

Tense and Aspect in Soqotri

Khaled Awadh Bin Makhashen

Dr. Munir Shuib

Dr. Salasiah Che Lah

Universiti Sains Malaysia

Khaled Awadh Omer is a lecturer in the English Department at Hadhramout University, Yemen and now he is a PhD student in the English, Department School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Malaysia. His main areas of interest are Semitic linguistics, syntax and morphology of Soqotri and indigenous languages.

Dr Munir Shuib is an assistant professor in the English Department School of Humanities; Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). His main areas of interest are applied linguistics, text analysis, syntax and thinking skills.

Dr. Salasiah Che Lah is an associate professor in the English Department, School of Humanities; University Sains Malaysia (USM). Her main areas of interest are language attitudes and language varieties, applied linguistics, phonetics and phonology and indigenous languages.

Foreword

Soqotri is an endangered Semitic language spoken by more than 50,000 people in a Yemeni island called Soqotra. The language is facing endangerment due to the increasing influence of Arabic on the Soqotri speakers. The current article is intended to be a humble contribution to the efforts aiming at documenting and preserving this lovely language. It sheds light on the structures and functions of the different tenses and aspects used in it this endangered language. Soqotri as well as all the other Semitic languages have a very limited verbal forms, they have only two forms; perfect and imperfect .The

current article describes in detail the ways how these two forms are used to express all the three tenses present past and future, it also describes the auxiliaries employed by the language to denote certain tenses and aspects that can not be expressed by the previously mentioned two forms.

The Soqotri language is one of six languages that form a group called (Modern South Arabian Languages). This group, which includes Soqotri, Mehri, Jibbali, Bathari, Hursusi and Hobbiot, is spoken in the western parts of Oman particularly in (Dhofar) and south east of Yemen in (Mahrah Governorate and Soqotra Island). Modern South Arabian Languages belong to the southern branch of the western Semitic languages. The other Semitic languages that are grouped in this branch are the Semitic languages of Ethiopia and the Inscription Languages (Epigraphic South Arabian Languages).

Soqotri is spoken in the Island of Soqotra which is located in the east of Aden Gulf about 300 KM south of the Arabian Peninsula. It is also spoken in another small nearby island called the island of Abdul kuri. The number of Soqotri speakers is estimated to be around 50,000. The island inhabitants depend on fishing, growing palm dates tree or rearing camel, cows and goats (Simeone-Senelle, 1997).

Classical Semitic languages such as Arabic and Hebrew are relatively poor in their verbal forms. They have only two forms; perfect form for perfect actions or events and imperfect form for the imperfect ones, consequently, these limited verbal forms of these languages do not give expression to aspects though they can be used with aspectual implications in certain contexts. Moreover, in such Semitic languages one verbal form may be used for different moods and time frames (Gray, 1935; Haywood & Nahmad, 1965; Joosten, 2002).

Cantarino (1974) goes further to indicate that tenses in Semitic languages are not a projection of the action to a definite time; they are a kind of a subjective approach to the action that started by the perfect and described in the imperfect.

The Soqotri language is not exceptional to its sister Semitic languages. It has only two verbal forms, the perfect and the imperfect. These two forms conjugate for person, number, gender and tense. The perfective is formed by suffixation and the imperfective is formed by prefixation but the imperfect and the perfect of certain pronouns are formed by a joint operation of affixation and stem modification (apophony).

As other Semitic languages, the Soqotri language's morphologically-marked two tenses (perfect and imperfect) can express verbal ideas in any of the three temporal stages: future, present and past, this feature of Soqotri can be easily attributed to the limited number of verbal forms. Aspect in Soqotri is not morphologically marked, it is marked with adverbs or auxiliaries.

The Functions of the Perfect Tense in Soqotri

a- Past:

1- the perfect is used to express actions completed in the past, so it has become the natural tense for narration.

(1)

c- ʔəmʃən tɑ:hər-k hədi:bə w- tɑ:ʒər-k ɛrhɛz wə
yesterday go-1SG.M.PER Hadibu and buy -1SG.M.PER. rice

and

ʒədəh-k- tɛ:sən k'ɑ:ʔer məh dəhə ʔɛ:ʒɛh w- ʔɑ:mər-k hɛs
bring- 1SG..PER them.F home to my wife and told

her

t-ək'ɑ:dər- sən wə ʒəd səh k'ədərɛ-t sən
3SG.F.IMP -Cook. them F and then she cook.3.SG.F.PER them F

Yesterday, I went to Hadibu (the island capital), and I bought rice and brought it home to my wife and told her to cook it, and then she cooked it.

II- The perfect tense is used to express actions that started in the past and perhaps completed but still lasting in their results or consequences – thus, it is equivalent to the (present perfect) in English, it is called resultative perfect. The following examples illustrate this use of the perfect:

(2) s f α : r
 travel 3SG.M.PER.

