Time Expressions in Jordanian Spoken Arabic:  
An Ethno-Linguistic Statement

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Abstract

Time expressions in Arabic constitute a set of forms reflecting some culture-specific ethnolinguistic patterns of communication. These patterns are translatable into modern world languages, e.g. English. Although the translation is comprehensible, the time expression may sound strange to non-Arabs. Such is the relativity of linguistic expressions. Non-Arabs may wonder why $ba'ad$ bukra ' (lit) after tomorrow ’ should specify ‘ the day after tomorrow ’ whereas $ba'ad$ ?usbuu9 ’ after a week ’ is not nearly as specific. Note that $ba'ad$ bukra is a day of the week, but $ba'ad$ ?usbuu9 denotes a period whose duration may extend for days beyond the specified week. A Jordanian who says $bašuufak ba'ad$ bukra commits himself to seeing his interlocutor on ‘the day after tomorrow’, whereas $bašuufak ba'ad$ ?usbuu9 does not commit the speaker to seeing his interlocutor on the day that comes after the week in question ends.

The article discusses a sample of spoken Jordanian time-expressions, and provides ethnolinguistic (and pragmatic) explanations of their meanings in the contexts in which they occur. In the concluding section, an attempt is made to point out a few implications as to the way some loose time-expressions may sound to a recipient coming from a western culture where the minutes and seconds count in the life of men and women.

Keywords: Ethnolinguistic, Jordanian time expressions, culture – specific, Western culture.
Brief reading conventions pertaining to some Arabic sounds

Consonants:

ʔ glottal stop
θ voiceless, dental, fricative.
δ voiced, dental, fricative.
š voiceless, palato-alveolar, fricative.
S voiceless, dento-alveolar, emphatic fricative.
D voiced, dento-alveolar, emphatic plosive.
T voiceless, dento-alveolar, emphatic plosive.
D voiced, dental, emphatic fricative.
j voiced, palato-alveolar, affricate.
h voiceless, pharyngeal fricative.
ɢ voiced, pharyngeal fricative.
q voiceless, uvular plosive.
g voiced, uvular fricative.

Vowels:

i high front
e mid front
a low front
u high back
o mid back

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1) Foreword

The aim of this study is to discuss the time expressions used in Jordanian spoken Arabic; the meanings and implications of these time expressions will be investigated in appropriate contexts. The English translation of the time expressions should, albeit indirectly, constitute grounds for comparing them with their English counterparts.

Implicit in this modest study and insofar as the domain of time expressions is concerned is the concept of linguistic relativity and particularities of communication-patterning in Arabic vis-à-vis English.

The methodology used is descriptive; a fairly judicious and systematic set of examples from Jordanian Arabic is presented with a view to analyzing and commenting on their meanings and implications. Native intuition is focal in the study.

Insofar as focus is concerned, it is hoped that this piece of research will highlight the pragmatic function of temporal terms and expressions in Jordanian Arabic;
pragmatic function here includes actual usage in adequately contextualized, real and contrived, situations.


2) The significance of time for speakers of Arabic.

The significance of time for speakers of Arabic (standard and colloquial) can hardly be overemphasized. Most of our daily activities and functions are closely tied up with some reference to time. Employers and employees, hosts and guests, teachers and students, judges, lawyers and plaintiffs, jailers and prisoners, parliamentarians and politicians, farmers, labourers and journalists are just a few of the inventory of people who cannot function properly except within a framework of time specifications. Our eating habits and meals, appointments, prayers, going to bed, waking up, using the phone, watching TV, listening to the radio, travelling, working, resting, fasting, breaking the fast, feasting and celebrations, to mention just a small portion of daily activities, are time bound and time dependent. Individual, societal, and cultural activities independent of time must be extremely rare indeed. In short, time permeates all social, political, economic and institutional transactions.

In the past, reference to time in the Arab world was associated with historical events, natural phenomena and natural disasters; with stars and planets—especially the sun and the moon. Consider such expressions as the following:

ma9i-Tluu9- iššams
‘At sunrise’

ba9di gyaab iššams
‘After sunset’

bass tiTla9 nijmit iSSubuḥ
‘As soon as the morning star rises’

Sant ilhazzih
‘In the year of the earthquake’

maši/masiirit yoom
‘A day’s walk’

Taaynawwir ilmiliḥ
‘(lit) until salt flowers’

zayy ilbarg
‘with lightning speed’
In the year of land-partition
9azaman ilattraak

In / During the Ottoman reign

Some of these expressions, in one form or another, are still current in Arab countries. ?ayyaam zamaan ‘bygone days/ the good old days’ are all too often glorified and cherished, e.g.,
sagallah 9ala ?ayyaam zamaan
‘ How wonderful the (good) old days were! would that the (good) old days returned’

Pre-Islamic Arabian poets had their ways of describing time and the duration of nights. Complaining about the duration and retarded motion of the night, Imru’il Qais says:

Fayaa laka min laylin ka?anna nujuumahu
bi?amraasi kitaanin ?ila Summi jandali
‘ O you (slow moving) night ! It is as though the stars are tied with flax ropes to firm, solid rocks.’

