakandarī and 58 Indonesian items from *Seni Merayu Tuhan* by Husein Jaʼfar al-Hadar. Data were collected through documentary study using observation and note-taking, and then analyzed using the distributional method and the identity method. Each corpus yielded eleven semantic categories in the Arabic data and six in the Indonesian data. The Arabic data are semantically varied, led by partitive (18.33%), benefactive (16.67%), and possessive (15.00%) meanings, whereas the Indonesian data concentrate on the genuine locative (55.17%, 32 items). Twenty-three Arabic items (38.33%) have no corresponding equivalent in

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the Indonesian corpus. Structurally, although prepositional phrases in Arabic occupy the predicate position, the genuine predicate is the elided element with existential meaning (*muta'allaq maḥżūf*), the view designated as preferred (*al-qawl al-rājiḥ)* among those recorded in the nahwu tradition. In Indonesian, prepositional phrases function as independent, self-standing genuine predicates. This difference predicts interference for Indonesian learners, particularly in inferring the *muta'allaq maḥżūf*, and leads to three contrastive-based learning strategies. The surface similarity between Arabic and Indonesian prepositional phrase predicates does not reflect equivalent underlying grammatical systems. The rules of *ta'alluq* and *muta'allaq maḥżūf* should be taught explicitly and consistently to prevent syntactic interference.

Keywords: Contrastive analysis; *khabar syibh al-jumlah; naḥwu* instruction; prepositional phrase predicate; syntax

Introduction

The status of prepositional phrase predicates in Arabic nominal sentences remains a dynamic issue in modern linguistics (Assiri, 2021; Nadir & Latifa, 2023). Although debate persists regarding the existence of a hidden copula (Al-Horais, 2021; Althawab, 2022; Errguig & Jmila, 2025), the *nahwu* tradition records the view, designated as preferred, that this phrase (*syibh al-jumlah*) is not syntactically independent and necessarily requires linkage (*ta'alluq*) to an elided existential element (Al-ʿAsymāwī, 2010; Ibn Malik, 2006). By contrast, standard Indonesian grammar establishes that prepositional phrases can legitimately function as independent main predicates (Alwi et al., 2017; Besier, 2021; Satyawati et al., 2021). This gap between the two grammatical systems creates an illusion of surface-structure equivalence that obscures divergence at the level of deep structure (Qistifani, 2019), a divergence that generative tree diagrams can make visible (Chomsky, 1957). This surface-level similarity can be observed in the genre of reflective religious texts, such as *al-Ḥikam* by Ibn 'Aṭā'illāh and *Seni Merayu Tuhan* by Husein Ja'far al-Hadar, both of which are characterized by semantic density achieved through the use of non-verbal sentence structures to convey ideas (Bafoevna & Khamidovna, 2025). Because classical texts of this kind rely on such non-verbal constructions, learners who analyze them encounter this divergence repeatedly, which makes it a practical problem for *nahwu* instruction and not only a theoretical one.

This typological divergence beneath the surface similarity is predicted to trigger syntactic interference and negative transfer for second-language learners (Jawad & Gatea, 2024). Given that Indonesian prepositional phrases constitute an unmarked construction, while Arabic requires a marked mechanism involving

the inference of an implicit element (Eckman, 1977), Indonesian learners may transfer the predicate-independence parameter of their first language into Arabic grammar. Empirical evidence from prior studies lends support to this assumption. At Islamic higher education institutions in Indonesia, 73% of students were reported to experience serious difficulty in grammatical analysis, and 61% in analyzing complex sentences (Ayatullah & Farhana, 2024). Preposition errors are also the largest category of learners' grammatical errors, accounting for 39% of all identified errors (Zulaeha, 2022). This is further reinforced by empirical findings from Rahmi et al. (2026), who identified that the ontogenic and epistemological obstacles faced by Indonesian learners in the topic of prepositions stem from a fundamental weakness in understanding *i'rab* markers and an inability to connect prepositions with the overall sentence structure. This interference has been found to persist even at the postgraduate level, where an analysis of graduate students' Arabic writing identified errors specifically in preposition use, including the erroneous combination of two prepositions within a single construction, attributable to the influence of Indonesian sentence structure (Muliansyah & Baroroh, 2020).

Through the Applied Contrastive Analysis approach (Fisiak, 1981; Whitman, 1970), potential difficulties and first-language interference can be projected before such errors are actually realized by learners, complementing error analysis, which instead validates them empirically in the field (Mabruroh, 2019). Without explicit instructional strategies, this difficulty in inferring deep structure may settle into cognitive fossilization that hinders advanced language acquisition (Alfaifi & Saleem, 2024).

Although the discourse on prepositional phrase predicates has been widely examined, most existing research remains monolingual in scope, limited to theoretical debates on copularity, or confined to general comparisons of phrase classification (Faraj, 2023; Mubarak et al., 2020; Sultan, 2022). A fundamental research gap therefore remains, namely the scarcity of studies that specifically link a contrastive analysis of Arabic-Indonesian prepositional phrase predicate structures to their pedagogical implications for *nahwu* instruction. In response to this gap, this study aims to describe the syntactic structure of prepositional phrase predicates in nominal sentences in both languages, identify their similarities and differences, and formulate the theoretical implications of these contrastive findings with a view to minimizing potential syntactic interference in *nahwu* instruction.

