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## Pragmatic uses of participles in Egyptian Arabic

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### 1 Introduction

In Egyptian Arabic (EA) participles are used in all finite verb contexts to express aspectual categories which complement those expressed by the inflected verbal paradigms. This paper is concerned with contexts in which the AP contrasts with the Perfective (1, 2).

1. 'ana Talabt 'ahwa min nuSS sa:9a  
I order(Perf) coffee from half hour  
I ordered coffee half an hour ago'
2. 'ana Ta:lib 'ahwa min nuSS sa:9a  
I order(Part) coffee from half hour  
I ordered coffee half an hour ago'

Both (1) and (2) refer to an event which occurred prior to the time of speaking, but 2, with the Active Participle (AP) *Ta:lib* generates implications which are absent with the Perfective. (2) would be appropriately used in a context in which, for example, the speaker is drawing attention to the fact that his coffee has not yet been served, rather than one in which he is merely stating that he placed an order. Discussions of the Participle in the literature have for the most part been concerned with classifying the various putative functions of the semantics of the AP in relation to the inflected forms of the verb, and with the attempt identify one or more 'core' meanings for the AP. In the case of examples such as (2) above, the use of the AP is typically attributed to its role in indicating 'current relevance' (CR). Although most studies of the AP acknowledge that contextual factors are central to its interpretation, the distribution of labour between semantic and pragmatic contributions to meaning has not been explored.

The present paper examines the specifically contextual aspects of the interpretation of the AP, and argues that the role of the AP can only be fully characterised in terms of the complementary nature of semantic and pragmatic meaning. Of particular importance here is the distinction between entailments and implicatures, and it is demonstrated that in at least one function, the AP may be chosen by speakers specifically to generate implicatures which act to construct context, and which do not arise with the Perfective. The paper ends with a tentative explanation of the relationship between the semantics of the AP, current relevance, and context.

### 2 Verbs in Arabic

We begin with a brief overview of the verbal system of EA. EA has two inflected tense/aspect paradigms, referred to here as *Perfective* and *Imperfective*. The Perfective is exclusively suffixal, and the Imperfective predominantly prefixal. The Imperfective, uniquely, can host the progressive/habitual prefix *bi-*, and the Future prefix *Ha-*:

3. *faTma katab-it riwa:ya*  
Fatima write(Perfective)-3SF novel  
'Fatima wrote a novel'
4. *magdi bi-yi-ktib riwa:ya*  
Magdi Prt-3SM-write(Imperfective) novel  
'Magdi writes/ is writing a novel'
5. 'ana **H-a-ktib** riwa:ya  
I FUT-1S-write(Imperfective) novel  
'I will write a novel'

While the morphological facts are clear, the nature of the semantic distinctions encoded by the morphology is considerably less so. The debate as to whether the distinction between the Arabic verbal paradigms is primarily one of tense (past versus non-past), or aspect (completion versus non-completion) has a long and inconclusive history. (See, for example, Binnick, 1991; Comrie 1976, 1990; Eisele 1990, 1999; Fassi-Fehri 1993). For convenience, the present paper will assume, without further discussion, that the paradigms are primarily aspectual.<sup>1</sup> The temporal interpretation of the inflected paradigms is partly a contextual matter. In the absence of contextual indications to the contrary, the Imperfective, for example, will normally be interpreted as referring to the present. In (6) the time reference is clearly present, as is indicated by the adverbials *dilwa'ti* and *kull yo:m*. Similarly, as (7) shows, the Imperfective is the form used for a 'timeless' statements.