Similarly, ?alnaabiga ?al-?ubyaani, another pre-Islamic poet, talking about his suffering in a slow-moving night, says:

Kii?i nik lihammin yaa ?umaymata naaSibi
walaylin ?uqaasihi ba?ii?i ikawaakibi
‘Leave me to a tiring worry, O Omaymah, and to my suffering in a night of slow-moving planets.’

The Jordanian concept of time, both old and new, crude and sophisticated, precise and approximate, will be scrutinized and highlighted in this piece of work. The time expressions in the examples selected will undergo analytical treatment to reflect their significance and pragmatic implications.

For convenience, the relevant time expressions may be divided into three categories:
1. Imprecise expressions
2. Semi-precise expressions
3. Precise expressions

Each of these categories will now be considered in some detail.

1. Imprecise expressions

This category involves expressions whose temporal specifications are somewhat vague. Only in a rather general way is the time denoted by such expressions subject to determination. Take for instance:
(i) 9ajloon Saarat mutaSarfiyyi 9azamani-l?atraak

‘Ajloun became a district during the Turks (i.e., Ottoman) time’

The expression 9azamani-l?atraak ‘during the Turks time’ is too general and lacks determinate specification. The Ottoman Empire was established in 1300 A.D. and remained in power until 1920, or so. Reference here is to a period spanning more than six centuries. It is not clear from the above expression when Ajloun was recognized as a district by the Ottomans. The expression 9azamani-l?atraak simply places the event in question at a period during the six centuries of the Ottoman rule. The exact specification of this event doesn’t seem to be important in this context. All that matters is the historical fact that Ajloun became an important regional governorate (mutaSarfiyyih), a testimony to its cherished significance. The interlocutors in this speech act are proud to point out that Ajloun reached this high status so long ago when other regions were not as fortunate. The utterance is probably charged with the emotive locution of nostalgia, of pride, prestige and approval. It is as though they wish to say that Ajloun is worthy of recognition and deserves the best.

In the utterances sagalla 9ala ?ayyaam zamaan ‘How wonderful the (good) old days were!/ would that the (good) old days returned’ and ?allah yiťam ?ayaam zamaan ‘May Allah have mercy on the (good) old days’, the time expression ?ayyaam zamaan ‘the old days’ is indeterminate and the utterance is also nostalgic. It is customary in Jordan and perhaps elsewhere in the Arab world to remember with pleasure the old days, even when life in those days might have been hard and infelicitous. Perhaps the old days stimulate pleasant memories of youth, strength and good health- factors which contribute to this felicitous remembrance of them.

The expression ?ayyaam zamaan ‘the (good) old days’ has recently acquired commercial value in that some businesses (e.g., restaurants) and commodities (e.g., sweets/halva) are correlated with it collocationally:

maTaa9im ?ayyaam zamaan
‘(good) old days restaurants’
halaaawit ?ayyaam zamaan
‘(good) old days halva’

The name captures the attention of the middle-aged and older people who would be tempted to seek the commodity and buy it. To echo Firth (1957:194), one can say that part of the meaning of ?ayyaam ‘days’ is derivable from its co-occurrence syntagmatically (and habitually) with zamaan ‘past/bygone’. Furthermore, and at the same time, the expression ?ayyaam zamaan, qua expression, has in the speech of Jordanians contracted syntagmatic associations of the collocational type with words like sagallah 9ala ‘would that/ how wonderful’ (i.e., sagallah 9ala ?ayyaam zamaan) ‘would that old days returned’, ?allah yiťam ‘may Allah have mercy on’ (i.e., ?allah yiťam ?ayaam zamaan) ‘may Allah have mercy on the (good) old days’, maa btirja9 ‘won’t come back’ (i.e., ?ayyam zamaan maa btirja9) ‘the (good) old days won’t come
back’, raḥat ‘have gone’ (i.e., ʿayyaam zamaan raḥat) ‘the (good) old days have
gone’,…etc.

The related expression kaan zamaan (e.g. ʿaywa, bass haaDa kaan zamaan
‘Yes, but this is a thing of the past’ is said in such a context as ʿibni-9amm binazzil
(il9aruus) 9ani-Ifaras ‘(lit) A cousin has the right to make the bride dismount from her
horse’ meaning that he has the priority of marrying her even when she is being legally
wedded to a non-relative. ʿaywa bass haaDa kaan zamaan is an appropriate response
to such an unreasonable priority claim, i.e., such a claim is no longer valid in the
society. This entails a rejection of the old tradition of forcing a woman (or young lady)
to marry her cousin by tribal conventions. The illocution of the expression kaan
zamaan in such a context can hardly be more effective: it is an outright protest against
a tradition which has been superseded by virtue of education, freedom, and positive
social change.

The expression ʿayyaam zamaan also brings bad memories to certain
Jordanians; they are not always remembered with happiness. Consider: ʿallah yigTa9
ʿayyaam zamaan. walla kunna mayytiin mnil-juu9 wil-marDa ‘ May Allah sever the old
days. By God, we were on the verge of death because of hunger and disease’. This is
a kind of curse implored on the old days because of the hardships people had been
suffering during them. This is the other side of the coin reflecting painful memories of
the old days. Note the collocations involved this time with ʿallah yigTa9 ʿayyaam
zamaan, ʿallah laa y9iid ʿayyaam zamaan, ʿallah laa ywarriina ʿayyaam zamaan, etc.
All of these implorations involve a prayer (an appeal) to Allah not to bring the old days
back. Of course, the old days themselves never come back; it is the people’s joy on
the one hand, or misery on the other hand, that is desired or abhorred, depending on
the circumstances remembered.

