This paper discusses the morphosyntactic properties of elements that can occupy the tense projection and proposes a syntactic representation of the complex tense in Sason Arabic (SA). Based on data from SA, (an endangered Arabic dialect spoken in Turkey), I argue that complex tense phenomena in SA do not require a biclausal analysis (pace Ouali and Fortin 2005 for Moroccan Arabic), but does require an elaboration of Giorgi and Pianesi’s (1997) version of Reichenbachian framework, adopted also in Cinque 1999. Fassi Fehri (2000/2004, 2012) assumes two syntactic TP projections headed by predicative Ts, to account for Perfect tenses, as in (1). I will argue that SA requires a more articulated configuration, as in (2).

(1) \([\text{TP}_1 (\pm\text{Past}) [\text{TP}_2 (\pm\text{Perf/Ant}) [\text{Asp} (\pm\text{Pfv/Term}) [\text{VP} (\pm\text{Telic}) ]]]\]

(2) \([\text{TP}_1 (\pm\text{Past; +impf}) [\text{TP}_1 (\pm\text{Past}) [\text{TP}_2 (\pm\text{Perf/Ant}) [\text{Asp} (\pm\text{Pfv/Term}) [\text{VP} (\pm\text{Telic}) ]]]\]

These properties are mainly the tense particle \(\kappa\alpha\)-, unique to SA, and the ambiguity between the past progressive and the past perfect progressive. The particle \(\kappa\alpha\)- turns a verb in present/future into imperfective in the past (3).

(3) a. \(\text{ya-yel,} \) eat

b. \(\text{k\text{-}ya-yel} \)

3M-eat

\(\text{He eats. He is eating. He will eat.}\)

\(\text{He was eating. He used to eat. He was going to eat.}\)

Support for the claim that \(\kappa\alpha\)- is a Tense morpheme, as I propose, and not an Asp morpheme, as one might suspect, comes from (4), where it occurs with simple past and turns it into past perfect (4a). Unlike other Arabic dialects, perfective verb in SA cannot be embedded under the auxiliary \(\text{kwn}\) to form a past perfect (4b). Note that the presence of absence of \(\kappa\alpha\)- plays no role in the ungrammaticality.

(4) a. \((\text{bahal\text{c}e}) \kappa\alpha\text{-}\text{nam, le git} \)

\(\text{already PAST-slep.3M that came.2M already PAST.be.3M PAST-slep.3M that came.2M}\)

\(\text{He had (already) slept, when you came.}\)

The compatibility of \(\kappa\alpha\)- with both the perfective (4) and imperfective (3) suggests that \(\kappa\alpha\)- has no aspectual content, but carry only temporal information, as schematized below. In the talk, I will provide independent evidence \(\kappa\alpha\)- heads its own projection.

(5) a. Past Present

b. Past of the Past Past

Given the properties of \(\kappa\alpha\)-, the next step is to discuss the instances of tense syncretism in the language. I will argue that although Fassi Fehri’s (2000/2004) structure explains the ambiguity between a simple and a complex tense (6), it falls short of accommodating the structure for the ambiguity between two complex tenses (7). In this model, the differences are due to the effects of the Move/Agree relations of \(v\) with respect to T1, T2, or Asp. In order to get the (±Past) interpretation, \(v\) has to move to T1; if it moves to T2, it is interpreted as Perfect (±Perf); and if it moves to Asp, it is associated with (±Pfv), for ‘performative’ verbs. Although this configuration accounts for the ambiguity in (6), it falls short of explaining (7). A structure with two TP projections would always project past perfect progressive reading, since the configuration available would be as in (8). Now assume that there are two distinct TP1 projections located in separate layers, the higher one for \(\text{kan} (\text{TP}_1)\) and the \(\text{TP}_1\) in the lower layer for \(\kappa\alpha\)- when past progressive meaning is intended (9a). When past perfect progressive interpretation is available, \(\kappa\alpha\)- occupies (TP2) projection (9b):

(6) a. \(\text{amlol m\text{-}ye} \)

\(\text{last year left.3F (just) now left.3F}\)

\(\text{She left last year.}\)

b. \(\text{a\text{-}s\text{\text{\text{-}}}sin m\text{-}ye} \)

\(\text{‘She has left just now.’}\)

(7) a. \(\text{ans} \text{kan} \kappa\alpha\text{-}\text{f\text{\text{-}}}\text{qez.} \)

\(\text{yesterday be.PAST.3M PAST-3M-run since-morning be.PAST.3M PAST-3M-run that saw-1M-him}\)

\(\text{He was running yesterday.}\)

b. \(\text{mi\text{-}s\text{\text{\text{-}}}ari} \text{kan} \kappa\alpha\text{-}\text{f\text{\text{-}}}\text{qez le ada\text{-}tu\text{-}n} \)

\(\text{‘He had been running since morning, when I saw him.’}\)

(8) \([\text{TP}_1 \text{kan} [\text{TP}_2 \kappa\alpha [\text{Asp yayel}, [\text{VP t}]]] \]

(9) a. \([\text{TP}_1 \text{kan} [\text{TP}_1 \kappa\alpha [\text{Asp if\text{-}qez, [VP t]]] \]

\(\text{the structure for (7a)}\)

b. \([\text{TP}_1 \text{kan} [\text{TP}_1 [\text{TP}_2 \kappa\alpha [\text{Asp if\text{-}qez, [VP t]]] \]

\(\text{the structure for (7b)}\)

Support for our assumption that the auxiliary \(\text{kwn}\) and the particle \(\kappa\alpha\)- occupy distinct projections, although both are tense elements, come from the coordination test.

(10) \(\text{kan} [\kappa\alpha\text{-}\text{ya\text{-}yel}] u [\kappa\alpha\text{-}i\text{-}si} \text{ gerre} \).

\(\text{be.PAST.3M PAST-3M-eat and PAST-3M-do noise}\)

\(\text{He was eating and making noise.}\)

This configuration in (9) accounts for the ambiguity between present perfect and past simple, in which case instead of \(\kappa\alpha\)- SA has ‘O’ in either one of the lower positions. The core idea behind is that there are two distinct TP layers, the lower layer consisting of two TPs. Subdivision of the lower layer into two TPs serves to account for complex tenses. Projection of two distinct TP layers due to tensed morphology and agreement on the auxiliary and the thematic verb is coupled by projecting two TPs in the lower layer to account for the synthesis in the language. I will also account why \(\kappa\alpha\)- doesn’t it occur in simple past tense, how (perfective) past tense is realized in SA and the selectional properties of the auxiliary \(\text{kwn}\).