The Mehri Participle: Form, Function, and Evolution

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The verbal form known as the active participle (= AP) is an integral part of the Mehri verbal system, functioning mainly – but not exclusively – as a future tense.[1] Yet despite its frequency, recent synopses of the language have given this form very little attention. For example, in the very important sketch of the Modern South Arabian languages by Johnstone (1975), discussion of the AP is limited to less than one sentence (p. 119). In the very useful set of observations by Lonnet (1994a), the AP receives only a little more consideration, about ten lines. In the more recent outline by Simeone-Senelle (1997), the AP also gets about ten lines. All of this is in contrast to the grammar of Jahn (1905), in which the AP (or future, as Jahn calls it) is treated as a basic verbal tense and is included in all paradigm sets.[2]

The AP is worth scholarly attention, not only because of its frequency in Mehri texts, but also because of its importance to the comparative study of the Semitic languages.[3] And there is, in fact, one study which devotes considerable attention to the Mehri AP, namely, that of Lonnet (1994b).[4] In that article, Lonnet deals extensively with the morphological development of the Mehri forms. There remains, however, more to be said on the subject. In the present paper, we will focus on the functions, forms, and evolution of the AP in Mehri, specifically in Mehri of the Dhofar. All forms and examples cited in this article are based on the texts of Johnstone as published in Stroomer (1999).

[1]I would like to thank Antoine Lonnet, whose own work greatly stimulated my interest in the study of Mehri, for kindly providing me with valuable comments on this article. I also thank Rebecca Hasselbach for her helpful comments on an earlier draft. All opinions and errors are, of course, my own.

[2]Thomas (1937) also treats the AP as a verbal tense, calling it alternately the present or the future, and gives it ample representation in his paradigms. Wagner (1953) recognizes the use of the participle as a future tense, but also gives it relatively little attention (see especially pp. 49–50).

[3]It is worth noting that the forms of the AP played a large role in the comparative treatment of Christian (1944), though its conclusions are quite contentious. More fruitful use of the Mehri forms has been made by Pennacchietti (1970; 1979). All too numerous are the comparative Semitic treatments in which mention of the Mehri AP is absent.

[4]Lonnet's important article is a lengthy treatment on the verbal systems of the Modern South Arabian languages; the participle in Mehri, Harsusi, and Bathari (with reference also to Jibbali) is discussed on pp. 233–245. Much of the morphological data discussed in the present article is also discussed by Lonnet; I do not reference every one of these instances.

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1. Functions

a. Future

As noted already above, the basic function of the AP in Mehri is as an indicator of future tense. Of the approximately 350 attestations of the AP in Johnstone's texts (from about 125 different roots), nearly all fall into this category. A few representative examples are:[5]

wə-l-ād hō ***dəbhōna*** *zōyəd lā* 'I will never collect honey again!' (77:6)
agənnáy ***ḥəśrōna*** *arḥəbēt* 'The Jinnee will destroy the country' (42:20)
ḥābū ***nəkēya*** *. . . wə-****səkyēna*** *báwməh* 'People will come . . . and dwell here' (74:5)
abḳār ***wərdūtən*** *aw lā yəmō* 'Will the cows come down (to the water) today or not?' (27:1)
hēt ḳənnawn w-ādk 'əl hēt ***məhārəs*** *əlā* 'You are a child and you will not get married yet' (8:8)
ṣāḳōna *ḥōkəm u* ***mšáxbər*** *təh* 'I will call the ruler and ask him' (20:6)
məhawṣəl *tīk tét̲ṭk* 'It will lead you to your wife' (37:15)

Note that when the subject is pronominal, the pronoun can be, and very often is, omitted. Person, therefore, must frequently be gleaned from context.

b. Present

Though a future tense meaning is the norm, there are several examples where the AP is best translated with an English present tense, specifically a present progressive or immediate present. Examples are:[6]

hō ***gəzmōna*** *hīkəm məḳā hō hērəḳ* 'I swear to you that I am not a thief' (47:11)
hō 'ār ***ərkəbōna***[7] *ləh* 'I am really mounting it [the camel]!' (102:12)
wə-ṣərōməh ***'āməlōna*** *līn ġərōy* 'And now you are giving us an argument! (lit. making for us words)' (46:13)
məwṣyēta *šūk b-anḳāṭ əlyōməh* 'I am advising you on these points' (90:15)