Note that layaali (nights) does not seem to collocate with zamaan. Layaali is
marked here, but ʿayyaam is unmarked in the sense that the latter (i.e., ʿayyaam
zamaan) includes the former.

Another imprecise temporal expression is shown in the following example from
the spoken Arabic of the region in question:
(ii) ʿilta?eena- bmakka filhajj- ilmaaDii
‘ We met in Mecca in/during the previous Hajj (i.e., pilgrimage) ’
‘ Hajj ’ in Arabic (and in Islam, generally) is a period co-extensive with the two
lunar months of ʿawwaal and ʿulqi9da along with the first ten-to-thirteen days of
ʿulhiijja, i.e., approximately 73 days. It is not clear when in Mecca the meeting took
place; but it is construed as having occurred sometime during the 73 days mentioned
above. ‘ Hajj ’ is also culture specific, and although generally translatable into English
as pilgrimage, its denotation is determined in terms of the concept of this Islamic
annual event. The reference, therefore, is to an Islamic event which takes place in
fixed days of the lunar calendar. Perhaps the meeting assumes special significance by
virtue of the fact that it happened during a period so much appreciated, cherished and
desired by all Muslims; the memories it hoards are pleasant and worthwhile.

Now consider the following example and the ethnography of its political and
historical associations:

(iii) \[?illaaji\textsuperscript{?}iin raaj\textsuperscript{9iin lafalasTiin walaw ba\textsuperscript{9id hiin}\]

‘Refugees will return to Palestine if after a while (even if they have to wait a long
time) ’.

The collocation in this time expression has significant denotations and
connotations for all Arabs, especially for all Palestinian refugees and exiles who have
always embraced the hope of returning to their country which has been under
occupation since 1948. The utterance is loaded with the historical and human suffering
of the Palestinians in diaspora, and underlines their aspiration that, at some
unspecified (if distant) future time, they will return.

Example (iv) introduces a culture-specific time expression.

(iv) \[?iTTalaaq haSal- ibsaa9it ga\textsuperscript{Dab}\]

‘The divorce was pronounced at an hour (a moment) of
anger/rage.’

The time phrase \[ibsaa9it ga\textsuperscript{Dab}\], according to Islamic law and fatwa makes the
divorce pronouncement null and void. Divorce , needless to say, is a serious act which
leads to the disintegration of the family in the first place, and might involve the folk of
the wife and those of the husband in feuds and confrontation. It is indeed a costly act.
Therefore, Sharia law seeks to minimize the circumstances that make divorce a valid
act; anger and rage on the part of the husband invalidate the divorce pronouncement.

The next example contains a time expression which is ambiguous.

(v) Salaat-ittaraawii\textsuperscript{?} ba\textsuperscript{9d- il9i\textsuperscript{\textbar{a}}}?

‘Taraawiih prayers are after 9i\textsuperscript{\textbar{a}}a?‘

In this utterance there are two culture-specific terms which need explanation for
the sake of a non-Arab reader. First, Salaat-ittaraawiih ‘Taraawiih (i.e., prayers
involving periodic resting) prayers’ are performed every night during the month of
Ramadan (the month of Muslim fasting). They are performed in pairs of two ‘rak\textsuperscript{9as}‘
and their total number varies from 8 to 20 ‘rak\textsuperscript{9as}’, and the worshippers in the mosque
sit for a short while after every four of these rak\textsuperscript{9as}; glorifying Allah and celebrating His
praise.

The other term is ‘il9i\textsuperscript{\textbar{a}}aa?’ which denotes one of the five sets of prescribed daily
prayers: \textbar{fajir} ‘dawn’, \textbar{Duhur} ‘noon’, \textbar{9aSur ‘mid-afternoon’, mag\textbar{r}ib ‘sunset} and 9i\textsuperscript{\textbar{a}}aa?
‘late-evening’

Muslims know exactly when the prayers of 9i\textsuperscript{\textbar{a}}aa? are to be performed; they
know when these prayers begin and how long the grace period for performing them is
valid.
Here are some more examples without detailed cultural elaboration.

(vi) ma9 fajjit- iDDaww
‘At the first glimpse of dawn’

This glimpse of dawn is established within Arab cultural and societal norms, not according to calendar calculations.

(vii) ba9d- ilfTaam
‘After (child) weaning’.

The practice of weaning children varies: sometimes children are weaned when they are several months old; sometimes when they are two years old, or even beyond that age.

(viii) filhajii9- il?axiir
‘At / During the final slumber, ’i.e., approximately the last few hours of the night when people are in deep slumber.’

One more example is worthy of mention here, namely, the synonymous words sanih and 9aam, both meaning ‘one year’. Cf:

(ix) ?ilxaaruuf 9umru san/teen/9aameen
‘The lamb is two years old.’

That doesn’t necessarily mean exactly 24 months; only in a rather loose sense is the lamb construed as being in its second year, or nearing the completion of its second year.

When the definite article is attached to these words, their meanings are not synonymous. Consider the following examples where ?issanih means ‘this year’ and ?il9aam means ‘last year’.

