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► **To cite this version:**

Samia Naïm. The semantic structure of motion verbs in the dialect of Zabid (Yemen). Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies, 2010, Papers from the forty-third meeting of the Seminar for Arabian Studies held at the British Museum, London, 23-25 July 2009, 40, pp.239-246. halshs-00906999

**HAL Id: halshs-00906999**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00906999v1>**

Submitted on 13 Sep 2024

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## The semantic structure of motion verbs in the dialect of Zabid (Yemen)

### 1. Introduction

Spatial relations have been the object of many studies during the last decades. Among the different approaches dealing with the subject, many works took for object the expression of *Location* and *Motion*. In a large number of languages *Motion* is expressed by verbs, in association with “satellites” (particles, prepositions) or not, depending on languages and on verbs (*cf.* Verb-framed ~ Satellite-framed system, Talmy 2007). In addition to that, Motion verbs may be divided into two groups, movement verbs as “to jump, to swim, to crawl” and displacement verbs as “to leave, to go, to come, to come down”. This repartition is not absolute insofar as the languages of the world do not all behave differently toward the two groups of verbs, but it is relevant in the vernacular Arabic of Zabid. We will be concerned here by displacement verbs, and more specifically by basic active motion verbs as “coming” and “going”, which reveal a specific semantic structure not mentioned until now in any language description, in our knowledge.

### 2. Basic active motion verbs

Five verbs figure under the general notion of *Going*, and seven under *Coming*, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Motion-displacement verbs

<i>Going</i>	<i>Coming</i>
rāḥ	ʔata
našar	rawwaḥ
bāk	warad
ṣāb	baḥḥan
sāfar	ʔaggal
	ḏahhar
	dann

These verbs are likely to be set out again in three sub-groups, *General*, *Specific* and *Temporal*, according to the complexity of their semantic components. That means that the *General* sub-system does not correspond here to the most recurring one, but to the less complex one.

Table 2. Motion sub-system verbs

<i>General</i>	<i>Specific</i>	<i>Temporal</i>
rāḥ	našar	ʔaggal
ʔata	warad	baḥḥan
bāk	bāk	ḏahhar
rawwaḥ	rawwaḥ	dann
sāfar	ṣāb	

Two couples of verbs, bāk and rawwaḥ, figure under two different sub-systems, the *General* and the *Specific* (Table 2.). Depending on the situation of the discourse and the frame of the displacement, these two verbs may incorporate a co-event to the Motion one, as we will show later.

## 2.1. The General system

The *General* system consists of five verbs, one centrifugal and four centripetal, the source, the path and the goal of the Motion being conveyed by directionals.

### 2.1.1. To go: *rāḥ*

With *rāḥ* the source of the motion is expressed by the ablative *min* (2) and the goal by the allative *sana* (3). The verb is also attested as an auxiliary followed by a verb in the imperfect (ex 4).

(1) *fēn ruḥt?*  
Where go.PERF.2SGM  
“Where did you go?”

(2) *qall-u xlas rɔḥ-l-ak min ʔl-rəggāl*  
say.PERF.3SGM-3SGM enough go.IMP.SGM-DAT-2SGM from the-man  
“He said to him: that is enough, do not annoy this man any more [go from him]”

(3) *rāḥ sanā-(ø)*  
go.PERF.3SG to-3SGM  
“He went to him.”

(4) *ša-rɔḥ ʔətqarraʔ*  
PART.F-go.IMPERF.1SG have breakfast.IMPERF.1SG  
“I will have my breakfast.”

### 2.1.2. To come: *ʔata*

Like *rāḥ* “to go”, *ʔata* does not incorporate in its semantic structure the goal or the source of the motion. In the examples presented below, the goal is introduced by the directionals *ʔind* (7) and *sana* (9). In (8), the motion the speaker refers to is deictically anchored in the speaker.

(5) *ša-ʔēt m-lēl*  
PART-come.IMPERF.1SG the-night  
“I shall come at night.”

