Tense in Modern Standard Arabic

Yasir Alotaibi[1], **Abdel Fattah Daw[2], Muhammad Alzaidi**[3] [1]Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia, [2]Department of Arabic Language, Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, Alkharj, Saudi Arabia. [3]Department of English, King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, Email: y.alotaibi@psau.edu.sa

The main aim of this paper is to describe the system of tense in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). It follows some linguists in distinguishing between three points of tense: the speech time, the event time and the reference time. We describe the past tense in MSA and argue that there are four types of past in this language and they should contain the perfective form, which indicates the past tense in neutral context. In addition, this paper discusses the present tense, which is indicated by the imperfective form. We argue that the imperfective form is ambiguous between two aspects of present: habitual and continuous. Finally, we describe the future tense in MSA and show that it is indicated by the imperfective form, following the prefix *sa*, which is used for near future, or the particle *sawfa*, which is used for far future.

Key words: *Modern Standard Arabic, Tense, Language, tense, aspect, perfective, imperfective.*

Introduction

This paper describes tense in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). There is a debate in the literature about tense in Arabic, in which some researchers argue that the Arabic language is a tenseless language, meaning that the tense in this language does not come from the form of the verb, while other researchers suggest that verbs in the Arabic language indicate tense. The latter researchers do not, however, agree about the type of this tense, whether it is absolute tense, taking the present point as a reference point, or relative tense, taking another point from the context as a reference point (for more information about this debate, see Comrie (1985) and Alotaibi (2020)). In this paper, we suggest that MSA is a tensed language and that the tense is indicated by using two verb forms: the perfective form, which indicates the past tense, and the imperfective form, which indicates the present tense and also the future tense, if it follows the prefix of the future or the particle of the future, respectively.

This paper uses a system suggested by Reichenbach (1947) for describing the tense in MSA. The following section discusses the system of Reichenbach (1947), which distinguishes between three points in tense: the speech time, the reference time and the event time. The following section discusses the tense in MSA and is divided into three subsections: the first describes the past tense in MSA, where the perfective form is used to denote four types of past in MSA and the difference between these types is in the degree of remoteness from the speech time. The four types of past should be formed by adding an auxiliary or a particle to the perfective form of verb. The second subsection describes the present tense in MSA, which is indicated by the imperfective form of the verb. We show that the imperfective form in MSA is ambiguous between two aspects: the habitual present and the present continuous, and the context or adverbs should identify the right meaning. Also, we show that the present continuous may be denoted by using an auxiliary preceding the imperfective form of verb. Finally, the third subsection discusses the future tense and we show that the future tense in MSA is indicated by a verb in the imperfective form following the prefix *sa* or the particle *sawfa*. In this section, we argue that there is a difference in the degree of remoteness between *sa* and *sawfa*, in which the former is used to indicate the near future and the latter is used to indicate the far future.

An overview of tense

In traditional grammar tense is analysed as a relationship between the situation time and the utterance time. That is, if the situation precedes the utterance, we use the past tense, if the situation and the utterance occur together, we use the present tense, and if the situation occurs after the utterance, we use the future tense. However, this view of tense cannot explain some kinds of tense, such as the present perfect, as shown in (1), where the situation has occurred before the utterance, meaning that *John* left before the speech, and we use the present form of the auxiliary verb *has*. This problem is fixed by a modern analysis, such as the analysis of Reichenbach (1947).

(1) John has left.

Reichenbach (1947) and following linguists, like Michaelis (2006) argue that the tense is not a relationship between the situation and the utterance, instead it is a relation between the speech time (S) and the reference time (R). Klein (1992) defines the reference time as the time that is the reason for making the claim. For example, in example (1), the claim, which is *John left,* was made for the present time, which is the time of the speech, but the situation has happened in the past.

