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# Idioms in Syrian Arabic: a semantic and grammatical approach to the verb

**Abstract:** This contribution deals with idioms in vernacular Syrian Arabic, focusing on the verbal component, as well as their semantic and grammatical particularities. The corpus of 151 idioms is extracted from seven popular TV series, 91 of these are presented in the paper along with a literal and idiomatic translation. The idiomatic meaning of the most frequently attested verbs is discussed first. This is followed by a grammatical discussion regarding word order, verbal inflection, morphological variation and lexical variation. The paper demonstrates the scarcity of idioms in some of the most important sources of Syrian Arabic. It further reveals grammatical parallels with idioms in other Arabic varieties, as well as in Western languages. The findings provide the field with new data, and will lead to a better understanding of both Arabic idioms in general, and Syrian Arabic in particular.

## 1 Introduction

Despite their common usage in daily life, Syrian Arabic<sup>1</sup> idioms are inadequately explored. This paper aims to fill this scholarly gap, specifically with regard to verbal components in the idioms. This is complementary to my recent treatment of nouns in the same variety of Arabic.<sup>2</sup> Three main questions are at the core of this study: (1) What are the most commonly used verbs in the corpus? (2) What do they idiomatically denote? (3) What are the most striking features of the grammatical behavior of the idioms?<sup>3</sup>

The analysis below consists of two parts. In the first part, which focuses on *semantics*, the most frequently attested verbs are listed, and each is presented

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1 The term “Syrian Arabic” traditionally alludes to the sedentary Arabic varieties spoken in the Western part of the country. However, Syrian Arabic as a dialect type, is also spoken in Lebanon, Antiochia and Cilicia (cf. Behnstedt 2009: 404).

2 Berlinches (2019).

3 I am deeply grateful to my main informant and friend Rim Rāšed for helping me to understand the precise nature of some idioms, and to Yuval Levavi for his helpful thoughts and comments.

with the literal meaning of the node and the collocates,<sup>4</sup> as well as the idiomatic meaning of the phrase and figures of speech, such as metaphors and metonymies. The second part deals with *grammatical* issues: Word order, verbal inflection, morphological variation and lexical variation.

My corpus includes 151<sup>5</sup> idioms, 91 of which are presented below together with their literal and idiomatic translation. The idioms were extrapolated from the following seven popular TV series—three Syrian and four Turkish (dubbed):

Tab. 1: Tv series

	Title	Year	Country	Episodes
1.	الفصول الأربعة	1999	Syria	74
2.	قلة ذوق وكثرة غلبة	2002	Syria	40
3.	ميرنا و خليل	2009	Turkey	72
4.	صبايا	2009	Syria	150
5.	العشق الممنوع	2010	Turkey	165
6.	فاطمة	2010	Turkey	189
7.	عودة مهند	2012	Turkey	214

All these series can be accessed online.<sup>6</sup> The episodes are around 40 minutes each, except for *الفصول الأربعة* (no. 1 above), of which some episodes can last up to an hour. The three Syrian series selected for this study are set in the capital city, hence they mainly use the typical dialect of Damascus. However, characters coming from other regions of the country may use their own vernacular. The dubbed (Turkish) series have a somewhat standardized or neutral character. These are dubbed by Syrian actors who use the dialectal variety of Damascus, yet with clear signs of standardization, namely the reduction of variables, the decline or disappearance of stigmatized features and reduction of differences among different communities or collectives.<sup>7</sup> This is due to the fact that these

<sup>4</sup> *Collocation* in this paper alludes to the occurrence of two or more words within a short space of each other in a text: the *node* is the word studied (i.e., verb), and the *collocate*, is any word occurring in the specified environment of a node (cf. Sinclair 1991: 115, 170).

<sup>5</sup> Selected from approximately 400 idioms analyzed for Berlinches (2019), which focused on the noun. For this paper, only idioms showing a verb were included.

<sup>6</sup> For example, on [www.alarab.net](http://www.alarab.net) and [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com).

<sup>7</sup> Standardization is defined by Ferguson (1997: 69) as: “the process of one variety of a language becoming widely accepted throughout the speech community as a supradialectal norm – the ‘best’ form of a language – rated above regional and social dialects, although these may be felt to be appropriate in some domains.”

series are broadcast in different Arabic-speaking countries, including those in the Maghreb, whose dialectal varieties differ substantially from those spoken in the Levant. Nonetheless, the variety used for the dubbed series is clearly recognized by non-Syrian Arabic speakers as a typical Syrian Arabic variety.

While these Syrian idioms were never properly treated in previous scholarship, a few are included in the main dictionaries concentrating on the region. Barthélemy's dictionary (1935–1954) records 17 of the idioms discussed in this paper, and three may be found in Al-Dāya (2002); these are indicated below.

The term “idiom” is regarded as ambiguous (Moon 1998: 3). Cruse (1986: 37) defines it as “an expression consisting in more than one lexical component whose meaning cannot be accounted for as a compositional function of the meaning its parts have when they are not parts of idioms.” Among the semantic properties of idioms indicated by Nunberg et al. (1994: 492–493), I highlight the following:

- (1) *Conventionality*: The idiom's meaning and use cannot be (entirely) predicted on the basis of knowledge of the independent conventions that determine the use of their constituents when they appear in isolation from one another.
- (2) *Inflexibility*: Idioms appear only in a limited number of syntactic frames or constructions.
- (3) *Opacity*: The idiom's meaning is not fully transparent.<sup>8</sup>
- (4) *Figuration*: The idiomatic meaning acquired by the components is generally founded on metaphoric and metonymic patterns.

Regarding the latter, metaphors are based on a relationship of similarity between two concepts that belong to two different domains of human experience (cf. Abdou 2012: 43). In other words, the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another (cf. Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 5). For example, *ʕam təlʕab bən-nār*,<sup>9</sup> which literally means ‘you (m.) are playing with fire,’ and idiomatically ‘you are putting yourself in a dangerous situation,’ as the fire is similar to something dangerous, or that might hurt. Such idioms are mostly isomorphic, as their global meaning is related to a consistent one-to-one mapping of their components (cf. Geeraerts 2003: 441, Abdou 2012: 67);

<sup>8</sup> For the different degrees of opacity, see Cruse (1986: 39).