6. *magdi biyi?ra? ig-gurna:l (dilwa?ti/kull yo:m)*  
Magdi read(impfv) the-paper (now/every day)  
'Magdi's reading/reads the paper (now/every day)'
7. *ij-fams bi-tiTla9 kull yo:m*  
the-sun rises every day

This 'default' (Smith, 1981) interpretation of the Imperfective is contextually determined, and the Imperfective occurs in a range of temporal contexts, retaining its aspectually imperfective character. This is evident when, for example, the Imperfective occurs in construction with the copular/auxiliary verb *ka:n* ('be'). This verb is the principal exponent of tense in EA, and in this role appears only in Past or Future forms. When the appears in construction with *ka:n*, it takes its time reference from the auxiliary:

<sup>1</sup> The literature in this area shows a degree of terminological confusion (cf. Eisele 1999). For example, Mitchell and al-Hassan (1994), in a detailed and insightful description of tense and aspect in a number of Arabic dialects, including EA, refer to the paradigms as 'tenses'. They are, however, concerned to point out that these forms '...refer only tenuously to temporal [ie. tense] distinctions'. In an earlier publication on aspectual distinctions in Arabic dialects, Mitchell (1978) notes, with reference to the Imperfective, that this form is 'effectively neutral with respect to time reference' [ie. tense].

8. *Magdi ka:n bi-yi-'ra' ig-gurna:l*  
M. was read(impf) the-paper  
'M. was reading(used to read)/will be reading the paper'
9. *magdi Ha-y-ku:n bi-yi-'ra' ig-gurna:l*  
Magdi FUT-3SM-be Prt-3SM-read the-paper  
'Magdi will be reading the paper'

Similarly, as (10) demonstrates, when the Imperfective appears in adverbial clauses, its time reference is determined by that of the main clause.

10. *fuft magdi wi huwwa biykallim il-bana:t*  
saw M. and he talk(impf) the-girls  
'I saw Magdi (and he was) talking to the girls'

The Perfective lacks the temporal versatility of the Imperfective, but, like the Imperfective, it can appear in Past, Present and Future time frames. In combination with appropriate tenses of *ka:n*, the Perfective forms 'past perfect' and 'future perfect' constructions.

11. *mona ka:nit xaragit*  
M. was gone-out  
'Mona had gone out'
12. *mona Ha-t-ku:n xarag-it*  
Mona FUT-3SF-be go(Pfv)-3SF  
'Mona will have gone'

The picture that emerges from this brief description of the inflectional paradigms of EA is that the Perfective and Imperfective are primarily aspects, and that the fixing of location in time (ie. Tense) is largely a contextual matter.

### 3 Participles

The AP is used in all finite verb contexts to express temporal, aspectual and modal distinctions which are supplementary or complementary to those expressed by the inflectional paradigms. These meanings include concomitance/progressivity, futurity, and, 'Perfect' meaning, whereby the AP signals that an event, is in some way relevant to the time of speaking. Typical uses of the AP are illustrated below.

13. 'ana ra:yiH il-be:t  
I go(AP) the-house  
'I'm going home (Progressive)'
14. *humma rayHi:n il-mustaf'a bukra*  
they go(AP)-Plural the-hospital tomorrow  
'They're going to the hospital tomorrow'

15. mama rag9a ba9db iD-Duhr  
Mum return(AP) after the-noon  
'Mum's coming back this afternoon'
16. mama lissa rag9a min is-su:<sup>2</sup>  
Mum just return(AP) from the-market  
'Mum has just got back from the market'
17. il-farra:f minaDDaf il-'oda  
the-janitor clean(AP) the-room  
'The janitor has cleaned the room'

The apparent polysemy of the AP has resulted in it being seen as problematic: Mitchell (1978) refers to the Participle as a 'black hole' in the universe of Arabic linguistics. Most treatments of the Participle have sought to explain its various meanings in terms of lexical features of the associated verb. Attempts to characterise the AP have, almost without exception, been predicated on the notion that the 'meaning' of the AP is largely definable in semantic terms. At the same time, most students of the Participle recognise the importance of a contextual element in its interpretation. Holes (1994) remarks that '[the Participle] ... has no intrinsic time-marking, taking its temporal colouration from context'. Investigation of the contextual and pragmatic dimensions of the Participles has been limited to the citing of specific examples, but exactly what it means to say that the AP has a contextual dimension remains unclear.<sup>2</sup>

