

Time and Tense in Basic Varieties of Arabic

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In their intercourse with us, they commonly adopted our mistakes and method of pronunciation for the better dispatch of business, but when any strange party arrived, we were half lost again, till the old standards gave instructions to the new comers.

—James Burney, first lieutenant on the *Discovery*, on communication with the Hawai'ians (quoted by Drechsel 2014, 122)

Introduction: Basic Communication

Basic human communication typically deals with essential needs in situations that are by definition ephemeral and difficult to capture in observation.¹ Yet, most of us have probably experienced such a situation personally, whether at the sending end when visiting a foreign country whose language we do not know, or at the receiving end when meeting a foreigner who does not speak our language well. Recently, two basic varieties of Arabic, Pidgin Madame and Gulf Pidgin Arabic, have become known, both belonging to the early stages of verbal interaction with non-native speakers of Arabic who have learned a reduced version of the language, commonly known as pidgins.²

Such early stages of verbal contact are to some extent identical with what Klein and Perdue (1997) call the Basic Variety, defined as the first learner's variety, which is systematic in its own right and has its own structure. This Basic Variety is characterized by an almost complete absence of functional

categories and minimal syntactic structure. Note that Klein and Perdue acknowledge the existence of similarities between their Basic Variety, which they see as a form of Second Language Learning, and pidgins, but they conclude “all we can say at this point is that there are certainly similarities, but it is quite unclear how far-reaching these are” (1997, 340). Yet, as we shall see below, it is hard to see the difference between the two: in both cases a process of Second Language Learning in a limited and unmonitored context is involved.

Generally speaking, the speakers of the Basic Variety as described by Klein and Perdue target the second language and attempt to follow its rules; it is only when the target language offers a choice that the structure of the source language (the mother tongue of the learners) may come to play a role in choosing between alternatives. The lexicon of the Basic Variety contains a number of noun-like and verb-like words, a few adjectives, a number of temporal and spatial adverbs, a negation, a minimal pronominal system, a few quantifiers, and a few prepositions. The syntax operates with a limited number of phrasal and pragmatic constraints, such as the rule that the controller of the action comes first, and the rule that the focus comes last (Klein and Perdue 1997, 312ff.). Explicit marking only takes place “if there is reason to assume that the interlocutor would otherwise reach a false interpretation, and if this false interpretation matters” (Dietrich and Klein 1986, 116). Utterances typically consist of uninflected verbs, their arguments, and optional adverbials. There are no free or bound morphemes with purely grammatical functions in the Basic Variety, nor is there any hierarchical system, such as subordination (Klein and Perdue 1997, 332).

In recent studies attention has shifted to an even more rudimentary form of communication, sometimes referred to as pre-Basic Variety. Benazzo and Starren (2007; see also Benazzo 2009) claim that at this pre-Basic stage almost all utterances consist of nominal and adverbial elements, centering around topic/focus messages. In their model, the first verbal expressions do not make their appearance until the Basic Variety stage. The data collected by them for this pre-Basic stage are predominantly narrative in nature because they were collected by means of interviews. In situations of a non-narrative nature, even at the very first stages of contact, verbal elements probably do figure.³ Early contact often involves giving orders and stating wishes, hence the first verbal forms used frequently derive from imperatives.

Verbal forms in both the pre-Basic and the Basic variety possess an argument structure, but do not exhibit any inflectional marking (except in

fossilized form). Tense and aspect are marked by temporal adverbials. At the pre-Basic stage, only a limited number of adverbials is used, but at the Basic stage, both deictic and anaphorical adverbials occur more frequently and they perform an increasing number of functions (Klein and Perdue 1997, 320–21; Benazzo 2009, 29; Benazzo and Starren 2007, 138):

1. They situate the event or state on the temporal axis (*I May; last week; afterwards*)
2. They quantify the frequency and duration of the event (*often, long time*)
3. They express some aspectual distinctions (habitual, iterative, continuity) (*always*)
4. They determine the sequence of events (*before, after*)

In addition, markers that establish the temporal limits of events (*begin, finish*) emerge at this stage.