<sup>9</sup> Vernacular varieties of Arabic are not used in their written form and cannot be represented in Arabic script, especially their phonological particularities. In the course of this paper, the examples in Arabic are thus presented in their phonological transcription, as it is accepted and generally done in the field of Arabic dialectology. The transcription follows the rules of Aldoukhi et al. (2016). The examples in Arabic are followed by a literal translation (in quotation marks), and an idiomatic translation. The latter shows the meaning of the idioms in the context they appeared, but in different contexts they might denote something else.

e.g., *yəlḥab* ‘play’ can be linked to performing an action, and *nār* ‘fire’ to danger. On the other hand, in metonymy the semantic link between the literal and figurative senses of a component is based on a relationship of contiguity between the referents of the expressions in each of those senses (Geeraerts 1994: 2477). For example, *šu ṭāleṯ bi-ṯidna?* literally means ‘What comes in our hand?’ Since the *ṯid*, ‘hand’, is the body part generally used for doing things, the idiomatic meaning alludes to the capability of doing something, the idiom should therefore be translated as ‘What can we do?’

Lastly, it is important to stress that idioms are only idioms when they occur in their respective collocations (cf. Ritt-Benmimoun et al. 2017: 645). Hence, their idiomatic meaning may be lost if the components are altered.

## 2 Semantic approach

This section deals with the semantic particularities of the most recurrent verbs in the corpus, based on the other components of the idioms in which they occur. This co-occurrence is semantic in nature, namely, it attends to semantic reasons (cf. Nunberg et al. 1994: 505).

The verbal processes identified in this study are in line with Moon (1998: 208),<sup>10</sup> and include the following: Material (events and actions), mental (affection, cognition and perception), relational (attributive and identifying), behavioral, verbal and existential.<sup>11</sup> Material and mental processes are by far the most numerous in the data, followed by behavioral. On the other hand, the number of relational, verbal and existential processes is very low. These results slightly differ from Moon (1998), whose data show, first and foremost, material processes, followed by relational attributive processes.<sup>12</sup> Arabic does not show a verb in nominal attributive sentences in the present tense, which may explain the scarcity of relational processes in my data. Additionally, the relatively high number of behavioral idioms in the corpus must be due to the numerous imperative forms included, which are intended to correct misbehaviors.

The type of evaluations expressed by the idioms are negative, neutral, or positive. The first two prevail in the corpus nearly to the same degree. The

<sup>10</sup> Based on Hallyday’s model (2004: 170–175).

<sup>11</sup> Verbal processes occurring in the idioms are indicated in each of the cases in the section below.

<sup>12</sup> Moon’s percentages: Material 42%, relational 30%, mental 19%, verbal 7%, existential 2%, and behavioral 10%. My percentages: Mental 32%, material 29%, behavioral 9%, relational 7%, verbal 3%, existential 1%.

prevalence of negative evaluations in phraseology has been identified before,<sup>13</sup> and Abdou (2012: 88) relates it to the idiom's property of indirectness for communicating its meaning, adding that users need tactful ways to express negative evaluations more than positive ones.

Furthermore, verbs tend to occur in specific semantic environments,<sup>14</sup> for example, *ʔakal*, *byākol* 'to eat,' *ʕamel*, *byəʕmel* 'to do, to make,' and *sakkar*, *bisakker* 'to close,' show negative or neutral evaluations. Other verbs, such as *ʕaṭa*, *byaṣṭi* 'to give' and *tarak*, *byətrok* 'to leave,' only show negative evaluations, while *rafaṣ*, *byərfaṣ* 'to raise,' *ṭār*, *biṭīr* 'to fly,' and *fataḥ*, *byəftaḥ* 'to open' show only positive. Although the exact meaning is determined by the collocate(s), the data does not show any example of a verb expressing both positive and negative evaluations.

Finally, the semantic productivity of the verbs depends on each particular case. Some always co-occur with the same set of lexemes,<sup>15</sup> while others can occur with different sets. The latter produce different idioms, the meanings of which do not have to be related. The most productive verbs in the data are: *ʔakal*, *byākol* 'to eat,' *ʔəṣa*, *byəṣi* 'to come,' *ḥaṭṭ*, *biḥəṭṭ* 'to put,' *sakkar*, *bisakker* 'to close,' and *ʕamel*, *byəʕmel* 'to do, to make'. On the other hand, the verbs *dabbar*, *bidabber* 'to manage,' *dār*, *biḍīr* 'to turn,' and *ʕazzab*, *biʕazzab* 'to torment' show a very restricted range of collocation, therefore they are not productive on the semantic level. It should also be noted that the semantic productivity of a verb is not connected to its frequency of use. Some verbs only appear in one idiom, yet are frequently used, while others appear in several idioms, but are seldom used.

## List of verbs:

### 2.1 *ʔəṣa*, *byəṣi* 'to come'

This verb is semantically very productive, expressing behavioral, relational, attributive, material, or existential processes. It metaphorically denotes the action of receiving something, but the exact meaning depends on the collocates.

- In collocation with noun *nōm* 'sleep,' it denotes a behavioral process:  
*ma ʕam biṣiṇi nōm*<sup>16</sup>  
 'Is not coming to me sleep.' = I am not able to sleep.

<sup>13</sup> Moon (1998: 247) found that negative assignments approximately double in number in comparison to positive ones. According to Kotb (2002: 39), they are dominant in phraseology.

<sup>14</sup> According to Sinclair (1991: 112), this would be one of the principles of idioms.

<sup>15</sup> Named by Benson et al. (1986: 258) "obligatory collocations."

<sup>16</sup> Barthélemy (1935–1954: 3).

- In collocation with noun *xabar* ‘news,’ or the phrase *mən taḥʔt rās-* (+ suf. pron.), it denotes a relational attributive process:  
*ʔəžāki xabar?*<sup>17</sup>  
 ‘Did come to you (f. sg.) news?’ = Do you have news?  
*əl-mašākel ʔəžet mən taḥʔt rāsak*  
 ‘The problems came from below your (m. sg.) head.’ = You are the one responsible for the problems.
- In collocation with noun *naṣīb* ‘fate,’ it denotes a material process:  
*ləssa ma ʔəža naṣibi*  
 ‘Still did not come my fate.’ = I have not found the one yet.  
 “Fate” metaphorically represents the right person to marry.
- In collocation with noun *tēlēfōn* ‘telephone,’ it denotes an existential process:  
*ʔəža tēlēfōn*  
 ‘Came a telephone.’ = There was a call.  
 “Telephone” metonymically stands for a telephone call.

## 2.2 *ʔakal*, *byākol* ‘to eat’

This verb is semantically very productive; it may express material, mental, behavioral or verbal processes.

- It metaphorically stands for the action of receiving something, thus denoting a material process. In all the examples, the thing received is negative:  
*ʔakalʔt ʔatle*<sup>18</sup>  
 ‘I ate a hit.’ = I was slapped / hit.  
*ʔakal boks*  
 ‘He ate a punch.’ = He was punched.  
*bākol ʔkfūf*  
 ‘I eat palms (of a hand).’ = I am slapped (several times).  
*ʔakal bahdale*  
 ‘He ate an insult / humiliation.’ = He was insulted / humiliated.  
 This idiom may be regarded as a verbal process as well.