Reichenbach (1947) argues that we can show the meaning of time by three points, which are speech time (S), event time (E) and reference time (R). When we describe the tense of a sentence, we use a comma or a line to separate these points. The comma is used to show that

the two points occur together at the same time, while the line is used to show that the left point precede the right one. For example, the present perfect in example (1) should be presented as (E_S,R) and this means that the event occurred before the speech time and the reference time, which occur at the same time. In addition, the past tense in example (2) and the present tense in example (3) should be represented as (E, R _S) and (E,R,S) respectively, meaning that the event time and the reference time precede the speech time in the past tense and all the three points occur at the same time in the present tense.

(2) John left.

(3) John leaves.

Tense in MSA

In this section, we discuss tense and aspect in MSA. We start with the past tense, which is indicated by the perfective form. Then we describe the present tense, showing that it is indicated by the imperfective form and this form is ambiguous between two aspects. Finally, we discuss the future tense in MSA, which is indicated by the imperfective form, too. We use the system of Reichenbach (1947) in describing all three tenses in MSA.

Past tense

The form of verb that is used to indicate the past in MSA is the perfective form. However, there are different types of past in MSA, as suggested by Hassan (1994) and Alotaibi (2014). These types are different in the remoteness from the speech time. We assume that these types of past are four types. The first type constitutes by using the auxiliary *kaan* preceding a verb in the perfective form and this type represents the furthest past. The next type of past is indicated by *qad*, preceding *kaan*, which precedes a lexical verb in the perfective form. *Qad* is a particle that has two usages in MSA, in which it asserts the situation before the perfective form and does the opposite before the imperfective form. We believe that the confirmation of the situation with the perfective form makes the meaning of this form closer to the speech time. The third type of past is denoted by using a verb in the perfective form, and the fourth type is formed by *qad* preceding a lexical verb in the perfective form. The following examples illustrate the four types of past, respectively (We use the following abbreviation in our examples: IPFV: IMPERFECTIVE, PFV: PERFECTIVE, 3SGM: THIRD PERSON, SINGULAR AND MASCULINE, DEF: DEFINITE, GEN: GENITIVE, ACC: ACCUSATIVE, NOM: NOMINATIVE):

(4) a. zayd-un   kaana   kharaja   mina   al-bayt-i

Zayd-NOM   be.PFV.3SGM   exit.PFV.3SGM   from   DEF-house-GEN

`Zayd had left the house'

b. zayd-un   kaana   qad   kharaja   mina   al-bayt-i

Zayd-NOM   be.PFV.3SGM   PAR   exit.PFV.3SGM   from   DEF-house-GEN

`Zayd had left the house'

c. zayd-un   kharaja   mina   al-bayt-i

Zayd-NOM   exit.PFV.3SGM   from   DEF-house-GEN

`Zayd left the house'

d. zayd-un   qad   kharaja   mina   al-bayt-i

Zayd-NOM   PAR   exit.PFV.3SGM   from   DEF-house-GEN

`Zayd left the house'

We suggest that the examples in (4a) and (4b) are past perfect and the examples in (4c) and (4d) are simple past. This means that in (4a) and (4b), the event time (E) occurs before the reference time (R), which occurs before the speech time (S), and we can present the tense in both examples, as (E_R_S). In contrast, in both examples (4c) and (4d), the event time (E) and the reference time (R) occur together and precede the speech time (S), meaning that they should be presented as (E,R_S).

In addition, the past tense in MSA can be with habitual or continuous aspect, but both aspects are not comfortable with the perfective form in MSA. Instead, both aspects should be indicated by verbs in the imperfective form. Therefore, these aspects can be denoted with past tense by using an auxiliary in a perfective form preceding a lexical verb in the imperfective form. The following examples show the habitual past in (5a), which contains the auxiliary *kaan* preceding a verb in the imperfective form, and the past continuous in (5b), which contains the same structure, but the context and the type of the lexical verb may specify the meaning.

(5) a. saalim-un   kaana   yadhhabu   ?ilaa   al-madrasat-i   kull-a

Salem-NOM   be.PFV.3SGM   go.IPFV.3SGM   to   DEF-school.GEN   every.ACC
yawm-in.   day.GEN

`Salem used to go to the school every day'

b. saalim-un   kaana   yal^cabu   fiy   al-madrasat-i.

