Actionality Classes of the Verb in Modern Western Aramaic:

the Dialect of Maaloula

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**Abstract:**

This study examines the actionality classes of verbs in Modern Western Aramaic (Siryōn), focusing on the distribution and semantic function of the historical \**qtīl*/\**qattīl* forms. Based on fieldwork and corpus analysis, we demonstrate that lexical meaning systematically conditions the morphological form of verbs, a phenomenon more pronounced than in languages like English, German, or Russian. The study classifies verbs into six actionality classes, revealing that \**qtīl*/\**qattīl* forms serve diverse functions, including perfect, evidential, resultative, and present-state encoding, depending on the verb’s lexical properties. The findings suggest that the \**qtīl*/\**qattīl* forms compose an innovative category still undergoing functional specialization, akin to similar developments in Levantine Arabic. Additionally, the study highlights the influence of transitivity and dynamicity on verbal morphology, providing new insights into the interaction between lexical semantics and grammatical structure in Siryōn. This research thus contributes to a broader understanding of verbal aspect and evidentiality in Semitic languages.

**Keywords:**

Modern Western Aramaic, verbal morphology, Actionality, Tense-Aspect-Mood, Evidentiality

In 1985, the American linguist Joan L. Bybee produced a monograph, *Morphology,* in which she outlined her philosophy of morphology as a ‘Study of the Relation between Meaning and Form’.[[1]](#footnote-1) One such relation is ‘Actionality’ (or *Aktionsart*, in time-honoured albeit vague terminology), a semantic feature of a verbal predicate, referring to stativity/dynamicity, telicity/atelicity, and punctuality, which manifests through the selection of a particular verb form. In the spirit of her approach, we enquire into the relationship between the forms of verbal morphology (which is to say, their inflectional categories) and meaning, building upon our observations from the Russian hse University Field Expedition in Qalamoun from 2020–24.[[2]](#footnote-2) We have discovered that lexical meaning systematically conditions the morphological form of verbs in one Semitic language, much more so than in languages such as English, German, or Russian.

In Siryōn, or Modern Western Aramaic (mwa), the form most sensitive to the respective verb’s meaning is the last of the forms introduced in the standard dictionary,[[3]](#footnote-3) the so-called *Perfekt* \**qtīl*/\**qattīl*). In this contribution, we review the grammatical meanings of this form based on data from the existing published corpus and our fieldwork. The latter data comes from a wide spectrum of individuals from all walks of life in Maaloula:

Rōza B̥qūba (‘Rōza’, f., b. 1950)

Ḥanān Bxīl (‘Ḥanān’, f., b. 1982)

Ḥanne Bxīl (‘Ḥanne’, f., b. 1946)

Yūsuf Bxīl (‘Abū Šādī’, m., b. 1946)

Žuryos Šaḥīn (‘Abū Šaḥīn’, m., b. 1969)

Ġassān Dabūl (‘Abū Sarcis’, m., b. 1959)

When we cite examples from the published corpus, we follow them with a reference in a footnote. Those examples published by Werner Arnold follow Arnold’s transcription standards.[[4]](#footnote-4) Those from earlier sources and our fieldwork are normalized according to our transcription standards,[[5]](#footnote-5) which differ slightly from Arnold’s, chiefly in the representation of the velar consonants *c* (Arnold’s *k*) and *k* (Arnold’s *ḳ*), the mid central vowel *ə* (which Arnold represents with a superscript *ə*, but which merges with the phoneme *i* in the speech of some of our informants), and finally the use of the undertie ‿ to indicate the prosodic unity of a phrase and highlight phonetic phenomena that transcend word boundaries.

**1. The Siryōn Verb: An Introduction**

To begin, we organize the mwa verbal lexicon into presumptive actionality classes based upon the Tense-Aspect-Mood-Polarity (or tamp) distribution of four inflectional categories, as illustrated in Table 1 below: **Form 1**, corresponding to the *Präterit* or sc, **Form 2**, corresponding to the *Subjunktiv* or pc, **Form 3**, the first of two denominal tenses, traditionally known as the *Präsens*, based on the \**CāCiC* pattern verbal adjective, and finally **Form 4**, the second denominal tense, traditionally the *Perfekt*, based upon the \**CCīC* and *\*CaCCīC* pattern deverbal adjectives.[[6]](#footnote-6) For our present purposes, we exclude the Imperative (ipv) from our consideration.

**Table 1: mwa Verbal Inflectional Categories**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Form** | Categories | ‘to take’ | ‘to hear’ | Pattern |
| **Form 1** | *Präterit* | *iškal* | *išmaʕ* | \*CaCVC- |
| **Form 2** | *Subjunktiv* | *yiškul* | *yišmaʕ* | \*yVCCVC- |
| **Form 3** | *Präsens* | *šōkel* | *šōmaʕ* | \*CāCiC- |
| **Form 4** | *Perfekt* | *iškel* | *šammeʕ* | \*CCīC- / \*CaCCīC- |

The tamp distribution of these four inflectional categories is not consistent from verb to verb but rather lexically determined. Despite prior generalizations about the use of Form 4, in particular, its appearance and usage can only be appreciated at the level of individual verbs, at least for the moment: sometimes it is active, sometimes it is passive. Sometimes, it is present actual, with stative or progressive implications; sometimes, it is past or present perfect. Sometimes, Form 4 verbs have an inferential or indirective nuance, but generally, they reflect direct evidence. Every verb cannot encompass all of these mutually exclusive meanings, but prior scholarship about mwa verbal morphosyntax tends to present its tamp system in terms of generalities.