<sup>17</sup> Barthélemy (1935–1954: 3).

<sup>18</sup> Barthélemy (1935–1954: 11). Al-Dāya (2002: 53) registers the following variant: أكل قتل و فرق ‘He ate a beat and distributed,’ meaning that he was slapped several times.

*kōl hawa!*

‘Eat air!’ = Go to hell!

This is actually a curse.<sup>19</sup>

- In collocation with noun *hamm* ‘concern, worry,’ it metaphorically denotes a mental process related to perception:

*la tākōl hamm*

‘Don’t eat (you m.) concern / worry’ = You have nothing to worry about.

- In collocation with noun *lsān* ‘tongue,’ it metaphorically represents the cessation of speaking, thus a behavioral process:

*əl-ʔəʔʔ ʔakal lsāno*<sup>20</sup>

‘The cat ate his tongue.’ = He does not speak.<sup>21</sup>

“Tongue” metonymically stands for the capacity of speaking.

- In collocation with the phrase *bi-ʕaʔli ʕalāwe* ‘in / with my mind sweets,’ it denotes a verbal process:

*la tākōl bi-ʕaʔli ʕalāwe*

‘Don’t eat (m. sg.) in / with my mind sweets!’ = Don’t fool me! / Stop messing with me!

## 2.3 *tarak, byətrok* ‘to leave’

This verb denotes mental processes and usually has negative connotations:

*la tətrəkni ʕa-nār!*

‘Don’t leave (m. sg.) me on fire!’ = Don’t leave me in this state of anxiety!

*trəkūni bi-rāḥti!*

‘Leave (pl.) me in my comfort!’ = Leave me alone / in peace!

<sup>19</sup> Our informants indicated that, when used among friends, it may also denote that someone is a liar.

<sup>20</sup> This idiom can be considered a proverbial metaphor, which occurs as a whole proposition, therefore variation is less common (cf. Abdul-Raof 2006: 221–222). All its components are fixed, except for the suffixed pronoun, which varies in accordance with the person to whom the idiom refers. Two variants have been documented, both showing the same particularities: *əl-ʔəʔʔ ʔakal-lo lsāno* ‘The cat ate to him his tongue’ = He does not speak (also, fem. *əl-ʔəʔʔa ʔakalat-lo lsāno*), provided by our informants, who regard it more common than the former; and *لمسانه أكله القط* ‘His tongue: the cat ate it,’ registered in Al-Dāya (2002: 305), where the verb shifted to an active participle (see Section 3.3.1).

<sup>21</sup> This idiom is found in Western languages: (English) ‘Has the cat got your tongue?’ (*Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms* 1998: 61).

## 2.4 *ḥaṭṭ, biḥaṭṭ* ‘to put’

This verb expresses material or mental processes. It is semantically very productive and usually collocates with parts of the body and prepositional phrases.

- Material processes denote actions:

*ḥaṭṭ rāsak w nām!*

‘Put your (m. sg.) head and sleep!’ = Go to sleep!<sup>22</sup>

*la ṭḥaṭṭi rāsek °b-rās muhannad!*

‘Don’t put your (f. sg.) head next to Muhannad’s head!’ = Don’t challenge Muhannad!

Note that although the two idioms above share the components *yḥaṭṭ* (vb.) and *rās* (n.), the other collocates completely change the meaning.

*ʕam yḥaṭṭ ʔl-ḥa?? ʕalēna*

‘He is putting the truth against us.’ = He is blaming us.

The meaning of this idiom may be regarded as a verbal process as well.

- Mental processes are related to the cognition or the perception:

*ʔante ḥaṭṭet ʕēnak ʕala ʔaxto la-karīm*

‘You put your (m. sg.) eye on the sister of Karīm.’ = You want a relationship with Karīm’s sister / You want to marry Karīm’s sister.

*ḥaṭṭi ʕaʔlek bi-rāsek!*

‘Put your (f. sg.) mind in your head!’ = Think clearly!

## 2.5 *ḥamal, byaḥmel* ‘to carry’

This verb expresses material or relational processes.

- Its combination with the noun *ḥāl-* (+ pron. suf., with a reflexive sense) denotes an action, and has an inchoative sense. It is frequently followed by a second verb denoting movement (e.g., *rāḥ, birūḥ* ‘to go,’ *māši, byāmši* ‘to walk’):

*ḥamalt ḥāli w-ʔažžit*<sup>23</sup>

‘I carried myself and I came.’ = I (just) came.

<sup>22</sup> This idiom shows the omission of the phrase *ʕal-°mxadde* ‘on the pillow’ because the meaning is implicitly understood by the hearers (see Berlinches 2019: 14).

<sup>23</sup> Barthélemy (1935–1954: 177): *ḥamal ḥālo* ‘to get started, to set out on his way’ [(French) se metre en route].



- Its combination with noun *masʔuliyye* ‘responsibility’ is quite common, denoting a relational identifying process:  
*huwwē byəḥmel əl-masʔuliyye*<sup>24</sup>  
 ‘He carries the responsibility.’ = He is responsible.

## 2.6 *xalla, bixalli* ‘to keep’<sup>25</sup>

This verb may express mental processes, but it also appears in begging formulas:

- In collocation with noun *ʕēn* ‘eye,’ the organ of sight, it metonymically denotes a mental, cognitive process:  
*xalli ʕēnek ʕalēha*  
 ‘Keep your (f. sg.) eye on her!’ = Watch her closely! / Keep an eye on her!
- In collocation with noun *ʔalla* ‘God,’ and showing a suffixed pronoun, it turns into a begging formula:  
*ʔalla yxallik*<sup>26</sup>  
 ‘May God keep you (m. sg.)!’ = Please!<sup>27</sup>

## 2.7 *sakkar, bisakker* ‘to close’

This verb expresses material or mental processes, and it is semantically very productive.

- Material processes are related to the cessation of an activity, literal or metaphorical:  
*sakker hal-mawḏūʕ*  
 ‘Close (m. sg.) this subject!’ = Stop talking about this subject!

<sup>24</sup> There is a variant showing the verb in the derived verb form V, *huwwē byəṭḥammal masʔuliyye* ‘He accepts responsibility’ = He assumes the responsibility, with an inchoative sense, one of the uses of form V (cf. Cowell 1964: 250–251).

<sup>25</sup> This is a derived verb form II, very productive in phraseology. Its two prominent values are: (1) causative, namely verbs that cause something to happen; and (2) augmentative, specifically verbs that indicate that the action is enhanced in one way or another—repeated, extended, or intensified (cf. Cowell 1964: 240, 253).

<sup>26</sup> Barthélemy (1935–1954: 215).

<sup>27</sup> Literally translated by Ferguson (1983: 74) as ‘God keep you,’ i.e., ‘May God spare you and let you stay alive.’ He explains that God-wishes are intended to ask for something, or to deflect the request in some way.