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach with a Content Analysis design (Krippendorff, 2018). The data sources are reflective religious texts: *al-Ḥikam* by Ibn ʻAṭāʾillāh al-Sakandarī (Arabic) and *Seni Merayu Tuhan* by Husein

Ja'far al-Hadar (Indonesian). Because the Arabic edition used (Toha Putra, Semarang) is the commentary *Syarḥ al-Ḥikam* by Ibn 'Abbād al-Rundī, only the *matn* enclosed in parentheses was treated as data. The inclusion criterion is nominal sentences with a prepositional phrase predicate, operationalized as *jarr-majrūr* and *ẓarf* constructions functioning as *khabar* in Arabic, and prepositional phrases occupying the non-verbal predicate function in Indonesian. Constructions preceded by *nawāsikh* are also included, because in the Arabic grammatical tradition the *khabar* remains a *khabar* after the entry of a *nāsikh*: only its status and case change, not its function. Examples are *min tamām al-ni'ma 'alayka an yarzuqaka mā yakfīk* (Arabic, inverted order) and *Sesungguhnya shalatku, ibadahku, hidupku, dan matiku hanyalah untuk Allah* (Indonesian, normal order).

Data were collected through documentary study using the observation method and note-taking technique (Sudaryanto, 2015). The entire corpus of each text was reviewed, and each candidate sentence was recorded on a data card and re-checked repeatedly against the inclusion criterion. Verbal clauses and sentences without a prepositional phrase in the relevant function were removed, leaving 60 Arabic and 58 Indonesian items. Validity was supported by analytical criteria from established sources (Al-Ghalayaini, 2019; Alwi et al., 2017; Ibn Malik, 2006) and by review of the classification by the research supervisor, an expert in *nahwu* and contrastive analysis. Reliability was supported by an auditable trail of data cards and analysis sheets, and by repeated re-checking. Coding was done by one researcher, without an independent second coder or an inter-coder agreement test.

Analysis follows Fisiak's (1981) Applied Contrastive Analysis through Whitman's (1970) four stages: description (Immediate Constituent Analysis), selection (Determinant Element Sorting), contrast (Compare-Equalize and Compare-Differentiate techniques), and prediction. In the prediction stage, each point of divergence was projected as a potential difficulty for Indonesian-speaking learners based on negative transfer (Abdurrahman, 2014; Lado, 1957) and markedness (Eckman, 1977), and pedagogical implications were formulated. These predictions are theoretical projections and were not tested empirically with learners.

Findings

Distribution of Semantic Categories and Syntactic Patterns of Prepositional Phrase Predicates

An examination of 60 Arabic data items and 58 Indonesian data items yielded eleven semantic categories of prepositions in the Arabic data and six in the Indonesian data. In the Arabic data, the partitive meaning was recorded as the most dominant, with 11 items (18.33%), while in the Indonesian data, the genuine locative meaning was the most dominant, with a total of 32 items

(55.17%). The frequency distribution and percentages of semantic categories are summarized in Table 1, and the distribution of syntactic patterns in Table 2 below:

Table 1. Distribution of Semantic Categories

Semantic Category	Arabic		Indonesian	
	N	%	N	%
Partitive	11	18.33%	11	18.97%
Benefactive	10	16.67%	6	10.34%
Genuine Locative	5	8.33%	32	55.17%
Metaphorical Locative	4	6.67%	-	-
Source Directional	6	10.00%	1	1.72%
Goal Directional	3	5.00%	2	3.45%
Similative	2	3.33%	6	10.34%
Possessive	9	15.00%	-	-
Causal	7	11.67%	-	-
Referential	2	3.33%	-	-
Purposive	1	1.67%	-	-
Total	**60**	**100%**	**58**	**100%**

Table 2. Distribution of Syntactic Patterns

Arabic	N	%	Indonesian	N	%
Normal	27	45.00%	Without copula or existential verb	22	37.93%
Inversion	14	23.33%	With copula	13	22.41%
Nawāsikh + Normal	11	18.33%	With existential verb	23	39.66%
Nawāsikh + Inversion	8	13.33%			
Total	**60**	**100%**	**Total**	**58**	**100%**

As shown in Table 2, the Arabic data are more often in normal order (38 items, 63.33%, including those with *nawāsikh*) than in inverted order (22 items, 36.67%). *Nawāsikh* occur in 19 Arabic items (31.67%). In the Indonesian data, constructions with an existential verb (23 items, 39.66%) and without a copula or existential verb (22 items, 37.93%) are almost equally frequent, followed by constructions with a copula (13 items, 22.41%).

