Tense and aspect in Arabic in comparison to English

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الزمن والجهة في اللغة العربية مقارنة باللغة الإنجليزية

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Abstract:

This paper discusses tense and aspect in Arabic in comparison to English. It follows an analytical approach considering modern theories of tense and aspect. It rejects the perceived notion that Arabic is an aspectual language and argues based on Tammam Hassan's distinction between morphological tense and grammatical tense that Arabic distinctively expresses both tense and aspect. It has three main tenses: Present, past, and future; and that like English has aspects connected to tenses such as the continuous, perfect, and perfect continuous, in addition to other aspects related to the semantic nature of verbs. The importance of the study lies not only in its contribution to the ongoing debate about tense and aspect in Arabic, but in presenting a detailed analysis that could be useful for pedagogical approaches and translation tasks.

Keywords: Tense, Aspect, Arabic Language, English Language, Morphological and Grammatical Tense.

الملخص

تتناول هذه الورقة الزمن والجهة في اللغة العربية مقارنة باللغة الإنجليزية، وذلك من خلال اتباع منهج تحليلي يستند إلى النظريات الحديثة في دراسة الزمن والجهة. وتعارض الدراسة الفكرة السائدة التي تنظر إلى العربية على أنها لغة تركز على الجهة فقط، حيث تجادل ــــ بالاستناد إلى تمييز تمام حسان بين الزمن الصرفي والزمن النحوي ــــ عن أن اللغة العربية تُعبّر بشكل مميز عن كل من الزمن والجهة. وتشير إلى أن للعربية ثلاثة أزمنة رئيسة: الحاضر، الماضي، والمستقبل؛ وأنها، على غرار اللغة الإنجليزية، تحتوي على جهات ترتبط بالأزمنة مثل المستمر، التام، والتام المستمر، إضافة إلى جوانب أخرى تتعلق بالطبيعة الدلالية للأفعال. وتكمن أهمية هذه الدراسة ليس فقط في مساهمتها في النقاش المستمر حول مفهومي الزمن والجهة في اللغة العربية، بل أيضًا في تقديم تحليل مفصل يمكن أن يكون ذا فائدة في مجالات التعليم والترجمة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الزمن، الجهة، اللغة العربية، اللغة الإنجليزية، الزمن الصرفي، الزمن النحوي.

1- Introduction

This paper undertakes a contrastive analysis of tense and aspect in Arabic and English, aiming to elucidate key structural and conceptual differences between the two languages. The study is grounded in a theoretical premise that challenges the common perception of Arabic as a primarily aspectual language. It argues that such a view often stems from an over-reliance on analyzing the verb's morphological form in isolation. To move beyond this limitation, this study adopts the crucial distinction, advanced by the linguist Tammam Hassan, between morphological tense (the basic past/non-past verb form) and grammatical tense (the actual time reference constructed through particles, context, and auxiliaries). This framework is essential for recognizing that Arabic possesses a robust, grammaticalized tense-aspect system.

Within this theoretical model, tense is defined as a grammatical category that locates an event in time relative to the moment of speaking (past, present, or future). In contrast, aspect is defined as a grammatical category that

reflects the speaker's perspective on the internal temporal constituency of a situation—such as whether it is ongoing, completed, or habitual.

The primary aim of this study is to provide a functional map of correspondences and divergences between the English and Arabic tense-aspect systems. Its purpose is fundamentally practical: to develop a clear, pedagogically-sound model that can aid in second language acquisition, enhance translation accuracy, and inform teaching methodologies.

The study adopts a descriptive-analytical approach, examining linguistic data from both languages through the lens of the aforementioned dichotomy. The method of inquiry involves a close examination of verb conjugation patterns, the use of auxiliary verbs, and particles that modify temporal and aspectual meaning. This analysis is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do the core grammatical structures for expressing tense and aspect in Arabic, when analyzed beyond mere morphology, correspond to the established tense-aspect system of English?
2. What are the most significant conceptual mismatches between the two systems that pose challenges for learners and translators?
3. What functional equivalents and compensatory strategies can be identified to bridge these grammatical and conceptual gaps?

This classification is driven by pedagogical and translational concerns, seeking to establish clear, functional equivalents between English and Arabic verb structures. English serves as the reference point for this comparison due to its role as a global lingua franca in second-language education and translation, as well as its well-documented and codified tense-aspect system. By systematically addressing these questions, this study provides practical insights for learners, translators, and educators, outlining not only structural correspondences but also identifying critical mismatches and the translation challenges they generate

2. Methodology and Approach of Inquiry

This study adopts a structured contrastive analysis to map the tense-aspect systems of English and Arabic. The methodology is designed to systematically compare the two linguistic structures by first establishing a well-defined framework for English and then applying a functional analysis to Arabic.