- In collocation with the phrase *b-wəšš-* ‘in (someone’s) face’, the cessation is abrupt, and has negative connotations:  
*sakkar ʔb-wəšši*  
 ‘He closed in my face.’ = He hung up (the phone) while I was talking.<sup>28</sup>
- In collocation with nouns *daftar* ‘notebook,’ or *ṣafḥa* ‘page,’ it metaphorically denotes putting an end to a period of life:  
*nəḥna maḏbūrīn ʔnsakker əd-dafāter əl-ʔadīme*  
 ‘We are obliged to close the old notebooks.’ = We are obliged to put an end to old episodes of our lives.  
*sakkar hadāk əd-daftar mən zamān*  
 ‘He closed that notebook a long time ago.’ = That period of his life is far behind him.  
*ʔante kamān sakker haṣ-ṣafḥa*  
 ‘You (m. sg.) also, close this page!’ = You too, put this episode behind you!
- In collocation with noun *ʔəṣṣa* ‘story,’ it is something that finishes:  
*mən zamān nəḥna sakkarna hal-ʔəṣṣa*  
 ‘A long time ago we closed this story’ = This matter is far behind us.
- In collocation with *məxx* ‘brain,’ it denotes a mental, cognitive process, since the brain is the center of cognition and perception:  
*sakkar məxxi*  
 ‘My brain closed.’ = I am not able to think.

## 2.8 *dabbar, bidabber* ‘to manage’

This verb expresses a mental process, and only collocates with noun *rās-* ‘head’ (+ pron. suf.) or the noun *ḥāl-* ‘state’ (+ pron. suf.), with the same idiomatic meaning:

*məndabber rāsna / ḥālna*<sup>29</sup>

‘We manage our head / our state.’ = We will get by / We can deal with the situation.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Usually, the object of the verb which receives the action is *talifōn* ‘telephone,’ metonymically referring to a telephone call, but it is frequently omitted because the meaning is implicitly understood (cf. Berlinches 2019: 36). However, in other contexts it might have different meanings, for example, to run out of options or opportunities after many attempts.

<sup>29</sup> *Rās* is a prominent part of the body for physical identity, thus metonymically denotes the individual to which the idiom refers, and may have a reflexive sense.

<sup>30</sup> It may also refer to the first person singular (see Section 3.2.2).

## 2.9 *dār, bidār* ‘to turn’

This verb only collocates with noun *bāl* ‘mind,’ the faculty of cognition and perception, metonymically expressing a mental perceptive process:

*dār bālak!*<sup>31</sup>

‘Turn your (m. sg.) mind!’ = Take care! / Be careful!

## 2.10 *rafaʿ, byərfaʿ* ‘to raise’

This verb expresses material or mental processes. It metaphorically represents a physical movement of an individual, and the idioms in which it appears have positive connotations.

- Material processes denote actions:

*byərfaʿ kās*

‘He raises a glass.’ = He proposes a toast (to sb.).

“Glass” metonymically stands for a toast.

- Mental processes are related to perception:

*bərfaʿ rāsi fiki*

‘I raise my head on you (f. sg.).’ = I am proud of you.

## 2.11 *ʔaʔʔ, biʔaʔʔ* ‘to click, to explode’

This verb expresses mental or verbal processes, and frequently collocates with parts of the body.

- In combination with noun *məxx* ‘brain,’ it denotes an emotional state, thus a mental, perceptive process:

*məxxi raḥ yʔaʔʔ*

‘My brain is going to explode.’ = I am very stressed.

- In combination with *ḥanak* ‘jaw,’ it metonymically denotes the act of talking, thus a verbal process:

*ʕam ʔnʔaʔʔ ḥanak*

‘We are clicking the jaw.’ = We are talking for the sake of talking.

<sup>31</sup> Barthélemy (1935–1954: 255). For example, in combination with the noun *məxx* ‘brain,’ semantically very similar to *bāl* ‘mind,’ the idiomatic sense would be lost.

## 2.12 *ṭaleṣ, byəṭlaṣ* ‘to come out, to lift’

This verb expresses material or relational processes.

- In collocation with noun *ṭid* ‘hand,’ a body part responsible for doing things, it metonymically denotes capability, thus a material process:

*nəṣmel yəlli byəṭlaṣ bi-ṭidna*<sup>32</sup>

‘We do what comes to our hand.’ = We do what we can.

- In collocation with preposition *la-* and a noun denoting an individual, it qualifies him or her, thus being a relational attributive process:

*ṭana ṭləṣet la-ṭəmmi*<sup>33</sup>

‘I came out like my mother.’ = I resemble my mother.

## 2.13 *ṭawwal, biṭawwel* ‘to enlarge’

This verb expresses material or mental processes.

- In combination with noun *bāl* ‘mind,’ it denotes an emotional state, thus a mental perceptual process:

*ṭawwel bālak!*<sup>34</sup>

‘Extend your (m. sg.) mind!’ = Calm down!

- In combination with noun *ḡēbe* ‘absence,’ it denotes an action, thus a material process:

*la ṭawwli l-ḡēbe!*

‘Don’t extend (f. sg.) the absence!’ = Come back soon!

## 2.14 *ṭār, biṭīr* ‘to fly’

This verb expresses mental processes, related to perception. It mostly denotes positive evaluations, by metaphorical extension:

*raḥi yṭīr mən əl-faraḥ*

‘He will fly from happiness.’ = He is extremely happy.

<sup>32</sup> Barthélemy (1935–1954: 484).

<sup>33</sup> Barthélemy (1935–1954: 483).

<sup>34</sup> Barthélemy (1935–1954: 493), including the variant *ṭawwal rōḥo*, with the same meaning.

*biṭīr ṣaʔli mən əl-farḥa*<sup>35</sup>

‘My mind flies from joy.’ = I am extremely happy.

*ḥāses ḥāli raḥ ṭīr ʔadd mu farḥān*

‘I myself feel I am going to fly, (that’s) how happy I am.’ = I am extremely happy.

## 2.15 *ṭayyar, biṭayyer* ‘to make (someone) fly’

This verb expresses relational or behavioral processes.

- Relational processes are attributive and have positive connotations:  
*biṭayyer əl-ṣaʔl*<sup>36</sup>  
‘It makes the mind fly.’ = It is wonderful / amazing.
- In collocation with *nōm* ‘sleep,’ it metaphorically denotes a behavioral process:  
*ṭayyaret ən-nōm mən ʔṣyūno*  
‘(She) made the sleep fly from his eyes.’ = She kept him awake (at night).

## 2.16 *ṣazzab, biṣazzeb* ‘to torment’

This verb expresses a mental, perceptive process, and only collocates with the noun *ḍamīr* ‘conscience’:

*ḍamīro ṣam yṣazzbo*

‘His conscience is tormenting him.’ = He has a guilty conscience.