In the following sections the system of temporal reference in two contemporary varieties of Arabic, Pidgin Madame and Gulf Pidgin Arabic, will be discussed.

Temporal Reference in Pidgin Madame

Pidgin Madame is the name given by Bizri (2010) to a pidginized variety of Arabic that is spoken in Lebanon between Sri Lankan domestics and their Lebanese employers. It exhibits an extreme degree of variability, but at the same time it is conventionalized and regarded as learnable by its users.⁴ The verb forms in this pidgin derive etymologically from a variety of verbal forms in the lexifier, Lebanese Arabic. Their most frequent source is the singular feminine imperative; less frequently, they derive from second person singular finite verbs.

Pidgin Madame does not have any grammatical markers for the expression of tense or aspect. Usually, general world knowledge and pragmatic context suffice to allow the speakers to distinguish between events that happened earlier on, events happening right now, and events expected, wished, or intended to occur in the future. In an utterance like (1), we know that the speaker refers to the future because in the preceding utterance she has made clear that she would like to work in Lebanon for one more year.

- (1) *badēm rūh badēm mā īji*
 afterwards go afterwards NEG come
 ‘Then I’ll go and I won’t come back’ (Bizri 2010, 162)

Almost all communication about the future in Bizri's texts (a total of twenty-six tokens) deals with the expression of desire or intention, as in (2) where *baddik* derives from Lebanese Arabic *bəddik* 'you [2fs] want.'⁵

- (2) *hälla* *sway* *baddik* *nhottu* *bank*
 now little want put bank
 Now, I'll put away some [money] in the bank' (Bizri 2010, 237)

The present time is default and generally does not need explication (Benazzo and Starren 2007, 137). In order to avoid ambiguity, the speakers use temporal expressions that situate events on the temporal axis, for instance *awwāl* 'earlier on, in the past,' *hälla* 'now, in the present,' *badēm* 'then, afterwards, in the future.' When speaking about a sequence of events, the narrative order follows the natural order of events, often interspersed with *badēm* to underline the sequence. Other temporal expressions include those which indicate duration of an event ('three years,' 'two months'), and those which underline the habituality of the event (*kil yōm* 'always'). Finally, some speakers situate an event on the temporal axis by connecting it chronologically with an earlier event, as in (3):

- (3) *ana* *kam* *nēn* *säher* *bāba* *mēt*
 Is come [Eng.] two months father die
 'Two months after I came [back], my father died' (Bizri 2010, 240)

To mark the completion of an action *kalas* 'finished' is used a few times; it may occur both before and after the verb, as in (4a) and (4b):

- (4a) *bād* *no* *estegel* *kalas*
 yet NEG [Eng.] work COMPL
 'I have not yet finished the work' (Bizri 2010, 161)
- (4b) *hälla* *kullu* *kalas* *sēwe* *bil* *bēt*
 now all COMPL do in house
 'Now, all household work has been done' (Bizri 2010, 127)

The context of use of Pidgin Madame is unlikely to lead to a stable pidgin because of the lack of exposure to a variety of speakers. Most of the women communicate mainly with one interlocutor only, their employer, and apart

from the children in the household they have no contact either with other native speakers or with other pidgin speakers. Yet, there is a certain amount of conventionalization on the part of the employer, who has learned from her parents or her peers how to deal with foreigners, and possibly even experienced speaking this variety with her nanny when she was a child. Bizri mentions a few cases of women who have started out on their own, working for instance in a hospital. This is accompanied by an expansion in the range of their utterances.

Temporal Reference in Gulf Pidgin Arabic

A close relative to Pidgin Madame is the variety of Arabic that serves in the Gulf region as a means of communication between foreign workers from different Asian countries and their Arabic-speaking employers. The main sociolinguistic difference between this pidgin and Pidgin Madame is that the foreign workers in the Gulf region also use the pidginized varieties to communicate among themselves, whereas in Pidgin Madame almost all communication is restricted to contacts between employer and employee. Some of the speakers have stayed in the region for quite a long period of time. Several varieties of Gulf Pidgin Arabic have emerged in the last few decades (Naess 2008; Almoaily 2008; Bakir 2010; Al-Azraqi 2010).