The study of mwa verbal syntax begins with Christoph Correll, who describes our Form 3 as the ‘first participle’ (*das erste Partizip*).[[7]](#footnote-7) He divides our Form 4 into two ‘participial’ categories, the ‘second participle’ (*das zweite Partizip*) \**CCīC* and the ‘resultative participle’ (*das Resultativpartizip*) *\*CaCCīC*, rather than acknowledging their verbal nature. By contrast, David Cohen identifies each as an innovative ‘participial conjugation’, one based upon the \**CāCiC* pattern (*c. part.*, i.e., *conjugaison participiale*, our Form 3), and another two based upon the \**CCīC* and *\*CaCCīC* patterns (our Form 4), respectively *c. part. p 1*, active and passive perfects, and *c. part. p 2*, statives, medio-passives, and ‘internal deponents’.[[8]](#footnote-8)

It was Arnold (*Grammatik*) who first identified these two as suppletive bases of a single verbal conjugation, which he describes as a Perfect (*Perfekt*), their distribution determined by the transitivity of the base verb, while also acknowledging that the \**CCīC* stem also continues in its former role as a passive participle. In his analysis, elaborated in a 1999 article,[[9]](#footnote-9) he describes this conjugation exclusively in terms of the perfect, i.e., as actions or states completed at the speech time or reference time. As a modest contribution derived from our ongoing research, we build upon these observations concerning this conjugation, restricting ourselves for the moment to the relationship between its forms and meanings by addressing the basic (G-) stem and only considering the other Forms when they provide an illustrative contrast with Form 4.

To further complicate the picture, distinctions in voice may also be represented by the N-stem of the verb, which is characterized by the prefix *n-* and conventionally described as a mediopassive. The readership of *Aramaic Studies* may be puzzled by the reference to the N-stem, since its absence from all other forms of Aramaic is one of the diagnostic features distinguishing this family of languages from closely related languages such as Arabic and Hebrew.[[10]](#footnote-10) In mwa, however, the N-stem has been resuscitated as a productive verbal morphosyntactic category, likely through contact with Arabic, supplementing the G-stem in this regard.

**2. Form 4 or Perfective (\**qtīl*/\**qattīl*)**

The distribution of the Form 4 patterns for the basic stem, \*CCīC and \*CaCCīC, depends mainly upon lexical semantics. The rule of thumb for sound verbs is that Form 4 of transitive verbs has the base \*CCīC, and that of intransitive verbs has the base \*CaCCīC. However, there are exceptions to this rule, which may be either semantically conditioned or morphotactically conditioned.

The former class of exceptions is illustrated by the verbs *šmʕ* *šammeʕ* ‘to hear’ and *yḏʕ* *yaḏḏeʕ* ‘to know,’ which take the \*CaCCīC base like intransitive verbs. Significantly, in Ṭuroyo, the cognates of these same two verbs (*ʔḏʕ aḏəʕ* ‘to know’, *šmʕ šaməʕ* ‘to hear’) also use the same \*CaCCīC base for their past like other intransitive verbs due to their dynamicity, or more accurately, their lack thereof, i.e., these actions (‘hearing’ and ‘knowing’) do not impact their objects. Some other Ṭuroyo transitive verbs that take the \*CaCCīC base for their past are *ʔbʕ* *abəʕ* ‘to wish, want’ and *fhm* *fahəm* ‘to understand’, of which both are similarly transitive but lacking in dynamicity. This parallel development, across two Aramaic languages, Western and Eastern, that are only distantly related to one another and, moreover, completely isolated from one another, illustrates the sensitivity of the grammatical form to lexical semantics and could only have arisen through common drift.

Furthermore, some intransitive verbs take the \*CCīC pattern for their Form 4. These include *myṯ imeṯ* (m) / *mīṯa* (f) ‘to die’, *ḏmx iḏmex* (m) / *ḏmīxa* (f) ‘to sleep’, and *ʔzl izel* (m) / *zīla* (f) ‘to go’. It is not immediately obvious why these verbs are exceptional, although it is perhaps significant that all three are unaccusative rather than unergative intransitive verbs.

The latter class of exceptions is purely morphotactic: all III-weak verbs take the base \*CaCCīC rather than \*CCīC, even when transitive, e.g., ʔ*py app* (m) */ appīya* (f) ‘to give’, *ḥmy* *ḥamm* (m) */ ḥamm īya* (f) ‘to see’, *ščy šaṯṯ* (m) */ šaṯṯīya* (f) ‘to drink’, *šwy* *šaww* (m) */ šawwīya* (f) ‘to do, make’.

**3. mwa Actionality Classes**

With that in mind, we shall provide an overview of the distribution of Form 4’s potential meanings, organized according to the degree of the dynamicity of the verb. As noted before, sometimes Form 4 is active and sometimes passive. Sometimes, it is present actual, with stative or progressive implications, and sometimes, it is past or present perfect, as it has traditionally been described. Sometimes, it even encodes a remote past. Finally, Form 4 often has an inferential/indirective nuance but generally reflects direct evidence. This indirective usage of Form 4 is an isogloss with some nena dialects, also observed by Geoffrey Khan for the nena perfect.[[11]](#footnote-11)