## 2.17 *ṣaṭa, byaṣṭi* ‘to give’

This verb expresses mental or behavioral processes. All idioms in the data in which this verb features have negative connotations.

- In combination with parts of the body denoting attention (i.e., ‘face’ or ‘ear’), it metonymically denotes mental processes related to cognition and perception:  
*la ṭaṣṭī wəṣṣ*<sup>37</sup>  
‘Don’t give him a face!’ = Don’t pay heed to him!

<sup>35</sup> Barthélemy (1935–1954: 496).

<sup>36</sup> Barthélemy (1935–1954: 496).

<sup>37</sup> Barthélemy (1935–1954: 885).

*Ṣaṭēton ʔədni*

‘I gave them my ear.’ = I listened to them.

- In combination with noun *dars* ‘lesson,’ it metaphorically denotes a behavioral process:

*bəddi ʔaṣṭi dars əmrattab*

‘I want to give him an organized lesson.’ = I want to teach him a hard lesson.<sup>38</sup>

## 2.18 *Ṣamel, byəṣmel* ‘to do, to make’

This verb expresses material or behavioral processes.

- In material processes, the verb is semantically depleted, and used as support.<sup>39</sup> The meaning is thus given by the collocates. These idioms show a lower degree of opacity:

*Ṣam bəṣmel dūš*

‘I am making a shower.’ = I am taking a shower.

*bəṣmel ḥammām*

‘I make a bath.’ = I bathe / I take a bath.

*(hiyye) Ṣam təṣmel relax*

‘(She) is making relaxation.’ = She is relaxing.

- In combination with certain nouns including *ḥāl-* ‘state’ (+ pron. suf., with a reflexive sense), it denotes behavioral processes, and has negative connotations:

*la təṣmāl-lna ʔəṣaš!*

‘Don’t make (m. sg.) for us stories.’ = Don’t cause us problems!<sup>40</sup>

*la təṣəmli ʔaflām!*

‘Don’t make (f. sg.) films!’ = Don’t make up stories!

<sup>38</sup> This idiom is found in Western languages: (English) ‘to teach somebody a lesson’ (*Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms* 1998: 224), (Spanish) [dar (a alguien) una lección] ‘to teach (someone) a lesson’ (Real Academia Española. *Diccionario de la lengua española*, 23.<sup>a</sup> ed., [online version]. <<https://dle.rae.es>> [accessed 16 November 2020]).

<sup>39</sup> Some authors refer to verbs showing this particularity as “light verbs.” Leech (2006: 60) claims that the whole construction often seems equivalent to the use of a single verb, i.e., ‘Make a decision’ = Decide. It is the only verb of this kind in the data.

<sup>40</sup> The negative sense of the idiom is given by the co-occurrence of the noun *ʔəṣša* ‘story.’

*ʔmali masraḥiyye hallaʔ!*

‘Make (f. sg.) theatre now!’ = Fake now! / Exaggerate now!<sup>41</sup>

*bəʕmel ḥāli māli daryān*

‘I myself make like I don’t know.’ = I pretend not to know.

*la təʕmel ḥālak mu faḥmān!*<sup>42</sup>

‘Don’t make (m. sg.) like you don’t understand!’ = Don’t pretend not to understand!

## 2.19 *fataḥ, byəftaḥ* ‘to open’

This verb expresses material processes:

*(ʔante) ʕam təftaḥ mawḏūʕ*

‘You (m. sg.) are opening a subject.’ = You start talking about a subject.<sup>43</sup>

*raḥ yəftaḥli ktīr ʔbwāb*

‘It will open for me many doors.’ = It will give me many opportunities.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>41</sup> This idiom was used in a context where a man was telling a woman that it was too late to exaggerate what she was saying, since she would not obtain any (positive) result. According to our informants, the collocation with noun *ʔaflām* ‘films’ would be more common. Additionally, this idiom is found in Western languages: (English) ‘to play-act’ (*American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fifth Edition* [2011]. Retrieved from <https://www.thefreedictionary.com/play-act> [accessed 16 November 2020]), (Spanish) [hacer teatro] ‘to make theatre,’ among the definitions of “teatro” one finds ‘faked and exaggerated action ([Spanish: acción fingida y exagerada])’ (Real Academia Española. *Diccionario de la lengua española*, 23.<sup>a</sup> ed., [on-line version]. <<https://dle.rae.es>> [accessed 16 November 2020]).

<sup>42</sup> Barthélemy (1935–1954: 553). Boch and Grotzfeld (1964: 174) register two similar examples, one of which also has similar meaning: *ʕamel ḥālo mū šāyfo* ‘He made so, like he did not see him’ [(German) er tat so, als ob er ihn nicht sehen würde], and *ʕamel ḥālo mū faḥmān* ‘He made so, as if he hadn’t realized’ [(German) (er) tat so, als ob er nichts gemerkt hätte].

<sup>43</sup> Semantically opposed to *sakker ḥal-mawḏūʕ* ‘Close (m. sg) this subject!’ = Stop (talking about) this subject! (see Section 2.7).

<sup>44</sup> This idiom is found in Western languages: (English) ‘To open the door (to sth.)’ (*Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms* [1998: 103]), (Spanish) [abrir la puerta] ‘open the door’ (Real Academia Española. *Diccionario de la lengua española*, 23.<sup>a</sup> ed., [on-line version]. <<https://dle.rae.es>> [accessed 16 November 2020]).

## 2.20 *fattaḥ, bifatteḥ* ‘to open (sth.)’

This verb expresses mental processes, in collocation with parts of the body representing the center of cognition and perception:

*fatteḥ mæxxak!*

‘Open your (m. sg.) brain!’ = Think!<sup>45</sup>

## 2.21 *kabbar, bikabber* ‘to enlarge’

This verb expresses mental or behavioral processes, and has an augmentative sense.<sup>46</sup>

- Mental processes occur in collocation with parts of the body (which represent the center of cognition and perception), but they may be considered behavioral processes as well:

*kabber ʕaʔlak!*<sup>47</sup>

‘Enlarge your (m. sg.) mind!’ = Think clearly! / Don’t behave in a childish way!

*kabbri mæxxek!*

‘Enlarge your (f. sg.) brain!’ = Think clearly! / Don’t behave in a childish way!

The two idioms above are synonymous.

- In collocation with noun *mawḏūʕ* ‘subject,’ it denotes behavioral processes: *ʕam ʔnkabber əl-mawḏūʕ zyāde ʕan ḥaʒmo*  
‘We are enlarging the matter more than its size.’ = We are making the problem bigger than it is.