Some examples, translated by Johnstone as a present, are probably best categorised as futures, and thus cannot reliably be placed in this category. One such sentence is:

wə-nəḥā ***məšəwgəśūtən*** *lā* 'We won't go (this evening)' (Johnstone: 'We are not going tonight!') (35:4)

In two cases (of the same verb), the AP is used as a progressive tense relative to a past tense verb:

hámam bəh ***məháḳbəl*** *līhəm* 'They heard he was coming towards them' (32:6)
śənyō aḳawm ***məháḳbəl*** *l'áhi* 'They saw a raiding party coming towards them' (83:1)

[5]The number in parentheses following all examples refers to text and line number in Stroomer (1999).
[6]As pointed out to me by R. Hasselbach, one of these examples contains an explicit present-tense marking adverb, *ṣərōməh* 'now', and another the particle *'ār* 'indeed, really'. These particles are not necessary to mark the present tense, but they may be being used as such by the speakers in these examples.
[7]A phonetic variant of *rəkbōna*.

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c. In Conditional Sentences

Given the basic future tense meaning of the AP, it is not at all surprising to find such forms in the apodosis of real conditional sentences:

təḥōm xədmēt, ***ʾāmlōna*** *hūk* '(If) you want work, I will make (it) for you' (86:2)
hām əl nákak bīhəm lā, ***ḳəṣṣōna*** *ḥərúhk* 'If you don't bring them, I'll chop off your head' (86:3)
hām əl nákak bīs lā, ***sḥəṭōna***[8] ***tīk*** 'If you don't bring her, I'll slaughter you' (86:11)
əð hah ḳáybəl . . . ***bəgdōna*** *tīhəm* 'If he accepts, I will chase them away' (22:93)

But we also find examples of the AP in the apodosis of unreal conditionals, possibly having spread from its use in real conditionals:

əðə hē səyūr šay, hē ***śənyōna*** *təh* 'If he had been (lit. gone) with me (sexually), he would have seen it' (55:10)

One example of the preceding type is not technically part of a conditional, but can be considered an equivalent. It serves as the answer to a question with a (rare) conditional form (*yāmērən*):

lū hō ḳōrək aḳawt . . . wə-nákak báwməh wə-matk, hībō yāmērən ḥābū? ***ʾāmyēra****: 'ġayg bəxáyl wə-kawb!'* 'If I had hidden the food . . . and had come here and died, what would the people say? They would say: "A mean man and a dog!"' (98:12)

Occasionally, we also find the AP in the protasis of a real conditional sentence:

hām əl sēn ***wərdūtən*** *əlā, ḥōm əl-háwrəd həbɛ́ryɛ* 'If they (the cows) are not going to come down (to the water), I want to bring down my camels' (27:3)

This case is explainable, however, by the appearance of the participle in the phrase uttered by the speaker just before this one; see the example from 27:1, quoted above, section 1a.

2. Forms

a. G-stem

For the forms of the AP, there is a major division between those of the G-stem and the derived stems, as elsewhere in Semitic. In the G-stem, the AP has the following basic forms, which can vary slightly for verbs with "weak" root letters:

ms	*CəCCōna*	md	*CəCCōni*	mp	*CəCyēCa*
fs	*CəCCīta*	fd	*CəCCáwti*	fp	*CəCCūtən*[9]

Following are examples, including some of the "weak" verbal types:[10]

[8] A phonetic variant of *səḥṭōna*.
[9] Lonnet (1994b: 237) also gives the form *CəCCátna* as a variant dialectal form of the fp. Since this does not occur in the dialects recorded by Johnstone, I will not treat it here.
[10] Nearly all of these examples were assembled from Johnstone's texts by me. The major exception to this statement is with the fd forms. I found not a single example of a feminine dual AP in Johnstone's texts, so I instead