- (6) ʔata biḥīn  
COME.PERF.3SGM early  
“He came early.”
- (7) ʔata l-malik yaxṭɔb ʔind-u  
come.PERF.3SGM the-king become engaged.IMPERF.3SGM DIR-3SGM  
“The king came to him to ask for the hand of his daughter.”
- (8) ʔatan təzūra-nī  
come.PERF.3SGF visit.IMPERF.3SGF-1SG  
“She came to visit me.”

Depending on the context, this verb can take on different values, “to go, to come back, to approach”. Other examples are presented here, showing the distinct values of ʔata, depending on the point of view adopted by the speaker or the narrator, whether he is focusing on the source or on the goal of the motion, or whether he takes this or that person or character as a point of reference. As we have noted for *rāḥ*, ʔata has a strong output as an auxiliary of time and aspect (12).

- (9) ʔata sana zōgt-u  
go.PERF.3SGM DIR wife-3SGM  
“He went to his wife.”
- (10) ʔatan ʔinda bət-he baggaran f wagh bət-he  
go.PERF.3SGF DIR daughter-3SGF look amazed eyes in face daughter-3SGF  
“She went to her daughter [and] she looked at her with amazed eyes.”
- (11) lattaf kowsara ḥasamu w ʔate  
fill.PERF.3SGM basket gravel and come.PERF.3SGM  
“He filled a basket with stones and came back.”
- (12) ʔata ykɔl l zōgt-u  
go.PERF.3SGM say.IMPERF.3SGM to wife-3SGM  
“He went to say [something] to his wife.”

### 2.1.3. To go: *bāk*

The verb *bāk* figures in the *Specific* sub-system too, where it shows a complex semantic structure. In the *General* system, *bāk* means “to go” and is usually followed by the directional *sana*. The verb is very productive as an auxiliary of time and aspect, specially for the expression of the durative : in these constructions, it is followed by a verb in the imperfect (15, 16). According to the natives, there is no real difference between *bāk* and *rāḥ*, both means “to go”, but *bāk* is more colloquial and more employed in everyday speech.

(13) *bākan sana rāʔi l-ḥalāwi*  
go.PERF.3SGF DIR. cook the-pastery  
“She went to see the pastry cook.”

(14) *bāk yṣobb ʔarūsa*  
go.PERF.3SGM mould.IMPERF.3SGM doll  
“He went to make a doll.”

(15) *tabūk telgaḥ w tēti*  
go.IMPERF.3SGF go andcome.IMPERF.3SGF and come.IMPERF.3SGF  
“She was going and coming through the streets.”

(16) *bākan tamši tše tḥīd bət-he*  
go.PERF3SGF walkIMPERF3SGF wantIMPERF.3SGF seeIMPERF3SGF daughter-3SGF  
“She started up, in search of her daughter.”

### 2.1.4. To go (away): *rawwaḥ*

This verb too figures in the *Specific* sub-system. In the *General* system, it has most often an intransitive use and it is attested at the imperative mood. In this context, *rawwaḥ* means “go away”. In transitive constructions, the verb is followed by a directional introducing the source of the Motion, such as *min* in (18).

- (17) qal-l-u            yalla    kɔm    rawwiḥ  
 tell-DAT-3SGM INTERJ IMP.SGM go away.IMP.2SGM  
 “He said to him: ‘go, go away’.”
- (18) rawwaḥ            ət-tāli    min ʔindu-hum  
 go.PERF.3SGM the-other DIR LOC-3PL  
 “He went away [the other] from their house.”

When *rawwaḥ* is followed by the word “home” in the position of a direct object, it does not mean “to go from” any more, but “to go back home”. We will go back to this construction under the *Specific* sub-system.

- (19) rawwaḥan    m-bēt  
 go.PERF.3SGF the-house  
 “She went back home”.

### 2.1.5. To travel: *sāfar*

*Sāfar* is used whenever somebody goes outside Zabid, even if it is only to go to a village a few kilometers away, [lā hū warāʔ l-madīneh, *sāfar*] “If it is outside the city, [one employs the word] *sāfar*”, whereas in a large variety of vernacular Arabic, *sāfar* means “to go abroad”. This verb constitutes a good introduction for the *Specific* sub-system which, as we will see now, has for principal framework of reference the city of Zabid.