## 2.22 *kall, bikəll* ‘to tire, to be tired’

It expresses a material process:

*ʔənti la bətkəlli w-la bətməlli*<sup>48</sup>

‘You (f. sg.) neither get tired nor bored.’ = You are indefatigable.

It can also be regarded as a relational, attributive process.

<sup>45</sup> Semantically opposed to *sakkar mæxxi* ‘my brain closed’ = I am not able to think (see Section 2.7).

<sup>46</sup> As other verbs from the derived form II (see fn. 25).

<sup>47</sup> Barthélemy (1935–1954: 699).

<sup>48</sup> Barthélemy (1935–1954: 725) registers the following version: *la kall ula mall*, with the same meaning.



## 2.23 *kān, bikūn* ‘to be’

The imperfective *bikall-* (+ suf. pron.) is the result of the assimilation  $n + l > ll$ : *bikūn* + ( $\partial$ - >) *la-* > *bikall-*, denoting existence.<sup>49</sup> In combination with noun *fakʿr* ‘thought,’ it expresses a mental perceptive process:

*la ykallak fakʿr*

‘Don’t have (m. sg.) a thought’ = Don’t worry!

## 2.24 *māt, bimūt* ‘to die’

This verb expresses mental or relational processes, and frequently has hyperbolic connotations.

- The mental processes are related to affection:

*bmūt ʕalēki*<sup>50</sup>

‘I die on you.’ = I am totally in love with you / I am crazy about you.

*bmūt fiki*<sup>51</sup>

‘I die in you.’ = I am totally in love with you / I am crazy about you.

*bmūt ʕaṭ-ṭrāb yalli ʕam tamši ʕalē*

‘I die on the dust you (f. sg.) are walking on.’ = I am totally in love with you / I am crazy about you.

All these idioms are synonymous.

- Relational processes are attributive:

*raḥ mūt mən žūʕi*

‘I will die from my hunger.’ = I am very hungry.

<sup>49</sup> Concerning this assimilation see Barthélemy (1935–1954: 733) and Barbot (1981.II: 405, fn. 72). The verb is always in the form of a negative imperative, i.e., *la* + present without *b-* (see Section 3.2.1).

<sup>50</sup> Barthélemy (1935–1954: 805) registers the following extended version: *bimūt ʕalēya mḥabbe* ‘I die on her (one) affection’ = I die of love for her.

<sup>51</sup> This idiom and the former are found in Western languages: (English) ‘to die for’ (Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms: 1998: 97–98), (Spanish) [morir de / por] ‘to die of’ (Real Academia Española. *Diccionario de la lengua española*, 23.<sup>a</sup> ed., [on-line version], <<https://dle.rae.es>> [accessed 16 November 2020]).

# 3 Grammatical Remarks

## 3.1 Word order

The regular word order in Syrian Arabic verbal predications is as follows: Definite subjects either precede or follow the verb, whereas indefinite subjects follow the verb. However, some factors may alter this order (cf. Cowell 1964: 407–411).

a) In the idioms presented, definite subjects occur before or after the verbs. Many of these subjects are body parts showing a suffixed pronoun which refers to its human possessor:<sup>52</sup>

**Tab. 2:** Subject – Verb order

Subject (definite)	Verb	Meaning
<i>ḡamīro</i> his conscience	<i>ḡam yḡazzbo</i> is tormenting him	= He has a guilty conscience.
<i>məxxi</i> my brain	<i>raḡ yṡəʔʔ</i> is going to explode	= I am very stressed.

**Tab. 3:** Verb – Subject order

Verb	Subject (definite)	Meaning
<i>ḡam biḡazzbak</i> is tormenting you (m. sg.)	<i>ḡamīrak?</i> your (m. sg.) conscience?	= Do you have a guilty conscience?
<i>rtabaṡ</i> was tied	<i>ʔlsāno</i> his tongue	= He was not able to speak.
<i>sakkar</i> closed	<i>məxxi</i> my brain	= I am not able to think.

b) On the other hand, all indefinite subjects in the data appear after the verb:

Verb	Subject (indefinite)	Meaning
<i>ʔəʒa</i> came	<i>tēlēfōn</i> a telephone	= There was a call.
<i>ʔəʒāki</i> did come to you (f. sg.)	<i>xabar?</i> news (lit. a new)?	= Do you have news?

<sup>52</sup> Like in Egyptian Arabic (cf. Kotb 2002: 58).

## c) Complements:

If the sentence has complements, they are usually placed at the end of the sentence:

Tab. 4: Verb - Subject – Complements order

Verb	Subject	Complements	Meaning
<i>biṭīr</i> flies	<i>ṣaʔli</i> my mind	<i>mən əl-farḥa</i> from the happiness	= I am extremely happy.
<i>rəžeʃ</i> Did return	<i>ṣaʔlo</i> his mind	<i>la-rāso?</i> to his head?	= Did he come back to his senses?

Tab. 5: Subject - Verb – Complements order

Subject	Verb	Complement	Meaning
<i>ṣyūna lal-bənʔt</i> the girl's eyes	<i>btāxod</i> takes	<i>əl-ṣaʔl</i> the mind	= The girl's eyes are wonderful / amazing.

However, if the complement is an adverbial particle or a phrase denoting time, it tends to be placed at the beginning of the sentence, and it is followed by the verb:

Tab. 6: Complements - Verb – Subject order

Complements	Verb	Subject	Meaning
<i>mbāreh</i> yesterday	<i>ma ʔažāni</i> did not come to me	<i>nom</i> sleep	= Yesterday, I was not able to sleep.
<i>lassa</i> still	<i>ma ʔəža</i> did not come	<i>naṣibi</i> my fate	= I have not found the one yet.
<i>bukra</i> tomorrow	<i>btəmši</i> walk	<i>l-ʔiyyām</i> the days	= Life will go on.

### 3.2 Verbal inflection

The great majority of the verbs show full inflectability in tense, number, and mood, as observed in other languages: for instance, English (cf. Moon 1998: 94). However, some forms occur with more frequency than others.

### 3.2.1 Tense

Generally, verbs inflect in all tenses, for example:

Tab. 7: Verbal inflection

Tense	Idiom	Meaning
Simple past	<i>mbāreh ma ʔažāni nom</i>	‘Yesterday sleep did not come to me.’ = Yesterday I was not able to sleep.
<i>b</i> -present	<i>bākol ʔkfūf</i>	‘I eat palms (of a hand).’ = I am slapped (several times).
Present continuous	<i>ma šam bižini nōm</i>	‘Sleep is not coming to me.’ = I am not able to sleep.
Future	<i>rah ʔākol bahdale</i>	‘I will eat an insult / humiliation.’ = I will be insulted / humiliated.
Future perfect	<i>la tkūn ʔakalʔt bahdale?</i>	‘Won’t you have eaten an insult / humiliation?’ = Won’t you have been humiliated?

