

## ***Bidd-* ‘want’ in Spoken Palestinian Arabic: Processes of Acquisition and Grammaticalization**

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**Introduction:** The verb *want* is one of the earliest and most frequently used verbs in children’s lexicon across languages (Armon-Lotem and Berman 2003, Budwig 1995, Clark 2003, Ninio 1999, Uziel-Karl 2001). Semantically, *want* often functions as the prototype modal verb. Morphologically, it is used rather invariantly, mostly in the present tense. Syntactically, it is one of the verbs that children use at the outset of word-combination to mark transitive argument structure, and as such it is also one of the earliest verbs to appear with an overt direct object and with a verbal complement. Apart from its role in language acquisition, *want* figures prominently in diachronic processes of grammaticalization. As its meaning is inherently modal, it often grammaticizes into grammatical morphemes indicating volition, intention and future markers (e.g., *will* in English; Bybee et. al. 1994).

The expression of ‘want’ by the word *bidd-* in several dialects of Spoken Palestinian Arabic (SPA) is interesting both from the acquisitional and from the diachronic perspective. *bidd-* is related to the Standard Arabic phrase *bi-wudd-* ‘in will [of]’. Though nominal in origin and in morphology (person inflection is realized as the possessive suffixes), it functions syntactically as a verb or an auxiliary verb, taking an NP or a VP complement. It marks volition and intentionality as well as future tense (Piamenta 1964), indicating that it is well on its way to become a grammatical morpheme. In a few dialects noticeably (Haifa and Nazareth) we witness phonological reduction of *bidd-* to a prefix when marking the future tense.

To the Arabic acquiring child, *bidd-* and its complements present a challenge, since their structure is morphologically complex. Arabic does not have an infinitival form; therefore the VP complement of *bidd-* consists of a fully inflecting verb in the imperfect (*yi’fal*) form. Person inflection is realized both on *bidd-* (as a possessive suffix) and the complement verb (by the set of imperfect affixes). This is in marked contrast with many other languages, in which ‘want+infinitive’ structures are morphologically quite simple. Another interesting challenge is the functional diversity of *bidd-*, functioning both to indicate volition and futurity. The expression of volition appears quite early in child language, while the expression of futurity appears only later (Berman 1985). What would be its main function in the language of children acquiring SPA? The use of *bidd-* in SPA, then, can serve as an interesting test case for the process of verb acquisition from different perspectives. The aim of the present study is twofold: (1) to examine the acquisition of *bidd-* ‘want’ by children who speak dialects of Spoken Palestinian Arabic (SPA) in central and northern Israel, from the morphological, syntactic and functional perspectives, and (2) to detect patterns of grammaticalization in the use of *bidd-* by the children and their interlocutors.

**Method:** The present study is based on analyses of spontaneous speech samples of four children (3 girls, 1 boy), who are native speakers of SPA, belonging to mid-high SES, between ages 2;3 – 3;5. All children were video recorded in interaction with their family members in a variety of

situations (e.g., play time, meal time, story telling, etc.). The samples were transcribed using the CHILDES system with adaptations to Arabic (SemTalk, CHILDES online manual). For each child, we selected 4 transcripts at intervals of approximately two weeks apart, consisting of an average of 100 child utterances per transcript. The verbs in the children and adults' data were morphologically coded (person, number, gender, tense, accusative and dative affixes, negation). In addition, the instances of *bidd-* were isolated and coded for their function as marking future tense or intention/volition. The data were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively.

**Findings:** The children have between 3-8 forms of *bidd-*. By far its most frequently used forms are 1<sup>st</sup>-sg + [verbal complement] (*biddi `af'al*, 54% of the tokens) and the 1<sup>st</sup>-sg negated form *biddi:sh* (with no complement, 26% of the tokens). Even at the age of 2:6, Arabic speaking children have 3-5 inflecting forms of *bidd-*+ *yif'al*. The oldest child in our sample (3;3 – 3;4 years), used 8 of the 9 possible forms of the paradigm. One child used reduced forms of both *bidd-* and the complement verb in many of her productions, in which the person marker prefixes are often omitted, resulting in what might be uninflected forms of the imperfect (*biddi/biddo na:m* instead of *biddi `ana:m/biddo yena:m* 'I/he want(s) to sleep'). Syntactically, the most common complement was a verb, but all four children also used *bidd-* with a noun complement and with no complement. Two children had a PP complement as well. Functionally, most uses of *bidd-* (91%) expressed intention/volition and only a few (9%) marked future tense (though even in these cases, it is not trivial to separate the volitional use from future marking). In addition, one girl and her family members (speakers of the Haifa dialect) used contracted forms of *bidd-* as a future prefix (*dyokel* instead of *biddo yokel* 'he wants to/is going to eat'). These forms appeared in three person-number-gender configurations (1<sup>st</sup>-sg, 3<sup>rd</sup>-sg-masc. and 1<sup>st</sup>-pl) alongside full forms of *bidd-*, and it seems that the two forms are used somewhat differentially: the contracted forms mark futurity whereas the full forms are mostly used to indicate intention/volition.

**Discussion:** Our findings suggest that children are sensitive to the varied uses of *bidd-* in their language from very early on. This verb is one of the most frequently used verbs by SPA-speaking children, as it is in the early lexicons of other languages. In spite of the morphological complexity involved, SPA-speaking children use inflected forms of *bidd-* from very early on, as do kids acquiring languages which are less challenging morphologically. Nonetheless, some children use non-inflected forms of *bidd-* and its verbal complement in early stages. Functionally, *bidd-* is initially used by SPA-speaking children to mark volition and intentionality and only later to mark future tense, as is attested in other languages. In addition, the use of *bidd-* by speakers of SPA provides evidence from yet another language for the grammaticalization process that the verb *want* undergoes across languages.

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The CHILDES website: <http://childes.psy.cmu.edu/>

SemTalk: <http://semtalk.talkbank.org>