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The Dialectic of Time in Modern Arabic Linguistics Discourse

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Abstract

This research aims to reveal the dialogue of modern Arabian Grammarians about time and its representations in Arabic grammar. Using new findings of general linguistics field, this dialogue reflects vast efforts of reconstructions and developments of Arabic grammar in particular tense and aspect. It is descriptive research that explains some significant ideas and thought produced by modern Arabian grammarians such as Tammam Hassan, Mahdi al-Makhzumi, Yusuf Malik al-Muthallibi, and Ibrahim as-Samirra'i, primarily selected for their outstanding studies and discoveries on the topics. The data are collected from their books, processed and analyzed by comparing one work to another. Early results show that expression of time or temporal act is signified by numerous grammatical and lexical means covering verbs, verb phrase, and nouns, and considering negative, positive, and affirmative sentences.

Keywords: Modern Arabic Grammar, Tense, Aspect

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1. Introduction

The problem of time signal in the tradition of Arabic grammar is closely related to the discussion of the verb. Time is the inherent meaning of verbs and is the compulsory element in it. This time base becomes the main feature of the Arabic verbs. When it is not found in a word, the word cannot be classified as a category of the verbs, but rather is categorized as *mashdar* or gerund.

Based on this time too, the verb in Arabic is divided into three parts, namely the perfect verbs *(fi'l m*ādhī) which refer to the past, imperfect verbs *(fi'l mudh*āri') which refer to the present or future, and imperative verbs *(fi'l amr)* which refer to the future time.

However, in the syntactic structure of meaning, the time can possibly shift. Perfect verbs can express the past and future time. Imperfect verbs can also refer to the future and past. This can be seen from the example of the sentence *idz*ā*chadhara al-mudarrisu akramtuh*ū إذا حضر المدرس أكرمته, (if the teacher comes I will honor him). *Chadhara* is a perfect verb that morphosemantically refers to the past, but in the sentence, it refers to the future. As well as in the sentence *lam yachdhur al-mudarrisu* (لم يحضر المدرس) (The teacher did not come), the imperfect verb that refers to the future is here used for the past.

Such dilemma has been the concern of the classical Arabic linguists by regarding this shift of time meaning as the result of the existence of morpheme *idz*ā and *lam*. *Idz*ā is

the conjunction which characterizes and expresses the future time [7]: 1/71. Therefore, even though the verb form used is perfect, the reference of time reflects the future events. Meanwhile, *lam* is a negative particle deflecting the past perfect verb into the future [7]: 3/467.

However, such classical Arabic linguists' argument is considered as a simplification of the verb issue in classical Arabic syntax [6]: 243. In order to maintain such a theory, those classical Arabic grammar experts were reluctant to reconstruct the concept of contextual-based grammar of time. This proves that there is inadequacy of reasoning by the classical grammarians in classifying the concept of time according to the context of the sentence.

Laying its background on the issues described above, this study reveals the dialectical notions of the modern Arab linguists in understanding the concept of time and its representation in the Arabic grammar. This dialogue becomes the reflection of the efforts for the reconstruction and the elaboration in the Arabic grammar rules by utilizing the new findings in general linguistics. This becomes a rarely-found situation in the case of classical Arabic, although to some cases, the new findings have been previously and deeply reviewed by the classical Arabic linguists. One of those findings is the concept of tense and aspect in the general linguistics.

The study of time in language or the tense in Arabic was initiated by a researcher Kamal Bishr in his article "Maqālatu az-Zaman fī al-Lughati al-'Arabiyyati" published in the Journal of Egypt Language Institute in Cairo of the 14th edition in 1962. Bishr emphasizes the necessity to distinguish the term *az-zaman al-falsafi* (time) and the term *az-zaman al-lughaw*ī (tense) (Bishr, 1958: 45). This distinction is considered important because in the classical Arabic syntax, the meaning obscurity still occurs. The studies of tense have been so often distorted by the philosophical concepts so that they do not really result in actual findings.