He has traveled (and he has not come yet)

III – When two actions happened in the past the perfect tense is used to describe the action that took place first and the subjunctive form of the verb is used for the event or action that happened later. This use of the perfect can be described as the past perfect.

(3) a- k'ε:r-ək k'pɾɑ:n bəl lɛdmə
 Read-1SG.M.PER. Holy Quran before sleep1.SG.M.SUB

I had read the Holy Quran before I slept

When the conjunction / bəʔɛd / ' after ' is used it is followed by the action that happened first and expressed in the perfect. Then in the other clause the action that happened later which is also expressed in the perfect form of the verb comes.

Surprisingly, the perfect form of the verb in the after-clause is preceded by the negative particle /α:l/, 'not' though, the whole sentence is affirmative. So this particle in such sentences emphasizes the completion of the first action rather than negate the clause.

b- bəʔed a:l k'ε:rə χət' biʃε
 after not read 3.SG.M.PER letter weep.3.SG.M.PER

After he had read the letter, he wept.

b- Present

I- The perfect forms of some verbs in Soqotri are used to express present actions and activities. These verbs may be classified as: First verbs denoting activities of mind and will.

(4) a- (ʔəh) ɛɔ:rɛb-k
 (I) understand - 1SG.M.PER

I understand.

b- . ʔəʃε:b - εh t'ət'her
 Want- 3SG.F.PER. go 3SG.F.SUB.

She wants to go.

Second verbs of oaths:

(5) rək'əh- k tək zke:
 sacrifice.1SG.M.PER. you Islamic charity

Go to hell

Third verbs of appeal and prayers:

(6) a- mətɪ:n-ək - tək ʔəlləh kən t-əno:dək'en ʔənhen mɛsse
 Ask1SG.M.PER. you Allah to 2.SG.M.IMP- give. us rain

I ask you Allah to give us rain

C- Future

The perfect in Soqotri is also used to express present or future actions in ordinary conditional clauses and conditional clauses that express swearing

(7) a- k- li:sə α:l jə-jɛdħɛn
 if rain.3.SG.F.PER not 3SG.M.IMP - come.

If it rains, he will not come.

B- bħi det ʔid k-α:l ʔɛzʔo:m-k
 by your life if not stay -2.SG.M.PER

I swear by your life to stay.

The Function of the Imperfect Tense in Soqotri

The imperfect in Soqotri can also express actions or events in the present, past and future as follows:

A-Present

I - The imperfect of Soqotri can refer to a habitual aspect action. The use of adverbs of frequency in this aspect is a must.

(8) (sɛh) t-ɛdmɛ məħlɛ dα:hɛr
 (She) .3SG.F.IMP-get up early every day

She sleeps early every day.

II- The imperfect is used to express general aspects such as general states, processes or actions which are not generally limited by a time frame, that is to say they have permanent validity.

A- General State

(9) a- fɛdhɔn ʔɛ:li
 mountain high

The mountain is high.

Nouns, adjectives, and adverbs in Soqotri are put after the sentence subject without any linking (verb to be), especially when the sentence tense is present but when the tense is in the past, the past linking verb /kɔn /'be' is used.

B- General Process

b- ri:hɔ: j-ʝɔ:mɛd
water SG.M 3SG.M.IMP. - Freeze

Water freezes.

C- General Actions

c- fɑ:t'imə t-ək'ɔ:dɛr swə
Fatima SG.F 3SG.FEM.PRE- cook well

Fatima cooks well.

B- Past

I- The imperfect in Soqotri is used to express past actions when it is subordinated to the perfect to express durative or repeated actions happening simultaneously with the action expressed in the perfect.

(10) a- mɔkʃəm fɛ:rɛd w- jɛh j-dɔ:hɛk
child flee.3SG.M.PER. and he 3SG.M.IMP-laugh.

The child fled laughing.

c- ʃi:nə-k jɛh jə-ʃfɛ:rɛk
See -1SG.M.PER him .3SG.M.IMP- fish

I saw him fishing

II The imperfect in Soqotri is also used to express an action that occurred in the past but later than the action described by the perfect

(11) ʔəzʃəmk ʔək'ɔ:rɛ k'ɔrɑ:n
 sit 1.SG.MASC.PER read 1.SG.MASC.IMP. Holy Quran

I sat reading the Holy Quran.

C- Future

As Soqotri does not have verbal conjugations for expressing the future tense, the main way of expressing futurity in this language is through the use of the imperfect plus an obligatory temporal adverb.