#### 4 Verb Class and the AP

While context is undoubtedly a major factor in the interpretation of Participles, there are correlations between the lexical aspect of the root verb and the meaning potential of the Participle. As remarked by Eisele (1999), and Brustad (2000), several taxonomies of verbs based on the meaning of the AP have been proposed for EA. (See, for example, Woidich 1975; Al-Tonsi 1980.<sup>3</sup> The role of lexical aspect in participial semantics is an important area of study, but it would be beyond the scope of the present paper to attempt to do it justice.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, and at the risk of a degree of simplification, the present study will adopt a three-way division of verbs. Verbs, or more accurately, verb phrases, in EA can be, at the risk of a slight but harmless simplification, divided into three classes: Motion, Atelic and Telic. To take these classes in turn, the AP's of a subclass of

<sup>2</sup> Caubet (1991) describes a number of pragmatic uses of the AP across several Arabic dialects, pointing out that there is a 'subjective' element to its use. Caubet's study serves to draw attention to the existence and systematicity of such uses, but stops short of formulating a general theory of Participial pragmatics.

<sup>3</sup> A besetting problem with such classificatory schemes has been that the attempt to explain the meaning of the Participle in terms of the meaning of the root verb has frequently resulted in a plethora of proposed verb types, differentiated by the meaning(s) of their Participles. In addition to the circularity thus engendered, classificatory schemes typically do little more than describe the 'facts', but offer no explanation of the facts.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed discussion of lexical aspect, see Eisele 1999. For a convincing taxonomy of verb types in relation to participle meaning, see Cowell 1966)

motion verbs<sup>5</sup> are consistently interpreted as having either concomitant (progressive), or futurative meaning degree to which context serves as the key factor in determining the meaning of the AP. The pragmatic use of the AP is found with a subclass of verbs which can be characterised as transitive telic verbs. The APs of other subclasses of verbs have a fixed semantic relationship to the inflected paradigms, and do not generate pragmatic effects. The AP of these verbs is consistently interpreted as expressing either concomitance with the time of speaking (or another reference time) or futurity:

18. 'ana ra:yiH is-su:  
I go(AP) the-market  
'I'm going to the market'
19. humma msafri:n bukra  
they travel(AP) tomorrow  
'They're leaving tomorrow'

The second relevant class of verbs are atelic -the situation denoted by the verb has no necessary endpoint. The AP's of stative verbs, which are necessarily atelic, such as *xa:f* (AP *xa:yif*) 'fear', *9irif* 'know', and *fihim* 'understand' denote concomitance with the time of speaking, or, given a suitable context, with another reference time.

20. 'inta xa:yif min 'e:h  
you fear (AP) from what  
'What are you afraid of?'
21. kunt mi:f fa:him  
was NEG understand(AP)  
'I couldn't understand'

Other verbs in this class are those such as *'istanna* 'wait'(for), *libis* 'wear' (clothes), *fakkar* 'think'. These verbs denote activities which do not have an inherent endpoint. Like the AP of stative verbs, the AP of these verbs express concomitance with the time of speaking.

22. 'ana mistanni:k that  
I wait(AP)-you(CI) below  
'I'm waiting for you downstairs'
23. baba la:bis 'iswid  
dad wear(AP) black  
'Dad's wearing black'

For the purposes of the present study, it should be noted that the APs of motion and atelic verbs are in complementary distribution with the Imperfective. While the AP

<sup>5</sup> Mitchell and ElHassan (1994) prefer the term 'translocative' for these verbs, on the basis that all the verbs whose participles exhibit the relevant aspectual properties involve translocation. As the example of *ra:gi9* above shows, other the participles of other 'motion' verbs are more variable in their meanings.

denotes concomitant states or activities, the Imperfective denotes habitual states, properties or actions. In the case of Stative verbs, for example, the Imperfective describes permanent characteristics, while the Participle denotes a particular instance of the state or property occurring at a particular time. The Imperfective *bitxa:f* in 24 tells us about a permanent characteristic of Mona, while the AP in 25 tells us that in a specific situation Mona is afraid of a particular rabbit, regardless of whether or not she has a general fear of rabbits.