## *3.1. Dynamic Ambitransitive (or ‘Labile’) Verbs*

Our first class comprises ambitransitive verbs, i.e., those with transitive and intransitive readings. It is evidently a closed class, consisting of verbs such as *ičbar* (Form 1) ~ *yičb(u/a)r* (Form 2) ~ *čōbar* (Form 3) ~ *ičber* (Form 4) ‘to break’, *ičl(a/e)ḥ* ~ *yičl(u/a)ḥ* ~ *čōlaḥ* ~ *ičleḥ* ‘to tear’, *ifraṭ* ~ *yifr(u/a)ṭ* ~ *fōreṭ* ~ *ifreṭ* ‘to dismantle/fall apart’, *ifṣal* ~ *yifṣ(u/a)l* ~ *fōṣel* ~ *ifṣel* ‘to separate, divide, cut off’, *ifṯaḥ* ~ *yifṯ(u/a)ḥ* ~ *fōṯaḥ* ~ *ifṯeḥ* ‘to open’, *iġraḥ* ~ *yiġr(u/a)ḥ* ~ *ġōraḥ* ~ *iġreḥ* ‘to hurt’, *iḥr(a/e)b̥* ~ *yiḥr(u/a)b̥* ~ *ḥōreb̥* ~ *iḥreb̥* ‘to destroy/break down’, and *ikṭaʕ* ~ *yikṭ(u/a)ʕ* ~ *kōṭaʕ* ~ *ikṭeʕ* ‘to cut, tear’. In Forms 1 and 2, their transitivity may be reflected by the quality of their stem vowels when present. Verbs belonging to this class differ from our second class (Dynamic, Transitive, Telic) verbs such as ‘to make’ etc., insofar as the direct objects of their transitive uses correspond to the subjects of their intransitive uses, e.g., ‘I broke the cup’ vs ‘the cup broke’, etc., precisely as in English labile verbs. Form 4 of the verbs in this class can have both an active and a stative-resultative meaning, even within the same utterance, as in example 1.1:

1.1 *Mellun, ‘Hōb‿blōta ti elhel ʕaža* ***ḥrība****?’ Mrūle, ‘Hōḏi blōtaḥ’. Mellun, ‘ʕAža* ***čaḥribilla*** *ŭ čxarriḥilla?’*[[12]](#footnote-12)

He said to them, ‘Why **is** this village over there **destroyed**?’ They said to him, ‘This is our village’. He said to them, ‘Why **did you destroy** and burn it?’

Example 1.1 (*čaḥribilla* ‘you destroyed it’) illustrates the transitive diathesis of *ḥrb* ‘to destroy’ from this class. The following example illustrates this same verb in its intransitive diathesis:

1.2 *Inəbraḏ xarmiš Šarra, w la šwinnaḥ menne ḥamra. Inəbraḏ xull xarmō, la ḥčamyaṯ illa Niṣpō. Tastūra m-xōṭril Alō, la* ***ḥirb̥aṯ*** *illa Šarra*.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The vineyard of Šarra was destroyed by hail, and we haven’t made any wine from it. The whole vineyard was destroyed, nothing was spared save for Niṣpō. By the grace of God, nothing **was ruined** except Šarra.

Additionally, transitive forms may have an inferential shade of meaning, in contrast to Form 1, as in example 1.3, and may be used as remote past, as in example 1.4:

1.3 *‘Ana ḥmiččəl‿lanna finžōna ičber. Mōn* ***čbīrle****?’ ‘Waʔel* ***čabre****’.* (Abū Šādi, Abū Sarcis)

‘I saw this glass broken. Who **must have broken it**?’ ‘Waʔel **broke it**’.

1.4 *Hanna corsa* ***ičber****. Ana* ***ničbīrle*** *(m-zibnō).* (Abū Šādī)

This chair is **broken**. **I broke it** (a long time ago).

Note that the Form 4 example *ičber* ‘it is broken’ (1.3 and 1.4) has a stative-resultative meaning, contrasting with the Form 1 forms ***ičbar*** *cōrsa ‘*the chair broke/has broken’ (that is, while we were watching, as someone sat on it) and ***čabre***‘he broke it’ (1.3), which serves as present perfects.

While Form 4 may impart a stative-resultative meaning, the N-stem of transitive verbs such as *ičbar* ~ *yičbur* serves as a valence-reducing operation with passive and anticausative implications, as the examples below illustrate:

1.5 *La ṭawwel waḳča w* ***nčabraṯ*** *Turkīya, w itxal šarīf ḥsēn ʕa Ḏemseḳ*.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The moment did not last long, and Türkiye **was defeated** (lit. broken), and Sharif Hussein entered Damascus.

In this case, the grammatical patient (the Ottoman Empire) was defeated militarily by an implicit agent (in this case, the Allied Powers, in World War i), and the Hashemites moved into the power vacuum created by their defeat to seize the city of Damascus. By contrast, in the next example, *nḳaṭʕiṯ* ‘I got stuck’ admits no external instigator or causer:

1.6 *Ana ču nfakker* ***nḳaṭʕiṯ*** *ʕa tarba ġēr l-emmat šarikiččax*.[[15]](#footnote-15)

I don’t think **I got stuck** on the road, except when I partnered with you.

## *3.2. Dynamic Transitive Verbs*

The second class consists of dynamic transitive verbs without intransitive counterparts, a large and open class for which Form 4 can encode the perfect. We shall illustrate this with the verb *iškal* ~ *yiškul* ~ *šōkel* ~ *iškel* ‘to take’, but other verbs include *app* ~ *yapp* ~ *mapp* ~ *app* ‘to give’, *asab* ~ *yīsub* ~ *ōseb* ~ *iseb* ‘to take (along)’, *axal* ~ *yīxul* ~ *ōxel* ~ *ixel* ‘to eat’, *ikṭal* ~ *yikṭul* ~ *kōṭal* ~ *ikṭel* ‘to kill, hit’, and *išči* ~ *yišč* ~ *šōṯ* ~ *šaṯṯ* ‘to drink’. Where Form 1 *iškal* ‘he took’ encodes a simple past, Form 4 *iškel* ‘he has taken’ highlights the present-time relevance of the action, as in the following examples:

2.1 *‘****Šakliš*** *kiršō?’ ‘Ē,* ***šakliṯ’****.* (Ḥanān) ‘**Did you take** the money?’ ‘Yes, **I took (it)**.’