The analysis begins with the English tense-aspect system, which serves as the initial framework for comparison. It is organized according to the pedagogical model of twelve tenses, divided across the three primary temporal domains of present, past, and future. Each domain is analyzed through its simple form and three aspectual forms: continuous, perfect, and perfect continuous. This classification is further examined through the theoretical lens of Bernard Comrie's (1985) taxonomy of tense, which distinguishes between absolute, relative, and absolute-relative (perfect) tenses. The analysis of English also extends to other temporal structures not captured by the twelve-tense model and explicitly includes passive voice constructions.

Subsequently, the Arabic system is analyzed by applying Tammam Hassan's (1994) crucial distinction between *morphological tense* (the binary perfective/imperfective verb form) and *grammatical tense* (the actual time reference constructed with particles, auxiliaries, and context). This framework allows for a nuanced description of how Arabic expresses temporal and aspectual meaning beyond its basic morphology. The resulting Arabic structures are then directly compared to the twelve English tenses in both active and passive voices, with points of divergence within Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) usage being highlighted.

Throughout this comparative process, the researcher's practical expertise as a native Arabic speaker, teacher of Arabic and English, and translator is applied. This insider perspective is crucial for interpreting authentic usage, validating proposed equivalences, and explaining subtle nuances. The core of the inquiry is thus a side-by-side comparison of the two analyzed systems, designed to systematically highlight areas of functional equivalence and fundamental divergence. The final output is a detailed mapping that clarifies correspondences, identifies potential pitfalls for learners and translators, and accounts for the unique conceptualizations of time and action in each language.

3. Theoretical Framework

Tense and aspect are fundamental yet variably realized grammatical categories across languages. Tense is broadly defined as locating an event in time relative to the moment of utterance, while aspect characterizes the event's internal temporal structure, such as whether it is ongoing, completed, habitual, or iterative (Comrie, 1976; Klein, 1994; Smith, 1991).

This study operates within a contrastive linguistic framework, treating tense and aspect as distinct yet interrelated categories, with a specific focus on their structural and functional manifestations in English and Arabic. It integrates structuralist models and functional-semantic approaches to elucidate how these languages encode temporal and aspectual meaning through morphology, syntax, and context.

A key theoretical pillar is Comrie's (1976) classification of tense into absolute, relative, and absolute-relative categories, which facilitates a nuanced analysis of complex temporal references like the future perfect. This is complemented by Klein's (1994) semantic distinction between situation time, topic time, and utterance time, offering a precise lens for examining temporal reference in discourse.

For English, the study acknowledges the widespread pedagogical model of twelve tenses, which combines the three basic tenses (present, past, future) with four aspectual forms (simple, progressive, perfect, perfect progressive). While structurally clear for instruction, this model has been criticized for oversimplifying the dynamic, context-sensitive nature of tense-aspect usage in real discourse (Declerck, 1991; Huddleston & Pullum, 2002). Expressions such as "I used to smoke" or "He is going to travel" exemplify tense-aspect-modality interactions that extend beyond these conventional forms. Foundational studies of English by Comrie (1976), Quirk et al. (1985), and Huddleston and Pullum (2002) provide robust descriptive frameworks but are largely monolingual, seldom addressing contrasts with structurally different languages like Arabic.

In Arabic linguistics, both traditional Arab grammarians like Sībawayh and Ibn Jinnī and Western Arabists such as Wright (1975) and Ryding (2005) have emphasized the language's fundamentally aspectual verbal morphology, distinguishing between the perfective (*al-māḍī*) and imperfective (*al-muḍāriʿ*) forms. This view posits that *faʿala* represents a perfective action and *yafʿalu* an imperfective one. Comrie (1976, p. 80) echoes this, noting that the Arabic perfective indicates "both perfective meaning and relative past time reference, while the imperfective indicates everything else."

However, contemporary linguists including Brustad (2000) and Fassi Fehri (2004, 2012) have critiqued these generalizations, extending traditional insights through syntactic and discourse-based analyses. Fassi Fehri, for instance, argues for a covert tense system in Arabic, where temporal distinctions are inferred through aspectual forms and structural configurations.