## 2.2. The *Specific* sub-system

The *Specific* sub-system includes verbs characterized by a complex semantic structure. Five verbs figure under this sub-system, among which four are distributed by pairs, *bāk* and *našar* “to go” on the one hand, and *warad* and *rawwaḥ* “to come back” on the other hand ; the last verb is *šāb* “to go to”.

### 2.2.1. To go: *bāk* ~ *našar*

As we have seen previously, *bāk* is part of the *General* system too (2.1.3.). This verb is centrifugal : the direction of the displacement is encoded by directionals

(ex. 13 again here). By contrast, the verb *našar* belongs exclusively to the *Specific* sub-system. These two verbs may be found in the same context, such as in the couple of examples presented below in parallel.

(13) *bākan sana rāʔi l-ḥalāwi*  
 go.PERF.3SGF DIR. cook the-pastery  
 “She went to see the pastry cook.”

(20) *bākan m-sṾq*  
 go.PERF.3SGF the-market  
 “She went to the market.”

(20') *našar m-sṾq*  
 go.PERF.3SGM the-market  
 “He went to the market.”

(21) *fēn bāyke ?*  
 where go.PTCP.3SGF  
 “Where are you going ?”

(21') *fēn nāšre ?*  
 where go.PTCP.3SGF  
 “Where are you going ?”

There is nevertheless a semantic constraint attached to the usage of each verb.

What distinguishes these two verbs is their temporal compatibility: *bāk* is temporally anchored in the period going from the morning, *ṣabḥa*, to the middle of the afternoon, *qarīb al-ṛašir*, whereas *našar* relates with the period going from the middle of the afternoon to the fall of night, *baʔd al-ṛiṣī*. If the examples (20) and (20') are both judged acceptable, in (22) only *bāk*, which is temporally compatible with the lunch time, is judged acceptable.

(22) *bukt ʔatgadge bēt fulān*  
 go.PERF.1SG have lunch.IMPERF.1SG house So-and-so  
 “I went to lunch at someone’s place.”

(?) *našart ʔatgadge bēt fulān*



### 2.2.2. To come/go back : warad ~ rawwaḥ

These two verbs have the same semantic distribution as *bāk* and *našar*. They can alternate in a “neutral” temporal context such as in (23) but they differ on their temporal compatibility, *i.e.* *warad* is used when the event takes place between the morning and the middle of the afternoon, and *rawwaḥ* when the event takes place between the middle of the afternoon and the fall of night. In (?), *rawwaḥ* is judged unacceptable because school stops at noon.

- (23) ḥīn waradtī / rawwaḥtī  
when come back.PERF.2SGF / come back.PERF.2SGF  
“When did you come back ?”
- (24) waradu min al-madrasa  
come back.PERF.3PL from the school  
“They came back from school.”
- (?) rawwaḥu min al-madrasa

Moreover, these two verbs differ on an additional element incorporated to their semantic structure: with *warad* it is the achievement of the Motion event which is focalized (stative verb) whereas with *rawwaḥ* it is the trajectory or the path which is focalized (dynamic verb). Thus, a dynamic sentence as *yalla nūrid* “Let us go home” is judged unacceptable, but quite suitable with *rawwaḥ*, if the event takes place in the afternoon (25). If the event takes place during the morning period, one has to resort to the verb *bāk* “to go” which figures in the *General* system too (26).

- (25) yalla nrawwiḥ  
EXH go.IMPERF.1PL  
“Let us go home.”
- (26) yalla nbūk m-bēt  
EXH go.IMPERF.1PL the-house  
“Let us go home.”

### 2.2.3. To visit: *ṣāb*

The verb *ṣāb* is specific to women's speaking. It means "to visit one another repeatedly" and refers to the principal social activity of women in the afternoon. When it is specified, the goal of the displacement is introduced by directionals such as *ʔind* and *la* (28).

(27) yalla nṣābi  
EXH visit.IMPERF.1PL  
"Let us go to visit." [have a round of visits]

(28) yalla nṣābi ʔind / la maryam  
EXH visit.IMPERF.1PL DIR / DIR Mariam  
"Let us visit/go to Maryam."

The verb is incompatible with the morning period: it cannot be associated or composed with *bāk* in a verbal phrase as in (29).