The material in Bakir (2010) is particularly interesting, because he worked with informants who had lived in the Gulf region for a period between two and thirty years, the majority of them more than five years. They had occupations that brought them in touch with quite a few native speakers, and, even more to the point, with quite a few pidgin speakers from different linguistic backgrounds. Still, the language in Bakir's material as well as that in the other publications on Gulf Pidgin Arabic bears a definite resemblance to Pidgin Madame in that temporal reference is achieved mainly through temporal adverbials or contextual knowledge. If temporal disambiguation is needed, the adverbials *awwal* 'before' and *alhin* 'now' may be used for past and present reference. For the future, the adverbial *bādēn* is sometimes used, but its main function is to provide information about the sequence of events. To indicate habitual actions, the adverbial *kell yōm–kell yōm* 'every day, always' is used.

Gulf Pidgin Arabic appears to be going through some new developments, especially in the grammaticalization of verbal markers. The verb *ruuh* is sometimes used in combination with a main verb, apparently to indicate an imminent future, as in (5) and (6):

- (5) *anaa ruuh waddi baččaa medrisa*
 1s FUT bring chil dren school
 ‘I’ll take the children to school’ (Bakir 2010, 221)
- (6) *ruuh zawwij hurma taani*
 FUT marry woman second
 ‘He’ll marry another woman’ (Bakir 2010, 214)

There are indications that the particle *kalaas* ‘finished’ has developed into a completive marker, because it is not only used postverbally, as in (7), but also in preverbal position, as in (8):

- (7) *’atbuk kalaas laham šilli*
 cook COMPL meat take.out
 ‘When the cooking is done, I take out the meat’ (Bakir 2010, 212)
- (8) *’inta kalaas waddi fuluus*
 2s COMPL give money
 ‘Have you sent the money?’ (Bakir 2010, 213)

Finally, there is a remarkable development in the use of the existential *fii* ‘there is/are,’ which seems to be used with verbs as a continuous marker (Naess 2008, 88–91), as in (9) and (10):

- (9) *anaa fii guul*
 1s CONT say
 ‘I say’ (Bakir 2010, 217)⁶
- (10) *’inta fii yaskit*
 2s CONT be.quiet
 ‘You keep quiet’ (Bakir 2010, 217)

The marker *fii* has been analyzed by Avram (2012). He claims that it was originally a locative preposition, which developed into a copula, and was then grammaticalized as a continuous/habitual marker.

Bakir (2010, 223) concludes that Gulf Pidgin Arabic belongs to the group of prototypical pidgins in Winford’s (2006) classification. The traces of grammaticalization in this pidgin may be connected with the relatively long

stay of his informants in the region and in the interlingual contacts between pidgin speakers from different linguistic backgrounds, who use Gulf Pidgin Arabic as their common means of communication. Hence, a certain amount of conventionalization may have set in, which may explain why this particular variety of Gulf Pidgin Arabic has progressed further than Pidgin Madame.

Comparison with Temporal Reference in Other Work Jargons

What these varieties of Arabic in their early stages have in common is that they tend to have only one verbal form per verb and make extensive use of temporal adverbials to disambiguate reference to the time of the action. In this respect, they resemble Klein and Perdue's (1997) Basic Variety as well as other varieties employed in a work context, such as Tây Bôi, Kiche Duits, and Butler English.

Tây Bôi was the work jargon used by the French *colons* in Vietnam in the 1940s and 1950s. Although not much information is available, it seems clear that the form of the verb is predominantly that of the French infinitive, without any temporal reference, as in (11):

- (11) *monsieur aller saigon avec moi*
 he [polite] went Saigon with I s
 'He went to Saigon with me' (Liem 1979, 230)

Some of the verbs could conceivably derive from a plural imperative, as in the case of *aller/allez*, but with other verbs, such as *voir* 'to see' and *dire* 'to say,' the phonetic shape makes clear that it is indeed the infinitive rather than the imperative which is at the root of the form in Tây Bôi. The only verb in the examples given by Liem (1979) that does not derive from an etymological infinitive is the verb *mort* 'to die,' which derives from a past participle.