As shown in Table 1, a contrast in semantic orientation is observed between the two languages. In the Indonesian corpus, prepositional phrase predicate constructions are concentrated in the genuine locative meaning, reaching 55.17% (32 items). By contrast, the Arabic corpus shows a more varied semantic distribution, dominated by partitive (18.33%), benefactive (16.67%), and possessive (15.00%) meanings. In addition, 23 Arabic data (38.33%), covering metaphorical locative, possessive, causal, referential, and purposive meanings, have no corresponding equivalent as a prepositional phrase predicate in the Indonesian corpus. This absence should be read as a limitation of the corpus, not as a claim that Indonesian lacks such constructions. Since the Indonesian data come from a single reflective religious text, these meanings may well occur as prepositional phrase predicates in other Indonesian corpora. The finding therefore marks categories where correspondence could not be established here, and where a broader corpus is needed. It does not affect the predicted interference, which rests on the structural divergence between binding to an elided element and independent predication, and holds in all categories where both languages are attested.

In the Indonesian data, three types of prepositional phrase predicate constructions were found: a construction without a copula or existential verb, a construction with a copula ("adalah" and similar forms), and a construction with an existential verb ("ada," "berada," "menetap," and similar forms). The construction without a copula or existential verb represents the basic construction, showing that Indonesian identifies grammatical function through word order: when a prepositional phrase occurs after the subject, it automatically occupies the predicate function without requiring any implicit element. A copula or existential verb can be added optionally, either to remove ambiguity or to make explicit the existential meaning already contained within the prepositional phrase. It should be noted that the presence of an existential verb changes the function of the structure: the verb itself then occupies the predicate position, while the prepositional phrase shifts to become a modifier of it.

Recapitulation of Syntactic Convergence and Divergence

The contrastive analysis of the entire dataset yields three points of convergence at the surface-structure level and nine points of divergence at the deep-structure level, as summarized in Table 3 and Table 4.

Table 3. Syntactic Convergence of Arabic and Indonesian Prepositional Phrase Predicates

No	Syntactic Aspect	Arabic and Indonesian
1	Position of the prepositional phrase	Occupies the predicate position without the lexical presence of a verb

No	Syntactic Aspect	Arabic and Indonesian
2	Construction order	Permits both normal and inverted order
3	Requirement of a copula	Does not require an explicit copula to occupy the predicate position (Indonesian allows an optional copula)

Table 4. Syntactic Divergence of Arabic and Indonesian Prepositional Phrase Predicates

No	Syntactic Aspect	Arabic	Indonesian
1	Independence status	The prepositional phrase is dependent	The prepositional phrase is independent
2	Predicative status	Occupies the predicate position but is not the genuine predicate	A genuine predicate
3	Element binding	Obligatorily bound to an elided element (*muta'allaq maḥẕūf*)	Not bound to an elided element
4	Agreement rules	Agreement rules apply to the elided element	No agreement rules apply
5	Case system	Syntactic function is determined by final vowel change (*i'rab*)	Syntactic function is determined by word order
6	Operator intervention	The structure can be affected by syntactic operators (*nawāsikh*)	Free from the influence of syntactic operators
7	Existence of a copula	Has no copula system at all in the basic structure	Has an optional copula
8	Status of the existential element	Lexical, obligatory, and implicit; applies universally to all prepositions	Lexical, optional, and explicit; applies only to certain prepositions
9	Reconstruction system	Requires reconstruction (*taqdir*)	Does not require reconstruction

This recapitulation confirms that the equivalence between the two languages holds only at the level of surface structure. The Arabic prepositional phrase predicate structure requires a process of inferring an implicit element to

validate the predicative construction, whereas Indonesian relies on linearity and structural independence, in which word order takes over the function of inference in determining grammatical role, without the need for any additional element.

Discussion

This section interprets the findings in light of the *nahwu* tradition and previous studies. The finding that an Arabic prepositional phrase predicate is bound to an elided element is in line with Errguig (2025), Althawab (2022), and Nadir and Latifa (2023), and with Najah et al. (2022), who observe that this construction has no fully equivalent counterpart in Indonesian syntax. The finding that the Indonesian prepositional phrase stands independently, with an optional copula, agrees with Satyawati et al. (2021) and Besier (2021). Together, the two sets of findings support Qistifani's (2019) argument that surface similarity conceals divergence in grammatical systems, and extend it to prepositional phrase predicates, which earlier studies treated monolingually or through general phrase classification (Faraj, 2023; Mubarak et al., 2020; Sultan, 2022).

Mechanism of Binding to *Muta'allaq Maḥżūf* in Arabic

The descriptive analysis of all semantic categories in the Arabic data consistently shows that a prepositional phrase occupying the predicate position is obligatorily bound to a *muta'allaq maḥżūf*, an existential element elided from the surface structure but which must be inferred at the level of deep structure, typically in the form of the active participle *kā'in* or *mustaqirr*. Consider the following diagram:

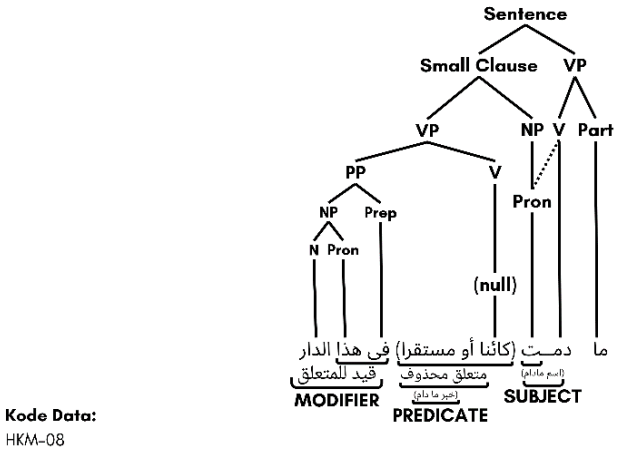


Figure 1. Genuine Locative, Normal Order with *Nawāsikh*

In this structure, the *nāsikh* verb *dāma,* preceded by *mā maṣdariyyah ẓarfiyyah,* enters the construction. The attached pronoun *–ta* becomes the *isim* of

dāma, while the *khabar,* formerly the *khabar al-mubtada',* becomes the *khabar* of *dāma,* with its case shifting from nominative to accusative. As noted in the Method section, *nawāsikh* constructions are included in our data because, in the Arabic grammatical tradition, the *khabar* remains a *khabar* after the entry of a *nāsikh:* what changes is its status and case, not its function. Accordingly, *dāma* is an incomplete verb (*fi'l nāqis*) and is not the predicate. The genuine *khabar* is the elided element (*muta'allaq maḥẓūf*), inferred as *kā'inan* or *mustaqirran,* and the prepositional phrase *fī hādhā al-dār* is not the predicate itself but a modifier bound to this inferred element.

As visualized in Figure 1, the V node in the tree diagram is labeled "(null)" directly above the label for the *muta'allaq maḥẓūf*. The presence of such an empty node draws on Chomsky's Transformational Generative Grammar: sentence derivation proceeds from deep structure to surface structure through transformational operations, including deletion, and syntactic positions can be filled by empty categories, elements that are syntactically active but have no phonetic realization at the surface, such as movement traces or PRO in infinitival clauses. On this logic, the absence of an overt pronunciation of the *muta'allaq maḥẓūf* does not represent its total absence, but rather the effect of a deletion process occurring during the transition from deep structure to surface structure (Abdurrahman, 2014). The "(null)" node therefore represents a structural position that is syntactically real, since it carries the predicate function, even though it is never pronounced. It should be noted that the inferred elements *kā'in* or *mustaqirr*, although morphologically classifiable as nouns, are still projected as fillers of the V position, since both behave as mixed categories: syntactically and semantically, they take a subject argument and carry a stative-existential meaning much like a verb. The VP label therefore refers to its syntactic function as a predicator, not to its categorial classification.

This analogy is illustrative, not a claim of equivalence between two theoretical frameworks from different eras. The concept of *taqdīr* in *nahwu* was formulated by Sībawayh and Ibn Mālik long before, and independently of, Chomsky's generative framework, with different theoretical motivations from the Empty Category Principle in X-bar theory or the Minimalist Program. The correspondence is limited to the shared premise that syntactic structure can host a functional element without phonetic realization, the analogy is presented only to help readers familiar with generative notation understand why the "(null)" node appears, not to equate its theoretical status with the empty category in *nahwu* itself.

Consider also the following diagram:

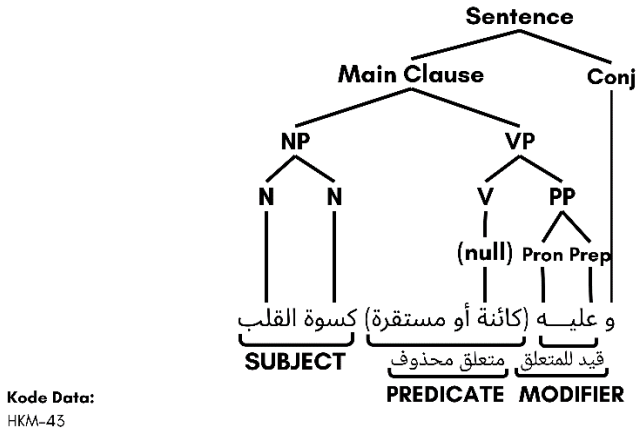


Figure 2. Metaphorical Locative, Inverted Order without Nawāsikh

Even without the entry of a cancelling operator, the binding rule still applies. The prepositional phrase *'alayhi* is bound to a *muta'allaq maḥẓūf* inferred as *ka'inatun* or *mustaqirratun* (singular feminine form, agreeing with the subject *kiswatu al-qalb*, which is also feminine). These three data items collectively show that the rule of *ta'alluq* applies consistently regardless of word order or the presence of a cancelling operator.

This binding of the prepositional phrase to *muta'allaq maḥẓūf* is one of several positions recorded in the *nahwu* tradition. In his gloss on *al-Ajurrūmiyyah,* al-'Asymawi (2010) summarizes three views on what constitutes the *khabar* when it takes the form of *syibh al-jumlah*. The first holds that the prepositional phrase alone is the *khabar*. The second holds that the elided element is the *khabar*. The third holds that both together are the *khabar*. Al-'Asymawi (2010) designates the second view as the preferred one.