(x) badna-nhijj-issani ?inšaallaah
‘We are going on hajj this year, God willing’.

(xi) *badna-nhijj-il9aam ?inšaallaah
Sentence (x) is acceptable and meaningful, whereas sentence (xi) is not. ?il9aam in this context means ‘last year’ cf:

(xii) hajjeena-l9aam ' We went on hajj last year’
Here is another example:

(xiii) ?issani sanit xeer
‘This year is a year of abundance’

(xiv) ?il9aam ?ajaana xeer kθiir
‘Last year we had plenty of good harvest.’

Note also that as greetings on, say, Eid Day, Jordanians have a choice between:

(xv) kull sana/sani wintu saalmiin
‘(lit) Every year and you are sound, i.e., ‘Happy Eid’

(xvi) kull 9aam wintu bxeer
‘(lit) Every year and you are in good condition, ’ i.e., ‘Happy Eid’
Note that *kull sani* collocates with *saalim/saalmih/saalmiin*, whereas *kull 9aam* collocates with *bxeer*. However, these two forms of greeting are not in free variation. There are gender distinctions between them: *kull sani* seems to be favoured by women, but *kull 9aam* tends to be more frequent in men’s speech.\(^2\)

Arabic abounds with culturally determined time expressions whose meaning and illocutionary import lack precision – thereby allowing for a wide range of interpretation from years to months, to weeks, days and hours. In spite of such lack of precision, these terms are (or seem to be) indispensable; they are deeply rooted in Arab culture and do portray interesting features of linguistic relativity and ethnography of communication.

Under the umbrella of imprecise temporal expressions, perhaps it is convenient to include reference to time expressed by the verb phrase in Arabic, notably through the function of the category of tense. As is well-known in the linguistic studies and grammars of European languages (cf. Palmer 1981, Quirk et al 1972, Comrie 1976, Lyons 1977). Tense locates the action/state expressed by the verb at a time measured with reference to the moment of speaking. Tense in Arabic, as in English, consists of two terms: past and non-past. Past tense usually (but by no means always) locates the action/state expressed by the verb at a time prior to the moment of speaking. For instance,

(xvii) \(\text{?isuyyaa}\text{h wisluj bissalaamih}\)

‘The tourists arrived safely’

Here the past tense *wisluj* ‘they arrived’ simply indicates that the event took place before the moment of speaking. No further specifications can be understood about the time when the event occurred. Whether it occurred seconds before the moment of utterance, or minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years, is unspecified. It is in this sense that the implied time is considered imprecise.

The non-past tense, on the other hand, can be defined negatively vis-à-vis the past tense such that the non-past tense locates the action/state expressed by the verb at a time not prior to the moment of speaking. For instance in :

(xviii) \(\text{?isuyyaa}h \text{bwsalaamih }\text{in?allaah}\)

‘the tourists will arrive safely, God willing’

The event of arriving expressed by *bwsalu* is not prior to the moment of speaking – in this case it is subsequent to, rather than contemporaneous with it. But it is not known precisely when the event takes place.

In certain contexts, the Arabic past tense may locate the event at a non-past time, and conversely the non-past tense may locate the event at a past time. But this is not the place for elaboration on the point.

2. **Semi-precise temporal reference**

This type of temporal reference may be roughly defined as short-term reference co-extensive with a fairly limited period of time. Example:
(i) lahDa min faDlak
‘ One moment, please. ’

The word lahDa suggests that the waiting won’t be long at all; in effect, however, it may take seconds or minutes. In sentence (ii),

(ii) fiih ?amTaar ba9di-DDuuhur
‘ There is rain in the afternoon/ Rain is expected in the afternoon ’

the listeners are able to make the following conclusions :

a- Rain is forecast.

b- The time of the utterance is most probably ante-meridiem.

c- The event is expected on the same day, post-merediem and before the evening.

Therefore, the coordinates of the event are fairly well-defined, allowing for a small margin of speculation.

If someone says,

(iii) barja9 ba9d išwayy
‘I’ll return after a while.’

The utterance suggests that the person in question is going out for a short while and will probably return within minutes; at least that is how the utterance is understood if the person in question observes Grice’s cooperative principle. But there is no guarantee that this understanding on the part of those who read the notice will in fact be translated into action : circumstances may prevent the person from returning in time, assuming of course that the cooperative principle is not intentionally flouted.

(iv) mnitaabal bukra-S-Subuḥ
‘We will meet tomorrow morning.’

The coordinates of bukra-SSubuḥ ‘ tomorrow morning ’ include the first twelve hours or so of the day that follows the utterance (00:00 – 12:00). The period is literally specified in these terms, but in practice (and depending on Arab cultural norms, which may not be quite uniform throughout the Arab countries) the utterance imposes some conventional limitations on the most likely range of the period, thereby excluding extreme ends, and reducing it to some prime hours of the morning, say, 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m.

However, it must be pointed out that the context of the utterance, as always, plays an important role in defining its meaning. Between two commuters, two shepherds, two farm or road works labourers, two school bus drivers, …etc., a much earlier sense of bukra-SSubuḥ (e.g. 7:00 am) is conventionally conveyed. Moreover, if the specified day is a holiday (e.g. a Friday) the interpretation of bukra-SSubuḥ allows for a later starting point (e.g. 10:00 am) as people tend to linger in bed on a holiday.

The time expression bukra / gadd ‘ tomorrow ’ is semi-precise according to the above definition. Strictly speaking bukra / gadd is a twenty-four hour period, and if someone says bašuufak bukra /gadd ‘ I’ll see you tomorrow’, he can be understood
differently on different occasions. If there is an agreed time, say between 9:00 and 10:00, then that is fairly well specified; otherwise, bukra / gadd may mean any time during the twenty-four hour span of the following day.

Now ba9id bukra / gadd ‘(lit) after tomorrow’ is not really so open-ended as the literal translation suggests; ba9id bukra / gadd in Arabic has acquired a fairly well-defined and definitive meaning translatable into English as ‘the day after tomorrow’. Throughout the Arab world, notwithstanding variation in the form it takes (e.g., ba9id baačir, ba9id bukra, ba9id gad, …etc.) this expression is invariably understood to refer to the day after tomorrow, as indicated above.

Note that although ba9id bukra / gadd denotes a day, ba9id ?usbuu9 ‘after a week’ means just that – a week from now. Similarly ba9id yoom ‘after one day’, ba9id šahur ‘after one month’, ba9id sanih ‘after one year’, ba9id il9iid ‘after the feast / eid’ ba9id il9uTi ‘after the holiday’ are as transparent as the English translation makes them. It is only ba9id bukra / gadd which to a non-Arab may at first be puzzling. ba9id yoom ?aw yoomene ‘after a day or two’ (Standard Arabic: ba9da yawmin ?aw yawmayn) is a very common phrase. All of these expressions signal durations; only ba9id bukra / gadd specifies a day of the week: 9iid miilaadi ba9id bukra / gadd ‘My birthday is on the day after tomorrow.’ Such is the ethnography of communication in Arabic.

Finally, there are a few time expressions introduced with the word ba9d ‘after’ to mean immediately or soon after some point of reference, e.g., Salaati- ljanaazih ba9di- lfarD ‘Funeral prayer (immediately) after fard (i.e., prescribed) prayer’.

(v) ?irra9d biSiir Thunder occurs (immediately) after lightning ‘.ba9di lbarq ‘

It is evident that the circumstantial context of the utterance is responsible for this delimitation of the sense of ba9d.

The word qabl/gabl ‘before’ like ba9d can introduce a semi-precise temporal phrase. Consider: qabl/ gabl- iDDuhr ‘(lit) before noon / ante-meridiem’, which theoretically covers the period just after midnight to just before noon, but in effect denotes the period of the few hours preceding midday. However, the context may give qabl the more limited, more specific reading as in:

(vi) ?ilxuTbah gabul Salaati- ljum9ah
‘The (Friday) sermon is (immediately) before the Friday prayer’

(vii) ?isšooraba gabl-iTTabag-irra9iisii
‘The soup is (immediately) before the main dish’

(viii) ?ilbarg gabl-irra9d
‘lightning is (immediately) before thunder’

The parallelism between the functions and senses of ba9d ‘after’ and qabl/gabl
‘before’ is all too obvious.

?imbaar?h / ?ams ‘yesterday’ is used with its literal sense, as maatat imbaar?h
 ‘She died yesterday’ but can be, and often is, used to refer to a previous time not too
distant away (or perceived as such) by the interlocutors as in ?imbaar?h kunna
nista9mil faanuuus- ilkaaz ‘ (lit) Yesterday, we used to use the paraffin lantern / lamp ‘.  
This kind of utterance simply refers to past experiences of the speaker – things that were
commonplace in his lifetime.

Colloquial ?amsaat ‘ (lit) yesterdays’ is also still used in a similar sense:

(ix) ?amsaat kunna nista9mil faanuuus-ilkaaz
 ‘Not so long ago we used to use the paraffin lamp’.

Note that the morphological form of ?amsaat is peculiar; it takes the shape of
jam9u- lmu?annaθ issaalem (sound feminine plural) as if it were derived from a noun,
where in fact ?amsi ‘yesterday’ is an adverb of time. In Standard Arabic ?amsi means
‘yesterday’, and the form ?amsaat is not attested in the standard language. Colloquial
Arabic morphology does not always conform with that of the standard, especially
where plurality is concerned. Perhaps the colloquial form ?amsaat functions as the
equivalent of (bi)?al-?amsi in the standard. It is well known that ?amsi means
‘yesterday’ exactly, and bili?amsi (with the definite article) means previously or in the
past. The surface plurality of ?amsaat could therefore be intended to refer to a plurality
of previous days; hence the proposed translation of ?amsaat as ‘not so long ago’,
which is slightly different from ?amsi/?imbaar?h, which, in its remote sense, is rendered
as ‘in the near past’.3

If the word ?awwal ‘(lit) first’ precedes ?ams / ?imbaar?h ‘yesterday’ the
meaning turns idiomatic such that the colloquial phrase ?awwal ?ams / ?imbaar?h
means ‘the day before yesterday’ (cf. ba9id bukr?h/ gad).

If ?awwal is repeated ?awwal ?awwal imbaar?h / ams the phrase denotes ‘
the day preceding the day before yesterday’. Thus, if someone said on Monday :
/ ams would mean ‘Friday.’

There are a number of temporal phrases which may be regarded as idiomatic-
cum-proverbial in Jordanian Arabic (and probably elsewhere in the Arab world). These
include:

(a) bram?it 9een  
‘in an eye-wink,(i.e., very quickly.)’

This term is used when a mission is urgent and has to be accomplished very
quickly or when some act was performed very quickly.

(x) ?iTTabiib laazim yuh?Dur ibram?it 9een.
 ‘The doctor must come within a wink’

(xi) ?ilbint ?akiyyi jiddan; ?allat- illuguz- ibram?it 9een
 ‘The girl is very intelligent; she solved the puzzle within a wink’
(b) bayna 9aššīyyatin waDuḥaḥaḥa

’(lit) between an evening and the following morning; i.e., overnight’

This expression is borrowed from Chapter 79 (i.e., surat ?alnaazzī9aat) of the Holy Quran where the last verse in this surah says:

kaʔannahum yawma yarawnahaa lam yalbaθuu ?illa 9aššīyyatan ?aw Duḥaḥaḥa

‘When they witness it ( i.e., the hour or day of judgment) it is as though they hadn’t stayed save one evening or a following morning’

The connotation of the adapted Jordanian (and, no doubt, pan-Arab) phrase is therefore anchored in the Holy Quran and has a prestigious air about it. It has become proverbial in conveying a sense of immediacy and fastness.

This phrase is often used ironically, thereby exhorting patience as in

(xii) baθum ilθiuθa tθill maθaakil ilθafgr wilbaTaalaθ bayna 9aššīyyatin waDuḥaθaθa

‘They want the government to solve the problems of poverty and unemployment overnight’. Implying this is unreasonable and impossible.

(c) min saa9a lasaa9a faraj

’(lit) From one hour to another (there is) relief’

This phrase is proverbial too and conveys a euphemistic tone in hard times; it is used to soothe a person or a group of people experiencing hardship. The illocutionary import of the phrase can be expressed as follows: The speaker tries to console and sympathize with interlocutors experiencing a hard time and reminds them of ensuing relief; the intended perlocutionary effect is to instill hope and assurance that the matter will soon be favourably resolved.

3. Precise time expressions:

These include clock time along with an overt or covert calendar day. For instance:

(i) θimnit?aabal issaa9a waθdi- w nuss ba9d - iθDuhur

‘ We will meet at a half past one p.m. ’

The day of the meeting is shared information between the speaker and the hearer(s). Otherwise,

(ii) θimnit?aabal issaa9a wafθdi-w nuSS ba9d-iθDuhur yoom-ilxamiis waaθhad

θayluθ.

‘ We will meet at half past one p.m. on Thursday, 1st September ’.

If the date is rather distant and the year is not understood from the context, it may have to be stated, e.g. ?alfeen ?u xamsθ ‘ 2005 ’. Thus, the minute, the hour, the day, the month (and the year) are all made explicit in precise time expressions. The seconds, are rarely used in the Arab world except perhaps in sports activities where a stop watch is used to determine the time of a contest to the nearest second.

Clock time in Arabic exhibits certain cultural patterns which may sound strange to non-Arabs. Consider the following:

(iii) θissaa9a alaaθi- wθilθ
'(lit) It is three and a third (meaning 3:20) ' in parallel with θalaaθ- wrubu9 ' a quarter past three '. People in the west, especially in the UK, do not use a ' third' in their clock time expressions. Instead, they quote the equivalent number of minutes. Thus, Arab θalaaθi- wʧiθθ is rendered as 3:20 or 'twenty past three'. The Arabs sometimes use a corresponding expression θalaaθi- w9išriin in conformity with other cultures, but only at the risk of being misunderstood as saying the homophonous two-figure number 23, which does exist as an expression of clock time meaning 23:00 hours. That is to say, θalaaθi-w9išriin in answer to, e.g., What time did the accident happen? is ambiguous in that it means either at 3:20 or at 23 hours (as in, at 23 hours local time).

More interesting perhaps are expressions like : tis9a-wnuSS-uxamsih (lit. 'nine and a half and five'), which corresponds to 9:35 or 35 past nine. Similarly, tis9a-wnuSS- illa xamsih ' (lit. nine and a half except five) corresponding to 9:25 or 25 past nine.

The two words ṭu / wa 'and', and ṭilla 'except' collocate with the half hour as shown above, and also with the top hour as :

(iv) tis9a- wxamsih

‘(lit) nine and five ’ i.e., five past nine, and

(v) tis9a ṭilla xamsih ‘(lit) nine except five ’, i.e., five to nine.

Any number of minutes may co-occur with ṭu / wa and ṭilla. Consider

(vi) tis9a-w9ašarah

‘(lit) nine and ten’, i.e., ten past nine.

(vii) tis9a- w?arba9ah

‘ four past nine ’

(viii) েalaaei- w?arba9Ta9iš

‘ fourteen past three ’

(ix) েalaaei- wxamsi-w 9išriin

‘ twenty-five past three ’

(x) tis9a ṭilla 9ašara

‘ ten to nine ’

(xi) ṭarba9a ṭilla 9neen-u-9išriin

‘ twenty-two to four ’

(xii) 9ašara ṭilla 9ašara

‘ten to ten’

But where nuss ‘half’ is used, both ṭu / w and ṭilla co-occur fairly regularly with minutes from 1 to nine only :

(xiii) tis9a wnuSS- u-θalaaθ

‘ (lit) nine and a half and three ’, i.e., 9:33.