Temporal adverbials include those indicating duration (*deux jours* 'two days'), time distance (*long temps déjà* 'a long time ago'), and the expressions *hier* 'yesterday' and *demain* 'tomorrow.' But since the sentences given by Liem appear to have been elicited, it is not clear which temporal contextualizers were actually used in this pidgin.

Namibian Kiche Duits (Kitchen German) originated in the same way as Tây Bôi, as a means of communication between masters and servants during the German colonization of Southwest Africa. In addition, it was often learnt in communication between (German) fathers and their children in mixed marriages. In Kiche Duits, the past is referred to in three different ways (Deumert

2009, 399–400): zero marking, past participle, and past participle with auxiliary, the last one being the most frequently used, often with a correctly inflected auxiliary but a non-canonical form of the participle, as in (12):

- (12) *die hat ganz so gut gesprech*
 3ms AUX very so good speak
 ‘He spoke it [that is, German] really well’ (Deumert 2009, 382)

Zero marking is found in both mesolectal and basilectal Kiche Duits; in the latter, its use is not constrained. Reference to the past with the participle without the auxiliary is somewhat more frequent in the basilectal variety, but even there the construction with the auxiliary is more frequent (Deumert 2003, 577–81). According to Deumert (2008, 407–408) Kiche Duits is a restructured language form used for interethnic communication (that is, as a work jargon between German colonists and their African employees). As a result of its use in mixed marriages, however, it also acquired the function of an in-group language, which was (and still is) used to express community solidarity. The close contact between native speakers and children in mixed marriages means that this is an atypical situation compared to the normal context of work jargons, in which there is a large social distance between learners and native speakers.⁷

Butler English was the common way of communicating for domestic personnel in India during British domination. In this variety of English, the most frequently used verbal form derives from the English progressive, which is also used for reference to the punctual and non-punctual past (Hosali 2000, 100–108), as in (13a, b):

- (13a) *I starting work twenty years ago*
 ‘I started my work twenty years ago’ (Hosali 2000, 104)
- (13b) *that time I working one lady*
 ‘At that time, I was working for one lady’ (Hosali 2000, 268)

The verbal form *is* is used as a general verbal particle (Hosali 2000, 108), as in (14):

- (14) *is they going to school*
 ‘They are going to school’ (ibid., 259)

Past time reference in this master/servant variety is accomplished predominantly by means of context or temporal contextualizers. For the past, the most frequently used marker seems to be *that time* (with variants like *those days*, *before*). Reference to the future is usually achieved through contextual clues, as in (15a), but *will* may also be added to the verb, as in (15b):

(15a) *you sending books also*

‘You’ll send books, too’ (Hosali 2000, 102)

(15b) *they will doing everything for me*

‘They will do anything for me’ (Hosali 2000, 101–102)

The variation in the corpus of Butler English also demonstrates the effect of exposure to native speakers: apparently, some of the informants worked closely with different native speakers and, as a result, their linguistic proficiency allowed them to approximate Standard English, while others, who did not have such a close relationship, remained in the Basic Variety stage.

The social situation of immigrant foreign workers in Western Europe resembles that of speakers of Gulf Pidgin Arabic. Blackshire-Belay (1991) has collected a large corpus of German spoken by foreign workers (which used to be called *Gastarbeiterdeutsch*). In her corpus, there are some speakers who disambiguate between present and past reference with morphological means rather than with temporal adverbs. For past reference they use the German past participle (*ge-* form), but only for some verbs, as in (16):

(16) *und dann ich gefunden eine neue fabrik*
 and then I_s find ART new factory
 ‘And then I found a new factory’ (Blackshire-Belay 1991, 233)

More advanced speakers of *Gastarbeiterdeutsch* use combinations of an auxiliary with a past participle and even some preterite-like forms, which they seem to have learnt as isolated forms. At this stage, temporal adverbials are less essential for disambiguating time reference because the verb form indicates whether a statement is made about the past or a future intention is intended.