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√*wzm* 'give': ms *wəzmōna*[11] fs *wəzmīta* md *wəzmōni* fd *wəzmáwti* mp *wəzyēma* fp *wəzmūtən*
√*'mr* 'say': ms *'ām(ə)rōna* fs *'ām(ə)rīta* md *'ām(ə)rōni* fd *'ām(ə)ráwti* mp *'āmyēra* fp *'ām(ə)rūtən*
√*syr* 'go': ms *sīrōna* fs *sīrīta*[12] md *sīrōni* fd *sīráwti* mp *səyēra* fp *sīrūtən*
√*śll* 'lift, carry': ms *śəllōna* fs *śəllīta* md *śəllōni* fd *śəlláwti* mp *śəlyēla* fp *śəllūtən*
√*ks'* 'find': ms *kəs(y)ōna*[13] fs *kəsyīta* md *kəsyōni* fd *kəsyáwti* mp *kəsēya* fp *kəs(y)ūtən*
√*ś'm* 'sell': ms *śāmōna*[14] fs *śāmīta* md *śāmōni*[15] fd *śāmáwti* mp *śəmēya* fp *śāmūtən*

b. Derived Stems

In all derived stems (D/L-stem, h-stem, t-stems, and š-stems) and with quadriliteral and quinquiliteral verbs, the AP is categorized by a prefixed *m(ə)-*.[16] The base of the derived-stem AP is identical to the subjunctive base (i.e., the 3 ms subjunctive form minus the prefix). The masculine singular AP is simply the prefix *m(ə)-* plus the base. The other forms are formed from the ms plus the following endings:

fs *-ēta* md *-i* fd *-ēti* cp *-ūtən*

Note that for all derived-stem APs there is no gender distinction in the plural. Examples are:

D/L-stem:
√*sfr* 'travel': ms *məsōfər* fs *məsfərēta* md *məsáfəri* fd *məsfərēti* cp *məsfərūtən*
h-stem:
√*wṣl* 'take, lead': ms *məháwṣəl* fs *məhəwṣəlēta* md *məháwṣəli* fd *məhəwṣəlēti* cp *məhəwṣəlūtən*
t-stem:
√*ġry* 'speak': ms *məġətáyr* fs *məġtəryēta* md *məġətáyri* fd *məġtəryēti* cp *məġtəryūtən*
š-stem:
√*wgś* 'go out in the evening': ms *məšáwgəś* fs *məšəwgəśēta* md *məšáwgəśi* fd *məšəwgəśēti* cp *məšəwgəśūtən*

It can be seen from these examples that, as a result of shifts in stress and changes in syllable structure, certain forms are affected by various vowel reductions.

3. Evolution

a. Morphology

The ms form of the G participle, *CəCCōna*, can be derived from an earlier nominal pattern **CaCCān-a*. Agentive nouns with the suffix *-ān* are known from elsewhere in Semitic,

rely on his paradigms (1987: lxix-lxxi). Since the fd can be made from the base of the fs, in all stems, this is of no worry to me.

[11] Though a class of weak verbs in some tenses, I-w verbs are fully regular in its forms of the AP. This root is one of the very few for which ms, fs, mp, and fp forms all occur in Johnstone's texts; in fact, it is the only "sound" verb to do so.

[12] Twice irregularly as *sīrūta* (48:8; 94:21).

[13] The form is listed as *kəsyōna* in Johnstone's paradigms (1987: lxx), but in fact is almost always found as *kəsōna* in the texts. There are no dual examples in the texts, and only one fs, *kəsyīta*.

[14] Once as *śəmōna* (39:4).

[15] The md form *śāmōwti* in Johnstone (1987: lxx) is a mistake.

[16] An exception is the t-stem of the root *ś'm*, meaning 'to buy'. In this form, the infix *t* has been reanalyzed as part of the root, and so its participle *śtəmōna* (34:9; 39:3) looks like the G-stem of a root *śtm*.