This is in line with the study of al-Makhzumi, a modern Arab linguist of Iraqi in his book *F*ī an-Nachwi al-'Arabiyyi Naqd wa Tawjīh (1964). As the critical study on the classical Arabic syntax, this book brings the concept of tenses based on the language facts, not on logical or philosophical paradigm. Among his criticisms of the tenses in classical Arabic syntax, one of them is: "Although the classical Arab linguists have understood the meaning of time contained in the verbs, by using the philosophical approach, they are far from the empirical results of linguistic study considering the linguistic facts used" (1986: 152). Based on this approach, al-Makhzumi conducted a semantic syntax study on tenses by using their own facts of language and by emphasizing more on the construction of the verbs and meanings combination.

Hassan, a leading Egyptian linguist labeled as the contemporary Sibawayh, in his book, *al-Lughatu al-'Arabiyyah Ma'n*āhā wa Mabnāhā, reconstructs the study of Arabic syntax by applying new concepts closer to general linguistics paradigm such as the concept of *az-zaman ash-sharfi, az-zaman an-nachwi* and *al-jihah.* These three concepts are first introduced by Hassan. He argues that: "Syntactic tense is the time in a context that can be expressed by the verbs, adjectives, or the type of words containing the verb meaning like *mashdar.* This kind of time is different from the morphological times which are inherently time verbs, not syntactically constructed, and out of context. This

morphological time cannot be expressed by the adjectives or *mashdar,* but can only be expressed by the verbs" (1994: 240).

Hassan's findings have inspired the later researchers such as al-Muthallibi. In his dissertation, entitled *az-Zaman wa al-Lughah* (1984), al-Muthallibi discusses in detail and in-depth the representation of the time in Arabic. Some classifications offered are about morphological time, syntactic time, semantic time, time and *i'rab,* the time in the affirmation, request and question expressions.

Another dissertation about tense was also conducted by Egyptian researcher ar-Raihani (1997) who observed the modern analytical linguistic approach related to the tenses in the Arabic language. The study results in some meaning construction of perfect and imperfect verbs as well their combinations to particular morphemes.

2. Method

This study is library research which bases its main activity on analyzing data and information provided by a number of literatures. The data and the information are understood as the research and analysis material to answer the problem of this study. The primary sources used in this study are *F*ī an-Nachwi al-'Arabiyyi Naqd wa Tawjīh, al-Lughatu al-'Arabiyyah Ma'nāhā wa Mabnāhā, az-Zaman wa al-Lughah, and *Ittij*āhātu at-Ta?līl az-Zamaniyyi fī al-Lughati al-'Arabiyyati. These primary literatures were considered by the researcher as powerful and influential in the study of tenses. Besides the primary sources, books and other relevant articles which discuss tenses and aspects are used as complementary.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1. Verb Tenses: Morphology and Syntax

The time meaning making based on verb forms before they are strung together in sentences and without considering the internal and external context is called morphological time or *az-zaman ash-sharf*ī. The term was first coined by [6]: 241, followed by al-Muthallibi ([3]: 24) and ar-Raihani. Hassan argues that the issue of the semantic verbs in Arabic related to the representation of time will remain dilemma when there is no distinction between the concept of tenses in morphological and in syntactic perspectives. The representation of verb tenses is frequently morphologically dragged into the field of syntax so that the problem occurs where the verb tenses representation does not correspond to the form of its morphological construction. In morphology, the basic form *fa'ala* expresses the past, while the basic form of verb *yaf'ulu* refers to the present or future.

Based on this statement, al-Muthallibi provides two recommendations to complement this study in morphological tenses. The first is to examine what is known as tense construction and events (*al-mashdar, ism f*ā'il, ism maf'ūl) which can represent the meaning of tenses. The second is to examine the syntactic verb tense by focusing on

the morphological verb form and to acknowledge whether the meaning of the tenses undergoes changes or not (1986: 44-45). In the section of "The Potential Meaning of Time and Events Construction", Al-Muthallibi states that the form *al-mashdar, ism f*ā'il, ism maf'ūl have verbal functions and characters. They can influence the other language constituents and reveal the meaning of time (1986: 47).