(xiv) tis9a-wnuSS ṭilla θalaaθ

‘ (lit) nine and a half except three ’, i.e., 9:27
However, expressions like "tis9a wnuSS-u- 9ašara ‘nine and a half and ten, i.e. 9:40 and, "tis9a-u nuSS ṭilla 9ašara ‘nine and a half except 10, ‘i.e., 9:20 are not permissible.

Note that in Arabic clock time, the hours precede the minutes, whereas in English the minutes come first:

(xv) tis9a-w9ašarah
‘(lit) nine and ten (minutes) i.e., ten past-nine ‘

(xvi) tis9a ṭilla 9ašarah
‘(lit) nine except ten (minutes) i.e., ‘ten to nine ‘

As shown above the conjunctions ṭu / w ‘and ‘ ṭilla ‘except ‘along with zero (i.e., nothing) commute in a three-term system of clock-time reference in Arabic to add to or subtract from the hour index fractions (of the hour) as the case may be, e.g., quarter, third, half, as well as any number of minutes: Consider

(xvii) Sab9a- wrubu9 / ṭuluθ / nuSS / 9ašarah
‘quarter / third / half / ten (minutes) past seven ‘

(xviii) Sab9a ṭilla rubu9 / ṭuluθ / 9ašarah
‘quarter / third / ten (minutes) to seven ‘

But it is worth noting that ṭilla does not co-occur with nuss ‘half ‘, hence the unacceptable string :

(xix) *sab9a ṭilla nuSS
‘half to seven ‘. Perhaps the reason is that the time understood from the unacceptable string *sab9a ṭilla nuSS is normally expressed by using the additive conjunction ṭu / w ;

(xx) sab9a- wnuSS ‘half past seven ‘

In sum, ṭu/w co-occurs with any number of minutes, as well as with three fractions of the hour : rubu9, ṭuluθ and nuSS; ṭilla behaves exactly like ṭu / w save that it does not co-occur with nuSS ‘half ‘.

Conclusion
In this article, time expressions in Arabic are placed in three categories :
1. Imprecise
2. Semi-precise
3. Precise

The patterning of time expressions and their pragmatic meanings are to a great extent culturally determined; they comprise integral parts of the ethnography of communication in this world language. Translatable into other languages undoubtedly they are; but they do lend support to a diluted version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis which, according to Palmer, “serves a useful purpose in reminding us that the categories we employ do not, simply ‘exist’ in the world of experience.” The propositional meaning of ba9d ‘after’, gabl/qabl ‘before’ and pragmatic interpretations of their senses must be seen within the perspective of Arab culture. The use of ṭu
Jordanians and Arabs in general use time expressions specific to their culture. Take, for instance, time expressions related to their Islamic beliefs and practices. First and foremost among these are the times of the five sets of prescribed prayers: al-fajir ‘dawn’, ?iD-Duhur, al-9aSur, al-ma?rib and al-9i?aa?. These prayers have to be performed in certain, well-defined times. For instance, magrib prayers begin ba9d gruub-i-ššams ‘immediately after sunset, notably when ?iššafag li?mar ‘the evening glow/twilight’ appears in the west. magrib prayers can be performed as long as the evening glow is visible. When ?iššafag li?mar disappears, 9i?aa? prayers begin. Hence, Duhuur-i-ššafag ‘the appearance of the evening glow’ and giyaab-i-ššafag ‘the disappearance of the glow’ are significant time expressions for Jordanians and Arabs.

People who come from a Western Culture may wonder why Jordanians (and Arabs in general) should use time expressions pertaining to ?iššafag li?mar , for example, when clocks and watches are so common and widespread. Aliens to Arab and Islamic culture have to be reminded that clocks and watches by themselves cannot determine prayer-times: a calendar, taqwiim, is needed to fix these times, and it is only then that a clock or watch is helpful for this purpose. Furthermore, these clock-times and the calendars that specify them are worked out with reference to specific natural phenomena including fajir ‘dawn’, ?luu?9-i-ššamis ‘sunrise’, giyaab-i-ššamis ‘sunset’ and ?iššafag li?mar ‘the evening glow/twilight’. Such natural phenomena and the time expressions signaled by them are crucial frames of reference. A Jordanian (or an Arab) in the wilderness without a watch and a calendar is capable of estimating fairly accurately the right time of the prescribed prayers with reference to the natural phenomena, however crude and primitive they might seem to a person from the western culture. Thus, giyaab-i-ššafag li?mar, for instance, is a significant natural sign for fixing the starting point of 9i?aa? prayers.

On the other hand, it would be unexpected, even surprising, if an Englishman said to a fellow from the same culture that he would meet him when the twilight (?iššafag li?mar) fades away. There are more precise ways of making appointments in a western culture. Linguistic relativity, notably a moderate version of it, recognizes the reality of such cultural differences.

To close this section, two more examples which do not pertain to religion will be cited. Jordanians often make promises to be fulfilled at certain seasons. For instance, biglaa9t-i-lgaTaanih ‘at the harvesting of legumes’ is often used as a time expression in contexts like the following: bašuufku biglaa9t-i-lgaTaanih ?inšaallah ‘I’ll see you at ‘the harvesting of legumes, God willing.’