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for example, from Akkadian and Mishnaic Hebrew.[17] This suffix is especially productive in Syriac, where it can be added to any participial form that begins with *m-* (that is, any derived-stem participle) to form an agentive noun, as in:[18]

Syriac: *malfānā* 'teacher', *maktbānā* 'writer', *mawmyānā* 'exorcist'

This situation is preserved in some Neo-Aramaic dialects, for example, in the North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic (NENA) dialect of Qaraqosh.[19] In other Neo-Aramaic dialects, however, the **-ān* suffix is found attached not to the derived stem participles as in Syriac, but rather to a base *CaCC-*, for example:

NENA (Arbel):[20] *'axlāna* '(big) eater, glutton', *kalwāna* 'writer', *šamyāna* 'listener'

Something similar to the situation in Aramaic must have occurred in Mehri. That is to say, the suffix *-ān*, attached to this same base **CaCC*, must have become common in the formation of agentive nouns. Subsequently, this pattern replaced that of the inherited G-stem active participle, which had probably already fallen out of use (or, rather, was simply lexicalised in many cases). Neither the loss of the inherited participle, nor its replacement by an agentive form, is surprising. In this regard, let us consider the case of Ge'ez, in which the inherited participial form was most likely *qātil*, as found in Akkadian, Hebrew, Arabic, and elsewhere in Semitic. The use of this pattern for the participle in Tigré is very good evidence that the pattern can be reconstructed for Proto-Ethiopic as well as for Proto-Semitic.[21] In Ge'ez, however, the participle as a category has essentially disappeared. The pattern **qātil* (> Ge'ez *qātəl*) survives mainly in a small number of adjectives and agentive nouns, e.g. *xāṭə'* 'sinner', *wārəs* 'heir'.[22] The case of Ge'ez illustrates two things. First, it shows an example of the loss of the inherited participle as a functional category. Second, because the fossilised participial forms function as agentive nouns, it shows the close connection of these two categories, participles and agentives.

In Mehri, once the inherited participial form was lost, a new form was able to fill this gap.[23] That new form was the agentive noun in **-ān*, which must have developed in a similar manner as in Neo-Aramaic. What remains unclear is the source of the final *-a* in the Mehri forms; it is unrelated to the final vowel of the Syriac and Neo-Aramaic forms, which is simply the Aramaic definite article. It has been suggested that its origin is to be found in the Proto-Semitic *nisbe* suffix **-ī*.[24] Various other theories are discussed by Lonnet (1994b: 242–44), but with no resolution of the issue. What is clear is that this *-a*, whatever its origin, has come to be an important marker of the participial form.

[17]For Akkadian, see von Soden (1995: §56r). For Mishnaic Hebrew, see Segal (1927: 119).

[18]Nöldeke (1904: §130). Already Bittner (1909b: 26 n. 1; 1911: 25) compared Mehri *-ōna* with the Syriac suffix *-ānā*. Bittner noted also the fact that the suffix occurs in Mehri exlusively in the G-stem, but in Syriac exclusively outside the G-stem. Bittner (1909a) also deals with this suffix.

[19]Khan (2002: 182).

[20]Khan (1999: 50–51). For another dialect with this feature, see Khan (2004: 172).

[21]This argument was made already by Fox (2003: 239).

[22]Dillmann (1907: §109a), Fox (2003: 239–40). The productive pattern for agentives from G-stems in Ge'ez is *qatāli*.

[23]An alternative scenario would be that the inherited participle competed with the new form before it disappeared.

[24]Rhodokanakis (1910: 3). It should be noted here that in the texts of the Viennese expedition (essentially all texts known before those of Johnstone), the suffix was transcribed not *-a*, but *-e* (probably = [ɛ] or [ə]). As evidence for the *-ī* origin, Rhodokanakis cites cases of *ān* + *ī* in Brockelmann (1908: §397c and §400h).