Salem-NOM   be.PFV.3SGM   play.IPFV.3SGM   in   DEF-school.GEN

`Salem was playing in the school'

Present tense

The present tense in MSA is indicated by a verb in the imperfective form. However, there is more than one aspect that can be understood from the imperfective form. In other words, the imperfective form may denote the simple present, the habitual present, or the present continuous, and the context and the meaning of verbs usually specify the right aspect. The following examples show the present tense in MSA by verbs in the imperfective form:

(6) a. saalim-un   ya^clamu   al-ḥaqiyqat-a

Salem-NOM   know.IPFV.3SGM   DEF-truth.ACC

`Salem knows the truth'

b. Saalim-un   yal^cabu   fiy   al-ḥadiyqat-i   al-?aan-a

Salem-NOM   play.IPFV.3SGM   in   DEF-qarden-GEN   now.ACC

`Salem is playing in the garden now'

c. Saalim-un   yal^cabu   fiy   al-ḥadiyqat-I   kull-a   yawm-in

Salem-NOM   play.IPFV.3SGM   in   DEF-qarden-GEN   every-ACC   day-GEN

`Salem plays in the garden every day'

Example (6a) indicates the simple present, while example (6b) indicates the present continuous with the adverb *now,* which is comfortable with the continuous aspect. In contrast, the same verb in example (6c) denotes the habitual present because the adverb *every day* is comfortable with this aspect.

We should mention that there is a difference between verbs in relation to aspects and this difference is based on the semantic meanings of verbs. Therefore, verbs are divided into two different semantic meanings, namely, state verbs and dynamic verbs (see Comrie (1976, 1985), Riemer (2010), and Kearns (2000)). We believe that if an imperfective verb is a state verb, it denotes the simple present or the right now reading. In contrast, dynamic verbs that are in the imperfective form are usually ambiguous between two interpretations: the habitual and continuous aspects. This is obvious from the previous examples of the imperfective form, in which the verb *know*, which is a state verb, gives the simple present meaning, while the verb *play,* which is a dynamic verb, indicates continuous or habitual meaning, and this depends on the type of adverb that is used in each example.

Additionally, in the present tense, the speech time (S), the event time (E), and the reference time (R) are identical, meaning that all the examples in (6) above should be shown as (S, E, R), in spite of the difference in aspects between these examples. In other words, the event time in example (6c), which indicates the habitual aspect, is not really identical with the speech time (S) and the reference time (R), but we follow Michaelis (2006) in assuming that present is a state selector. This means that in example (6c), the speaker aims to relate this habit, which is *playing in the garden every day* to *Salem*, and this is why the speaker uses the present tense.
In addition, MSA has a special form for the continuous aspect, which is the using of an auxiliary in the imperfective form preceding a lexical verb in the imperfective form. The lexical verb in this case should be a dynamic verb. The following examples illustrate the present tense with one reading, which is the present continuous:

(7) a. zayd-un   yakuwnu   yal^{c}abu   fiy   al-shaari^c-i.

     Zayd-NOM   be.IPFV.3SGM   play.IPFV.3SGM   in   DEF-street-GEN

     `Zayd is playing in the street'

b. faaris-un   yakuwnu   ya?kulu   fiy   al-bayt-i.

     Faris-NOM   be.IPFV.3SGM   eat.IPFV.3SGM   in   DEF-house-GEN

     `Faris is eating in the house'

3.3 Future tense

MSA has two verb forms: the perfective and the imperfective form. The future tense in MSA is indicated by the imperfective form in some special contexts or by using the prefix *sa* or the particle *sawfa,* preceding the imperfective form. However, there is a difference in the degree of remoteness between the prefix *sa* and the particle *sawfa,* namely, *sa* indicates the near future and *sawfa* the far future (see Alsuyawti (nd), Alansari (nd) and Abu-hayyan (nd)). The following examples illustrate the two types of future tense in MSA:

(8) a. ?aḥmad-u   sa-yadhhabu   ?ilaa   al-bayt-i.