In the most elementary form of this variety, however, there are only a few *ge-* forms, most of them belonging to change-of-state verbs (as can be ascertained from the list compiled by Blackshire-Belay 1991, 357–425), for example *gefunden* ‘found,’ *verloren* ‘lost,’ *runtergefallen* ‘fallen down,’

geboren ‘born,’ as well as some highly frequent verbs like *gesagt* ‘said,’ *gesehen* ‘seen.’ The difference in competence between the speakers in the three groups probably reflects the degree of exposure to the target language because of contact with a larger number of native speakers.

In general, only the most advanced speakers of a work jargon have at their disposal full verbal paradigms. For most speakers, verbs have only one form. Individual verbs may go back etymologically to different verbal forms in the target language, but since they do not form a paradigm, the speakers are unable to analyze these forms morphologically. Which verbal form in the target language is selected for which verb ultimately depends on the semantics of the verb, as manifested in the input to which the learners are exposed.

From Basic Variety to Stable Pidgin

All work jargons are Basic Varieties, used in a similar context, with the possible exception of Kiche Duits, which appears to have been introduced additionally as a means of communication in mixed marriages. Differences in the proficiency of the speakers reflect differences in the amount of exposure to the target language and the number of native speakers with whom they communicate. This creates a cline of Second Language Learning, from Basic Varieties like Pidgin Madame and Gulf Pidgin Arabic at one end, and classroom-taught Arabic as a second language at the other.

None of the varieties mentioned in the preceding sections have developed any unambiguous tense/aspect markers. Verbal forms may go back to various verbal forms from the lexifier language, but only as fossilized forms. No paradigm is formed, and temporal reference is achieved with temporal adverbs. In post-Basic varieties, some morphology is introduced. Benazzo and Starren (2007, 138) give two reasons for this development. In the first place, when time reference is lexically-based, there is a high risk of ambiguity and misunderstanding, as such non-obligatory expressions are easily omitted. In the second place, although some aspectual distinctions can be made without morphological means, other distinctions are bound to remain opaque, such as perfect aspect (topic time after situation time), prospective (topic time before situation time), and progressive (topic time in situation time). Benazzo and Starren (2007) argue that for the expression of such aspects verbal morphology is more economical.

Once morphological marking is introduced, it appears to follow the same pathways across varieties. Given the fact that the function of temporal reference shifts from temporal adverbials to markers on the verb, one might expect

the morphological material to exhibit a formal continuity with the temporal adverbials of the Basic Variety. This, however, does not seem to be the case.

Bickerton's (1974, 1981) proposal about the development of tense/aspect markers in pidgin and creole language claims that these markers always develop in the same way in all pidgins and creoles, regardless of the source and target languages involved. His proposal centers around three markers, a tense marker ANTERIOR, a modal marker IRREALIS, and an aspect marker NON-PUNCTUAL. In expressions referring to the future, both IRREALIS and NON-PUNCTUAL are used.⁸ Bickerton does not go into the details of the grammaticalization of the tense/aspect markers and their etymological source, but it seems that in this respect, too, there are common features among pidgins and creoles.

In their model of the development of tense and aspect marking, Bybee, Perkins, and Pagliuca (1994, 256–70) show that the development of tense/aspect markers always follows certain pathways of grammaticalization. For the marking of the future, for instance, cross-linguistically the most frequent lexical source is constituted by verbs of motion, rather than temporal adverbials; other sources include expressions of possession, of desire, and of obligation. These have in common that they all go through a stage “of functioning to express the intention, first of the speaker, and later of the agent of the main verb” (Bybee et al. 1994, 254). Since non-past statements about first persons are liable to be interpreted by the hearer as futures, such statements provide a suitable pathway to the expression of future tense.