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The remaining forms of the G-stem AP can for the most part be easily explained. The feminine singular is formed from the same base as the ms, with the replacement of the suffix *-ōn* by the suffix *-īt*, the most common feminine marker on nominal forms. To this is also added the final *-a*. Based on the situation in other Semitic languages, we might expect the feminine suffix to be added directly to the masculine form, resulting in something like **wəzmōnīta* or **wəzmənīta*.[25] But it seems that *-ōn* was reanalysed as simply a masculine singular suffix (attached to the base *CəCC-*), with the result that the additional suffix *-a* is seen as the lone marker of the AP.[26] Therefore, in the feminine singular, *-ōn* is replaced by the feminine suffix *-īt*, plus the AP marker *-a*. The masculine dual is formed by adding the dual suffix *-i* to the masculine singular, as is normal with nouns. Since the dual suffix is a vowel, the standard AP suffix *-a* cannot appear. The feminine dual suffix,[27] like the feminine singular, is added simply to the base *CəCC-*; as with the masculine dual, the final *-i* of the dual prevents the addition of the final *-a*. Finally, the feminine plural form consists of the base *CəCC-* plus the standard external feminine plural suffix *-ūtən*. In this case, the additional suffix *-a* is not added, likely because of the stress which lies on the syllable *-ūt*, the penultimate syllable of the suffix (but see note 9).

The masculine plural form remains to be discussed. The pattern *CəCyēCa* given above looks like some sort of internal plural, to which is added the AP marker *-a*. However, various Yemeni dialects have in place of this the pattern *CəCCēya*, that is, with the base *CəCC-* plus a suffix *ēya*.[28] This is more likely the original pattern, as concluded already by Lonnet (1994b: 238–239). In this case, we are dealing probably with an original plural **-āy* plus the AP marker *-a*.[29]

Nothing much needs to be said about the morphology of the Mehri derived-stem AP forms. These participial forms, which involve the prefixing of *m-* to the base of the subjunctive (*yaqtul*) form, reflect an inherited Semitic feature. The only really innovative feature of the derived-stem AP is the fact that the plural has lost gender distinction, at the expense of the mp form.[30]

b. Syntax

The evolution of participle to future tense is a nice example of grammaticalisation, but is by no means an unusual development, even within Semitic. In the attested histories of both Hebrew and Aramaic, the active participle has developed into a present tense.[31] This

[25] Cf. Syriac *malfānā* 'teacher', f. *malfānītā*.

[26] Or perhaps the reanalysis of *-a* as the marker of the AP led to the reanalysis of *-ōn*?

[27] On the shape of the fd suffix, see Lonnet (1994b: 240–41).

[28] This includes all of the texts recorded by the Viennese dialects. In the older grammars based on these texts, the suffix is usually transcribed as *-éye*.

[29] Rhodokanakis (1910: 17). On this plural suffix, see Bittner (1909b: 80–81). Lonnet (1994b: 239) also posits an original plural in **-āy*, comparing the Arabic plural pattern *CaCCay*.

[30] It is perhaps strange the gender distinction was lost here, but not in the paradigm of the G-stem AP. The issue of the loss of gender distinction in the derived-stem AP may be related to the same phenomenon in the adjectival system. That is to say, many Mehri adjectives also have lost gender distinction, for no apparent reason. For example, the adjective *ḵōməḥ* 'bad, evil' has the plural forms *ḵəmḥīn* (m.) and *ḵəmḥōt* (f.), while *gīd* 'good' has only the common plural *gīyēd*. Though not clear from these two examples, this phenomenon is unrelated to whether or not an adjective forms an internal (broken) or external plural.

[31] I have discussed this elsewhere. See Rubin (2005: 31–32), and references therein.

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must have happened in Mehri, as well. Once this happened it could have been seen as an equivalent to the imperfect indicative form, which itself had both a present and future meaning. Alternatively, the participle may have gone from a present to an immediate future (cf. English *I am leaving tomorrow*), from which point it could have developed into a real future. As evidenced by the data in section 1 above, the Mehri AP can have both a present and future meaning, though the latter greatly predominates.

4. Conclusions

This article has attempted to do several things. First, to show the importance of the active participle in the Mehri verbal system, since it has received so little attention in recent grammatical sketches. Second, to trace the origin and morphological development of the Mehri AP. And third, to show the importance of this form with regard to two areas of comparative Semitic studies in which Mehri data is usually absent: the use of the suffix *-ān*, on which there is no shortage of comparative material, and the development of the participle into a true verbal tense.

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