24. mona bi-t-xa:f min il-'ara:nib  
Mona ASP-3SF-fear(Impf) from the-rabbits  
'Mona is scared of rabbits'
25. mona xayfa min il-'arnab  
Mona fear(AP) from the-rabbit  
'Mona's afraid of the rabbit'

Similarly, with motion verbs, the Imperfective expresses habituality, while the AP expresses either action in progress, or future action:

26. bi-y-ru:H il-maktab is-sa:9a sab9a  
ASP-3SM-go the-office the-hour seven  
'He goes to the office at seven'
27. ra:yiH il-maktab dilwa?ti/ba9d fweyya  
go(AP) the-office now /after while  
'He's going to the office now/after a while'

The Participles of verbs of these classes of verb are in a systematic semantic contrast with the inflected forms: the AP is consistently associated with specific aspectual characteristics, and carries no pragmatic force.

### 5 Pragmatic use of the participle.

With transitive telic verbs a different picture emerges. Here the AP resembles the Perfective, in that both Perfective and AP entail that the act or situation expressed by the verb prior to the time of speaking. It is with this class of verbs that the choice between the Perfective and the AP is *pragmatically* rather than semantically motivated. The contrast between (28a), (b) illustrates.

- 28a. 'ana rattibt il-hudu:m  
I tidy (Impf) the clothes  
'I tidied the clothes'
- 28b. 'ana mirattib il-hudu:m  
I tidy (Pfv) the-clothes  
'I've tidied the clothes'

These two sentences are truth-conditionally synonymous: both entail that the speaker tidied the clothes at some point prior to the moment of utterance. Informally, it can be

said that whereas (28a), with the Perfective, functions as a neutral relating of an event, the use of the AP in (28b) generates implications not available with the Perfective. (28b) would thus be appropriate in a context in which the actual tidying of the clothes is not as important as some circumstance arising from that fact, and would be appropriate, for example, in a context in which the speaker is indicating that the clothes can now be put away.<sup>6</sup> Cuvalay-Hauk (1994) remarks, in connection with such examples, that the AP is '*...used to unambiguously indicate the perfect meaning of a resultant state which is still valid at the moment of speech or a reference point*' (187). Cuvalay-Hauk summarises this property by saying that with such verbs '*the AP expresses Perfect Aspect*'. The idea that the AP expresses Perfect aspect - is widespread in the literature. Holes (1995) notes that the participle '*frequently has a perfect meaning*', and for Mitchell (1978), the AP '*...carries the implication of the "current relevance" of past acts that in general terms characterises PERFECT Aspect*'. Mitchell and El-Hassan (1994) say that the AP signifies the '*...unbroken relevance of past act*'. 'Current relevance' (CR) has been widely invoked in analyses of the both AP, and the English Present Perfect. The notion of CR is, however, notoriously difficult to define, and, as the discussion of current relevance in Binnick (1990) reveals, attempts to define CR typically end in circularity. Aside from this definitional problem, there is a further, empirical problem with CR as an explanation of the use of the AP. CR fails to explain the contrast between the AP and the Perfective, which may in any case, express Perfect aspect, as pointed out by both Cuvalay-Hauk (op.cit.) and Eisele.

### 6 The participle in context

In this section the pragmatic use of the AP is explored in relation its function in generating implicatures. In all of the examples discussed here, it is argued that the AP is selected by the speaker to signal to the hearer how the utterance is to be interpreted with the respect to the ongoing discourse. The first example is an exchange between a cafe-owner (O) and an employee (E).<sup>7</sup>

29. O: ik-kubba:ya di wisxa  
the-glass this dirty  
'This glass is dirty'
- E: 'ana minaDDaf-ha marrate:n  
I cleaned(AP)-it twice  
'(but) I(ve) cleaned it twice (!)'

E's response is (likely to be) a repudiation of any implication that he has failed in his responsibilities to keep the glassware clean. The use of the Perfective form of the verb to clean, *naDDaft*, in this context, would constitute a bare statement of fact, and hence be

<sup>6</sup> Naturally, and as will be demonstrated subsequently, the pragmatic implicatures of such a statement may relate to factors other than the state of the clothes at the time of speaking, and indeed may have only a tenuous connection with the event described by the Participle. This is to be expected if, as argued here, the function of the AP is to instruct the hearer to derive implicatures, rather than entailments.