(29) fēn bāyke ?                      (?) bāyke ṣābi  
where go.PTCP. SGF  
"Where are you going?"

(30) fēn nāšre ?                      nāšre ṣābi  
where go.PTCP. SGF                      go.PTCP. SGF VISIT.IMPERF.1SG  
"Where are you going ?"                      "I am going to visit."

### 2.2.4. The temporal component of the *Specific* sub-system

In the *Specific* sub-system, all the verbs incorporate to their spatial meaning (Motion event) a temporal dimension that is revealed by their contextual compatibility. This specificity rises the question of the stability of the temporal element in the core of these verbs: to what extent can *Temporality* be considered as lexicalized ?

To answer this question, we will give more information about the *Specific* sub-system first. The data, which revealed it, consists of ordinary daily life speech, conversational discourse and dialogues recorded on the spot, whereas the data related to the *General* system consists of real or fictional accounts (stories, tales,

etc). Thus the frame related to motion verbs in each system is not the same: the frame of the *Specific* system relates to the daily displacements within the city of Zabid.

The verbs *bāk* and *rawwaḥ* figure in both systems, the *Specific* and the *General* where the temporal dimension is absent. Moreover, in the *General* system, *rawwaḥ* means “to go away” (unless it is followed by the word ‘home’, c.f. 2.1.4.), whereas, in the *Specific* sub-system, this verb means “to go back home”, the goal of the displacement (‘home’) being incorporated to its meaning. Since all the other verbs of the *Specific* system are underlain by temporal constraints, it is reasonable first to consider that *Temporality* is lexicalized in all the verbs of the *Specific* system, and second to conclude that *bāk* and *rawwaḥ* have two lexical entries, with *Temporality* integrated in the core of one of them.

### **2.3. The Temporal sub-system**

By *Temporal* sub-system, we refer to Motion verbs formed on temporal roots or derived from temporal expressions. These verbs are strongly linked to interlocutory situations.

#### **2.3.1. To come early: baḥḥan**

The verb is derived from the temporal adverb *biḥīn* “early”, which is a contraction of *bi* (particule) and *ḥīn* “moment”. It expresses the anteriority of an event to another. In (31) the speaker refers to an invitation for lunch and tells her addressee “come before lunch time”.

- (31) bukra      baḥḥinī  
tomorrow IMP.2SGF  
“Tomorrow, come early” [before lunch time]

### 2.3.2. to come back quickly: ʔaggal

The verb's root √ʕǝl expresses the notion of *quickness*. It is used when one says goodbye at the door: it means “do not be long to come back”, an equivalent to the English “see you soon”. More than often, this verb is attested at the imperative mood: /ʔaggilī/ “come back (F) quickly”. Considering the enonciative situation, the goal of the displacement is deictically anchored in the speaker here.

### 2.3.3. to come/be late: ǝahhar ~ dann

*ǝahhar* is a denominative verb formed on *ǝǝhr* “midday”. It is used when somebody is late to an appointment during the morning period. It means “he came late”. In the same way, the verb *dann* is used for a delay in the afternoon.

- (32) mā-l-ik            ǝahharti                            mā-l-ik            dannēti  
          why-DAT-2SGF be late.PERF.2SGF        why-DAT-2SGF be late.PERF.2SGF  
          Why are you late? (a.m)                            Why are you late? (p.m)

## 3. The semantic components of Motion Verbs

Table 3. The semantic components of Motion Verbs

<i>Going</i>	<i>Motion</i>	<i>Path</i>	<i>Temporality</i>		<i>Manner</i>	<i>Purpose</i>
rāḥ	+	+	-			
našar	+	+	+			
bāk	+	+	-	+		
ṣāb	+	+	+			+
sāfar	+	+	-			
ʔata	+	+	-			
rawwaḥ	+	+	-	+		
warad	+	+	-			
baḥḥan	+	+	+			
ʔaggal	+	+			+	
ǝahhar	+	+	+			
dann	+	+	+			

In a recent work, Leonard Talmy (2007) proposed three typological categories for Motion verbs, based on the examination of their components in a large

number of languages of the world. This work reveals three principal components lexicalized in the Verb root: 1) the Co-event (the manner or the cause of the Motion) 2) the Path (the Vector, the conformation and the Deictic) 3) the Figure (the moving object). Semitic is among languages that conflate Motion + Path.