In the example above, the Form 1 response *šakliṯ* ‘I took’ is an unmarked simple past response to the question *šakliš* ‘did you take?’ By contrast, the Form 4 *niškīla* ‘I have taken’ would be marked in this context, asserting the resulting state of the action (taking the money) rather than the action itself, as in the example below:

2.2 *‘****Škul*** *kiršō!’ ‘****Niškīla*** *ʕimm!’* (Ḥanān) ‘**Take** the money!’ ‘**I’ve taken it** with me (already)!’

In example 2.2, the speaker has already taken the money and consequently cannot fulfill the command *škul* ‘take!’ In this instance, she is obliged to reference the present relevance of the action rather than the resulting state, using Form 4; cf. §3.3 below for two-place static verbs, which employ Form 4 to encode such resulting states. Had she used Form 1, it would imply that she retrieved the money only after the initial command. Similarly, in the following example, 2.3, the speaker’s use of Form 4 implies that he married his wife as a young woman, and they continue to be married at the present time.

2.3 ***Nišḳīlla*** *zʕōr w xulle mett yōḏʕa w ti ču mbaḳḳrōle mšaʕʕlōl ntalella*.[[16]](#footnote-16)

**I married (=took) her** as a young woman, and she knows everything, and what she doesn’t know, she asks me, and I show her.

Comparing *nišḳīlla* ‘I married her’ in this example with *ničbīrle* ‘I had broken it’ in example 1.4 above, we can see that Form 4 may encode actions in the remote past across both actionality classes. Form 4 can also refer to actions that had occurred before a particular reference point in the past before the speech act, even without the auxiliary verb *wōb* ‘was’,[[17]](#footnote-17) as again in examples 2.4 and 2.5:

2.4 *L-ḥetta ešnil ameṯ bā, wōb ʕomre šičč w ḥammeš išən, w* ***šḳīš*** *šohərṯa b-xuss surīya, ḥetta b-lubnān*.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Until the year in which he died, he was 65 years old, and **he had acquired** fame in all of Syria, even in Lebanon.

Here, *šḳīš‿šohərṯa* ‘he had acquired fame’, functionally equivalent to the English past perfect, implies that the singer ʕAbdo Msīḥ Čažra had acquired considerable fame by the time of his death, the reference point for the sequence of tenses.

Form 4 can also be used to introduce ‘recovered information’ in the Weinrichian sense,[[19]](#footnote-19) as in example 2.5:

2.5 *U ōṯ binnišō,* ***škīlin*** *minnayn ġarḏ̣ō, m Maʕlūla.*[[20]](#footnote-20)

And there are some people, **they had taken** things from them, from Maaloula.

This phrase occurs as an aside in a narrative about some Italian skydivers who got lost in Qalamoun and were transported to Damascus, as the narrator explains what had happened to their possessions in the meantime, thus falling under the rubric of ‘recovered information’. Finally, Form 4 can have inferential or indirective implications, as in the example 2.6:

2.6 *Iḥmiṯ omṯa,* ***škīlin*** *leḥma* *m-forna ŭ ōzin ʕa-payṯa.* (Abū Šādī)

I saw some people, **they must have taken** bread from the bakery and are going home.

In this example, our informant Abū Šādī sees people walking on the street with bread in their hands and infers from what he sees that they are returning from the bakery.

As an aside, Form 4 can occasionally have resultative-passive implications in this class, like the earlier class, but these are mostly lexicalised, such as *škīla* ‘taken; married’ in example 2.7:

2.7 *Ana* ***nišḳīla****, ana berčil malka flanō, w ana beʕli malka ebər malka flanō*.[[21]](#footnote-21)

**I am married**, I am the daughter of King So-and-So, and my husband is the king, son of King So-and-So.

The N-stem is the exclusive way to indicate the true passive of this verb, rather than Form 4, which is otherwise never used in this meaning, as example 2.8 using the verb *išči* ~ *yišč* ~ *šōṯ* ~ *šaṯṯ* ‘to drink’ illustrates:

2.8 *Hanna finžōna wōb uppe kahwe, ŭ* ***inəšči***. *Ču maʕrūf mōn* ***šaṯṯille***; *ōmṯa* ***šaṯṯiyille****.* (Abū Šādī)

This cup used to have coffee in it, and **it was drunk**. It’s unknown who **has drunk it**; people **must have drunk it**.

The N-stem form *inəšči*‘it was drunk’ implies the existence of an agent who drank the coffee. Note that the Form 4 *šaṯṯiyille* ‘they must have drunk it’ (with the generalized impersonal *ōmṯa* ‘people’) is inferential in this context.

## *3.3. Two-Place Static (Transitive but not Dynamic)*

Our third class is another closed class consisting of two-place static verbs, i.e., those involving two participants who are not transformed through their participation, such as verbs of holding and carrying like *icʕam* ~ *yicʕum* ~ *cōʕem* ~ *icʕem* ‘to hold’, *icmaš* ~ *yicmuš* ~ *cōmeš* ~ *icmeš* ‘to grasp, hold’, *ilḳaṭ* ~ *yilḳuṭ* ~ *lōḳeṭ* ~ *ilḳeṭ* ‘to hold; catch’, and *iṭʕan* ~ *yiṭʕun* ~ *ṭōʕen* ~ *iṭʕen* ‘to carry’, and verbs of perception like *iḥəm* ~ *yḥəm* ~ *ḥōm* ~ *ḥam* ‘to see’, and *išmeʕ* ~ *yišmaʕ* ~ *šōmaʕ* ~ *šammeʕ* ‘to hear’. In addition, two other common verbs pertain to this actionality class but not to the general categories of ‘holding’ or ‘perception’, *iḏeʕ* ~ *yiḏeʕ* ~ *yōḏaʕ* ~ *yaḏḏeʕ* ‘to know’ and *inṭar* ~ *yinṭur* ~ *nōṭar* ~ *inṭer* ‘to wait’. In most instances, Form 4 encodes the ongoing situation at the speech time, as in example 3.1.

