
RESEARCH ARTICLE

On the structure of *b-* and *raḥ* as future markers in Najdi Arabic

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ABSTRACT

Tense is a cross-linguistic category that is typically expressed within the verb complex. It can be realized in verb forms/inflections, auxiliaries, particles, or any tense markers that are structurally related to the verb. Tense in general can relate the proposition, statement, action, event or whatever expressed by the verb to three main types of tense: past, present, and future. The aim of this paper is to investigate the underlying linguistic properties of the markers of the latter type of tense in one of the Arabic varieties: Najdi Arabic (NA). The paper mainly focuses on describing the linguistic properties of *b-* and *raḥ* as future makers in NA. In addition to describing their relevant linguistic properties, the paper attempts to account for these properties using the theory of Head-driven Phrase Structure Grammar (HPSG). The paper also offers a comparison of the NA future markers *b-* and *raḥ* and their counterparts in Standard Arabic and sheds light on the similarities and differences between them.

KEYWORDS

Tense, future, Najdi Arabic, syntax, analysis

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1. Introduction

Tense, as Comrie (2000) describes, is the grammatical location of time in language utterances. It is an essential grammatical category that has various roles. For example, it identifies the time relation of what is expressed in an utterance (e.g., action, event, situation) and the time of speech. Generally speaking, tense can be divided into three: present, past, and future. Each one of these three is cross-linguistically expressed within the verb phrase by means of verb inflections/affixes, auxiliaries, particles and so forth.

Najdi Arabic (NA), for instance, differentiates between the present and the past tense through the morphological forms or patterns of the verb. This means that it has a morphological form of a verb in the present that differs from its past form. For instance, the past (perfective) form of the present (imperfective) *yanaam* (sleep) is *naam* (slept). This morphological derivation applies almost to all verbs. The past form is mostly shorter than the present one. For the future tense, which concerns us most here, NA has two main future markers: *b-* and *raḥ*¹ (will) as exemplified in (1) and (2) respectively.²

(1) *b-yalṣab l-kabtin* *bukra*

¹ *raḥ* can also be written as *raaḥ*.

² In addition to *b-* and *raḥ*, the future in NA can be expressed indirectly by lexical items or by using adverbial future expressions. These, however, are beyond the scope of the current paper which focuses on *b-* and *raḥ* as the main 'grammatical' future markers in NA.

FUT-play DEF-caption tomorrow³
 'The caption will play tomorrow.'

(2) *raḥ* *yaḥsab* *l-kabtin* *bukra*
 FUT play DEF-caption tomorrow
 'The caption will play tomorrow.'

As shown in (1) and (2), the future tense can be expressed in NA using the markers *b-* and *raḥ* in the same way. One might wonder here about the linguistic status or grammatical class of each one of these two and whether there are differences in their structure, use, and meaning. This actually represents the research questions of the current paper which attempts to investigate the underlying linguistic structure of future markers in NA. It particularly aims to describe future markers in NA and compare them with their counterparts in Standard Arabic (SA). This includes providing naturally occurring linguistic examples that illustrate the structure of future markers in NA. The paper also attempts to briefly analyze their structure at both the lexical and phrasal level using the theory of Head-driven Phrase Structure Grammar.

The remaining part of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 briefly introduces the theoretical framework that will be used in the paper. Section 3 describes future markers in NA and compares them to their counterparts in Standard Arabic (SA). Section 4 offers a theoretical analysis of future markers in NA. Section 5 concludes this paper.

2. An Overview of the Theoretical Framework

The theory that will be used here is Head-driven Phrase Structure Grammar (HPSG). HPSG was established by Pollard and Sag (1987). Its beginning was heavily influenced by a framework known as Generalized Phrase Structure Grammar (GPSG), which was developed by Gazdar et al. (1985). HPSG is a constraint-based theory in which a grammar is composed of word and phrase types and constraints governing their usage (Borsley & Jones, 2005). As the name of this framework implies, HPSG places a strong emphasis on information encoded in the lexical heads of syntactic phrases (Sag et al., 2003). Furthermore, HPSG is a monostratal theory, meaning that the syntactic structure of a sentence is a single constituent structure, and thus it does not involve any movement processes (Borsley & Müller, 2024). Moreover, utterances in HPSG are modelled as feature structures of the type *sign*, i.e., a word or phrase, and the relevant constraints are defined once they are organized into a proper type hierarchy (Ginzburg & Sag, 2000). Also, the feature structure descriptions are represented in HPSG by using attribute-value matrices as will be exemplified in section 4.

3. Future Markers in NA and SA: Description and Comparison

Future tense in SA is often perceived by the presence of the future markers *sa-* and *sawfa* (Althawab, 2014; Aoun et al., 2010; Al-Saidat & Al-Momani, 2010), as shown in (3) and (4).

(3) *sa-yulqii* *l-mudiir-u* *xiṭaab-an* (*ṡad-an*)
 FUT-give DEF-manager speech (tomorrow)
 'The manager will give a speech (tomorrow).'

(4) *sawfa* *yulqii* *l-mudiir-u* *xiṭaab-an* (*ṡad-an*)
 FUT give DEF-manager speech (tomorrow)
 'The manager will give a speech (tomorrow).'

As the examples in (3) and (4) show, the future tense in SA can be expressed by means of *sa-* and *sawfa* and the use of future time adverbials like *ṡadan* 'tomorrow' is not necessary here. The main difference between these two future markers is that the former is a bound morphological prefix that needs to be attached to an imperfective verb. The latter *sawfa*, on the other hand, is a word, not a prefix. But, it also needs to be followed by an impactive verb to denote its future sense. In addition to functioning similarly as future markers, *sa-* is sometimes viewed as a short form of *sawfa* (Al-Ansari, 1964; Al-Mouradi, 1992). This is, however, a matter of debate among Arab grammarians and the two are often considered distinct. Semantically, it is argued that *sa-* is used to express the near future while *sawfa* is used to express the remote future (Al-Saidat & Al-Momani, 2010; Alshboul et al., 2010).

³ For conciseness purposes, only the most relevant details will be included in the glossing of all the examples.

NA, interestingly, has a pair of future makers that functions, to a great extent, similarly to the pair *sa-* and *sawfa* in SA. These future markers are *b-* and *raḥ*. It should be noted that these two have other lexical or grammatical uses. However, the focus here is on their use as future markers.

The first marker *b-*, like *sa-* in SA, is a morphological prefix that needs to be attached to an imperfective verb to express futurity. It is mostly written as *b-* although the prefix is not formed by *b* alone. It is normally followed by a vowel before the first sound of the verb that is attached to. So, it can be proposed that the future marker *b-* can also be written as *ba-* or *bi-* based on the phonological context. Another important point about *b-* is that it is often believed to be derived from the volition verb *baya/yabi* ‘he wanted/wants’ (Ingham, 1994; Persson, 2008; Altamimi, 2021). The lexical verb *yabi* expresses volition or desire. One important theory that can explain the development of *b-*, and *raḥ* as well, as a future marker is ‘grammaticalization’, which is the process wherein lexical forms develop to grammatical forms gradually (Kuteva et al., 2019). Cross-linguistically, volition verbs (want, desire) and motion verbs (come, go) are among the types of verbs that tend to undergo grammaticalization to become tense, aspect, and mood (TMA) markers (Bybee et al., 1994; Hopper & Traugott, 2003). In English, for example, the modal verb *will* is a grammaticized future tense marker as it was derived from the old English word *wyllan*, meaning ‘to want, wish, desire’ (Bybee et al., 1994).

The second future marker *raḥ*, like *sawfa* in SA, is an independent word (i.e., not a bound prefix). As *b-* has already been compared to the development of *will* in English, the same applies to *raḥ* in NA and *be going to* in English (Millar & Trask, 2015). Historically, *raḥ* was a lexical verb meaning ‘went’. Then, it develops into a grammatical future particle via the process of grammaticalization (AlQahtani & AlArifi, 2020; Altamimi, 2021).

To elaborate more on *b-* and *raḥ* as the main future markers in NA, consider the examples shown in (5) and (6).

- (5) *b-yisaafir* *l-mudiir* (*bukra*)
 FUT-travel DEF-manager (tomorrow)
 ‘The manager will travel (tomorrow).’

- (6) *raḥ* *yisaafir-l-mudiir-u* (*l-isbuuf* *l-jaay*)
 FUT travel DEF-manager (DEF-week DEF-next)
 ‘The manager will travel (next week).’

The use of *b-* and *raḥ* to express futurity is mostly interchangeable. However, the prefix *b-* is used to refer to the future when the event is about to happen (i.e., near in the future like *tomorrow*) as exemplified in (5). The use of the particle *raḥ*, on the other hand, can be preferred to denote future plans or intentions as in (6). Structurally, it can be concluded that the two need to be followed by an imperfective verb to express futurity. More details about their structure will be discussed in the next section.

4. Analysis

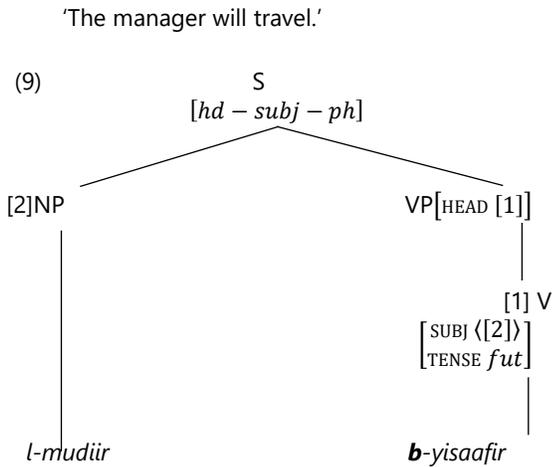
Given the observations discussed in the previous sections, it can be argued that the linguistic properties of the future marker *b-* in NA could be analyzed as schematized in (7).

- (7) The entry of future marker *b-* in NA.

$\left[\begin{array}{l} \textit{prefix} \\ \text{PHON } \langle b - \rangle \\ \text{HEAD } [\text{MOD } \langle V[\text{VFORM } \textit{impf}] \rangle] \\ \text{CONTENT } [\textit{fut} - \textit{rel}] \end{array} \right]$

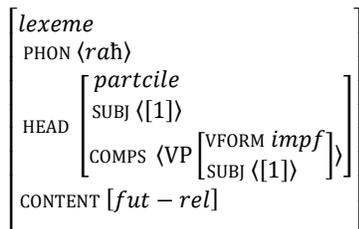
The entry in (7) encapsulates the underlying linguistic information of the future marker *b-*. It states that it is a prefix whose phonological value is *b-*. It also shows that *b-* modifies a verb whose form is imperfective. Its CONTENT, which concerns semantic value, states that it denotes futurity (i.e., it expresses future relation). Hence, the entry includes all what has been discussed so far about the prefix *b-* as a future marker. At the phrasal level, nothing specific will be included in the analysis of *b-* since it joins the verb at a lexical level. It will just appear as part of the verb to which it is attached as in (9) which shows the structure of the short sentence repeated below in (8).

- (8) *l-mudiir* *b-yisaafir*
 DEF-manager FUT-travel



The analysis of the second future marker *raḥ*, on the other side, includes more details because it is not just a prefix that is attached to an imperfective verb as is the case with *b-*. The underlying properties of *raḥ* that have been discussed so far can be illustrated using the lexical entry given in (10) which summarizes them in HPSG terms.

(10) The entry of future marker *raḥ* in NA.



In simple words, the lexical entry in (10) states that *raḥ* is of the type *lexeme* (i.e., word) whose phonological value is *raḥ*. In the information of HEAD, which concerns its syntax, the part or speech or grammatical class of *raḥ* is identified as a particle. Being a particle accounts for the fact that it has only one invariable form that does not inflect for tense, aspect, or agreement. It is also stated that *raḥ* takes a subject and complement. The value of its subject is identical to the one taken by its complement. This can be seen via the shared tag [1]. Moreover, its complement is specified as a verb phrase whose form is imperfective. The last feature CONTENT states *raḥ* semantically refers to the future. Hence, this entry accounts for all the underlying linguistic properties of *raḥ* and distinguishes it from the other *raḥ* which, as already discussed, functions as a lexical verb meaning 'went'. To make the contrast clearer, the entry of the lexical verb *raḥ* that is exemplified in the sentence (11) is given in (12).

(11) *l-mudiir* ***raḥ*** *la-l-bait*
 DEF-manager went to-DEF-home
 'The manager went home.'

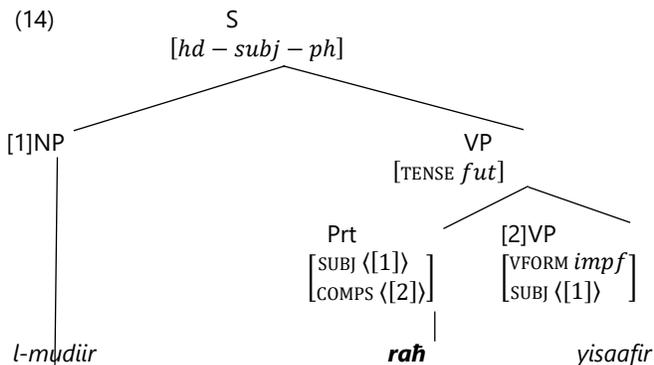
(12) The entry of the lexical verb *raḥ* in (11).

$$\left[\begin{array}{l} \text{word} \\ \text{PHON } \langle \text{raḥ} \rangle \\ \text{HEAD } \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{verb} \\ \text{fin} \\ \text{SUBJ } \langle \{1\}\text{NP} \rangle \\ \text{COMPS } \langle \{2\}\text{PP} \rangle \end{array} \right] \\ \text{CONTENT } [\text{going} - \text{rel}] \end{array} \right]$$

The entry in (12), unlike (10), states that *raḥ* is a finite verb (i.e., tensed) that takes an NP subject and a PP complement. It also shows that lexical *raḥ* expresses ‘going’ relation. Almost none of these properties applies to the grammaticalized future particle *raḥ*.

At a phrasal level, the particle *raḥ* can be analyzed in a way that is similar to analysis of copula verbs or auxiliaries that take verbal complements with which they share the same subject. For instance, the structure of the simple sentence including *raḥ* in (13) will be as schematized in (14).

(13) *l-mudīr raḥyisaafir*
 DEF-manager FUT travel
 ‘The manager will travel.’



The structure in (14) shows that the sentence, as is the case with subject-initial clauses in Arabic, is of the type *head-subject-phrase* which consists of a head VP and a subject (Althawab 2022, Althawab & Alhabib, 2026). The subject here is the NP *l-mudīr* and the head VP *raḥ yisaafir* is which carries the future tense because of *raḥ*. It is also shown that the particle *raḥ* takes the verb phrase *yisaafir* whose head is in the imperfective form as its complement. Lastly, the structure shows that the subject of both *raḥ* and the VP *yisaafir* is identical.

It should be noted, however, that the future particle *raḥ* can also be analyzed as modifier (i.e., a modifying particle). In this case, *raḥ* will not take the verb following it as its complement. The relationship between the two will be accounted for in HPSG by means of MOD. The value of the verb following *raḥ* will appear as the value of its MOD feature instead of COMPS (e.g., MOD [VP [VFORM *impf*]]).

5. Conclusion

The paper explores the structure of the future markers *b-* and *raḥ* in Najdi Arabic. It first introduces how these two are used to refer to the future. It also compares them with their counterparts *sa-* and *sawfa* in SA. It shows that NA has this pair of future markers which structurally function like the pair in SA (i.e., the first in the two languages is a bound prefix and the second is

grammatical particle). In addition, the paper describes the structure of these two future markers with naturally occurring examples. It also summarizes the underlying linguistic properties of each marker. Using the theoretical framework of HPSG, the paper proposes analysis that can account for their properties and the constructions where they occur. The proposed analysis views *b-* as a prefix that is attached to a verb in the imperfective form. Once this affixation occurs, the tense of this verb becomes future. The other marker *rah* is analyzed as a particle that takes an imperfective verb as a complement and shares the same subject with it. The analysis of the two reasonably covers their linguistic properties and distinguishes them clearly from similar forms.

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