

Quantity Adjectives in Syrian Arabic
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Abstract: In this paper, I offer a diachronic explanation for differences between the quantificational terms *ktīr* ‘much/many’ and *ʔalīl* ‘little/few’ in contemporary Syrian Arabic, on the basis of their distribution in the Shami corpus of that dialect. While *ʔalīl* behaves like an ordinary adjective, *ktīr* shows a wider distribution and is less robustly inflected. But revealingly, the distribution and prevalence of the inflected forms of *ktīr* is roughly on par with the distribution and prevalence of *ʔalīl*. I conclude that *ktīr* and *ʔalīl* functioned as quantity adjectives in the parent language, but that *ktīr* underwent a diachronic split in the development of contemporary Syrian Arabic, in which it took on a use as a degree quantifier, which has a wider distribution than an adjective and does not show agreement. The degree quantifier use of *ktīr* lives side-by-side with the adjectival use that displays agreement (known as ‘layering’), but the adjectival use of *ktīr* is now as marginal as *ʔalīl*. On this analysis, the differences between *ktīr* and *ʔalīl* in Syrian Arabic are an epiphenomenon of the near total loss of quantificational adjectives per se, together with the unrelated reanalysis of *ktīr* as an quantificational element.

Keywords: Adjectives, degree semantics, diachronic semantics, Syrian Arabic

1. Introduction

This chapter seeks to explain striking differences in distribution and prevalence between the quantity terms *ktīr* ‘much/many’ and *ʔalīl* ‘little/few’ in the Shami Corpus of Syrian Arabic (Kwaik 2018).¹ The Shami corpus is a roughly 500,000 word corpus harvested automatically from internet texts posted by individuals known to write in Syrian Arabic. Its content appears to be primarily short stories and television dramas. ‘Quantity terms’ are terms that must occur in the vicinity of a ‘scalar associate’, usually adjacent to it. ‘Scalar words’ denote a property that can be instantiated to a greater or lesser degree (gradable adjectives or verbs and plural or mass nouns). *ktīr* and *ʔalīl* are ‘antonyms’; positive differences on the *ktīr* scale correlate with negative differences on the *ʔalīl* scale (as with *tall/short*, *wide/narrow*, etc.).

I describe the use and distribution of *ktīr* and *ʔalīl* in Syrian Arabic in sections 2 and 3 below on the basis of corpus data. In section 4 I conclude that both are moribund as quantificational adjectives but that *ktīr* has acquired a use as degree quantifier, in which it remains highly productive.

2. The distribution of *ktīr*

ktīr may pre- or post-modify a predicate adjective.²

¹ The corpus is of Levantine Arabic and consists of subcorpora for Syrian, Lebanese, Palestinian and Jordanian, available at <https://github.com/GU-CLASP/shami-corpus>. The occasional native speaker grammaticality judgments reported here were graciously provided by H. Al-Khaled, Bushra Al-Shalabi and Samah Alouch.

² Following Noyer’s (1992) theory of Arabic morphology, the glossing of the examples only notates deviations from the default features third person, masculine and singular. A

- (1) a. mašāʕr-i kân-it ktîr mxarbaʕ-a.
 feelings-my be.PFV-PL very confused-PL
 ‘My feelings were very confused.’
 b. l-ʕālam kân-u taʕbān-în ktîr.
 the-world be.PFV-PL tired-PL very
 ‘Everyone was very tired.’

And it may pre- or post-modify an attributive adjective.

- (2) a. fî maʕṣam ktîr ḥilu hûn.
 EXIST restaurant very nice here
 ‘There is a very nice restaurant here.’
 b. smiʕ-t xabar ḥilu ktîr l-yôm.
 hear.PFV-1S piece.of.news nice very the-day
 ‘I heard very nice news today.’

It may pre- or post-modify an adverb.

- (3) a. wa-ṭḥassan il-a wa-taʕāmal-a ktîr mnîḥ.
 and-improve.PVF to-her and-treat.PVF-her very well
 ‘And he improved toward her and treated her very well.’
 b. ʔafal-t-u mnîḥ ktîr.
 lock.PFV-1S-it well very
 ‘I locked it very well.’

It may also itself function as an adverb, either preceding or following a scalar verb.

- (4) a. abū-ki ktîr ʕam yinʔahir
 father-your.F a lot PROG be.upset.IMPF
 ‘Your father is getting very upset.’
 b. wa-ḥālit-u ṭḥassan-it ktîr.
 and-condition-his improv.PVF-F a lot
 ‘His condition improved a lot.’

