On the Syntax of Tense and Aspect in Jordanian Arabic

The literature on the syntax of tense/aspect in Arabic supports the view that Arabic has distinct aspect and tense projections (Benmamoun 2000; Fassi Fehri 2000, 2004, 2012; Ouali & Fortin 2007; a.o.). At least two proposals exist for analyzing complex tense constructions involving the auxiliary kwn and a lexical verb: a bicausal analysis with two TPs, two AspPs, and two VPs (developed for Moroccan Arabic; schematized in (1)), and a monoclausal two-TP analysis (developed for Standard Arabic; schematized in (2)). This paper supports a bicausal analysis of Jordanian Arabic (JA) tense/aspect based on three facts: first, both the auxiliary kwn and the lexical verb can co-occur with the aspectual marker b- and the future marker rah (cf. (4)c, (7)(9)a); second, both verbs are inflected for agreement (4)c); third, both verbs can be negated (cf. (4)c). Under the analysis developed here, schematized in (3), both the matrix and embedded TPs can be associated with either ±Past or ±Perf (cf. Fassi Fehri 2000/2004).

(1) [TP [AspP [VP BE [TP [AspP [VP [VP main verb]]]]]] (Ouali & Fortin 2007)
(2) [T1 (±Past) [T2 (±Perf/Ant) [Asp (±Pfv/Term) [VP (±Telic)]]]] (Fassi Fehri 2000/2004)
(3) [T1 (±Past) [T2 (±Perf) [AspP [VP BE [T1 (±Past) [T2 (±Perf) [AspP [VP [VP main verb]]]]]] (Fassi Fehri 2000/2004)

In JA, imperfective verb forms in simple tense constructions are prefixed with b-, while perfective verb forms are not (cf. (4)a,b):

(4) a. *(bi)-y-\(^{-}\)l\(^{\prime}\)ab  b. *(bi)-li\(^{-}\)ib
   Asp-3M-play.IMPERF  (*Asp)-play.PERF-3M
   ‘He plays/is playing.’  ‘He played.’
   ‘He will not have played.’

This distribution suggests that b- is a marker of imperfective aspect rather than non-past tense; otherwise, we should expect –b to co-occur with the perfective verb to form a present perfect. In complex past-tense constructions with the perfective auxiliary kwn, b- is optional; its presence produces a past-progressive/habitual-past interpretation. The auxiliary kwn with a perfective verb gives a past-perfect reading.

(5) a. kaan (bi)-y-\(^{-}\)l\(^{\prime}\)ab  b. kaan li\(^{-}\)ib
   be.PERF-3M  Asp-3M-play.IMPERF  be.PERF-3M  play.PERF-3M
   ‘He was playing/used to play.’  ‘He had played.’

JA also has a putative future marker rah, which is incompatible with aspectual b-. rah always co-occurs with the imperfective form of the lexical verb, as in (7)a, or the auxiliary, as in (7)b & (7)c. When rah combines with the auxiliary y-kuun, it can be followed by a perfective verb (resulting in a future-perfect reading: (7)b) or an imperfective verb prefixed with b- (resulting in a future-progressive reading with obligatory aspectual marker ba:- (7)c):

(7) a. rah *(bi)-y-\(^{-}\)l\(^{\prime}\)ab  b. rah y-\(^{-}\)kuun li\(^{-}\)ib  c. rah y-\(^{-}\)kuun *(bi)-y-\(^{\prime}\)ab
   Future (*Asp)-3M-play.IMPERF  Future 3M-be.IMP  play.PERF-3M  Future 3M-be.IMP  Asp-3M-play.IMPERF
   ‘He will play.’  ‘He will have played.’  ‘He will be playing.’

rah’s incompatibility with aspectual b- suggests that it is not truly a tense marker. If it were, nothing should block it from co-occurring with b- in (7)a to give a future-progressive reading. I therefore posit that rah is an imperfective aspect marker associated with future tense (Fut).

(8) a. [T1 (-Past, Fut) [AspP (-Pfv) rah [VP y-\(^{-}\)l\(^{\prime}\)ab [VP (Derivation for (8)a)
   b. [T1 (-Past, Fut) [AspP (-Pfv) rah [VP y-\(^{-}\)kuun [T2 (+Perf) [AspP (-Pfv) o [VP li\(^{-}\)ib [VP (Derivation for (8)b)
   c. [T1 (-Past, Fut) [AspP (-Pfv) rah [VP y-\(^{-}\)kuun [T2 (-Perf) [AspP (-Pfv) bi [VP y-\(^{-}\)l\(^{\prime}\)ab [VP (Derivation for (8)b)

When the aspectual marker b- combines with the imperfective form of the auxiliary kwn, we get the auxiliary bi-y-kuun, with a future-tense reading. The combination of bi-y-kuun and the b- prefixed imperfective verb results in a future-progressive reading similar to the one in (7)c. The combination of bi-y-kuun with rah and an imperfective verb results in a future-in-the-future reading (9)a, offering further support for the conclusion that rah is associated with a future-oriented imperfect tense. The combination of bi-y-kuun and the perfective verb gives the future-perfect reading in (9)b:

(9) a. bi-y-\(^{-}\)kuun rah y-\(^{-}\)l\(^{\prime}\)ab  b. bi-y-\(^{-}\)kuun li\(^{-}\)ib
   Asp-3M-be.IMP  Future 3M-play.IMPERF  Asp-3M-be.IMP  play.PERF-3M
   ‘He will be about to play.’  ‘He will have played.’

(10) a. [T1 (-Past) [AspP (-Pfv) bi [VP y-\(^{\prime}\)kuun [T2 (-Perf, Fut) [AspP (-Pfv) rah [VP y-\(^{-}\)l\(^{\prime}\)ab [VP (Derivation for (9)a)
   b. [T1 (-Past) [AspP (-Pfv) bi [VP y-\(^{-}\)kuun [T2 (+Perf) [AspP (-Pfv) o [VP li\(^{-}\)ib [VP (Derivation for (9)b)

The facts in (7)c and (9) suggest that each finite clause must have an aspectual marker (the imperfective aspect marker b- or the perfective aspect marker o). This requirement, in turn, lends credence to the proposal that complex tense constructions have two clauses. Further support for this bicausal analysis with two tense projections per clause comes from cases like the past-perfect-progressive reading available in (5)a. In addition to laying out the details of this proposal, I will also discuss the full distribution of the imperfective and perfective verb forms with respect to tense/aspect and negation and show how they derive from the configuration in (3).