?u nuSS-uxamsi, ?u nuSS illa xamsi, ?u nuSS, but not "illa nuss in Arabic are interesting clocktime facts which non-Arabs may find strange.
This utterance may be said by a labourer who intends to work in the harvesting of legumes; equally, it may be uttered by a creditor or a money lender the repayment of whose loan is promised at this harvesting time.

A Jordanian may threaten another Jordanian by using the time expression njuum-i-DDuhur '(lit) the midday(noon) stars' as in walla lawariik injuum-i-DDuhur 'I swear by God that I’ll make you see the stars at noon'. The illocutionary force of this utterance is construed as a threat involving coercion, torture…etc. Between Jordanians, the meaning of the utterance is clear, although to a recipient from a western culture it may be meaningless unless someone explains it to him.

The last example has to do with the expression zagzagat il9aSaafiir 'the twitter of sparrows' which Jordanians in rural areas use in contexts like laazim nimši lamma tzagzig-i-il9aSaafiir. 'We must set out when the sparrows (begin to) twitter'. This is construed as quite an early departure, almost at the first light of day. The twitter of sparrows is known to people in different cultures and environments where there are sparrows; but rural Jordanians use this phenomenon to encode the sense of a very early start.

It is hoped that these examples in particular (and those in sections 1 and 2 above) will signal a set of implications as to how Jordanian time expressions may strike recipients from other cultures. The reactions may vary according to the biography of the recipient. The un-initiated may be led to the conclusion that Jordanians are primitive and have a poor concept of time and that Jordanians do not value the minutes and the hours; everything is so loose. More enlightened recipients will appreciate the cultural differences.

In spite of the oddness of measuring time with reference to ?iššafag lhmar, glaa9t-i-lgTaanih, zagzagat-i-l9aSaafiir …etc. western sociologists, linguists and anthropologists will, of course, be more tolerant and even appreciative of the diverse human patterns of speech in diverse cultures. The world doesn’t have to be monolithic, and different societies will be led to categorize the world of experience differently.

Commenting on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, Palmer says that Whorf argued that the American Indian language Hopi " shows that the Hopi have no notion of time. The only distinction they make is between what is subjective and what is objective, the subjective including both the future and everything that is ‘mental’."5

Jordanians have a fairly complex concept of time; on the one hand, they use precise time expressions according to the western calendar. They also use precise time expressions pertinent to the lunar calendar and time expressions which are culture-specific. These latter expressions may lead some westerners to raise an eyebrow, but in the context in which they are used, they are not only meaningful but constitute a very effective mode of ethnolinguistic communication.
Endnotes

1  I am very grateful to Professor Shahir El-Hassan for his valuable comments on an earlier version of this paper; his views have been incorporated in the paper.

2  During the Adha Eid of this year (Hijri 1428) which occurred on 19th December, 2007, the researcher set out to observe the actual use of kull{sani/9aam in a small area of the region in question. He made notes of the behaviour of men and women on this happy occasion. It turned out that women indeed favoured kull sani with a frequency of (23 out of 24) whereas men only used kull 9aam (36 occurrences of kull 9aam on 36 occasions). Whether the grammatical fact that sani is feminine and 9aam is masculine has anything to do with these gender differences in usage remains to be seen. But it is noteworthy that phonologically and phonaesthetically sani does sound softer and more delicate than 9aam.

3  About ten native speakers of the region in question were asked by the researcher about the use of ?amsaat and they suggested an interpretation which conformed to that of the researcher.


5  Ibid., 45.
التعابير الزمنيّة في اللغة العربية

بشار الرشدان

ملخص

تشكل التعابير الزمنيّة في اللغة العربية تراكيب لغوية تعكس أسماءً من التفاهم الأنتولوجية، الثقافية خاصة. هذه الأسماء يمكن ترجمتها إلى اللغات العالمية، كالإنجليزية مثلاً. قد بتساءل الناطق بغير العربية أحياناً لماذا "بعد بكره" تحدد الزمن باليوم الذي يلي يوم غد، بينما "بعد أسبوع" ليست بنفس الدرجة من الدقة، إذ إن "بعد أسبوع" تشير إلى فترة زمنية قد تمتد لأيام. بعد انقضاء الأسبوع، وهنا تكمن نسبة التعابير الزمنية.

تم تقسيم التعابير الزمنية في اللغة المحكية في الأردن إلى ثلاث مجموعات:

1- تعابير طويلة الأمد غير محددة مثل "عندما يستوي العنب". في الأردن مثلاً، ينصح العنب في بداية فصل الصيف في مناطق غور الأردن، وفي نهاية فصل الصيف في المناطق الأكثر برودة في عجلون والشوشوك على سبيل المثال.

2- تعابير قصيرة الأمد محددة مثل "بعد الظهر" و"قبل الغداء".

3- تعابير محددة ذات صلة بأوقات الساعة مثل الساعة "سبعة ونصف".

يُعرض هذا البحث عينة من التعابير الزمنية المحكية في الأردن ويقدم توضيحًا أنتولوجيًا براجماتيكيًا لبعض معاني هذه التراكيب وكيف يتعامل معها أهل الثقافات الأخرى وصاحب الثقافة الغريبة منها.

References


