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In: 2nd Arabic Linguistics Forum. 2016, York

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This is the author’s manuscript of a paper that was presented at 2nd Arabic Linguistics Forum Conference, held 12/12/2016-14/12/2016, York

Link to article:

Date deposited:
15/11/2017

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Multi-functional Verbs *gaam* & *gaʕad* in Kuwaiti Arabic:

Between Serialization and Auxilation

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It is believed, when looking at the historical development of auxiliaries that auxiliaries develop from main verbs when they acquire functional properties (Seiss, 2009). Motion and posture verbs are considered a source for auxiliary verbs cross-linguistically (Juge, 2006). Furthermore, there seems to be a consensus that serial verbs can be an immediate stage on the grammaticalization cline for auxiliaries (Seiss, 2009; Anderson, 2006; Heine, 1993; amongst others).

In Kuwaiti Arabic (Henceforth KA), there are two interesting posture verbs that show both lexical and functional behaviours, relevant to the introduction above. Verbs *gaam* ‘get up’ & *gaʕad* ‘sit’ can combine with other verbs without the use of an overt linking element, i.e. a coordination or subordination marker. In such combinations they either show a lexical meaning or a less lexical -more functional- meaning. For example, verb *gaam* is ambiguous in the following construction:

(1) Muna  *gaam.t*  dˤhakaat.t  lamma  faaf.t-ni

Muna  V.3SF  laughed.3SF  when  saw.3SF-1S

a. ‘Muna stood up (and) laughed when she saw me’
b. ‘Muna started laughing when she saw me’

Verb *gaam.t* can mean literally standing and laughing as expressed in the translation in (1a), or it can have a functional meaning, marking inceptive aspect, i.e the initiation of an event in relation to another event. This sort of ambiguity is also shown in the use of verb *gaʕad* in KA:

(2) Talal  *y.gfad*  y.iʕlab  riyaδa  b-il-bait

Talal  3SM.V  3SM.play  sports  in-DEF-house

a. ‘Talal sits (and) plays sports in the house’
b. ‘Talal keeps playing sports in the house’

In example (2), the first reading is a lexical one, meaning that Talal must be in a seated position in order to play his sport. The second possible reading is functional; it marks
continuous/progressive aspect hence the lexical meaning of being in seated position is not necessary for the interpretation of the sentence.

The ambiguous constructions are not structurally equivalent to one another. There are a number of structural clues that disambiguate the lexical uses from the functional ones in addition to semantics. The main hypothesis is that there is one lexical entry for verbs ‘gaam/gaśad’, and depending on the position where they are merged, they acquire these different interpretations. When these verbs are merged in the VP domain they get the lexical reading. On the other hand, when they are merged in the functional domain – anywhere above VP – they acquire the functional reading. The ambiguous readings are possible due to the availability of two different positions for these verbs to be merged, especially when there is another lexical verb in the clause.

(Note on glossing: Imperfective verbs are glossed with all features before the verb, for example 3SM.V, while perfective verbs are glossed with all features after the verb V.3SM, using the distinction between suffixal form vs. prefixal form borrowed from Fassi Fehri, 2012).

References: