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Future and Progressive Markers in Assiri Arabic: A Case Study of Grammaticalization

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Abstract—**The purpose of this paper is to describe and explain the process through which future and progressive markers in Assiri Arabic [1] evolve from lexical elements into grammatical ones, a process known as grammaticalization. Addressing a gap in the literature, this study provides the first analysis of grammaticalization within Assiri Arabic, a previously unexamined dialect in the field. This paper follows van Gelderen's (2003) proposal that elements move up the syntactic tree rather than down as they grammaticalize. Moreover, this analysis advocates a streamlined syntactic structure where there is only a single functional category below the Tense Phrase (TP), known as the Aspect Phrase (ASPP). This approach simplifies the syntactic model and aligns with trends in contemporary syntactic theory. The structural framework employed in this analysis is based on the Minimalist Program as developed by Chomsky (1995, 2000, 2001b, 2007, 2008). This Minimalist approach aims to explain linguistic phenomena with the simplest and most economical theoretical constructs, making it an ideal choice for examining the intricate process of grammaticalization in Assiri Arabic.**

Index Terms—**grammaticalization, progressive marker, future marker, Assiri Arabic**

I. Introduction

Grammaticalization, a fundamental and ubiquitous process in language change, drives the evolution of linguistic structures by transforming lexical items into grammatical markers. This dynamic process, as Heine (2003) suggests, arises from the need to enhance communicative efficiency (p. 578), streamlining expression and refining the conveyance of meaning. Roberts and Roussou (2003) further elucidate grammaticalization as a process of reanalysis, whereby a lexical element, originally possessing a concrete, independent meaning, is reinterpreted as a grammatical morpheme. This reanalysis is often accompanied by phonological reduction—a loss of phonetic substance—and fusion with neighboring elements. Hopper and Traugott (2003, p. 7) capture this trajectory of reduction succinctly with the following cline:

content item > grammatical word > clitic > inflectional affix

Building on these foundations, van Gelderen (2024) defines grammaticalization as the creation of entirely new grammatical categories from pre-existing lexical ones. This process is typically characterized by a dual loss: a loss of phonological weight, as the element becomes shorter and less prominent, and a loss of semantic specificity, as its original concrete meaning bleaches out, giving way to a more abstract, grammatical function. These changes can be visualized through clines that depict not only semantic and morpho-phonological reduction but also the increasing degree of association with other elements in the clause. As Heine and Reh (1984, p. 15) concisely state, grammaticalization involves linguistic units diminishing in "semantic complexity, pragmatic importance, syntactic flexibility, and phonetic substance".

This paper explores the grammaticalization of two lexical expressions in Assiri Arabic: *ʔabġa*, originally meaning 'want' or 'desire,' and *gaʕid*, originally meaning 'sitting,' 'remaining,' or 'staying.' These expressions have undergone a remarkable transformation, evolving into functional elements that denote futurity and progressiveness, respectively[2]. This investigation aims to demonstrate that this grammaticalization process invariably involves movement to a functional position within the syntactic tree. Following van Gelderen (2003), the paper argues that "elements climb higher up in the tree as they grammaticalize" (p. 28). This upward movement aligns with the principle of economy in syntactic theory, specifically Chomsky's (1995, 2001a) 'merge-over-move' preference. This principle favors generating an element directly in its target functional head (merge) over moving it there from a lower, lexical position (move), thus minimizing computational complexity. Therefore, the paper will show that the grammaticalization of the Assiri Arabic future marker, derived from ʔabġa, and the progressive marker, derived from gaʕid, provides empirical support for this claim. Furthermore, it will be argued that both markers occupy the same functional head, namely the Aspect Phrase (ASPP), implying a more streamlined syntactic structure with fewer functional categories. This co-occurrence within ASPP is further supported by their complementary distribution with other modals, suggesting that they occupy the same structural position. Furthermore, the evolution of ʔabġa into the reduced future marker b- streamlines speech by creating a more

[1] Assiri Arabic is the dialect spoken in Abha, the capital of Saudi Arabia's southern region (Asir Province). Within that region, it often serves as a standard dialect understood by speakers of other local dialects. For further details on Saudi Arabia's dialects, see Prochazka (1988).
[2] Pinpointing the exact date for the grammaticalization of *ʔabġa* and *gaʕid* in Assiri Arabic is a challenging task. The divergence between spoken and written Arabic, coupled with the limited historical documentation of the spoken vernacular, makes it difficult to ascertain precise timelines for these linguistic changes.

concise expression of futurity, aligning with the principle of enhancing communicative efficiency (Heine, 2003). The following sections will analyze these two markers in greater detail, tracing their historical development and examining their current syntactic behavior to illuminate the intricacies of grammaticalization in Assiri Arabic.

II. Grammaticalization in Arabic

Grammaticalization in Arabic is an area that has not received extensive research attention. Nonetheless, a number of studies have examined this phenomenon within Arabic dialects, particularly the transformation of content verbs into grammatical markers for future tense and aspect. For instance, Alshboul et al. (2010) analyze the evolution of the lexical verbs ra:ħ 'went' and baddi 'I want' into future markers in Jordanian Arabic. Similarly, Jarad (2013) examines the grammaticalization of the motion verb ra:ħ as a future marker in Syrian Arabic, noting that this process involves semantic, morphological, phonetic, and morpho-phonological shifts. Jarad (2017) also studies this phenomenon in Emirati Arabic, focusing on the transformation of the volitional verb ʔabɣi 'I want' into a future marker. Further, Altamimi (2021) investigates the grammaticalization of specific verbs in Saudi Najdi Arabic (SNA), particularly those related to posture, the motion verb raħ 'to go', and the b-imperfective form. This study explores how these verbs have transitioned from their original meanings to serve as grammatical markers for tense, aspect, and mood. Altamimi includes data from native speakers and compares SNA with other Arabic dialects, utilizing grammaticalization theory to explain the grammatical evolution of the Arabic language.

Regarding aspect markers, research has investigated the shifts of posture verbs into progressive aspect markers in Kuwaiti Arabic (Al-Najjar, 1991), Urban Hijazi Arabic (Basulaiman, 2018), and colloquial Arabic more broadly (Camilleri & Sadler, 2017). Other studies on grammaticalization have focused on pronominal markers, prepositions, and subordinators (see Druel, 2010; Esseesy, 2010; Wilmsen, 2017), as well as copulas originating from pronouns or posture verbs (Camilleri & Sadler, 2019).

Overall, research on grammaticalization in Arabic often neglects modern spoken dialects due to challenges like spoken-written divergence and limited documentation. While some dialects have been studied, more investigation is needed. This study helps fill this gap by providing the first analysis of grammaticalization within Assiri Arabic, a previously unexamined dialect in this field.

A. The Future Marker b-

It is believed that the future marker b- in Assiri Arabic has evolved from the lexical verb *ʔabġa* 'want,' which in turn developed from the Classical Arabic (CA) verb *ʔabġii* 'I want'. This development mirrors a common cross-linguistic pattern where verbs of volition or desire grammaticalize into future markers, as seen with English *'will'* and Greek *'tha'* (Lehmann, 2002). Consider the following examples from CA:

1) a. ya ʔabana ma nabġii haða
O father not want-1P this
'Our father we don't want this' (Holy Quran, 12, 65)
b. qaal ðalik ma kuna nabiġ-1P
said-3S that what we wanted
'That's what we wanted' (Holy Quran, 18, 64)

In contemporary Assiri Arabic, this verb root is used outside the future marker context both in its past tense form (e.g., *baġiit* 'I wanted', see (2)) and its present tense lexical form (*ʔabġa* 'I want', see (5)).

2) a. baġiit ʔashtari sayarah
wanted-1P buy car
'I wanted to buy a car'
b. baġina nsafer tayarah
wanted-1P travel-1P airplane
'we wanted to travel by airplane'

While these past tense forms exist, the verb has undergone a significant phonological reduction in its path to becoming the future prefix *b-*. Now consider the following examples with a future reading:

3) a. *b-*alʕab shaṭranẑ
will-play-1S chess
'I will play chess'
b. ʕli *b-*iruuħ al-ẑamiʕah
Ali will-go-3SM the-university
'Ali will go to the university'

Examples (3a) and (3b) show that the future marker has been reduced to *b-* and functions as a prefix cliticized to the verb, losing its independent status. This reduction is reminiscent of the Standard Arabic future marker *sa-*, which is reduced from the future particle *sawfa*, as seen in (4):

4) a. sa-ʔaʕuud ʔilaa fass
will-return-1S to Fez
'I will return to Faz' (Fassi Fehri, 1993)

b. sawfa taʕuud ġariiban
will-return-3SF soon
'She will return soon'

Crucially, the lexical verb *ʔabġa* still exists in Assiri Arabic with its meaning indicating "want" and "desire," coexisting alongside its grammaticalized counterpart *b-*. Consider the following sentences:

5) a. ʔabġa ʔashtari sayarah
want-1S buy-1S car
'I want to buy a car'

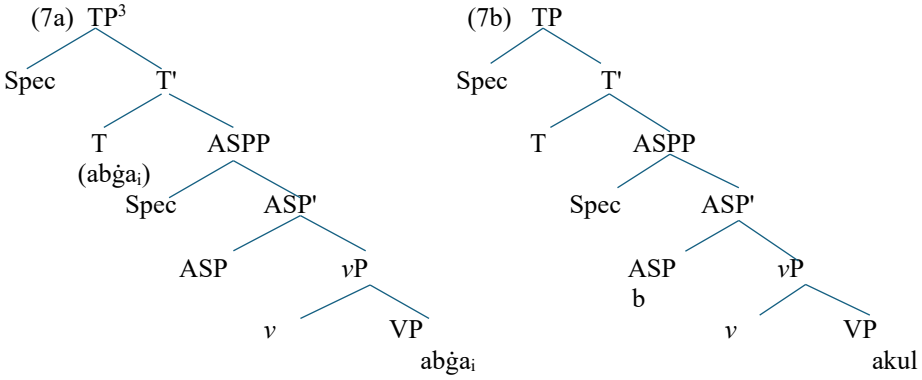
b. ʕli yabġa yudrus ṭeb
Ali want-3SM study-3SM medicine
'Ali wants to study medicine'

c. ʔalawlaad yabġuun yalʕabuun kurah
the-boys want-3PL play-3PL football
'The boys want to play football'

The examples in (5) show *ʔabġa* in its full lexical form, inflecting for person/number agreement with the subject and maintaining its semantic weight. This coexistence suggests that the initial, simple developmental path proposed below is incomplete:

(6) ʔabġii > ʔabġa > b

The phonological reduction from *ʔabġa* to *b-* involves the deletion of the initial glottal stop and vowel (ʔa-), the voiced velar fricative (-ġ-), and the final vowel (-a), leaving only the initial b. This reduction, however, is context-dependent. Syntactically, this reanalysis from a lexical verb into a functional prefix suggests movement or re-positioning from a lexical projection (vP) to a functional one (ASPP), as illustrated conceptually in the simplified trees below:



Structure (7a) conceptually represents the lexical verb ʔabġa originating in vP, potentially raising to T[4]. Structure (7b) represents the grammaticalized marker b- occupying a functional head (here, ASP), positioned higher than the main verb's vP base position. This illustrates the upward shift characteristic of grammaticalization (Roberts & Roussou, 2003; van Gelderen, 2003).

However, the simple schema in (6) fails to capture the coexistence shown in (5) and the contextual constraints on reduction. The marker only reduces to b- when preceding a verb (auxiliary-like function), not when preceding a noun phrase, as shown in (8):

8) a. ʔabġa al-ʕasha ðaħiin
want-1S the-dinner now
'I want the dinner now'

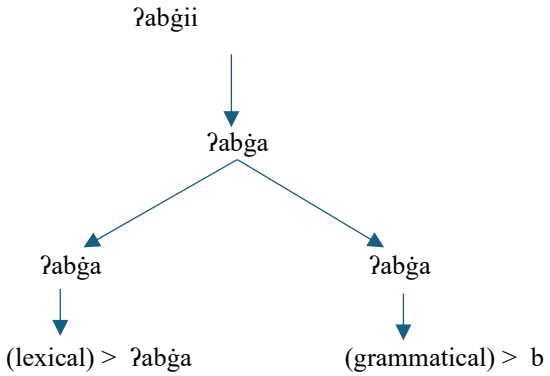
b. *b-ʕasha ðaħiin
FUT-dinner now
'I want dinner now'

Therefore, the structure in (6) must be revised to include uses of the verb *ʔabġa* both as lexical and future marker. Consequently, the developmental stages should be represented in a more accurate schema as (9) rather than that in (6):

[3] This analysis assumes, following Chomsky (2001a), that all clauses are CPs; however, the presented trees are simplified by not showing CPs and sometimes other irrelevant nodes.

[4] This means that in a sentence where the T position is not filled by an auxiliary, the verb moves from *v* to T in order to fill the T position. This is true because, like French, Arabic exhibits a V-to-T movement.

(9)



Schema (9) illustrates that the original verb ʔ*abġa* persists as a full lexical verb (inflecting for agreement, taking VP or NP complements, retaining 'want' meaning) alongside the development of the grammatical future marker b-. This grammatical morpheme b- results from phonological reduction and merges with the following verb stem, specifically when ʔabġa occurs in an auxiliary-like syntactic position preceding another verb (compare (5) where ʔabġa precedes a verb but retains its form, vs. (3) where b- occurs). The lexical form ʔabġa remains when used as a main verb, especially with NP complements (8a).

B. Progressive Marker gaʕid

In Assiri Arabic, the locative participle *gaʕid*, originally meaning 'sitting,' 'remaining,' or 'staying,' has also taken on the grammatical function of marking progressive aspect when followed by an imperfective verb. This development represents another instance of grammaticalization, where a lexical item with a concrete meaning extends its function to express a grammatical concept. Consider the following examples where the progressive marker is inflected for person, number, and gender:

(10) a. gaʕid yuktub risalah
PROG-3SM write-3SM letter
'He is writing a letter'
b. al-bint gaʕdah talʕab kurah
the-girl PROG-3SF play-3SF football
'The girl is playing football'

These examples demonstrate that gaʕid conveys that an action is ongoing or in progress. However, the grammaticalization of gaʕid differs significantly from that of the future marker b-. Crucially, gaʕid does not undergo phonological reduction or fusion with a following verb. This is evidenced by the ungrammaticality of the following examples, where reduction is attempted:

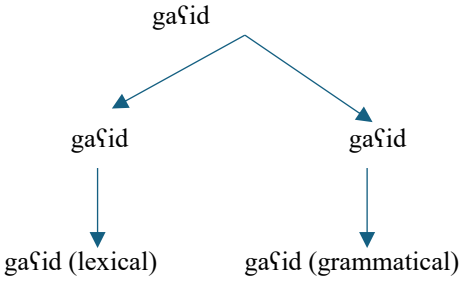
(11) a. *g-yuktub risalah
PROG write-3SM letter
'He is writing a letter'
b. *albint g-talʕab kurah
the-girl PROG play-3SF ball
'The girl is playing football'

The ungrammaticality of (11a) and (11b) highlights a key difference between the two grammaticalization processes. While b- has become a tightly bound prefix, gaʕid retains its status as an independent morpheme, resisting phonological reduction and maintaining its separate word status. Furthermore, the locative participle gaʕid, retaining its original meaning of 'sitting' or 'staying,' is still used in everyday Assiri Arabic, as shown in the following examples:

(12) a. gaʕad kul al-yom fi albeit
stayed-1S all the-day in the-house
'I stayed all day at home'
b. ʔabġa agʕad aktub
want-1S sit-1S write-1S
'I want to sit (down) and write'

These examples show that the lexical and grammatical uses of gaʕid coexist in contemporary Assiri Arabic. However, it's important to note that the lexical use of gaʕid, to mean 'sitting', has become increasingly infrequent in everyday conversation. A competing form, jalis 'sitting,' is often preferred in its place, particularly among younger speakers. This suggests an ongoing shift in the lexical inventory, where jalis may eventually replace the lexical use of gaʕid entirely. Therefore, while gaʕid has clearly grammaticalized into a progressive marker, its developmental path diverges from that of b-. It hasn't undergone the same degree of phonological reduction or fusion, and its lexical counterpart, though declining in use with the meaning of 'sitting', still exists (particularly with the meaning of 'staying'). A possible schema for the development of the progressive marker gaʕid is presented in (13):

(13)



III. Analysis and Discussion

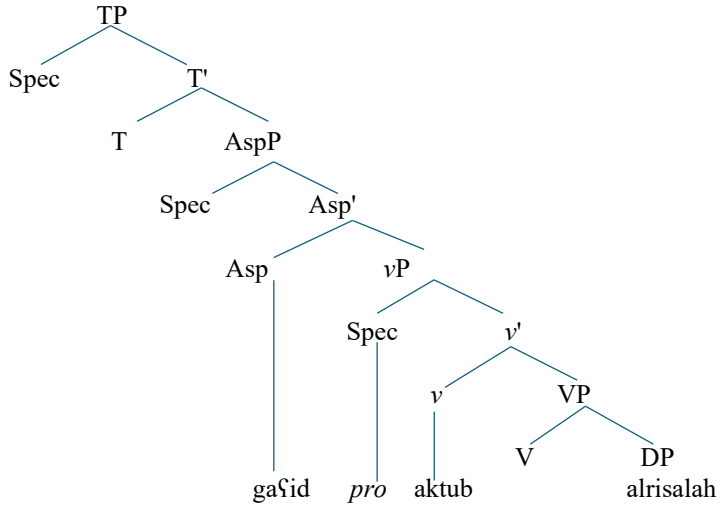
This section argues for a streamlined syntactic structure where only one functional projection (ASPP) intervenes between the TP and the vP. This approach simplifies the clausal architecture and aligns with the minimalist goal of reducing theoretical complexity. It will be demonstrated that both the progressive marker gaʕid and the future marker b- in Assiri Arabic originate in ASPP, providing evidence for this simplified structure. While gaʕid may move to T, b- will be shown to move to T in certain contexts.

A. The Progressive Marker gaʕid

Let us first examine the progressive marker *gaʕid*. It is proposed that *gaʕid* originates in the head of ASPP and may move to T, as illustrated by example (14) and structure (15) below:

(14) gaʕid aktub alrisalah
PROG write-1S the-letter
'I'm writing the letter'

(15) Progressive marker



Structure (15) illustrates the derivation of a sentence with the progressive marker gaʕid. gaʕid is base-generated in the head of ASPP, reflecting its role in marking aspect. It can optionally move to T, especially when T is not filled by another element. However, when the head T is occupied by an auxiliary like "be" (kaan), the progressive marker remains in ASPP, as shown in (16) below:

(16) kunt gaʕid aktub alrisalah
was-1S PROG-1S write-1S the-letter
'I was writing the letter'

Example (16) demonstrates that when the auxiliary *kunt* (form of kaan 'be') occupies T, *gaʕid* remains in ASPP. In this case, neither the main verb nor the progressive marker can move further because the available functional head position, T, is already filled. This provides evidence that gaʕid originates in ASPP and may move to T, but only when T is not otherwise occupied. This behavior supports the proposed structure with a single functional projection, ASPP, between TP and vP.

B. Modals and the Position of ASPP

Further evidence for this simplified structure comes from the interaction of *gaʕid* with modals. In Assiri Arabic, as in most dialects of Arabic, modals cannot co-occur with each other, nor can they co-occur with auxiliaries like "be" in the presence of the progressive marker. Consider the ungrammaticality of the following examples:

(17) a. *lazim kunt gaʕid aktub alrisalah
must be PROG-1S write the-letter

'I must be writing the letter'
b. *qad kunt gaʕid aktub alrisalah
may be PROG-1S write the-letter
'I may be writing the letter'

The ungrammaticality of (17a) and (17b) arises from a competition for the T position. Both the modals (*lazim*, *qad*) and the auxiliary (*kunt*) appear to be competing for the same structural position. To render these sentences grammatical, either the modal or the auxiliary must be removed, as shown in (18):

(18) a. kunt gaʕid aktub alrisalah
was PROG-1S write the-letter
'I was writing the letter'
b. lazim ʔgaʕid aktub alrisalah
must PROG-1S write the-letter
'I must be writing the letter'