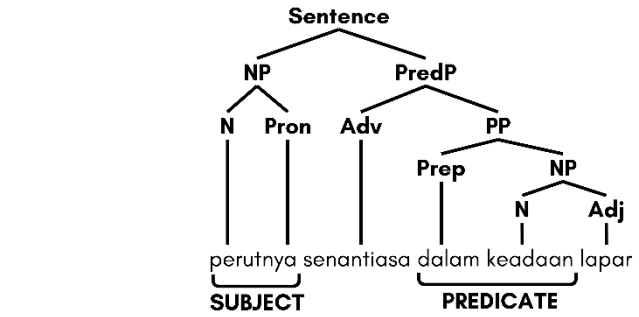
This study adopts the second view as its analytical framework, for two reasons. First, it is the view that al-'Asymawi (2010) designates as preferred. Second, it provides a uniform account of the binding mechanism observed across all semantic categories in the data. This choice does not imply that the other two views are invalid. They remain recorded positions in the tradition, and the present study simply adopts the one designated as preferred. Under this view, a prepositional phrase may occupy the predicate position, yet the genuine *khabar* is the elided element to which the phrase is bound. This is the distinction drawn throughout this article between predicate position and genuine predicate.

Independence of the Prepositional Phrase Predicate in Indonesian

In contrast to the pattern above, the Indonesian data for the same locative meaning show that a prepositional phrase can occupy the predicate

position without requiring a *muta'allaq maḥẓūf* or any other implicit element. The following three data items were selected specifically because each represents one of the three construction types identified earlier in the data-distribution section, allowing for direct comparison with the Arabic data discussed in the preceding subsection.

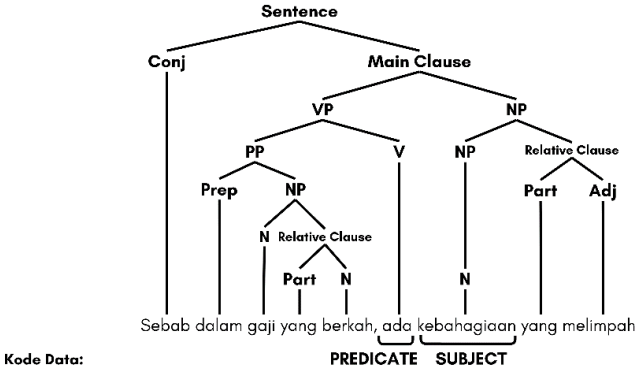
Consider also the following diagram:



Kode Data:
SMT-09

Figure 3. Pure Construction without a Copula or Existential Verb

The prepositional phrase *dalam keadaan lapar* ("in a state of hunger") stands directly as the predicate of the subject *perutnya* ("his/her stomach"), without any copula or existential verb. This construction shows that Indonesian identifies the predicate function through word order: once a prepositional phrase occupies the position after the subject, it automatically becomes a valid predicate without requiring the inference process for an implicit element that is obligatory in Arabic.



Kode Data:
SMT-16

Figure 4. Construction with an Existential Verb

In this construction, the prepositional phrase *sebab dalam gaji yang berkah* ("because [it lies] within blessed earnings") no longer functions as the predicate, since the predicate position is explicitly occupied by the existential verb *ada* ("to be/exist"). The prepositional phrase instead shifts to function as a modifier of that verb. This finding is significant for cross-linguistic discussion: an existential verb such as *ada* in Indonesian is semantically comparable to the *muta'allaq maḥẓūf* in Arabic, since both carry existential meaning. The difference, and this is the critical point, is that Indonesian allows this verb to be made explicit at the surface structure, whereas Arabic requires its elision.

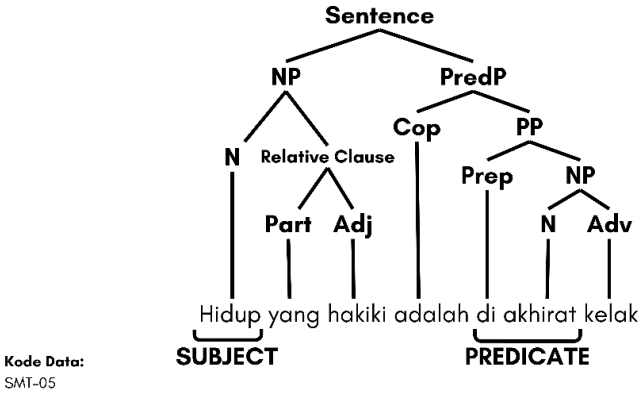


Figure 5. Construction with a Copula

The presence of the copula *adalah* ("is/to be") in this data item is not an obligatory element under the rules of Indonesian nominal sentences. Besier (2021) holds that the copula is optional rather than an inherent element of nominal sentence structure, functioning to distinguish subject from predicate and clarify intonational boundaries, a view reinforced by Satyawati et al. (2021), who note that a prepositional phrase predicate remains independent in conveying declarative meaning whether the copula is present or omitted. Comparing this with the Arabic data highlights a contrast: Arabic recognizes only one structural path for the prepositional phrase predicate, dependence on an obligatorily elided *muta'allaq maḥẓūf*, whereas Indonesian is flexible across three optional structural paths. Since the Indonesian copula functions as a predication-marking particle rather than a verbal category (Alwi et al., 2017; Besier, 2021), the predicate structure in the tree diagram for this construction is projected not as VP but as PredP (Predicate Phrase), a functional head proposed by Bowers (1993) to license the predication relation independently of the lexical category filling the predicate. The "Cop" node thus represents the Pred head filled by *adalah*, distinct from the V node in the earlier diagrams, a distinction reflecting the difference in categorial status of the predicator across the two languages, not an inconsistency.