3.1 *Amelle hanna či iġən l-anna či ifḳer, ‘Mō* ***čiṭʕen*** *ʕemmax?’*[[22]](#footnote-22)

This rich man said to this poor man, ‘What **are you carrying** with you?’

By contrast, Form 3 does not reflect the present situation but rather habitual (3.2) or future (3.3 and 3.4) situations:

3.2 W aḥḥaḏ **ṭōʕen** ṣlība, w mett **ṭōʕnin** ṣūrča l-marč marya, ayba ʕa ḳmōša, mʕallḳilla xett ex ṣlība w **ṭōʕnin**.[[23]](#footnote-23)

And someone **carries** a cross, and some **carry** a picture of the Virgin Mary, which is on a cloth, which they also hang like a cross and **carry**.

3.2 Amelle, ‘Xalaṣ, lōfaš **nṭōʕen** ʕa ḥaṣṣ.[[24]](#footnote-24)

He told him, ‘Enough, **I will** **carry** (it, Form 3) on my back no longer’.

3.4 *Čuʕle mett,* ***nlōḳeṭ*** *kayyes*.[[25]](#footnote-25)

There’s nothing to it, **I shall hold on** tight.

Three verbs, *iḥəm* ~ *yḥəm* ~ *ḥōm* ~ *ḥam*, *inṭar* ~ *yinṭur* ~ *nōṭar* ~ *inṭer*, and *išmeʕ* ~ *yišmaʕ* ~ *šōmaʕ* ~ *šammeʕ* also have atelic dynamic senses, namely ‘to look at’, ‘to watch’, and ‘to listen’. These senses, in contrast to their static counterparts (‘to see’, ‘to wait’, and ‘to hear’), cannot be encoded by Form 4. Ongoing situations (e.g., ‘he is looking’, etc.) are encoded by Form 3 with the preverb *ʕa(m)-* instead, as illustrated in examples 3.5 and 3.6:

3.5 *Ana* ***ču nḥam****‿ṭayra b‿išmō*. (Ḥanne)

**I don’t see** (Form 4) a bird in the sky.

3.6 ***ʕA-nḥōm*** *m-ʕayna ti ṯarʕa.*[[26]](#footnote-26)

I am looking (Form 3) throughthe peephole of the door.

In addition to noting the complete absence of a passive meaning for Form 4 of these verbs within the entire corpus available to him, Cohen also observed that *ḥam* and *šammeʕ* encode a ‘durative’ (*duratif*) meaning, which we describe as a static situation, in opposition to Form 1, which expresses the event as ‘punctual’ (*ponctuelle*), and Form 3, which represents it as habitual or future.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Finally, *iḏeʕ* ~ *yiḏeʕ* ~ *yōḏaʕ* ~ *yaḏḏeʕ* ‘to know’ also belongs to this class of two-place static verbs, but the choice of form depends on the kind of knowledge it encodes. Form 4 is used to indicate present knowledge with an explicit temporal context, i.e., ‘I (have come to) know’, e.g., already or at the moment, as the dialogue in example 3.7 illustrates:

3.7 (Abū Šaḥīn) *Waʔel ušme.* (Rōza) *M-bē mōn ḥáḏ̣irṯḗ?* (Abū Šaḥīn) *Falaṣṭīnay* a*əl-ʔaṣəl*.a (Rōza) *M-bē mōn?* ***Nyaḏḏīʕa*** *Filṣṭīnay!*

(Abū Šaḥīn) His name is Wael. (Rōza) From whose family is our distinguished guest?[[28]](#footnote-28) (Abū Šaḥīn) aThe origina is Palestinian. (Rōza) From whose family? **I (already) know** that he is Palestinian!

By contrast, Form 3 without *ʕa(m)-* encodes general knowledge without explicit temporal relevance, as in examples 3.6 and 3.7:

3.6 ***Čyōḏaʕ*** *emmat msaccer maṭəʕma?* (Ḥanān)

**Do you know** when the café closes?

3.7 *Ana* ***nyaḏaʕle*** *m-ḥammeš išən.* (Abū Šādī)

**I have known** him for five years.

## *3.4. Intransitive Non-Agentive Accomplishments*

This class consists of verbs that represent telic, non-instantaneous, unintentional actions or events such as *ameṯ* ~ *yīmuṯ* ~ *mōyeṯ* ~ *imeṯ* ‘to die’, *isbeʕ* ~ *yisbaʕ* ~ *sōbaʕ* ~ *sappeʕ* ‘to get full’, *iṣkaṭ* ~ *yiṣkaṭ* ~ *ṣōkeṭ* ~ *ṣakkeṭ* ‘to fall’, and *iṯken* ~ *yiṯkan* ~ *ṯōken* ~ *ṯakken* ‘to happen’. Much like the second class (but unlike the third class), they employ Form 4 to encode perfects, sometimes even past perfects without the auxiliary verb *wōb* ‘was’, as in example 4.1, sometimes with an evidential nuance, as example 4.2 illustrates. In this regard, they behave much like the dynamic transitive verbs introduced in the second class above, unlike the two-place static verbs introduced in the third class.