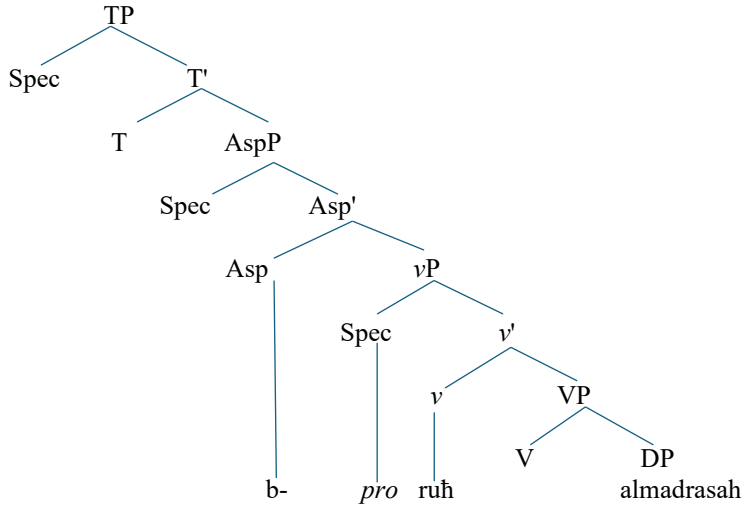
These examples demonstrate a crucial constraint: typically, only one element from the class of modals or auxiliaries like *kaan* 'be' can occupy the T position (or a related high functional position) at a time. The fact that modals and the auxiliary *kunt* are in complementary distribution with each other strongly suggests they target the same structural position (T). Furthermore, the observation that *gaʕid* remains in a lower position when T is filled (as in (16) and (18b)) provides evidence for its origin in a distinct functional projection, ASPP, situated below TP. This supports the proposed simplified clausal architecture.

C. The Future Marker b- and Its Position

Now, let us turn to the future marker b-. Following Mitchell and El-Hassan (1994), it is assumed that b- is also a member of the aspect phrase, as it indicates a prospective action. Structure (20) is proposed for the future marker, illustrated with example (19):

(19) b-aruħ almadrasah ðaħiin
FUT-go the-school now
'I will go to the school now'

(20) Future marker



In this structure, the future marker *b-* originates in the head of ASPP and then moves to T. The verb subsequently moves (e.g., through v) to T as well, cliticizing to the future marker to form b-aruħ. The obligatory movement of b- to T is evidenced by the ungrammaticality of sentences where a modal occupies T in the presence of the future marker, as shown in (21a) and (21b):

(21) a. *qad b-yaħṭur
may FUT-come
'He may will come'
b. *lazim b-yishtri sayarah bukrah
must FUT-buy car tomorrow
'He must will buy a car tomorrow'

The ungrammaticality of (21a) and (21b) arises because both the modal and the future marker b- are competing for the T position. This complementary distribution between the future marker and modals also holds in Standard Arabic, as illustrated in (22):

(22) a. *qad sa-yaħṭuru
may will present-3SM
'He may will come'

b. sa-yaħṭuru (Fassi Fehri, 1993)
will-come-3SM
'He will come'

The evidence presented above strongly suggests that ASPP is situated immediately below T in the functional sequence relevant to these markers in Assiri Arabic. The proposed structure, with a single functional projection ASPP between TP and vP, adheres to the following hierarchy:

(23) TENSE > ASPECT > HEAD VERB

D. Incipient Phonological Reduction of gaʕid

The proximity of the future marker *b-* (as seen in examples 3a and 3b) to the verb stem facilitates their fusion. A similar potential for fusion might be emerging for *gaʕid*. As also noted by Alnajjar (1991) for Kuwaiti Arabic regarding its progressive marker, the phonological reduction process for the Assiri Arabic progressive marker *gaʕid* may have already begun, with occurrences of a reduced form *gaʕ-* reportedly heard in informal conversations and rapid speech, as shown in the following examples:

(24) a. gaʕ-agul-ək nafs ʔashaii
PROG-tell-CLITIC-YOU-2SM same thing
'I'm telling you the same thing'
b. ʕli gaʕ-yuktub mulaħaṭah
Ali PROG-write-3SM note
'Ali is writing a note'

These examples suggest that *gaʕid*, despite its general resistance to reduction thus far (as noted in section 2), might be undergoing incipient further grammaticalization, potentially moving towards a more phonologically reduced form, similar to the path taken by *b-*. This observation aligns with the general path of grammaticalization, where elements tend to become phonologically weaker over time.