However, a few verbs do not allow certain inflections. For example, in *əl-ʔətt ʔakal lsāno* ‘The cat ate his tongue’ = He does not speak, the verb *ʔakal* must be conjugated in the past tense, if not, the idiomatic sense would be lost. The reason is that the idiom denotes a situation that figuratively results from a previous action, specifically because the cat ate his tongue, he is not able to speak anymore.

Another restriction in inflection is found in *la ykəllak fəkʔr* ‘Don’t have (m. sg.) a thought’ = Don’t worry! In another tense, the form *ykəll-* (> *kān*, *bikūn* with the assimilation *n > l*) would lose its idiomatic sense. For example, *\*kalli fəkʔr* would mean ‘I was thinking about (sth.),’ although it is not used.<sup>53</sup>

Moreover, in Modern Standard Arabic (henceforth MSA), Abdou (2012: 115) shows idioms in which the verb only occurs in the present tense, for example, *yaḥrutu fi al-baḥri* = He is plowing the sand. He claims that the past would be expressed by adding the verb *kāna*. My data do not show any example of this kind, but it is certainly a matter to bear in mind in further research.

<sup>53</sup> The form *kall*, *bikəll* literally denotes existence, and can be used in past or present, always showing a suffixed pronoun which refers to the possessor, for example, *kalli sayyāra* ‘There was a car for me’ = I had a car (cf. Barthélemy 1935–1954: 733).

### 3.2.2 Number

The majority of verbs in the data occur in the singular because idioms tend to address a single person. Among them, the first and third person prevail. The second person, however, is seldom used, except for imperative forms (see Section 3.2.3). As the data have plenty of dialogues where cases of second person are likely to happen, one would have expected to find more examples.<sup>54</sup>

Concerning the plural persons of the verb, there are only a few instances in the first person, for example, *nḥaṭṭ ṣala žarʿḥna mālʿḥ* ‘We put salt to our wounds’ = We make matters worse. The low use of plural subjects in phraseology has been attributed to the insecurity amongst speakers towards pluralizations (cf. Moon 1998: 96).

Finally, one idiom is constantly conjugated in the first-person plural, although the person who speaks is only one – a phenomenon known as “modesty plural” (cf. Du Bois 2012: 324). It is the combination of the verb *byaḥraḥ* ‘to be happy at’ and the preposition *fī-* (+ suf. pron.), which usually collocates with verbs *yxalli* or *bədd-*: *xallīna nəḥraḥ fīk* ‘Let us be happy in you (m. sg.)!’ = Get merry!; *xallūna nəḥraḥ fikon* ‘Let us be happy in both of you!’ = Get merry (you both)!; *bəddna nəḥraḥ fīk* ‘We want to be happy in you (m. sg.)!’ = Get merry! Furthermore, the idiom *məndabber rāsna* ‘We manage our head’ = We will get by / we can deal with the situation, may refer to a single person when conjugated in plural, although its use in the first person singular (*bidabber rāsi*) is also common.<sup>55</sup>

### 3.2.3 Mood: Imperative

My data show a significant number of imperative verbs, which are intended to correct bad attitudes or habits, or to give advice. They occur in dialogues, which are common in the data. Among these, idioms involving body parts are particularly productive. For example: *šaḡḡel məxxak!* ‘Make your (m. sg.) brain work!’ = Think!; *dəbbi lšānek!* ‘Place your (f. sg.) tongue!’ = Do not speak! / Do not say anything to anyone!

<sup>54</sup> Verbal idioms in Abdou’s data (2012: 119), based on written texts, do not generally occur in the second person. He explains that its use is more typical of spoken language, as in this medium the interlocutors usually share the same space and time.

<sup>55</sup> In Syrian Arabic one finds this kind of plural in other expressions, like: *mnaškor ʔaḷḷa* ‘We thank God,’ answering the question *kifak / kifek?* ‘How are you (m./f. sg.)?’ The use of these expressions seems to be fossilized nowadays.

Furthermore, the data only show one imperative in plural form: *trākūni bi-rāḥti* ‘Leave (pl.) me with my calm!’ = Leave me alone / in peace! which is another evidence of the reduced use of plural subjects in idioms.

Another common phenomenon in the corpus is the indicative / imperative shift:

**Tab. 8:** Indicative / imperative shift

Indicative	Imperative
<i>ḡaxad<sup>9</sup>t rāḥti</i> ‘I took my calm.’ = I calmed down.	<i>xōd rāḥtak</i> ‘Take your (m. sg) calm!’ = Calm down!
<i>ḡabbet<sup>9</sup>lsāna</i> ‘She placed her tongue.’ = She did not speak / She did not say anything to anyone.	<i>ḡabbi lsānek!</i> ‘Place your (f. sg.) tongue!’ = Do not speak! / Do not say anything to anyone!

**Tab. 9:** Indicative / negative imperative shift

Indicative	Negative imperative
<i>ḡaṭetak wəšš<sup>9</sup> ktīr</i> ‘I gave you (m. sg.) much face’ = I paid too much heed to you / I let you go too far.	<i>la ṭaṣṭi wəšš</i> ‘Don’t give (m. sg.) him face!’ = Don’t pay heed to him! / Don’t let him go too far.
<i>ḡakal<sup>9</sup>t hammak</i> ‘I ate your (m. sg.) concern.’ = I was worried about you.	<i>la tākol hamm</i> ‘Don’t eat (m. sg.) concern / worry!’ = Don’t worry!

### 3.2.4 Voice

Passive forms are more prolific in written language than in spoken.<sup>56</sup> In Arabic, unlike in some Western languages, passivization is made by morphological inflection of verbs, and it is therefore not a syntactic process. Vernacular varieties of Arabic generally express the passive with the derived verb form VII, i.e. *nfaʿal*, *byənfaʿel* ‘to be done,’ whereas in MSA, the passive is formed by changing the internal vowel pattern of the verb, i.e., *kataba*, *yaktubu* ‘to write’ (active) vs. *kutiba*, *yuktabu* ‘to be written’ (passive).

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Abdou (2012: 126), who claims that in written language the passive form is useful to avoid direct assignment of negative judgement to the agent.

My data only register two idioms with a passive sense. The first is *nxarab bēti* ‘My house was ruined’ = I had a big problem, which is a variant from *yaxrab bētak!* ‘May your (m. sg.) house be ruined’ = Damn you!, showing a verb from the simple form, and also commonly used for cursing somebody. Interestingly, when the verb shifts to form VII, and hence undertakes a passive sense, its meaning is no longer a curse but an existential process, with negative connotations.