It may also function as a predicate.

- (5) a. wa-ixwāt-i ... kân-u ktîr.

form with no feature gloss is third person masculine singular, a form marked merely ‘F’ is third person feminine singular, etc. Noyer treats the imperfective prefix *yī-* as a default phonological filler for a prefixal position of exponence accompanying imperfective verb forms and here is neither glossed nor separated from the verb stem. These are not merely notational conventions but reflect a theory of Arabic inflectional morphology that eliminates feature redundancy among the pieces of morphology. Note that feminine singular forms are sometimes used to express plural agreement in Syrian (as in Standard) Arabic, especially with a non-human antecedent. These are glossed ‘PL’ even though the form is homophonous with ‘F’.

- and-brothers-my be.PFV-PL many
 ‘And my brothers ... were many.’
- b. hadūl kill-a il-ik wa-kān-u ktār ktār ktār.
 these all-them to-you.F and-be.PFV-PL many.PL many.PL many.PL
 ‘These [jewels] are all for you, and they were many, many, many.’

It also may pre- or post-modify a plural or mass noun.

- (6) a. tzakkar-t ktīr tafāṣīl.
 remembered-1S many details
 ‘I remembered many details.’
- b. mā b-a-ṣrif tafāṣīl ktīr ṣann-u.
 not IND-1S-know.IMPF details many about-him
 ‘I don’t know many details about him.’

When pre-modifying a noun, *ktīr* does not agree with the noun in number or gender. When post-modifying a noun, agreement is optional, as the contrast between (6b) and (7) shows.

- (7) xasar-t ašyā ktīr-a b-l-ḥarb.
 loose.PFV-1S things many-PL in-the-war
 ‘I lost many things in the war.’

ktīr may even be separated from its scalar associate by intervening structure, as in (8a), where the verb *baṣrif* ‘I know’ intervenes between the quantity term *ktīr* and its scalar associate *mnīḥ* ‘well’, and (8b), where the prepositional phrase *fī-ha* ‘in it’ intervenes between *ktīr* and its associate *nuḏūm* ‘stars’. This is highly unusual cross linguistically, though the phenomenon, known as ‘quantification at a distance’, is found to a limited extent in French (Kayne 1975, i.a.).

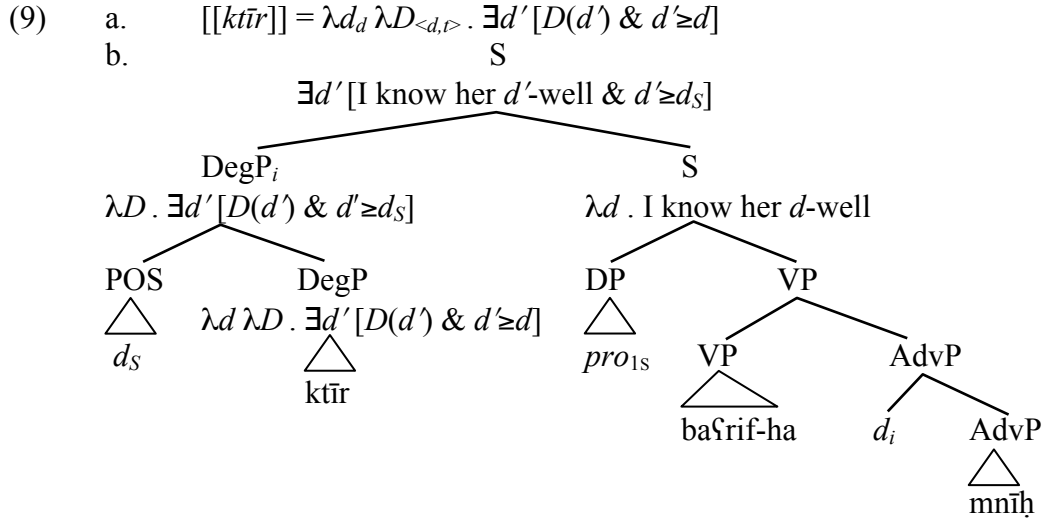
- (8) a. ana ktīr b-a-ṣrif-a mnīḥ.
 I much IND-1S-know.IMPF-her well
 ‘I know her very well.’
- b. s-samā kān-it ktīr fī-ha nuḏūm.
 the-skywas-PL many in-it stars
 ‘The sky had many stars in it.’

In summary, *ktīr*:

- may pre- or post-modify any gradable term.
- agrees only optionally in canonical agreement configurations (as attributive post-modifier or predicate)
- may be separated from its scalar associate (subject to restrictions)

These observations point to a analysis for *ktīr* in which it functions as degree quantifier, that is, as a term that combines with a degree predicate derived by syntactic displacement of *ktīr* (see Solt 2015 on *many/much* and Heim and Kratzer 1998 on the syntax of predicate abstraction). I propose that *ktīr* has the denotation in (9a), which says

that it holds of a degree d and a degree predicate D if D holds of a degree greater than d . This quantifier combines with a covert pronoun POS denoting a contextually determined standard, or expected degree d_s , so that *ktīr* in effect (that is, together with covert POS) means ‘more than standard’ (Cresswell 1976, von Stechow 1984). POS derives the ‘positive’ as opposed to comparative form of the term. Displacement of *ktīr* to the clause edge derives a degree predicate over the scope of the quantifier. Unlike other languages, this displacement is potentially overt in Arabic, as the examples in (8) show. The structure and semantic composition of (8a) is shown in (9b).



I propose that *ktīr*'s analysis as a degree quantifier accounts for its failure to agree in the displacement configurations (when it precedes its scalar associate), since in this use it is not functioning as an adjective. However, this raises the question of whether the agreeing instances such as (5b) and (7) are in fact adjectival after all, rather than degree quantificational, a question to which I return in section 4. In the following section, I turn to the distribution of *ʔalīl* and ways in which it contrasts with *ktīr*.

3. The distribution of *ʔalīl*

The word *ʔalīl*, including its various inflected forms, occurs only 62 times in the corpus, a striking scarcity that I return to below. On one hand, *ʔalīl* is not found modifying another adjective (predicative or attributive) or adverb, and native speakers judge this to be ungrammatical, as (10) illustrates (cf. (1b)). However, this restriction is not unique to Arabic, as the English translation to (10) shows, so does not warrant an Arabic-specific explanation.

- (10) *l-ʕālam kān-u taʕbān-īn ʔalīl.
 the-world be.PVF-PL tired-PL little
 (*‘Everyone was little (i.e., not very) tired.’)

ʔalīl occurs 31 times in predicate position. Of these occurrences, 10 mean something like ‘insignificant’, which I claim below is a conventionalized meaning for the standard quantity adjectival use of *ʔalīl* meaning ‘below standard’.

- (11) mā-nak ʔalīl.
not-you little
'You are not insignificant.' (i.e., don't underestimate yourself)

Six additional occurrences of predicate *ʔalīl* are what Cowell (1964, p. 466) calls 'adjective constructs', conventionalized constructions like *ʔalīl fahm* 'little [of] comprehension', *ʔalīl zōʔ*, 'little of taste', *ʔalīl šaraf* 'little [of] honor', and *ʔalīl tarbāye* 'little [of] upbringing'. Here, it is the nominal complement of *ʔalīl* that is 'little', though aside from this syntactic hallmark, *ʔalīl* itself seems to have the usual meaning of a quantity term, here 'below standard', as I elaborate below.

- (12) mā nāʔiṣ-ni šī bass žōz-i ʔalīl fahm bass.
not lacking-me thing but husband-my little comprehension just
'I am fine, but my husband is just a little dull-witted.'

The remaining 15 occurrences of predicate *ʔalīl* involve a fully productive adjectival use with no conventionalized component, with the subject functioning as its scalar associate.

- (13) maʕlūmāt-i ʔalīl-e.
informations-my few-PL
'My information is little.' (i.e., I don't have much information)

ʔalīl occurs 17 times as an attributive modifier of a noun, and there only as a post-modifier. Of these, one is *ʔalīl* in its conventionalized use meaning 'insignificant' in (14a), and four are conventionalized adjective constructs such as (14b).

- (14) a. w-awʔāt šī ʔalīl ʕalē-k.
and-times [that is] thing little on-you
'And sometimes [even that] is something little for you.' (=not enough to describe how bad you are)
b. mīn r-rižžāl ʔalīl š-šaraf illi ʕand-a žawwa.
who the-man little the-honor REL at-her inside
'Who is the dishonorable man inside with her?'

An additional ten occurrences of attributive *ʔalīl* involve modification of a time unit-denoting noun.

- (15) wa-ḡall asābīʕ ʔalīl-e ʔabl z-zafāf.
and-remained weeks few-PL before the-wedding
'And few weeks remained before the wedding.'

And the last two occurrences of attributive *ʔalīl* modify *kammiyye* 'amount'.

