

Existential and Universal Perfect in Arabic

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In this talk, we present evidence from Syrian Arabic that corroborates Hoffmann's (1966) and Stowell's (2007) claim that the perfect is a syntactically low past tense, but only in connection with the 'existential' perfect—the Arabic data also support Iatridou et al.'s (2001) claim that the 'universal' perfect is constructionally distinct from the existential perfect.

The English perfect is expressed by the auxiliary *have* and a past participle, and has a low syntactic locus, since it is compatible with tense and modal verbs (1a). The 'existential perfect' asserts that an eventuality in the underlying verb denotation took place in the past (McCawley 1971 and many others). We adopt Portner (2003) and others' conclusion that the relevance of this event's post-state to the reference time is a pragmatic implicature. A stative predicate in the perfect asserts that the state holds at the reference time (the utterance time in (1b)) in what is known as the 'universal perfect' (McCawley 1971). But Iatridou et al. (2001) claim that the reference time entailment only holds when a durative adverb is present. That is, (1b) only entails that Mona is still an employee when the duration adverb *for three years* is present. Without it, (1b) simply asserts that Mona was once an employee, which is the existential perfect interpretation. The fact that the universal perfect **requires** a stative predicate and a duration adverb may mean that its superficial resemblance to the existential perfect belies significant underlying differences.

- (1) a. Mona has decided / had decided / must have decided to stay.
b. Mona has been an employee here (for three years).

In Syrian Arabic, the so-called 'perfective' form of the verb functions both as past tense and as perfect (see Fassi Fehri 2003 on Standard Arabic). In the perfect use, it occurs with the auxiliary *yikuun* 'be' (3FS *tikuun* below) in modal (2a) and other contexts (Arabic is reported not to have the auxiliary *have*, but see below). Putting the auxiliary itself in the perfective form results in a past perfect construction (2b).

- (2) a. Mona laazim ti-kuun ʕtamad-it ti-bqa
Mona must 3FS-be_{IMPF} decide_{PERF-3FS} 3FS-stay_{IMPF}
'Mona must have decided to stay.'
b. Mona kaan-it ʕtamad-it ti-bqa lamma xaalid dʒaa?
Mona be_{PERF-3FS} decide_{PERF-3FS} 3FS-stay_{IMPF} when Khalid arrive_{PERF}
'Mona had decided to stay when Khalid arrived.'

Arabic is a copula-drop language (in the present tense), and copula-drop of *yikuun* results in a present perfect reading for (3a). But it is clear that (3a) has a simple past tense reading, too, since it is compatible with a past tense *lamma* 'when' clause (3b), which requires a tense-matched matrix clause, as in English.

- (3) a. Mona ʕtamad-it ti-bqa
Mona decide_{PERF-3FS} 3FS-stay_{IMPF} 'Mona decided / has decided to stay.'
b. Mona ʕtamad-it ti-bqa lamma xaalid dʒaa?
Mona decide_{PERF-3FS} 3FS-stay_{IMPF} when Khalid arrive_{PERF}
'Mona (*has) decided to stay when Khalid arrived.'

Consequently, past tense and perfect have the same morphological expression in Syrian Arabic; both are expressed as a perfective verb. This morphological identity supports Hoffmann and Stowell's analogous claim about English that *have* is an allomorph of past tense *-ed*, one that occurs in 'non-finite' contexts, i.e., other than in TP.

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But Syrian Arabic also supports the view that there is more than one kind of perfect construction. In the construction illustrated in (4), the subject is doubled by the inflected preposition *ila*, consisting of *il* ‘to’ and a suffix that varies with the ϕ -features of the antecedent (3MS *-u*, 3PL *-on*, etc.). In the context of the inflected preposition, the predicate must be stative, a duration adverb must be present, and the construction asserts that the state holds at the reference time. These are just the properties of the universal perfect, but expressed very differently than the existential perfect in Arabic. The construction is put in other tenses through tense-inflected forms of the auxiliary *yikuun*, and can appear with *yikuun* under modals (not shown), just like the existential perfect in (2).

- (4) Mona il-a *(tleet sniin) mwazzafe hoon ‘Mona has been an employee
 Mona to-3FS three years employee here here for three years.’

In spite of the peculiar form of (4), we claim that its defining morphosyntactic feature—the inflected preposition *ila*—actually represents a concealed commonality with the English perfect. This term appears with a possessive signification in several other constructions, a salient one being inalienable possession (Cowell 1964, Boneh and Sichel 2010):

- (5) Mona il-a ʕuyuun hilwe ktiir ‘Mona has very pretty eyes.’
 Mona to-3FS eyes pretty very

It appears that the prepositional possessive predicate *il+AGR* has developed a use as an auxiliary on par with the English transitive possessive predicate *have*, but only for the universal perfect, not the existential perfect. We propose then that English *have* is ambiguous between an existential meaning (*have*₁) identical to past tense *-ed*, and a universal meaning (*have*₂). Arabic morphologically differentiates these two, where perfective morphology PERF = *have*₁ (= *-ed*) and *il+AGR* = *have*₂. The denotations below reflect Katz’s (2003) claim that the perfect is stative (regardless of whether the underlying verb is stative or eventive). ε is the type of eventualities (events or states) and σ the type of states. ‘<’ means ‘temporally precedes’ and ‘ \subseteq ’ means ‘is temporally contained in’. The Arabic perfective and English *-ed* and *have*₁ in (6a) say of an eventuality predicate *P* that it holds of an eventuality *e* that is prior to the ‘reference’ state *s* (the utterance situation by default). Arabic *il+AGR* and *have*₂ in (6b) say of a stative predicate *P* and a temporal adverb *T* that both hold of a state *s*’ that contains the reference state *s*, deriving the obligatoriness of the adverb (it is an argument of *il+AGR* /*have*₂) and the fact that the underlying state description holds at the reference time. Thus, the Arabic facts presented here support Hoffman and Stowell’s identification of (existential) perfect with past tense and Iatridou et al.’s separation of existential and universal perfect.

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| (6) | Arabic | English | |
| | a. [[PERF]] | = [[-ed]] = [[have ₁]] | = $\lambda P_{\langle \varepsilon, t \rangle} \lambda s_{\sigma} \exists e_{\varepsilon} . P(e) \ \& \ e < s$ |
| | b. [[il+AGR]] | = [[have ₂]] | = $\lambda P_{\langle \sigma, t \rangle} \lambda T_{\langle \sigma, t \rangle} \lambda s'_{\sigma} \exists s_{\sigma} . P(s') \ \& \ T(s') \ \& \ s \subseteq s'$ |

References: Boneh and Sichel (2010) Deconstructing Possession *NLLT* 28:1-40. Cowell (1964) *A Reference Grammar of Syrian Arabic*. Fassi Fehri (2003) Arabic Perfect and Temporal Adverbs, in *Perfect Explorations*. Hoffman (1966) Past Tense Replacement and the English Modal Auxiliary System, in *Harvard Computation Laboratory Report NSF-17*. Iatridou et al. (2001) Observations about the Form and Meaning of the Perfect, in *Ken Hale: A Life in Language*. Katz (2003) On the Stativity of the English Perfect, in *Perfect Explorations*. McCawley (1971) Tense and Time Reference in English, in *Studies in Linguistic Semantics*. Portner (2003) The Temporal Semantics and (Modal) Pragmatics of the Perfect *L&P* 26:459-510. Stowell (2007) Sequence of Perfect, in *Recent Advances in the Syntax and Semantics of Tense, Mood and Aspect*.