The issue of the verb tense meaning is no longer as simple as the issue of verbs in the construction of syntax where the meaning of tense undergoes dialectic and experiences interaction with the other language constituents. This interaction then creates a building of contexts determining the meaning of the syntactic tense. In [2]: 147, suggests that the syntactic tenses are the constructions of syntactic verbs which refer to a particular event at a particular time and are firmly bonded by the relation of time when the speakers speak or by any other events in the sentence arrangement. In such a definition, al-Makhzumi interprets these syntactic verbs more as forms of construction that reveal a specified tense.

The concept of *az-zaman an-nachwi* is later revised by Hassan saying that *az-zaman an-nachwi* is a problem of contexts, and can be expressed by verbs, adjectives, and participle nouns (*mashdar*) (1994: 240). Hassan takes the issue of syntactic verb tenses not on their form and construction, but on their presence in the sentence position. Under this context, the issue of tenses is assessed and classified according to the contexts in the forms of the positive or negative sentences, and the affirmative or imperative sentences.

From these two concepts, ([3]: 103) concludes the characteristics of syntactic verb tenses in the following points: (1) The existence of a basic verb form in giving meaning of time corresponds to or is different from the morphological verb tenses which are based on the contexts, (2) Syntactic verb tenses are expressed by the combination of verb construction, (3) The concept of aspects exists in the system of syntactic verb tenses, (5) The existence of verbs is without meaning of time, *non-temporal verb,* (6) The classification of tenses is based on the type of sentence, and (7) The meaning of adverbs of time is shifted from lexical to grammatical.

Thus, it can be concluded that the concept of syntactic verb tenses can express a wider range of meanings of time. In addition, due to the urgency of contexts in determining the meaning of tenses, some linguists negate that the morphological verb tenses are the syntactic verb tenses using the context as determinant of the time meaning.

3.2. The Aspectuality in Arabic Linguistics

In general linguistics, aspect or aspectuality is defined as a variety of ways to see the internal time constituent of a situation or an event [5]: 4. This internal time element is different from the time itself. The difference in the expressions *He was reading* and *He read* in English is not situated in the time expressed, as long as they refer to the past activities but it is at the internal time constituent of progress.

The term aspect in Arabic linguistics is known as *al-jihah.* This term, under the researcher's understanding, is examined first by Hassan in *Al-Lughatu al-'Arabiyyatu*

Tense	Aspect	Verb pattern
Past	Far interrupted	Kāna fa'ala
	Near interrupted	Kāna qad fa'ala
	Recurred	Kāna yaf'ulu
	Done before now	Qad fa'ala
	Progressive until now	Mā zāla yaf'ulu
	Ongoing	Dzalla yaf'ulu
	Basic/simple	Fa'ala
	Approaching the "almost"	Kāda yaf'ulu
	Starting	Thafiqa yaf'ulu
Present	Habit	Yaf'ulu
	Recurring	Yaf'ulu
	Ongoing	Yaf'ulu
Future	Basic/*simple*	Yaf'ulu
	Near	Sayaf'ulu
	Far	Saufa yaf'ulu
	Ongoing	Sayazhallu yaf'ulu

TABLE 1: The formulation of aspectuality by Hassan.

*Ma'n*āhā wa Mabnāhā who defines it as the specification of the verb meaning that can occur in the time element in the verb or in the event element in verbs (1994: 257). This concept was later developed by other researchers such as [1, 4, 8].

The examples of aspects in Arabic can be found in the sentence *darrasa al-mu'allimu al-athf*āl درّس المعلمُ الأطفالَ (*the teacher has taught the children*) and *k*āna al-mu'allimu yudar-risu al-athfāl كَانَ المُعَلِّمُ يُدَرِّسُ الأَطْفَالَ (*the teacher has been teaching the children*). Both sentences are addressing the same time but with different aspects. Both point the past with different aspects. The first sentence has completed aspect at an indefinite time in the past, and the second sentence has a progressive aspect of a past time.