<sup>7</sup> The example discourses are from a variety of sources: some are overheard; others from television films and dramas in the dialect.

appropriate in, say, a reply to a question such as 'did you clean the glass?'. A's utterance could, potentially, prompt a variety of responses. B interprets it as an actual or potential accusation, and the intended implicature of his utterance is likely to be that of disclaiming responsibility, or perhaps expressing surprise. The function of the AP in this example, then, is akin to that attributed by Blakemore (1989) to discourse markers such as 'but', which, as Blakemore shows, signal to the hearer how the utterance is to be interpreted against the surrounding discourse.<sup>8</sup>

The second example presents a similar case. Here a patient is discussing a gastric upset with his doctor. The doctor asks the patient what he has eaten, using the Perfective.

30. D. kalt 'e:h  
Eat(Pfv)-2SM what?  
'What have you eaten?'

P. mij fa:kir bi ZZabT. 'ah, wa:kil samak mafwi  
Neg remember exactly. Ah, eat (AP) fish grilled  
'I don't remember exactly. Ah, I ate some grilled fish'

P's response with the AP is intended to convey that the *fact* of his having eaten grilled fish is of less significance than the implicated causal connection between what he ate and his current condition. In both of the above examples, then, the AP serves to generate implicatures against a context. In each case, the suggested interpretations are implicatures, and hence cancellable, rather than entailments of the utterances. The relevant implicatures can be accommodated under a broad notion of 'current relevance': in each case, the second party (E, P) is acting within a conversational context in which a particular range of response types is expected, and hence is effectively constrained to (current) relevance. This observation does not, of course, explain why the AP is selected by the speakers over the Perfective. In the next two examples, the AP is used in what are effectively monologues, to serve purposes which are essentially 'rhetorical'. In the first example the AP is used within a single turn consisting of two linked clauses. The speaker is establishing his status as someone who associates with people of power and influence. The speaker firstly asserts that a certain government minister is a personal friend, and then, in the second clause, substantiates this claim.

31. O: huwwa Sadi:qi, wi dayman biyu'9ud ma9a:ya  
he my-friend and always sits with-me  
'imba:riH mityaddiyi:n sawa  
yesterday ate-lunch (AP) together  
'He is my friend, and always sits with me. Yesterday we had lunch together'  
(cf: 'Why, only yesterday we had supper together')

<sup>8</sup> The similarities between the pragmatic properties of discourse markers (connectives), as described by Blakemore, and the use of the AP (or other tense/aspect/modal devices) to generate implicatures are suggestive, but are unlikely to be exact. Blakemore's claim is that discourse markers act in a manner similar to that of logical connectives to indicate to the hearer how the containing utterance is to be interpreted – as a premise, or conclusion to an implicit syllogistic reasoning, for example. The degree to which the verb forms serve the same types of discursive function is a matter for research, but it is likely that at least some forms are systematically used in such functions: see Binnick, 1990, p.235, on the use of the Perfect in Norwegian in 'explanatory' contexts.

If the speaker's intention were to simply record the fact that he and the minister had lunch on the previous day, the Perfective would be the natural choice. The use of the AP *mityaddiyi:n* instead of the Perfective *ityadde:na* seems to be motivated by the need to implicate something of the character of the relationship, rather than giving a recounting of events.

The next example also features a 'rhetorical' use of the AP. The first speaker is the daughter-in-law (DIL) of the second (MIL). DIL, who has, shortly before, been released from police custody for an offence she did not commit, has, as a result of being taken into custody, been sent notice by her husband (Ahmed) that that he intends to seek a divorce. In explaining this to MIL, DIL uses the Perfective 'send' (*ba9at*). MIL's retort uses the same verb root, but in the AP form.

32. DIL: aHmad 9a:yiz Tala:'. **ba9at**-li wara'a.  
Ahmed wants divorce. send(Pfv)-me paper  
'Ahmed wants a divorce. He('s) sent me a note'

MIL: wi **ba9it**-ha: -lik fe:n  
and send(AP)-it-to-you where?  
'And where did he send it to you?'