(12) a- jə -bɔ:ʔɛl ʃi:nɔh t - əɬɑ:rɛm
 3SG.M.IMP. Marry year .3.SG.F.IMP - come

He will marry next year

b- ʔə-ʃrɑ:k'əh sək'ɑ:t'rj k'ərə:rɛh
 1SG.M.IMP-go Soqotra tomorrow

I will go to Soqotra tomorrow.

The perfect future in Soqotri is also expressed in the same way that is through the use of the imperfect plus an obligatory adverb indicating the future time in which an action will be accomplished.

(13) k'ərə:rɛh dɛ jəhməh ʔə - tɛ:tɛ b- nɑ:fəʃ
 tomorrow of afternoon 1SG.M.IMP - complete. with wok

By tomorrow afternoon I will have finished the work.

In addition to the previously described tenses and aspects expressed through the use of the perfect and imperfect verbal form, Soqotri has other types of tenses and aspects. But due to its limited verbal forms (perfect & imperfect), Soqotri employs some adverbs and auxiliaries to express other various tenses and aspects as will be illustrated below:

First Adverbs:

Unlike verbs, nouns and adjectives, adverbs in Soqotri do not inflect for person number or gender so they have the same form used for all persons, numbers and genders.

/næʔəh/ ‘**now**’

This adverb is used with the imperfect to express the progressive present aspect

(14) (səh) tə - k'ɔ:rə nəʔəh
 (she) 3SG.F.IMP - read. now

She is reading now.

/kərhən nəʔəh/ ‘**just now**’

These two adverbs are used with the perfect to express the immediate past, which is quite similar to the English present perfect when used with (just). The following example illustrates this:

(15) əh kərhən nəʔəh t'ɑ:hər
 he just now 3SG.M.PER - go

He has just gone

/fɔ:nəh/, /ʔinɔ:təh/ , /t'əʔi:nəh/ ‘**long ago**’

These adverbs are used with the perfect form of the verb to express the far past.

(16) a- fɔ:nəh nɑ:fəʔə-k b- hədi:bu:

Long ago work -1SG.M.PRE in Hadibu

Long ago I had worked in Hadibu.

b- sfo:r ʃino:tɛh
Immigrate- 3SG..PER so many year ago

He immigrated so many years ago.

c- t'ɛ:lɛk' dɛh ɛɑ:ʃɛh t'ɛʃi:nɔh
divorce/3.SG.MASC.PER. his wife long ago

He divorced his wife a long time ago

Auxiliaries

These auxiliaries form a part of a compound tense with the main verb because they have always preserved a degree of independence in both position and agreement. They always precede the main verb they modify and agree in number, person and gender with the subject. What distinguishes them from the ordinary verbs is that they do not have imperfect forms; they have only perfect forms that can be used to express actions or event in any tense. These perfect forms of the auxiliaries are usually followed by the perfect forms of the main verb and some times by the imperfect forms of the main verb.

/ʃəd/ 'still, yet'

This auxiliary is used with the perfect form of the main verb to express a present perfect similar to that of English in which the adverb (yet) is used. Sentences with such tense are usually negative to emphasize the incompleteness of the action.

(17) a- ʔəd ɑ: t'ɑ:hər
 still .3.SG.M. not go 3SG.M.PER.

He has not yet gone.

/ ʔəd / can be also used with the imperfect form of the main verb. Here, it indicates that an action will occur again in future (simple future) so it gives the impression that the action happened some time in the past and it will also happen again in future.

b- ʔəd jə - bɑ:ʔɛl
 still .3.SG.M. 3SG.M.IMP- marry

He will marry.

A Soqotri person hearing a sentence like the above will understand that the person talked about has already married, but still he will marry again.

ʔəd + the imperfect is also employed to denote that an action is still happening at the moment of speech (present progressive)

c- ʔəd -ɛh tə -ħɑ:lɛb ʔɛrhɑn
 still -3SG.F.PER .3SG.F.IMP- milk. goat \ PL.F

She is still milking the goats, or she will milk goats again.

/ bɛr / 'already'

This auxiliary is also used with the perfect form of the main verb to express the present perfect tense in Soqotri. It is equivalent to the English present perfect in which the adverb (already) is used.

- (18) bɛ-ʃ t'ɑ:hər-ʃ ?
 already -2SG.F.PER. go- 2SG.F.PER

Have you already gone?