- (16) a. ēy, bass kammiyye ʔalīl-e.
yes, but amount little-F
'Yes, but a small amount.'
b. kammiyye ʔalīl-e min l-kammūn
amount little-F of the-cumin

‘a small amount of cumin’

ʔalīl occurs five times as an adverb, two in the construction *mā ... illa ʔalīl* ‘not ... but little’ and three in the construction *ʔalīl mā* ‘rarely’. It never occurs by itself as an adverb.

- (17) a. wa-ṣār mā yinām illa ʔalīl kirmāl-i.
and-start.PFV not sleep.IMPF but little because-me
‘And he started to sleep only little because of me.’
b. wa-ʔalīl mā mart ʕamm-i ti-nzil.
and-little that wife uncle-my F-come.down.IMPF
‘And my aunt rarely visits.’

Lastly, *ʔalīl* occurs seven times in vocative constructions. All occurrences are conventionalized adjective constructs. And it occurs once in the phrase *ʔa-l-ʔalīle* ‘at the least’, which is also a lexicalized expression since it has superlative meaning but not superlative morphology.

- (18) a. yā ʔalīl-it t-tarbāye
VOC little-F the-upbringing
‘hey you uncivilized [person]’
b. ʕa-l-ʔalīl-e yihāwil yiražžīʕ-ni maʕ-u
at-the-little-F try.IMPF return.IMPF-me with-him
‘At least he should try to bring me back with him.’

Unlike *ktīr*, *ʔalīl* cannot occur precede its modifyee and cannot be separated from its scalar associate. Counterparts of (15) and (8a) above are judged ungrammatical with *ʔalīl*.

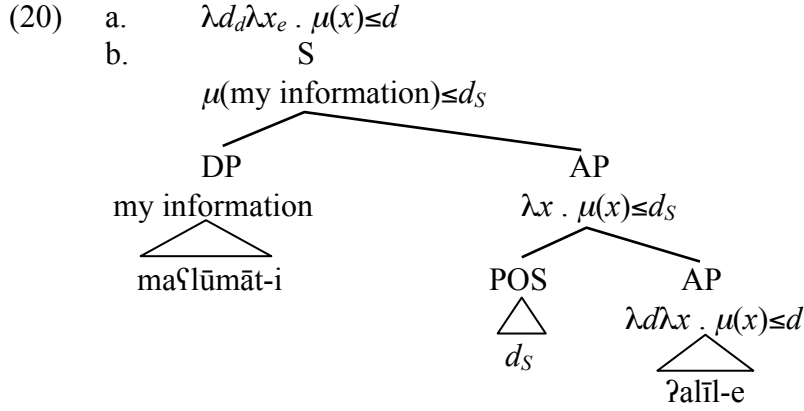
- (19) a. *wa-ḍall ʔalīl asābīʕ ʔabl z-zafāf.
and-remained few weeks before the-wedding
‘And few weeks remained before the wedding.’
b. *s-samā kān-it ʔalīl fī-ha nužūm.
the-sky be.PFV-PL little in-it stars
(‘The sky had few stars in it.’)

In summary, *ʔalīl*:

- occurs only as a post-modifier of a gradable term.
- agrees obligatorily in canonical agreement configurations (as attributive post-modifier or predicate).
- cannot be separated from its scalar associate.

That is, *ʔalīl* functions in every respect like a true adjective, unlike *ktīr*. This points to a denotation for *ʔalīl* that gives it the semantic type of a gradable adjective, which is the type of a degree relation such as (20a) (Cresswell 1976). Here, *ʔalīl* combines with a degree and an individual and asserts that the measure of the individual ‘ $\mu(x)$ ’ is less than a value d . I assume again that the standard value is provided by the

covert degree denoting pronoun POS. The function μ maps an individual to an appropriate quantity, subject to certain semantic constraints (see Schwarzschild 2006). If x is a plural individual, it maps x to its cardinality, but μ may also receive a conventionalized interpretation such as what it displays in (11), where it maps an individual to some assessment of their social worth. The composition of the simple case of predicate *ʔalīl* seen in (13) looks like (20b) according to this proposal.



4. Discussion

As mentioned above, *ʔalīl* occurs only 62 times in the corpus. Its antonym *ktīr*, on the other hand, occurs 3,041 times, a ratio of 49.2 : 1, which makes *ʔalīl* vanishingly rare in Syrian. By comparison, the counterparts in Modern Standard Arabic occur in a ratio of 4 : 1.³

It appears that *ʔalīl* is moribund in contemporary Syrian Arabic and is no longer used productively. This conclusion is corroborated by the fact that, as reported above, *ʔalīl* tends to occur in conventionalized expressions like certain adjective constructs, time intervals and expressions of worth (meaning ‘insignificant’). The abundance of such fixed collocations in the small number of occurrences of *ʔalīl* in the corpus paint a picture in which *ʔalīl* is no longer productive, and mainly survives in idioms.