Moreover, the placement of grammatical *gaʕid* in ASPP, as argued in section 3, supports the structure proposed in schema (23) [TENSE > ASPECT > (v) > HEAD VERB], which posits a close hierarchical relationship between ASPP and the verb phrase (vP). The grammaticalization of *gaʕid* from a lexical item into an aspectual marker within ASPP exemplifies this proximity.

Furthermore, the analyses of both *b-* and *gaʕid* support the principle that grammaticalized elements move up the tree rather than vice versa. In syntactic trees, higher positions typically represent more abstract grammatical functions. "Moving up" involves associating with a higher, more functional head. The future marker b- was reanalyzed from a lexical verb likely originating in the vP domain into a grammatical marker originating in the functional head ASP (and moving to T). Similarly, the progressive marker *gaʕid* was reanalyzed from a locative participle likely associated with the vP domain into a grammatical morpheme originating in ASP. Both represent instances of upward movement during grammaticalization, shifting from the lexical domain towards the functional domain.

This suggests a consistent upward directionality in grammaticalization. The evolution of *gaʕid*—its reanalysis from a participle into a functional marker originating in ASPP (as argued in section 3), even while retaining inflection (see 10) and resisting full phonological fusion—is an exemplary case fitting within this trend and supporting the proposed structure (schema 23). Its incipient reduction to gaʕ-, noted in (24), further hints at potential future developments along the grammaticalization cline. The journey of both *gaʕid* and *b-* exemplifies how languages change, with lexical elements shifting upward into more abstract grammatical roles within the syntactic hierarchy.

IV. Conclusion

The grammaticalization of the future marker b- and the progressive marker gaʕid in Assiri Arabic demonstrates the transformation of lexical items into grammatical markers through reanalysis, shifting their syntactic roles. The future marker b- evolved from a lexical verb conveying 'want' or 'desire'. Initially part of the lexical verb phrase (vP), b- underwent reanalysis and semantic bleaching: its original meaning faded as it was repositioned into a functional head within the Aspect Phrase (ASPP). Syntactically, it moved from the vP to this higher position, adopting the grammatical function of marking futurity rather than acting as a lexical verb. Similarly, the progressive marker gaʕid originated from a locative participle ('sitting,' 'staying'). Initially describing location within the verbal domain (vP), it was reanalyzed as its locative meaning diminished. This process repositioned gaʕid into a functional head within the ASPP, where it now functions as a grammatical marker expressing progressive aspect.

These examples from Assiri Arabic are classic instances of grammaticalization. Key evidence includes their specialized grammatical functions and detachment from original meanings, alongside the notable phonological reduction characteristic of b-. Such processes underscore the dynamic evolution of language, demonstrating how lexical items adapt in form and function, transitioning into new grammatical roles and reshaping the linguistic system over time. The placement of both markers within ASPP also implies that this phrase might be structurally lower than the Tense Phrase (TP) in the syntactic tree. Ultimately, examining these examples provides deeper insight into the mechanisms driving language change and the intricate relationship between lexicon and grammar.

While this paper provides a detailed analysis of the future marker b- and the progressive marker gaʕid within a streamlined syntactic framework for Assiri Arabic, several avenues for future research emerge. Further investigation could explore the grammaticalization pathways and syntactic positions of other functional elements in Assiri Arabic, such as negation or different modal verbs, to test the robustness of the proposed TP > ASPP > vP hierarchy. A detailed sociolinguistic and phonetic study of the incipient reduction of gaʕid to gaʕ- would be valuable to track this potential change in progress. Additionally, extending the comparative analysis to systematically examine the behavior and placement of future and progressive markers in neighboring dialects could provide crucial insights into regional patterns of grammaticalization and syntactic variation within the Arabian Peninsula. Finally, the divergent paths of b- and gaʕid invite further theoretical exploration into the relationship between syntactic reanalysis, semantic bleaching, and phonological reduction in grammaticalization processes.

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