Crucially, Tammām Ḥassān's (1994) influential distinction between *morphological tense (al-zaman al-ṣarfī)*—the surface verb form—and *grammatical tense (al-zaman al-naḥwī)*—which emerges from contextual and syntactic factors—resolves much of this confusion. This framework is vital for analyzing how particles (e.g., *sa-, sawfa, lan, kāna*), word order, and discourse context enable a single Arabic verb form to express multiple temporal meanings, thereby challenging Eurocentric analyses that misrepresent Arabic as lacking a tense system. Nonetheless, existing analyses often lack a fully integrated model connecting morphological form, syntactic structure, and pragmatic function. Similarly, much contrastive research (e.g., Al-Bayati, 1992; Al-Khawalda, 2002; Eisele, 1999) remains descriptive, highlighting morphological and usage differences without deeply engaging their theoretical implications.

4.   Tense and aspect in English

There is a substantial body of research on tense and aspect in English, offering a comprehensive account of their grammatical structure, semantic functions, and pragmatic applications. Studies by Comrie (1985), Bybee, Perkins, and Pagliuca (1994), Dahl (1985), and Smith (1991), among others, have elucidated the complexity of the English verbal system while situating it within broader typological and cognitive frameworks. These works have been instrumental in the development of tense-aspect typologies and have significantly advanced our understanding of cross-linguistic variation.

English utilizes a relatively overt and morphologically transparent tense-aspect system that combines verb inflection with auxiliary constructions. Traditionally, the English verb system is said to comprise twelve basic tense-aspect forms, generated from the combination of three primary tenses—present, past, and future—with four aspectual categories: simple, progressive, perfect, and perfect progressive. For instance, the verbs *writes* (present simple), *is writing* (present progressive), *has written* (present perfect), and *has been writing* (present perfect progressive) each reflect a different aspectual interpretation of the same temporal reference point.

English verbs are typically categorized into regular and irregular types, each of which follows a three-form paradigm: bare infinitive (V1), past simple (V2), and past participle (V3). These forms are central to the construction of tense and aspect, especially when used in conjunction with auxiliary verbs such as *to be*, *to have*, and modal verbs like *will* or *shall*. For example, regular verbs such as *want* follow the pattern: want – wanted – wanted. Irregular verbs, such as *go*, deviate from this pattern: go – went – gone.

Table (1) Conjugation of English verbs

Regular verbs			
Infinitive 0	Bare infinitive 1	Past 2	Past participle 3
To want	*Want*	*Wanted*	*Wanted*
Irregular verbs			
Infinitive 0	Bare infinitive 1	Past 2	Past Participle 3
To go	*Go*	*Went*	*Gone*

These verb forms, in combination with auxiliaries, form the basis of both active and passive voice constructions in English. Auxiliary verbs in English play a crucial role in expressing tense, aspect, and modality. The verb *to be*

appears in present forms (*is*, *am*, *are*), past forms (*was*, *were*), and as the participle *been*. The verb *to have* is expressed as *have* or *has* in the present and *had* in the past and the participle form. These auxiliaries combine with principal verbs to form aspectual distinctions, such as *have written* (perfect), *is writing* (progressive), or *has been writing* (perfect progressive). Notably, English marks the present simple with the addition of *-s* or *-es* for the third person singular (*she writes*, *he plays*), while the past simple is marked by the past form of the verb (*she wrote*, *they went*). The future tense lacks a dedicated inflection and is instead formed by placing a modal auxiliary (*will*, *shall*) before the bare infinitive (*she will write*). Of course, future in English is expressed not only through these modal verbs as will be shown later.

Table (2) Auxiliaries used in progressive and Perfective Aspects

Infinitive (0)	Bare infinitive (1)	Present	Past (2)	Past participle (3)
To be	*Be*	*is/ am / are*	*was/ were*	*been*
To have	*Have*	*have/ has*	*had*	*had*

English relies heavily on auxiliaries such as *be*, *have*, *will* form complex tenses and aspects. In fact, auxiliaries are central not only to grammatical structure but also to expressing temporal nuance, intentionality, and modality (Declerck, 1991; Huddleston & Pullum, 2002).

These auxiliaries have distinctive present forms, whereas other lexical verbs use the same bare infinitive but with the addition of the present (s, or es) when the subject is a singular noun or a singular third person pronoun.

- *She **is** a student.*   - *They **are** students.*
- *She go**es** to school every day*   - *They go to school every day.*

Building on Comrie's (1976) classification of tense into absolute, relative, and absolute-relative types, this study adopts the view that only absolute tense, based solely on the time of utterance, is treated as tense proper, while relative and absolute-relative tenses are more appropriately analyzed as aspectual or temporal-aspectual categories. Within this framework, any construction that employs only one of the principal verb forms without an auxiliary is interpreted as expressing tense, while those that incorporate *verb to have* or *verb to be* are interpreted as expressing aspect. Accordingly, three main types of aspect can be structurally distinguished: progressive (*be* + present participle), perfect (*have* + past participle), and perfect progressive (*have* + *been* + present participle). These patterns allow for a systematic classification of aspect in English.