One last observation, though, contributes an important new dimension to the matter. *ktīr* has four inflected forms: the plural forms *ktār*, *ktīrīn*, and feminine *ktīrāt*, and feminine singular *ktīra*, also used for the plural, especially with non-human nouns. *ʔalīl* has the same derivatives *ʔāl*, *ʔalīlīn*, *ʔalīlāt* and *ʔalīle*. The inflected forms of *ʔalīl* account for about half of its occurrences in the Shami corpus, as the table on the left below shows, meaning that bare and inflected *ʔalīl* stand in a ratio of about 1 : 1. But the inflected forms of *ktīr* account for only a tiny fraction of its occurrences, as the table on the right shows. Bare *ktīr* outnumbers all of its inflected forms by a ratio of 59.8 : 1.

³ This ratio is calculated based on the number of occurrences of *kaṭīr* and *qalīl* in the modern literature subcorpus of the Arabic corpus (Parkinson 2020; www.arabiccorpus.byu.edu), which is close in genre to the Shami corpus. The count ignores occurrences of the terms *qalīl-an* ‘[a] little-ACC’ or *qalīl min* ‘[a] little of’ both of which are used to mean ‘a little’, which corresponds more closely to the meaning of Syrian Arabic *šwayy* ‘a little’ and is therefore not semantically commensurate with *ʔalīl* in Syrian. With this exclusion, *kaṭīr* occurs 1,373 times and *qalīl* 342 times.

item	number of occurrences	total	item	number of occurrences	total
bare <i>ʔalīl</i>	30	30	bare <i>ktīr</i>	2,991	2,991
<i>ʔalīle</i>	30		<i>ktīra</i>	30	
<i>ʔāl</i>	0	32	<i>ktār</i>	15	50
<i>ʔalīlīn</i>	1		<i>ktīrīn</i>	5	
<i>ʔalīlāt</i>	1		<i>ktīrāt</i>	0	

It appears that inflected *ktīr* is as moribund as *ʔalīl* is. *ʔalīl* is inflected obligatorily, being an ordinary adjective. If inflection reflects its use as an adjective, then it appears that *ktīr* has an adjectival use parallel to *ʔalīl*. I suggest that it is this adjectival use of *ktīr*—not inflection per se—that is moribund, like the adjective *ʔalīl* is.

The ratio of inflected *ktīr* (representing clear cases of adjectival *ktīr*) to inflected *ʔalīl* (representing *ʔalīl* in the range of contexts that inflected *ktīr* occurs in) in the tables above is 1.6 : 1, less than the expected baseline of 4 : 1 attested in Modern Standard Arabic, as mentioned above. What might explain this disparity is that *ktīr* sometimes fails to show inflection even in syntactic contexts that must be adjectival. In (21), for example, *ktīr* is conjoined with a quality adjective in post-nominal position. The quality adjective *mitwaṣṣl-e* ‘continuous-PL’ shows obligatory plural agreement with the head noun, but *ktīr* is bare. Here, the quantity adjective *ktīr* is coordinated with an agreeing quality adjective, and therefore occurs in what must be an adjectival context, but yet does not display any agreement inflection.

- (21) bass rann marrāt ktīr wa-mitwaṣṣl-e.
but ring.PFV times many and-continuous-PL
‘[His phone] rang many and continuous times.’

This indicates that failure of agreement does not necessarily implicate the quantificational use of *ktīr*, but is also compatible with the adjectival use. Nonetheless, only the adjectival use is compatible with agreement, and I maintain that the rarity of agreement is at least partially a result of the rarity of the purely adjectival use of *ktīr*.

5. Conclusion

I conclude that *ʔalīl* and *ktīr* originated as quantificational adjectives as we see in Modern Standard Arabic. However, *ktīr*, but not *ʔalīl*, was subject to a diachronic split in which a new degree quantifier use was innovated alongside its quantificational adjective use. The quantificational adjectives distribute like adjectives and show agreement in agreement configurations (*ʔalīl* obligatorily, *ktīr* optionally), but are moribund, leading to the disproportionate representation of the degree quantifier *ktīr* with respect to both the agreeing forms of *ktīr* (the quantificational adjective) and *ʔalīl* altogether. The latter are relics of an earlier form of the language.

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