By using the aspect concept, the Arab linguists begin studying and developing the concept of finding a variety of the meaning revelation of time and proving ability of Arabic to create expressions. In discussing this aspect, despite formulating the forms of aspectuality, the Arab linguists also formulate the markers in the forms of language construction stating those aspects forms.

Table 1 of aspects and markers of language construction revealing the aspects according to [6]: 245.

The above table shows that the past tense has the most aspectuality. Of the total 16 forms, 9 of them are in the past tense. Those nine aspects occur in the past, but each occupies a different situation in their internal time. The present and future tenses have lesser aspects. Nevertheless, there are verb tenses which do not have aspects that are indicated by the term "basic" in the table above. Associated with markers, it can be noted that the marker of aspectuality can include particles such as *sin*, *saufa*, and *qad*, or verbs *naw*āsikh (verbs working at nominal sentence and change it according to the

Tense	Aspect	Verb pattern
Past	Unlimited	Fa'ala
	Unlimited affirmative	Qad fa'ala / laqad fa'ala
	Unlimited approaching	Kāda fa'ala
	Far	Kāna fa'ala
	Upcoming	Kāna sayaf'ulu
	Ongoing and habit	Zhalla yaf'ulu / kāna yaf'ulu
Present	Unlimited	Yaf'ulu
	Starting	Akhadza yaf'ulu
	Approaching	Yakādu yaf'ulu
	Ongoing	Yakūnu yaf'ulu / yazhallu yaf'ulu
Future	Near	Sayaf'ulu
	Far	Suafa yaf'ulu
	Ongoing	Syazhallu yaf'ulu / Saufa yazhallu yaf'ulu
Al-Musytarak/ combination	From the past to the present being interrupted or not depends on the contexts.	Mā zāla yaf'ulu
	From the past to the present it is not interrupted	Lā zāla yaf'ulu

TABLE 2: The aspectuality of verbs by al-Muthallibi.

verb's function) like *k*āna, *zhalla*, and *m*ā zāla. The construction of verb *fa'ala* is always used in the past tense and the construction of verb *yaf'ulu* is used in the present and future tense.

In [3]: 306-308, also contributes with his thoughts on the tense and aspect in Table 2.

The table by al-Muthallibi mentions 4 forms of tenses with 15 forms of aspects. Of the 4 tenses, one is a combination of past and present tenses, which means that a verb occurs in the past and in continuous to the present. This type of combination of tenses is not commonly found in the other Arabic linguists' studies. It is at least due to the principle of the tense classification which is based on the three classifications of time namely the past, the present, and the future. In addition, al-Muthallibi is more concise in classifying the aspects of syntactic verb tenses compared to Hasaan especially in the past tense. He does not include the tense "near" and does not classify the aspect of "progressive until now" as the combination tense.

4. Conclusions and Suggestions

Based on the above results, it can be concluded that the dialectic of time in modern Arab syntax has been able to bring Arabic out from the synchronization problems of form and time meaning of verbs. The concept of classification of morphological and syntactic verb tense successfully answers this problem by determining the meaning

morphologically which is not bound syntactically to the context and meaning, which is completely determined by either literal or situational context. Syntactic verb tense enables the Arabic speakers to express the temporal meaning not only by using verbs but also adjective and noun formed by *verb+ing,* so that the argument saying that the system of Arabic grammar provides less means of creating the meaning of time is disputable. In addition, the concept of aspectuality of verbs helped to enhance syntactic verb tense system with markers in the form of affixation or combination of verb *naw*āsikh. In the discourse of modern Arabic syntax, there are differences in the number of aspects that are formulated by the linguists. Nonetheless, the difference was not fundamental but rather terminological.

The suggestion which can be noted here is the need to study semantic syntax further on the context in syntactic verb tense by grounding on the facts of the use of Arabic, both the classic and modern. This is because the dialectic of time in modern Arab syntactic discourse is still limited in its formulation of concepts that it still needs to be supported by factual and comprehensive language data.

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