DIL: fi kkarako:n  
- at the police station

MIL's question, rhetorical and ironic, rather than elicitory, is intended to underline the fact that the note was sent to DIL at the police station, and has a range of potential implicatures centring on the impropriety associated with the fact that DIL received the note at the police station. It is not altogether clear to what degree 'current relevance' can be invoked as an explanation of the use of the AP here, as MIL's utterance *introduces* the relevant contextual assumptions, through the use of the AP.

## 7 Conclusion

The foregoing provides evidence that the use of the AP in contrast to the Perfective appears to be motivated by pragmatic considerations. The pragmatic role of the AP appears to be that of generating implicatures which pivot around the consequences or implications of an event, rather than merely its occurrence. Importantly, the examples show that there is reason to assume that the use of the AP may create context, rather than its use being merely parasitic on previous contextual information. These observations inevitably raise several questions some of which must be the subject of future research. One question of particular interest, however, is why the AP is charged with this pragmatic role. There are suggestive similarities between the AP and the English Present Perfect, most notably complementary distribution with preterite-like forms (English Past, EA Perfective), and the generation of implicatures.<sup>9</sup> Studies of the

<sup>9</sup> The similarities are, at points, striking, but it should not be concluded that the AP is the equivalent of the Present Perfect. The AP has syntactic and semantic properties including collocation with certain classes of adverbials, temporal unboundedness, and, in some uses, modal overtones, which are not shared by the Present Perfect. In the view of Li et al (1982), however, the aspectual category 'Perfect' is discursively motivated, and, as Li et al observe, may be expressed in different languages in a variety

English Perfect from a variety of perspectives have sought to identify the role of both semantic and pragmatic aspects of meaning in its use and interpretation. Several studies in this area converge on the idea that the meaning of the Perfect in context can only be understood if it is assumed that it is associated with a conventional implicature. In Smith's (1981) formulation, the Perfect has the conventional implicature '...that the propositions relevant to the interpretation of the sentence include some present ones'.<sup>10</sup> Taking this to be a more explicit statement of the informal characterisation of the Perfect as a form which bridges the past and the present, it can be applied to the AP. For Salib (1985) the AP can be regarded as an alternative form of the 'present tense' in EA.<sup>11</sup> Salib defines the character of the AP as 'stative'. The pragmatic functions of the AP may well derive from its stative character: the AP, as a verb form which is uninflected for tense/aspect will receive a 'present' interpretation by default. The contrast between the Perfective and the Participle may be explained if it is assumed that, as is argued for the Present Perfect in English, the Participle, conventionally implicates that some of the propositions to be accessed in its interpretation are 'present'. The rest – the implicatures relevant or appropriate to particular contexts – are issued by the speaker, and determined by the hearer. Thus, in example (31) above, the AP form *mit'adiyyin* implicates that the proposition has current relevance. The specific implicature identified in connection with the example – namely that the reference to having dinner is to be interpreted as support for the statement that the speaker and another individual are friends – is a contextually-derived implicature.

This paper has suggested that a thorough analysis of the Participle requires a detailed and explicit account of how it relates to context. This in turn requires an account of both the semantic character of the Participle, and its role in the generation of implicatures. These ideas remain, as yet, tentative. Further research could usefully explore two main areas. Firstly, specifying the complementary contributions of the Participle to 'conventional' meaning on the one hand, and implicature on the other, in particular with regard to resultative meanings (cf. de Praetere, 1998, Michaelis 1994). The second focus of enquiry is the relationship between the pragmatics of the Participle and presupposition.

of ways, including dedicated verb forms, particles, and, it can be suggested, extended use of participles such as those described here.

<sup>10</sup> See also de Praetere 1998, Michaelis 1994.

<sup>11</sup> The idea that there is, or might be, a 'present tense' in EA is controversial. Salib's is a descriptive, pedagogical work, in which the Imperfective is compared to a 'present' tense form. Salib's claim regarding the stative nature of the AP is valid, regardless of whether one subscribes to the existence of a 'present' tense in EA.

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