The Position of This Study within the Debate on the Null Copula

The status of the Arabic prepositional phrase predicate remains a site of debate among contemporary linguists. Al-Horais (2021) rejects the existence of a null copula, arguing that Arabic nominal sentences fundamentally require no copula, whether implicit or explicit. Errguig (2025) responds by arguing that nominative case on the predicate is not determined purely by the presence or absence of a copula but can be derived directly from a temporal element, such that positing an implicit copula remains tenable. Althawab (2022) advances a similar hypothesis that such constructions contain a hidden copula occupying the function of the core element, a view further supported by Nadir and Latifa (2023).

This study takes a position between these two camps. The existence of an elided element at the level of deep structure is accepted as a necessity, in line with Errguig (2025), Althawab (2022), and Nadir and Latifa (2023), but this study rejects characterizing that element as a copula, aligning instead with Al-Horais's (2021) rejection of a copulative status. This position draws on Ibn Mālik (2006) in his *Alfiyyah*, who allows for the inference of an elided *kāna*, specifically *kāna al-tāmmah* ("complete kāna," carrying existential meaning) rather than *kāna al-nāqiṣah* ("deficient kāna," which assigns accusative case and functions as a linking copula), or alternatively an active participle derived from it. Under both inferences, the elided element is the predicate itself rather than a copula linking subject and predicate, while the prepositional phrase serves merely as a modifier bound to it, a view reinforced by Mubarak et al. (2020), who posit an implicit grammatical factor that must be inferred to secure the sentence's meaningfulness and the validity of the predicative relation.

Predicted Potential Syntactic Interference

Building on the nine points of divergence in Table 4, the prediction stage within the Applied Contrastive Analysis framework (Fisiak, 1981) leads this study to identify four potential syntactic interferences for Indonesian learners studying Arabic as a second language. Lado (1957) states that one source of interference is divergence between a learner's first language and the second language being learned.

First, the overall divergence in predication systems is predicted to generate interference, since the Arabic prepositional phrase may be treated as capable of standing alone as a predicate, as is common in the "pure without copula/existential verb" construction in Indonesian (Figure 3) (22 of the 58 Indonesian items, 37.93%; Table 2), causing the obligatory inference of the *muta'allaq maḥẕūf* to be overlooked. This divergence can be explained through Eckman's (1977) Markedness Differential Hypothesis: predication via a prepositional phrase is unmarked in Indonesian but marked in Arabic. Based on Wardhaugh's (1970) contrastive-analysis approach, the cognitive transition from

an unmarked first-language rule to a marked second-language rule can trigger syntactic interference. Al-Omari et al. (2020) link this to an acquisition hierarchy in which learners take a cognitive shortcut by analogizing first-language rules onto the second language. If left unaddressed by explicit instructional strategies, this could lead to fossilized interference, as noted by Selinker (1972).

This point carries a dual nuance worth noting. As shown by Data SMT-16 (Figure 4), and by the 23 Indonesian items (39.66%) that contain an existential verb (Table 2), the existential-verb construction in Indonesian in fact contains an element that is semantically comparable to the *muta'allaq maḥẓūf*, namely the verb *ada* ("to exist") and similar forms. This correspondence may serve as a source of positive transfer, if learners recognize that the predication of Arabic prepositional phrases obligatorily requires such an existential element. However, this same correspondence may equally become a source of negative transfer if that element is rendered explicit in form when translated into Arabic, given that Arabic instead requires its absolute elision at the surface structure.

Second, even where learners recognize the need for an inferred element, the absence in their first language of any rule for inferring an elided element is predicted to create a distinct difficulty in determining the correct form and type of *muta'allaq maḥẓūf* at the level of deep structure.

Third, the agreement rules for gender and number on the *muta'allaq maḥẓūf* are predicted to be overlooked, given that Indonesian does not mark gender or number agreement between subject and predicate (Alwi et al., 2017). This prediction aligns with Weinreich's (1953) concept of under differentiation, whereby the absence of a corresponding rule in the first language, while such a rule exists in the second language, leads learners to disregard the distinction. This prediction is also consistent with the findings of Nashoih and Darmawan (2019), who show that agreement rules constitute the largest source of error for Indonesian learners, as well as Najah et al. (2022), who found gender and number mismatches to be the most dominant error in constructing Arabic nominal sentences.

Fourth, the change in grammatical case (*i'rab*) on the *muta'allaq maḥẓūf* triggered by the entry of a cancelling operator (a construction found in 19 of the 60 Arabic items, 31.67%; Table 2) is predicted to constitute an even more intricate point of difficulty, as learners are confronted with two layers of abstraction simultaneously: the obligation to infer an unwritten element and, at the same time, to adjust its case marking according to the operator affecting it, while the surface structure of the prepositional phrase itself shows no visible change whatsoever.