4.1 *Ṭaʕnil ġešra m-ḏukkis* ***saḳḳeṭ*** *bē ġamla l-misti ḥaṣlō ti bē malaṣ*.[[29]](#footnote-29)

He carried the trunk from where the camel **had fallen**, into the midst of the Malaṣ family warehouses.

4.2 *Šimʕīṯ ḥeṣṣa, izlīl, ḥmmičl‿ipsōna* ***sakkeṭ*** *ʕal-ʕarʕa.* (Ḥanne)

I heard a noise, I went, I saw the boy **must have fallen** to the ground.

## *3.5. Intransitive Agentive Result Verbs*

Our next class consists of a subset of telic intransitive verbs of motion, specifically those of ‘result’ rather than ‘manner’ in the sense of Rappaport Hovav and Levin,[[30]](#footnote-30) i.e., those that lexicalize an achieved location (e.g., ‘to go up’, ‘to go down’, etc.). The most salient feature of the verbs of this closed class, namely *iʕber* ~ *yiʕbar* ~ *ʕōbar* ~ *ʕapper* ‘to go in’, *imrek* ~ *yimruk* ~ *mōrek* ~ *marrek* ‘to pass by’, *infek* ~ *yinfuk* ~ *nōfek* ~ *naffek* ‘to go out’, *inḥeč* ~ *yinḥuč* ~ *nōḥeč* ~ *naḥḥeč* ‘to go down’, and *islek* ~ *yislak* ~ *sōleq* ~ *sallek* ‘to go up’, is that they encode an individual situation in progress at the speech time via Form 4, as illustrated by examples 5.1–3 below, rather than a perfect or a resultative as in intransitive agentive verbs that lexicalize manners of motion (e.g., ‘to run’, ‘to swim’, ‘to drive’, etc.), for which the progressive present is encoded by Form 3. Significantly, these ‘result’ verbs of intransitive motion unexpectedly cluster with static verbs such as those related to body postures, q.v., below. This is atypical among the languages of the world.

5.1 *Hōš* ***nsallek*** *ʕa-tarba*.[[31]](#footnote-31)

**I am now going up** the road (= I’m on the way to Damascus).

5.2 *Tēr bōlax, ōṯ zaləmṯa* ***naḥḥeč*** *m-ʕarkuba*. (Abū Šādī, Ḥanān, Ḥanne)

Pay attention, there’s a man **going down** the cliff.

5.3 *Aḥcā ʕim hačč ŭ* ***čnaffek****.* (Ḥanān)

Call me while **you are leaving**.

Such verbs of intransitive motion may also express atelic situations with *ʕam-* + Form 3, as examples 5.4 and 5.5 concerning rain and snow illustrate; otherwise, the use of *ʕam-* + Form 3 is deprecated:

5.4 ***ʕAm-nōḥča*** *rayya.* (Ḥanne)

Rain **is** (in the process of) **falling.**

5.5 ***ʕAm-nōḥeč*** *ṯelca.* (Ḥanne)

Snow **is** (in the process of) **falling.**

Peculiarly, some high-frequency telic intransitive verbs of motion do not behave in this manner but pertain to their own distinct class (q.v. below). In the following example, the speaker employs Form 3 for the verbs *ʔzl* ‘to go’ and *ʔṯy* ‘to come’, but Form 4 for the verbs *slk* ‘to ascend’ and *nḥč* ‘to descend’, as example 5.4 elegantly illustrates:

5.6 *Mett ōzin mett ōṯyin, mett* ***sallīḳin*** *mett* ***naḥḥīčin***.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Some are going (Form 3), some are coming (Form 3), some **are going up** (Form 4) and some **are going down** (Form 4).

These two telic intransitive verbs of motion *ṯōle* ~ *yiṯēle* ~ *ōṯ* / *ṯēle* ~ ∅ ‘to come’ and *zalle* ~ *yzelle* ~ *ōz* / *zelle* ~ *izel* ‘to go away’, compose their own subclass, in which their Form 3 has alloforms with and without the suffix *l-*, otherwise obligatory for Forms 1 and 2, much like the verb *kʕōle ~ yikʕēle ~ kaʕēle ~ ikəʕ* ‘to sit’ (q.v. below). Those without the *l-* suffix encode individual events, as in example 5.6 above, and the *l*-forms encode future and habitual events, as in examples 5.7 and 5.8 below. The verb *zalle* ~ *yzelle* ~ *ōz* / *zelle* ~ *izel* ‘to go away’ prefers Form 1 for past tense situations, but occasionally employs *īzel* (m) / *zīla* (f) for negations (as in example 5.9 below) and the construction *ḳayya* + neg ‘not yet’. Otherwise, its Form 4 has a lexicalized meaning, ‘gone’ or even ‘disappeared’, as in example 5.10 below. The other verb, *ṯōle* ~ *yiṯēle* ~ *ōṯ* / *ṯēle* ~ ∅ ‘to come’, lacks Form 4 entirely.

5.7 *Suzan* ***ṯyōla*** *bōṯar šaʕṯa.* (Ḥanne)

Suzanne **will come** in an hour.

5.8 *Hanic* ***ʕazzellax*** *uxxul ḥašoppa?* (Abū Šādī)

Where **do you go** each Sunday?

5.9 *Samya* ***ḳayya čū zīla*** *ʕa-Ḏemsek. Samya ḳayyō hōxa.* (Ḥanne)

Samya **has not yet left** the village. Samya is still here.