    Ahmad-NOM   FUT-go.IPFV.3SGM   to   DEF-home-GEN

    `Ahmad will go home'

b. ?aḥmad-u   sawfa   yadhhabu   ?ilaa   al-bayt-i.

   Ahmad-NOM   FUT   go.IPFV.3SGM   to   DEF-home-GEN

   `Ahmad will go home'

In the future tense, the event time (E) and the reference time (R) are identical and both should follow the speech time (S). This means that both examples above should be represented as (S_R,E).

Additionally, the future in MSA is close to the present in that all aspects that can be understood from the imperfective form of verb should be in the future tense, and this is possible with both the prefix of future *sa* and the particle *sawfa*. This means that if the imperfective form that is used in the future is a state verb, the future should be simple, as shown in example (9a) below. In contrast, when the imperfective form is a dynamic verb, it should be ambiguous between two readings: the habitual future or the future continuous, as shown in example (9b) below:

(9) a. saalim-un   sa-yuṣaddiqu   al-khabar-a

    Salem-NOM   FUT-believe.IPFV.3SGM   DEF-news-ACC

    `Salem will believe the news'

  b. saalim-un   sawfa   yamshiy   ?ilaa   al-^{c}amal-i.

    Salem-NOM   FUT   walk.IPFV.3SGM   to   DEF-work-GEN

`Salem will walk /be walking to work'

Moreover, the imperfective form in the future is the same as the imperfective form in the present, in that if the verb in the imperfective form follows the auxiliary *yakuwn,* it indicates the continuous. The following examples illustrate this with both *sa* and *sawfa*:

(10) a. fahd-un   sa-yakuwnu   yal^{c}abu   fiy   al-mall^{c}ab-i.

Fahd-NOM FUT-be.IPFV.3SGM   paly.IPFV.3SGM   in   DEF-stadium-GEN

`Fahd will be playing in the stadium'

b. fahd-un   sawfa   yakuwnu   yal^{c}abu   fiy   al-mall^{c}ab-i.

Fahd-NOM FUT   be.IPFV.3SGM   paly.IPFV.3SGM   in   DEF-stadium-GEN

`Fahd will be playing in the stadium'

Conclusion

This paper has discussed tense in MSA. It shows the three tenses in this language and identifies the speech time, event time and reference time in each tense. We argue that MSA contains four types of past with different degrees of remoteness and that all the four types use the perfective form. Additionally, we discuss the present tense, which is indicated by the imperfective form. We argue that the imperfective form is ambiguous between two aspects: habitual present and present continuous. Finally, the paper describes the future tense, which is indicated by the imperfective form, following the prefix *sa,* which is used for near future, or the particle *sawfa*, which is used for far future. The past tense is represented as (E,R_S) in Reichenbach (1947)'s system, the present as (E,R,S), and the future as (S_R,S).

Acknowledgement

REFERENCES

Abu-hayyan (n.d.). *ertishaf altarab*. alkhanqi. Alansari, E.
(n.d.). *muqni allabib*. dar alfikr.

Alotaibi, Y. H. (2014). *Conditional Sentences in Modern Standard Arabic and the Taif Dialect*.
Ph. D. thesis, University of Essex.

Alotaibi, Y. H. (2020). *Verb Form and Tense in Arabic*, Volume 10. Inter- national Journal of
English Linguistics.

Alsuyawti (n.d.). *hama alhawamia*. dar alkutub alalmayah.

Comrie, B. (1976). *Aspect*. Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge
University Press.

Comrie, B. (1985). *Tense*. Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge
University Press.

Hassan, T. (1994). *allwgatu alarabiatu manaha wa mabnaha*. Daru Al- thqafati.
Kearns, K. (2000). *Semantics*. Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan Press.

Klein, W. (1992). The present perfect puzzle. *Language*, 525–552.

Michaelis, L. (2006). Time and tense. *The Handbook of English Linguistics*, 220–243.

Reichenbach, H. (1947). *Elements of Symbolic Logic*. London: Macmillan.

Riemer, N. (2010). *Introducing Semantics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.