In the vernacular arabic of Zabid, all Motion verbs presented here conflate the Motion event and the Path (Table 3). Two verbs of the *Specific* system, *ʔaggal* and *Ṣāb* conflate an additional element: *ʔaggal* > Motion + Path + Manner ; *Ṣāb* > Motion + Path + Purpose. Still, the temporal element persists, which does not find its place in the patterns proposed by Talmy, and which is central in the dialect of Zabid since it underlies a major system, the *Specific* one.

Indeed, under Co-event, Talmy (2007 : 85-87) distinguishes, besides Manner and Cause, other kinds of relation attested in the languages of the world, between a Co-event and the Motion event, *i.e.* ‘Precursion’, ‘Enablement’, ‘Concomitance’ and ‘Subsequence’ (including ‘Consequence / Purpose’). None of these relations, which at different degrees convey a temporal relation (or rather an aspectual relation) with the Motion event, correspond to the *Temporality* of Motion verbs in the dialect of Zabid. In fact *Temporality* operates here as the reference *par excellence* for the *Specific* system, *i. e.* it establishes a relation between the linguistic expression (Motion verbs) and the extralinguistic reality to which the expression refers (the daily life in Zabid). We may consider *Temporality* as an equivalent to what Talmy calls ‘Ground’, an abstract equivalent nevertheless, because in the terminology of Talmy, ‘Ground’ is closely associated to a concrete object:

“The basic Motion event consists of one object (the ‘Figure’) moving or located with respect to another object (the reference-object or ‘Ground’). It is analysed as having four components: besides ‘Figure’ and ‘Ground’, there are ‘Path’ and

‘Motion’. The ‘Path’ is the path followed or site occupied by the Figure object with respect to the Ground object.” (Talmy 2007: 70).

Moreover, all the examples given by Talmy to illustrate the Ground component confirm this formal definition : english ‘emplane’ (verb root -plain) “move with respect to an airplane” (Talmy 2007: 99). In this respect, two verbs of the *Temporal* system, *baḥḥan* “to come early” and *ḍahhar* “to come late” may be ranged under verbs which conflate Motion-event and Ground: *ḍahhar* (verb root “midday”), *baḥḥan* (verb root ‘early’).

Furthermore, it seems that in the languages of the world “[...] the Ground does not by itself conflate with the Motion verb to form any language’s core system for expressing Motion. Conflations of this sort may not even form any minor systems” (Talmy 2007: 99). Talmy proposes different explanations to that in terms of economy (being the most unvarying component, the Ground does not need specification), saliency (the Ground is the component the least salient or accessible to identification) or hierarchy. On the basis of the concept of hierarchy he concludes “The different conflation types seem to be ranked in their prevalence among the world’s languages, with conflation of Path apparently as the most extensively represented, of Co-event next, and of Figure least so. It may therefore be the case that Ground conflation is also a possibility, but one so unlikely that it has not yet been instantiated in any language that has come to attention.” (2007: 100).

If we admit the existence of an “abstract” Ground, as we defined above, we may say that for the *Specific* system *Temporality* constitutes the Ground. Besides, such an alternative to a concrete, formally expressed, Ground still remains in agreement with the ‘economy’, ‘saliency’ and ‘hierarchy’ that Talmy refers to to define the ‘Ground’ : the temporality of the motion verbs has been revealed by

the examination of their compatibility (the constraints attached to each verb) and not just by looking into their lexical components. Thus, the vernacular arabic of Zabid may be that language which testifies to the existence of a language core system with the conflation Motion verb + Ground.

## Notes

[1] In a previous work I suggested that, from a diachronic point of view, the *temporality* of the verb *bāk* has emerged by default, in parallel with the temporality integrated to the verb *našar* “to go in the afternoon” (Naïm 2006).

[2] Such systems are not so common in arabic dialects. It seems that Mehri, a modern South-arabian language, spoken in Yemen, presents similar data (Janet Watson, p.c.).

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