It should be emphasized that the four points above are theoretical projections derived from the prediction stage of the Applied Contrastive

Analysis, not conclusions drawn from direct observation of learners' actual language errors in the field. As Tarigan (2009) cautions, the first language remains a potential source of interference, although it must be acknowledged that learners may also make errors due to factors unrelated to first-language influence.

Implications for *Nahwu* Instruction

Building on the four predictions above, this study formulates three directions of implication for *nahwu* instruction, particularly for the chapter on prepositional phrase predication.

1. Introducing the *Ta'alluq* Rule from the Early Stages of Instruction

This principle rests on the distinction among three word classes in Arabic. Particles (including prepositions) are words whose meaning is incomplete unless paired with another word category, unlike nouns and verbs, which carry complete meaning on their own. From a psycholinguistic perspective, introducing this rule is projected to accustom learners to deep cognitive processing, so that they are not left relying on shallow processing that stops at the surface structure. The importance of applying such a functional and contextual approach to *nahwu* aligns with the findings of Azizah and Nashoih (2024), who demonstrate that reorienting *nahwu* instruction toward a functional framework can significantly improve learners' grammatical understanding compared with rigid rule-memorization approaches.

This study recommends that instructors familiarize learners with *i'rab* formulas drawn from classical *nahwu* literature, for example, "min: ḥarfu jarrin aṣliyyun yaḥtāju ilā muta'allaq yata'allaqu bih", without presenting the entire complex detail of the *ta'alluq* rule at the outset, in accordance with the principle of gradation, as emphasized by Khanabadi et al. (2026).

2. Deconstructing the Practice of Oversimplifying I'rab Formulations at the Beginner Level

This study takes issue with the tendency in some teaching materials to simplify (or omit) *i'rab* patterns into abbreviated formulas without addressing the necessity of inferring the *muta'allaq maḥẕūf* at all, a tendency traceable to the nahwu-simplification movement pioneered by Shauqi Ḍayf and Mahdī al-Makhzūmī, intended to ease the cognitive burden on beginners and still developed today (Mustofa et al., 2024). However, as shown by Holilulloh et al. (2021), this simplification may undermine the rule for inferring the elided element, which is fundamental rather than a mere additional detail.

Rahmi et al. (2026) similarly emphasize that neglecting the basic rules of *i'rab* and prepositional binding has been found to give rise to epistemological obstacles that prevent learners from understanding case changes following a

preposition. This study therefore recommends an *i'rab* formulation for beginners, as exemplified in *Sharḥ Mukhtaṣar Jiddan 'alā Matn al-Ājurrūmiyyah*, for instance: "al-jarr wal-majrūr muta'alliq bi ism maḥżūf wujūban taqdīruhu kā'in aw mustaqirr khabar al-mubtada'" ("the jarr-majrūr is bound to an elided noun, which must be inferred as kā'in or mustaqirr, serving as the khabar of the mubtada'").

3. Contrastive-Based Teaching Strategy for Muta'allaq Maḥżūf Using Indonesian as a Reference

This strategy addresses a concrete problem: how to determine the correct position of the *muta'allaq maḥżūf* when a sentence contains a succession of consecutive prepositional phrases, common in complex Arabic texts. The three Indonesian predicate-construction patterns established earlier serve as an equivalence standard for testing candidate cut points, following Alamin et al.'s (2024) view that such functional syntactic marking strengthens learners' analytical tools for complex sentence structures. The procedure comprises three stages: formulating a control formula, then applying it to sentences in normal and in inverted order.

a. Formulating the Control Formula

Instructors guide learners to first identify the subject, then have them insert a separator (namely the inferred *kā'in* or *mustaqirr*) directly before the prepositional phrase suspected of functioning as the predicate. The resulting segmentation is then evaluated against Indonesian sentence patterns: if the meaning is coherent and the structure is valid in Indonesian, that position marks the correct cut point; conversely, if the meaning breaks down or the sentence remains incomplete, the segmentation is incorrect. This procedure is expressed in two formulas:

Pure normal order:

[Subject] + [*kā'in*/*mustaqirr*] + [Prepositional Phrase]

Pure inverted order:

[Prepositional Phrase] + [kā'in/mustaqirr] + [Delayed Subject]

b. Application to Sentences in Normal Order

As an illustration, consider the following example drawn from *al-Ḥikam*, which serves as data in this study:

الحزن على فقدان الطاعة مع عدم النهوض إليها من علامات الاغترار.

This sentence contains four consecutive prepositional phrases: *'alā fuqdāni al-ṭā'ah, ma'a 'adami al-nuhūḍ, ilaihā, and min 'alāmāti al-ightirār*. Learners test

each phrase in turn as a candidate cut point, [al-huzn] + [ka'in/mustaqirr] + [prepositional phrase], checking the result against Indonesian sentence patterns:

Table 5. Candidate Cut Points for A Normal-Order Sentence

Candidate Cut Point	Pure	With Copula	With Existential Verb
'alā fuqdāni al-ṭā'ah	Kesedihan atas hilangnya ketaatan	Kesedihan adalah atas hilangnya ketaatan	Kesedihan ada atas hilangnya ketaatan
ma'a 'adami al-nuhūḍ	Kesedihan beserta tidak bangkit	Kesedihan adalah beserta tidak bangkit	Kesedihan ada beserta tidak bangkit
ilaihā	Kesedihan kepadanya	Kesedihan adalah kepadanya	Kesedihan ada kepadanya
min 'alāmāti al-ightirār	Kesedihan di antara tanda-tanda tertipu	Kesedihan adalah di antara tanda-tanda tertipu	Kesedihan ada di antara tanda-tanda tertipu

Each candidate yields a grammatical short sentence in isolation, so the decisive test is whether the full original meaning survives once the remaining phrasea are reattached as modifiers. Only the fourth cut point satisfies this:

[*al-ḥuzn 'alā fuqdāni al-ṭā'ah ma'a 'adami al-nuhūḍi ilaihā*] + [*kā'in/mustaqirr*] + [*min 'alāmāti al-ightirār*]

[Kesedihan atas hilangnya ketaatan serta tidak bangkit untuk melakukannya] + [adalah] + [sebagian dari tanda-tanda tertipu]

The number of trials scales with the number of prepositional phrases in the sentence.

c. Application to Sentences in Inverted Order

The second example is likewise drawn from al-Ḥikam:

من علامات الاعتماد على العمل نقصان الرجاء عند وجود الزلل.

This sentence is structured in inverted order with three consecutive prepositional phrases, namely *min 'alāmāti al-i'timād, 'alā al-'amal, and 'inda wujūdi al-zalal*, while the delayed subject is *nuqṣānu al-rajā'*. Learners apply the second formula by placing the separator after each phrase, testing each candidate cut point against Indonesian sentence patterns:

Table 6. Candidate Cut Points for an Inverted-Order Sentence

Candidate Cut Point	Pure	With Copula	With Existential Verb
min 'alāmāti al-i'timād	Di antara tanda-tanda mengandalkan (amal), kurangnya rasa harap	Di antara tanda-tanda mengandalkan (amal) adalah kurangnya rasa harap	Di antara tanda-tanda mengandalkan (amal) terdapat kurangnya rasa harap
'alā al-'amal	Atas amal, kurangnya harapan	Atas amal adalah kurangnya harapan	Atas amal ada kurangnya harapan
'inda wujūdi al-ẓalal	Ketika adanya kesalahan, kurangnya harapan	Ketika adanya kesalahan adalah kurangnya harapan	Ketika adanya kesalahan ada kurangnya harapan

Only the first candidate yields a result that remains coherent once the full sentence is reassembled. The second and third instead break down or leave the meaning incomplete when checked against the whole. The correct cut point is therefore the first:

[*min 'alāmāti al-i'timādi 'alā al-'amal*] + [*kā'in/mustaqirr*] + [*nuqṣānu al-rajā'i 'inda wujūdi al-ẓalal*]

[di antara tanda-tanda mengandalkan amal] + [adalah] + [kurangnya rasa harap ketika adanya kesalahan]

When a cancelling operator enters the tested sentence, the same procedure applies; only the grammatical case of the inferred word (nominative or accusative) changes, depending on the operator involved.

These three implications are theoretical and preventive, derived from contrastive grammatical logic, and their effectiveness in actual teaching practice still requires further testing, e.g. through classroom action research. As supporting evidence, Nashoih and Darmawan (2019) found that contrastive-analysis-based syntax materials raised learning outcomes from around 50% to 80%, with prepositional-phrase binding identified as one of eight major interference errors; Raswan (2018) reports similar effectiveness for contrastive-based Arabic instruction generally. Both studies offer general support rather than a direct test of the specific strategy proposed here.

Conclusion

The contrastive analysis of 60 Arabic and 58 Indonesian data items confirms the study's initial premise, the surface-level similarity between prepositional phrase predicates in the two languages does not reflect equivalence at the level of deep structure, where nine points of grammatical divergence emerge. The Arabic predicate is dependent, obligatorily bound to an elided *muta'allaq maḥẓūf*, here argued to be the existential *kāna al-tāmmah* rather than a copula, while the Indonesian predicate is independent, realized through three optional construction types. These divergences translate into four theoretically predicted points of syntactic interference, informing three pedagogical implications: introducing the *ta'alluq* rule early in instruction, reconsidering simplified *i'rab* formulations that omit the *muta'allaq maḥẓūf*, and applying a contrastive segmentation strategy based on Indonesian predicate patterns.

As these implications remain theoretical and the corpus is limited to two religious reflective texts, future research should empirically test their classroom effectiveness and extend the analysis to a broader range of text genres, in order to strengthen and generalize the predictions proposed here. Semantic categories absent from the Indonesian corpus may be attested in other corpora, which a broader dataset could clarify.

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Author Contributions Statement

VR conceptualized the research, designed the methodology, and wrote the original draft of the manuscript. MA supervised the research process, provided expert guidance on the contrastive analysis, and validated the findings. KN critically reviewed and edited the manuscript to ensure academic rigor and clarity.

AI Writing Statement

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used Scopus AI, NotebookLM, and Claude to assist with literature exploration, idea organization, and language editing. The authors carefully reviewed and edited the content generated with the assistance of AI and take full responsibility for the final content of this manuscript.

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