5.10 *Wōṯ reḥya, imōḏ hann xullen* ***zīlan*** *riḥyōṯa*.[[33]](#footnote-33)

There was a mill, today all of them **are gone**, the mills.

## *3.6. One-Place Static*

One-place static verbs mostly relate to postures, such as *awkef* ~ *yawkef* ~ *mawkef* ~ *wakkef* ‘to stand (still)’, *iḏmex* ~ *yiḏmux* ~ *ḏōmex* ~ *iḏmex* ‘to sleep’, *irxab̥* ~ *yirxab̥* ~ *rōxeb̥* ~ *irxeb̥* ‘to ride’, and *kʕōle ~ yikʕēle ~ kaʕēle ~ ikəʕ* ‘to sit’, or conditions, such as *azaʕ* ~ *yīzuʕ* ~ *zōyaʕ* ~ *zayyeʕ* ‘to fear’, *ibheč* ~ *yibhač* ~ *bōheč* ~ *bahheč* ‘to be ashamed, shy, embarrassed’ and *iḥḥ* ~ *yiḥḥ* ~ *ḥōy* ~ *ḥayy* ‘to live’. Their Form 3 encodes ‘properties’ (prp) or individual-level predicates, while their Form 4 encodes states (stat) or stage-level predicates, i.e., at the moment of observation, comparable to the distinction between *ser* and *estar* in Spanish, without past or perfect implications. In this last regard, they behave much like other static verbs (Class 3 above) and intransitive agentive result verbs (Class 5 above). This distinction is illustrated in examples 6.1–4 below.

6.1 *Nḥammīx,* ***čikəʕ*** *ʕa-cōrsa ŭ ču ʕa-čmišu mett.* (Abū Šādī, Ḥanne)

I see you, **you are sitting** on the chair doing nothing.

6.2 *Ḥanān* ***rxība*** *ʕa-baġla*. (Ḥanne)

Ḥanān **is riding** the mule.

6.3 *Nifḳiṯ willa ḏ̣abʕa* ***waḳḳef*** *ḳommiṯ ṯarəʕlə mʕarrṯa*.[[34]](#footnote-34)

I went out, and a hyena **is standing** in front of the cave entrance.

6.4 *Haš* ***čiḏmīxa****? La, ana ču* ***niḏmīxa***. (Ḥanne)

**Are you sleeping**? No, **I am not sleeping**.

To illustrate the distinction between Form 3 properties and Form 4 states, observe examples 6.5 and 6.6 below:

6.5 *Ana* ***nzōyʕa*** *m-xalpō.* (ḥanān)

**I am afraid** (Form 3) of dogs (in general). (prp)

6.6 *Ana* ***nzayyīʕa*** *m-xalpa*. (ḥanān)

**I am afraid** (Form 4) of the dog (i.e., the one in front of me). (stat)

As a corollary, the Form 3 of certain low-dynamicity classes is incompatible with the preverb *ʕamm* prog. For this reason, \**ʕam-zōyaʕ* ‘he is being afraid (in general)’ would be virtually unthinkable.

## *4. Conclusions*

From the data, it emerges that Form 4 is the most versatile of the finite inflections, changing in meaning from class to class according to its actionality:

1. Verbs of the first class are ambitransitive and therefore differ from verbs such as ‘to make’ etc., insofar as the direct objects of their transitive uses correspond to the subjects of their intransitive uses, much like labile verbs in English, e.g., ‘to break’, ‘to tear’, etc. Their Form 4 can have both an active and a passive-resultative meaning, even within the same utterance.
2. The second class consists of dynamic transitive verbs without intransitive counterparts, such as ‘to eat’, ‘make’, etc., for which Form 4 can be perfect or evidential.
3. Our third class consists of two-place static verbs, i.e., those involving two participants who are not transformed through their participation, such as ‘to hold’. Their Form 4 refers to the ongoing situation at the speech time rather than rendering a perfect or a resultative-passive meaning.
4. In the fourth class (non-agentive intransitive ‘accomplishments’), Form 4 serves as a perfect, sometimes with an evidential nuance rather than a resultative significance, much like the first two transitive classes but unlike the static classes such as Class 3.
5. Five intransitive agentive result verbs encode an individual situation in progress at the speech time via Form 4 and not Form 3, thereby patterning with the static classes (Class 3 and Class 6) rather than with dynamic intransitives or transitives (Classes 1, 2, and 4).
6. The final class consists of one-place static verbs, primarily related to postures and conditions, for which Form 4 encodes states at the moment of observation, without past or perfect implications, much like other static verbs (Class 3) and telic intransitive motion verbs (Class 5).

Form 4 is, therefore, a ‘young’ innovative form still in search of a function. To an extent, it demonstrates similar patterns of behavior to the innovative perfect *qātel* / *qatlān* of Levantine Arabic or *Šāmī*, e.g., Siryōn *ana nnaffek* ‘I am leaving (now)’ corresponds in meaning precisely to Šāmī *ana ṭāleʕ*, and Siryōn *ču nšammīʕlax* ‘I don’t hear you’ corresponds to Šāmī *māni samʕānak*, even if the morphological forms are completely different. This illustrates the well-documented *Sprachbund* between the two languages, but at this stage of research, it is impossible to determine the directionality of this influence or whether it reflects common drift as in the examples from Ṭuroyo that we noted earlier. Finally, we observe that the only function of Form 4 that cuts across all these verbal classes is evidential. Therefore, the precise distribution of Form 4’s other functions across the verbal lexicon, how they relate to Form 3, and how they relate to the classes we have already identified and those yet to be identified all remain to be determined.