The following table shows the addition of the perfect suffixes of the different pronouns to the auxiliaries

Table 1 Perfect Paradigm of / ʔəd / and / bɛr / in the Soqotri

Person / Gender			/ ʔəd /	/ bɛr /
1 st Singular.	Masc.		ʔək	bək
	Fem.		ʔək	bək
Duel	Masc.		ʔəki	bəki
	Fem.		ʔəki	bəki
Plural .	Masc.		ʔədən	birən
	Fem.		ʔədən	birən
<hr/>				
2 nd Singular	Masc.		ʔək	bək
	Fem.		ʔəʃ	bəʃ
Duel	Masc.		ʔəki	bəki
	Fem.		ʔəki	bəki
Plural	Masc.		ʔəkin	bəkin
	Fem.		ʔəkin	bəkin
<hr/>				
3 rd Singular	Masc.		ʔəd	bɛr
	Fem.		ʔədɔh	birɔh
Duel	Masc.		ʔi:dɔh	bi:rɔh
	Fem.		ʔi:dətɔh	bi:rtɔh
Plural	Masc.		ʔəd	bɛr
	Fem.		ʔəd	bir

/ʔɛ:rɛm/

Like /ʔəd/ and /bɛr/, the auxiliary /ʔɛ:rɛm/ has only a perfect form which is inflected for person, number and gender, and used with the imperfect form of the main verb to express the past continuous aspect, which is considered as a mixture of tense and aspect.

(19) ʔɛ:rɛm-k ʔə-nɑ:fəʔ b-du:bəj
be- 1SG.M.PER SG.M.IMP- work in Dubai

I was working in Dubai.

The habitual past in Soqotri is also expressed through the use of (ʔɛ:rɛm + imperfect) and the addition of a suitable adverb of times such as every day, sometimes every morning, etc.

(20) ʔɛ:rɛm jə-ʔʃɛ məhlə dɑ:her
AUX 3SG.M.PER .3SG.M.IMP- wake up early ever day

He used to get up early every day.

Another use for /ʔɛrɔm/ plus the imperfect is to express the past future tense. The auxiliary in this use can be replaced by the /jədəħk/

(21) a-li:lən ʔɛ:rɛm-k ʔɛ-dɔm məhlə lɑ:kən jədəħ tɔ
last night AUX.-1SG.M.PER. 1SG.IMP- sleep early but came to me
bəj w-ɑ:l dɛ:m-ək
man and not sleep-1SG.M.PER

I would sleep early last night but a man came to me and I did not sleep.

/hɛk'əm/ 'remained'

This auxiliary is used in Soqotri with the imperfect to express what is called (durative aspect) Dowty (1972) and Cook (1979) state that the durative aspect is formed by the predicate REMAIN, and it denotes the duration or a continuation of a state, a process or an action. It is used with durative adverbials:

(22) a- hɛk'əm-k ʔə-bɔ:ʃi h̄tɛ:r ʔəf s'əbəh
Remain-1SG.M.PER .1SG.M.IMP - weep at night till morning

I remained weeping all night till the morning.

/sɛ:bɛr/ 'started'

It is used with the imperfect to express the inceptive aspect. Inceptive aspect denotes the beginning of an action or a process and it is semantically represented by the predicate BEGIN (Postal, 1974, and Newmeyer, 1975).

(23) sɛ:bɛr j-k'ɔ:rɛ k'ɔrɑ:n w ʔəd k'i:hɛn
begin 3SG.M.PER 3SG.M.IMP- read Holy Quran and still 3SG.M.PER small

He began reading the Holy Quran while he was still young.

/məʔɛd/, /ʔɛ:mɛn/ 'be about to'

These two auxiliaries are used with the imperfect verb form to express the prospective aspect, which indicates the seemingly imminent occurrence of an event. Such events are believed to be imminent but they are not certain.

(24) a- sɛh məʔɛd -ɛh t-ɛ:s'mə
she be about - 3SG.F.PER 3SG.F.IMP - die

She was about to die

b- jəh ʔɛ:mən jə-ɬtɛ:rək'
he be a bout 3SG.M.PER 3SG.M.IMP -drown

He was at the point of drowning.

/jəʔʃɛʃ/, / jəbɔ:lɛk'/

Unlike the previously described auxiliaries these two verbs / jəʔʃɛʃ / 'cease' and /jəbɔ:lɛk'/ 'stop' have imperfect forms. They are followed by the imperfect forms of the main verbs to express the future progressive. They are always negated to indicate that the action described, which is usually insisting that behavior will continue for ever.

(25) a- ʔɑ:l ʔə-bɔ:lɛk' ʔə-ʃk'ɛ:bɛtɛn sək'ət'rijəh
not 1SG.M.IMP - cease 1SG.M.IMP - learn. Soqotri

I will remain / not stop learning the Soqotri language

b- ʔɑ:l j-əʔʃɛʃ jə-ʃʃɛ:rɛn ʔəf lɛsmɛ
not 3SG.M.IMP- stop 3SG.M.IMP- fish. till die \ 3SG.M SUB.

He will be fishing till he dies.

List of Abbreviations

The researcher transcribed the Soqotri examples using the IPA.

DU Dual

F Feminine

IMP	Imperfect
M	Masculine
PER.	Perfect
PL	Plural
PRO.	Pronoun
SG	Singular
SUB	Subjunctive

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