Temporal adverbials form one possible pathway for reference to the future and they go through the same development as other expressions, by moving from the expression of the agent's intention to the prediction of future actions (Bybee et al. 1994, 271). Yet the verbal markers in Arabic post-Basic Varieties do not seem to be derived from the temporal adverbials that were used in Basic varieties, but from lexical material in the lexifier language. In line with Bickerton's proposal, both Juba Arabic (Miller 2007) and Ki-Nubi (Wellens 2007) have three markers, an anterior marker *kan* (< *kān* ‘to be’), a continuous marker *gi-/ge-* (probably < *gāʿid* ‘sitting’), and an irrealis/future marker *bi-* (either < *bi-* ‘in’ or < *bʿi* ‘to want’; see Persson 2008; Retsö 2014). Bongor Arabic (Luffin 2008) has only one aspect marker, *gay-*, which denotes continuous and non-past and is probably derived from the same source as *gi-/ge-*. For past reference the stable Arabic pidgins use the anterior marker *kān* in the case of stative verbs, while in the case of non-stative verbs the bare verb stem is used (Versteegh 2014b).

The conclusion must be that there is a major break in the development of pidgins from earlier forms of basic communication with foreigners. In the case

of other languages we usually depend on poorly documented travel accounts or descriptions by missionaries, for instance of Sranan (van den Berg and Smith 2013), Krio (Huber 2000), or Nigerian English Pidgin (Fayer 1990). The examples of early communication in Arabic are, therefore, particularly helpful in the discussion about the development of pidgin and creole varieties, because they emerge before our eyes.

Notes

- 1 This chapter is a revised version of (part of) my presentation at the Time and Space workshop organized by Peter Bakker and Aymeric Daval-Marcussen at the University of Århus, 15–16 January 2014. In examples from the literature, the transcription of the original has been maintained as much as possible. Note that *m* stands for a velar nasal, and *ɖ* for a retroflex dental. In glossing, the following abbreviations have been used: ART = article, AUX = auxiliary, CONT = continuous, COMPL = completive, FUT = future, NEG = negation, 1, 2, 3 = 1st, 2nd, 3rd person, m, f = masculine, feminine, s, p = singular, plural.
- 2 In Mühlhäusler's (1997) classification of pidgin varieties, there is a basic stage preceding those contexts of communication that are associated with pidginization. He calls this the stage of pre-pidgins or jargons. These are partly identical with what Winford calls Stage 1 pidgins and partly with his prototypical or Stage 2 pidgins.
- 3 Dench (1998) analyzes the data about a pidgin in northwest Australia, Ngarluma Pidgin, which the local population used in contacts with foreigners. From the account of two shipwrecked sailors who spent six months in the region it is clear that in communicating with them the Aborigines did use verbal forms, mostly to order them to do something.
- 4 The women are trained by their employer ("Madame") in speaking 'Arabic'; in one instance mentioned by Bizri (2010, 195–98) the employer brings in another, more experienced, maid to teach a newly arrived woman how to communicate in Arabic.
- 5 The same expression may also express obligation, as in (i):

(i)	<i>māḍam</i>	<i>baddi</i>	<i>ulīla</i>
	Madam	want	tell

'You need to tell Madam' (Bizri 2010, 228)

Some utterances involving the future could be seen as predictions, as in (ii).

(ii)	<i>estegel</i>	<i>ana</i>	<i>badēm</i>	<i>mūt</i>
	work	1s	afterwards	die

'If I work [without eating], I'll die' (Bizri 2010, 232)
- 6 Without any context, it is difficult to say what the exact purpose of this utterance is, but it would seem to mean 'I am saying'; in (10) the existential is also connected with a state-like predicate. Note that in another variety of Gulf Pidgin Arabic, utterances with *fī* are also used to indicate future tense, as in (i):

(i)	<i>sadig</i>	<i>'ana</i>	<i>fī</i>	<i>rūh</i>	<i>itmēn</i>	<i>šahar</i>
	friend	1s	FUT	go	two	month

'A friend of mine is going in two months' (Al-Azraqi 2010, 167)
- 7 This is probably one of the varieties that Holm (2004) would regard as a semi-creole or a partially restructured variety, just like Afrikaans.
- 8 For an evaluation of this proposal on the basis of data from a large number of pidgins and creole varieties, see Holm et al. (2000).



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