1. Joan L. Bybee, *Morphology: A Study of the Relation Between Meaning and Form* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1985). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This field expedition and the present publication were prepared with the support of the Academic Fund Program at hse University № 24-00-019 in 2024. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Werner Arnold, *Das Neuwestaramäische. Teil VI: Wörterbuch. Neuwestaramäisch/Deutsch*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. As elaborated in Werner Arnold, *Das Neuwestaramäische, vol. V: Grammatik* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1990), pp. 11–41. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Q.v., Anna Bromirskaya, Charles G. Häberl, and Sergey Loesov, ‘The Western Aramaic Context of a Famous Lullaby’, *Aramaic Studies* 21 (2023), pp. 205–232 [213–219] and more recently Philipp Yu. Burlakov, Anna S. Cherkashina, Charles G. Häberl, and Sergey Loesov, ‘The Church Militant: A Modern Western Aramaic Account,’ in Aaron Hornkohl, Magdalen M. Connolly, Eleanor Coghill, Ben Outhwaite, Nadia Vidro, and Janet C. E. Watson (eds), *Interconnected Traditions: Semitic Languages, Literatures, Cultures—A Festschrift for Geoffrey Khan. Volume 2: The Medieval World, Judaeo-Arabic, and Neo-Aramaic* (Cambridge Semitic Languages and Cultures; Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2025) pp. 667–692. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. These category labels are those of Arnold, *Grammatik*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Christoph Correll, *Untersuchungen zur Syntax der neuwestaramäischen Dialekte des Antilibanon (Maʿlūla, Baḫʿa, ǦubbʿAdīn) mit besonderer Berücksichtigung des arabischen Adstrateinflusses, nebst zwei Anhängen zum neuaramäischen Dialekt von ǦubbʿAdīn* (Wiesbaden: Kommissionsverlag Franz Steiner gmbh, 1978). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. David Cohen, *La phrase nominale et l’évolution du système verbal en sémitique: études de syntaxe historique* (Leuven and Paris: Peeters, 1984). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Werner Arnold, ‘Das Verbum im Neuwestaramäischen’, in Norbert Nebes (ed.), *Tempus und Aspekt in den semitischen Sprachen. Jenaer Kolloquium zur semitischen Sprachwissenschaft* (Jenaer Beiträge zum Vorderen Orient 1; Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1999), pp. 1–8. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. John Huehnergard, ‘What is Aramaic?’ *ARAM Periodical* 7 (1995) pp. 261–282 (275). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Geoffrey Khan, ‘The evidential function of the perfect in North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic dialects’, in Rebecca Hasselbach and Na’ama Pat-El (eds.), *Language and Nature: Papers Presented to John Huehnergard on the Occasion of His 60th Birthday* (Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization 67; Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2012), pp. 219–228, and ‘Narrative verbal forms in North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic dialects’, *Journal of Semitic Studies* 69.1 (2024), pp. 205–230. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Gotthelf Bergsträsser, *Neuaramäische Märchen und andere Texte aus Maʻlūla: hauptsächlich aus der Sammlung E. Prym’s und A. Socin’s* (Wiesbaden: F.A. Brockhaus, 1915), pp. 33 ln. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Werner Arnold, *Das Neuwestaramäische, vol. IV: Orale Literatur aus Maʕlūla* (Semitica Viva Bd. 4/IV; Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1991), p. 322 (text), 323 (translation) ln. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Werner Arnold, *Das Neuwestaramäische, vol. III: Volkskundliche Texte aus Maʕlūla* (Semitica Viva Bd. 4/III; Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1991), p. 370 (text), 371 (translation) ln. 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Arnold, *Neuwestaramäische III*, p. 130 (text), 131 (translation) ln. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Arnold, *Neuwestaramäische IV*, p. 138 (text), 139 (translation) ln. 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Q.v., Arnold, ‘Verbum’, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Arnold, *Neuwestaramäische III*, p. 364 (text), 365 (translation) ln. 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Harald Weinrich, *Tempus: besprochene und erzählte Welt*3 (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1977), p. 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Anton Spitaler, „Neue Materialien zum aramäischen Dialekt von Maʕlula“, *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 107.2 (1957), pp 299–339 (304 Text I ln. 38). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Arnold, *Neuwestaramäische IV*, p. 100 (text), 101 (translation) ln. 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Arnold, *Neuwestaramäische IV*, p. 12 (text), 13 (translation) ln. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Arnold, *Neuwestaramäische III*, p. 164 (text), 165 (translation) ln. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Arnold, *Neuwestaramäische IV*, p. 180 (text), 181 (translation) ln. 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Arnold, *Neuwestaramäische IV*, p. 198 (text), 199 (translation) ln. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Alexey Duntsov, Charles G. Häberl, and Sergey Loesov, ‘A Modern Western Aramaic Account of the Syrian Civil War’, *word* 68.4 (2022), pp. 359–394 (373 ln. 19). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Cohen, *La phrase nominale*, 503. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Lit. ‘his presence’. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Arnold, *Neuwestaramäische IV*, p. 230 (text), 231 (translation) ln. 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Malka Rappaport Hovav and Beth Levin, ‘Building verb meanings’, in Miriam Butt and Wilhelm Geuder (eds), *The Projection of Arguments: Lexical and Compositional Factors* (Center for the Study of Language and Information, Stanford University, 1998), pp. 97–134 (100–103). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Collected from a driver, on the road from the Beirut airport to Damascus, 30 January 2024. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Arnold, *Neuwestaramäische III*, p. 176 (text), 177 (translation) ln. 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Arnold, *Neuwestaramäische III*, p. 276 (text), 277 (translation) ln. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Arnold, *Neuwestaramäische III*, p. 48 (text), 49 (translation) ln. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)