The second example is *əl-maktūb byənʔara mən ʕanwāno* ‘A manuscript is read by its title’ = Someone can be judged by their external appearance / The outcome of a situation can be guessed from an early stage. The components of this idiom do not allow any morphological variation, therefore it fits in what Cruse calls “frozen” or “dead metaphor” (cf. Cruse 1986: 41–42). However, a native informant provided us with the following variant: *əl-maktūb bibayyen mən ʕanwāno*<sup>57</sup> ‘a manuscript is clear by its title’ = Someone may be judged from the external appearance / The outcome of a situation may be guessed from an early stage, where the verb is substituted for another from the first form, but it does not show any substantial semantic difference. This kind of substitution could be regarded as a “revival” of a dead metaphor (cf. Cruse 1986: 41–42).

### 3.3 Morphological variation

#### 3.3.1 Verb / active participle

Active participles generally behave like verbs, despite their adjectival inflection (cf. Cowell 1964: 265), therefore the shifting verb / active participle happens often.<sup>58</sup> These participles may express an action which takes place in the present moment, or an action which took place sometime in the past, but the effects remain in the present, known as “the resultative function.” For example:

<sup>57</sup> Two similar versions appear in Al-Dāya (2002: 347): المكتوب.. من عنوانه ‘A manuscript ... from its title’ and المكتوب باين من عنوانه ‘A manuscript is clear by its title’.

<sup>58</sup> This phenomenon is also documented in other varieties, like Egyptian Arabic (cf. Kotb 2002: 54) and MSA (cf. Izwaini 2015: 85).

Tab. 10: Verb / active participle shift

Verb	Active participle
<i>nəʒmel yalli byəʔlaʃ mən ʔidna</i> 'We do what comes from our hand.' = We do what we can.	<i>ʃu ʔāleʃ bi-ʔidna?</i> 'What comes in our hands?' = What can we do?
<i>raḥ yʔir mən əl-faraḥ</i> 'He will fly from the happiness.' = He is very happy.	<i>ʔāyra mən əl-faraḥ</i> 'I (f.) am flying from the happiness.' = I am very happy.
<i>fəʔt bəl-ḥēʔ</i> 'I entered the wall.' = I don't understand / I can't find a solution or a way out.	<i>huwwə fāyet bəl-ḥēʔ</i> 'He is entering the wall.' = He doesn't understand / He can't find a solution or a way out.

However, in some cases the shifting involves a semantic change:

Tab. 11: Verb / active participle shift, with semantic change

Verb	Active participle
<i>məʃi l-ḥal</i> 'Walked the state.' = The problem (or situation) was solved.	<i>māʃi l-ḥāl</i> 'Is walking the state.' = It is OK / I am OK.

### 3.3.2 Verb / verbal noun variation

The shifting verb / verbal noun is not very productive in my data, only showing the following example:

Tab. 12: Verb / verbal noun shift

Verb	Verbal noun
<i>la ʔḥāwel ʔtlaʃw ʔddūr</i> 'Don't try (m. sg.) to turn and move in circles!' = Speak directly! / Get to the point!	<i>bala laʃw dawarān</i> 'Without turning and moving in circles.' = Straight talk / Getting to the point.

## 3.4 Lexical variation

Several idioms show the replacement of one verb for another which literally has a different meaning but idiomatically are similar, hence they may be considered



synonymous variants. This phenomenon seems to be quite common, as observed by Nunberg et al. (1994: 504) in English, Kotb (2002: 32) in Egyptian Arabic, and Abdou (2012: 105) in MSA. The replacement of one lexical item with another points out the motivation’s transparency of the idiom (cf. Abdou 2012: 108).<sup>59</sup> Examples include:

Tab. 13: Lexical variation

Idiom a	Idiom b
<i>ṭawwel bālak!</i> ‘Extend your (m. sg.) mind!’ = Calm down! <i>biṭayyer əl-ṣaʔl</i> ‘It / he makes fly the mind.’ = It / he is wonderful or amazing. <i>byarkod wara l-mašākel</i> ‘He is running behind the problems.’ = He wants to cause problems. <i>šagḡel mæxxak!</i> ‘Make work your (m. sg.) brain!’ = Think! <i>byarʔoş mæn əl-faraḥ</i> ‘He is dancing from the happiness. = He is very happy.	<i>tammen bālak!</i> ‘Calm your (m. sg.) mind!’ = Calm down! <i>byāxod əl-ṣaʔl</i> ‘It / he takes the mind.’ = It / he is wonderful or amazing. <i>byəlḥaʔ əl-mašākel</i> ‘He follows the problems.’ = He wants to cause problems. <i>fatteḥ mæxxak!</i> ‘Open your (m. sg.) brain!’ = Think! <i>biṭir mæn əl-faraḥ</i> ‘He flies from the happiness’ = He is very happy.

4 Conclusion

The particularities of Syrian Arabic idioms seem to be congruent with those in other Arabic varieties.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, some similar idioms are used in Western languages as well.<sup>61</sup> However, because of the grammatical particularities of Arabic, differences exist.

The literal and the idiomatic meaning of a verb differ considerably, and the latter is determined by the collocates.

An unsurprising finding is that approximately two thirds of the mental processes in my data involve body parts; among them, many are related to the head of an individual or their particular elements (e.g., *mæxx* ‘brain,’ *bāl* ‘mind,’ *rās*

59 Motivation refers to the relationship between the literal and non-literal meaning of the idiom. However, an idiom could be motivated for one speaker but not for another. Thus, a degree of subjectivity is unavoidable in this regard (cf. Abdou 2016: 63–65).

60 See also Berlinches (2019).

61 Borrowed idioms are relatively common in Arabic phraseology. According to Izwaini (2015: 92), they have been formulated to denote new concepts introduced to the Arabic culture.

‘head,’ ʕaʔl ‘mind, sense, intellect,’ wəšš ‘face’). These lexemes are metonymically connected to cognitive, perceptive, or affectionate processes, and are very productive in phraseology.

In other languages, and in different Arabic varieties, negative actions and emotions are recurrently expressed through idioms. Moreover, some verbs are more likely to occur in negative contexts; on the other hand, idioms denoting positive actions or emotions are infrequent. The former requires a sensitive and indirect expression, but not the latter.

While verbs allow different types of variation, this variation mostly happens at morphological and lexical levels, and therefore could be considered superficial. In general, in order to retain the idiomatic meaning, collocations are relatively restricted (cf. Sinclair 1991: 121). This explains, for example, the scarcity of examples showing syntactic processes, as explained in Berlinches (2019: 39).

The linguistic particularities briefly presented in this contribution definitely need further investigation. Idiomatic expressions in Syrian Arabic are an insufficiently investigated field of research, even though idioms are frequently used on a daily basis, and they are crucial for an understanding of the language. I hope this paper sets the foundations for further research on the topic, which will result in a better understanding of both Arabic phraseology and Syrian Arabic.

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