Notes on the Progressive and the Perfective in Arabic

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It has been noted in the literature that the perfective/imperfective verb forms in Arabic do not necessarily express the Perfective/Imperfective aspectual meanings (Hallman 2015, 2016). The imperfective form of eventive verbs like ḥāb “drink”, in Moroccan Arabic (MA) can be ambiguous between a habitual/episodic and a progressive/continuous reading as in: ka-nḥāb lqahwwa “I drink/am drinking coffee” and in both meanings the event is anchored in the present tense. Nothing in the morphology of the verb stem marks these two different aspects. Also, nothing in the verb forms marks tense. The perfective forms of stative verbs like ūraf “know/recognize” and ġām “understand” is also ambiguous between describing a state that holds in the present and a state that holds in the past. Here again there is nothing in the perfective verb stem that marks perfectivity or tense. In this talk, I will first discuss the imperfective form, present data from a variety of Arabic dialects namely what I classify as the ka/bi-V.IMPERF dialects, e.g. MA, Jordanian (JA), Syrian (SA), and Egyptian (EA) and the V.IMPERF dialects, such as Najdi Arabic (NA), show that in both classes of dialects, the habitual and progressive are not morphologically marked in the verb stem. In the Ka/bi-V.IMPERF dialects the source of the habitual and progressive ambiguity is not the ka/bi marker. In the V.IMPERF dialects the source of the ambiguity is not the verb stem itself, similar in this respect to Standard Arabic. However, all dialects seem to have grammaticalized or in the process of grammaticalizing the active participle form of the stative verb glās/gašad/gaṣad “sit”, namely gaalas in MA and gaashid in JA and NA, the active participle form of the verb ūamal “work” in Syrian Arabic namely ūammal, to mark progressive/continuous. I will show that the path of grammaticalization is rather familiar especially in the case the grammaticalization of the future marker as described in Ouhalla (2012, 2016). In MA, JA, and some Gulf dialects we have a stative verb meaning “sit” that grammaticalizes as an aspectual verb, and then as a progressive marker: glās > glās > galās/ gašad > gaṣad > gaashid. Each of these cognate forms are still used in the dialects and each of them involves a different syntactic structure. Sentences with the aspectual light verbs glās/ gašad are examples of restructuring, whereas cases with the active participle, are examples of progressive and the active participle is the lexical operator responsible for the progressive reading (see Hallman 2015 for Standard Arabic). In Syrian and some other Levantine dialects the grammaticalization process seems to be in the advanced stage of the following grammaticalization path: ūammal > ūamma > ūam (see Cowell 1964 for examples of each of these cognates). Regarding the perfective verb stem, I will argue that it is not always associated with past tense as is widely assumed in the syntax literature (Benmamoun 2000, Aoun et al. 2010 among many others). A set of stative verbs namely so-called inchoatives can take the perfective form in the present tense context, as illustrated in the following question answer pair from MA: Q. waf ūraf ūnftini daba? “can you tell who I am now/ do you recognize who I am now”, A. ah, ūrafok daba “yes, I know/recognize you now”, but not “#I knew/recognized you now”. Sentences with perfective verbs are assumed to be derived by V-to-T movement and are always linked to past tense. I will argue that perfective stative verbs challenge this view of linking V-to-T with past tense. An inchoative verb in the perfective form indicating a state that holds true in the present is
also derived by V-to-T. I will, at the end, devise an analysis that derives both the imperfective continuous/ habitual and the perfective of eventive and stative verbs in relation to tense.