Table (3) Structure of main aspects in English Active Voice

Progressive	*Verb to be + bare infinitive (1) + ing*
Perfect	*Verb to have + past participle (3)*
Perfect progressive	*Verb to have +Verb to be (been) + 1+ing*

The present study also organizes these structures into a matrix according to three tenses (present, past, future) and four aspectual types (simple, progressive, perfect, perfect progressive). For instance, *I do*, *I am doing*, *I have done*, and *I have been doing* represent the four present-time aspectual distinctions. This structure extends similarly into the past (*I did*, *I was doing*, etc.) and the future (*I will do*, *I will be doing*, etc.). The bare infinitive with *-ing* marks the continuous form used in the progressive aspect, while the past participle form is used in both the perfect aspect and the passive voice. Though the future tense does not have a dedicated inflected form, it is regularly formed through modal verbs such as *will* followed by the bare infinitive verb (*she will read*, *they will arrive*).

Table (4) Tense and Aspect in English Active Voice

Tense	Aspect	Present	Past	Future
Absolute	*(Simple)*	1 = I do / They do 1+ s/es =She does	2 I did / They did She did	Will+ 1= I will do / They will do She will do
Absolute	*Progressive*	Be(present) +1+ing = I am doing She is doing They are doing	Be (2) +1+ing= I was doing She was doing They were doing	Will + be (1) +1+ing= I will be doing She will be doing They will be doing
Relative absolute	*Perfect*	Have(present)+3 = I have done They have done She has done	Have (2) +3 = I had done They have done She had done	Wil l+ have (1) +3= I will have done She will have done They will have done

Relative absolute	Perfect Progressive	Have(present)+be (3) +1+ing = *I have been doing* *She has been doing* *They have been doing*	Have (2) + be (3) +1+ing = *I had been doing* *She had been doing* *They had been doing*	Will + have (1) + be (3) +1+ing= *I will have been doing* *She will have been doing* *They will have been doing*

Noice that the distinctive past form (2) is solely denoting simple past, which is used to express a state or event that occurred in a specific time in the past. The bare infinitive form (1) is used to mark the present simple, but with the addition of an *s or es* with a third person singular subject. The present tense is usually used to express a fact or a habit that holds true at the time of speaking. However, there is no specific form for the future, simply the bare infinitive form (1) preceded by a modal auxiliary such as *will* or *shall*. It is also worth noting that the bare infinitive plus *-ing* is used in combination with the verb *to be* to mark the progressive aspect.

There are three main types of aspect linked to the morphological form of the verb: progressive, perfect, and perfect progressive. The present form of the verb be (is*/am/are*) plus the *ing*-form mark a present continuous which express an event still ongoing at the time of speaking, whereas the past form of the verb be (was*/were*) plus the *ing*-form mark the past continuous which expresses an event that was continuing in the past. The future continuous, however, is expressed by using modal verb such as (will*/shall*) plus the bare infinitive of the verb *to be* plus the *ing*-form.

The perfect aspect is expressed by combining the verb *to have* plus the past participle. The present perfect which is usually used to express an event that happened in the past and connected with an effect in the present is marked by (*have/has*) plus the past participle of the verb, whereas the past perfect which is used to express a distant past is marked by (*had*) plus the past participle of the verb. The future prefect is marked by a modal auxiliary (*will/shall*) plus the bare infinitive have plus the past participle of the verb.

As for the prefect progressive, it is marked by a combination of the verb *to have* (according to the tense, *has/have; had*; (or the bare infinitive of the verb *to have* after a future modal auxiliary), plus the past participle of the verb *to be* (*been*), plus the *ing*-form of the main verb. This is the case in the active voice. The past participle form is also utilized to express the passive voice as will be shown below.

Although this classification offers a clear structural delineation of tense and aspect, the actual interpretation of a sentence often relies heavily on contextual adverbials. For instance, the present continuous can express an action continuing at the time of speaking as in
- *He is reading Gurdian now.*
But it can also express a habitual activity if we add the adverb always
- *He is always reading the Guardian.*
It can also express a future activity that has been decided and arranged for
- *He is reading the Guardian for an audience tomorrow.*
Such examples underscore the importance of discourse context in the interpretation of tense and aspect.

Beyond the traditional twelve-tense model, English exhibits a wide range of temporal constructions that reflect more nuanced temporal relations, particularly for expressing habituality, planned actions, and indirect futurity or past futurity. For instance, the following structures one describes a habit in the past and other express a routine in the past.
- A habit in the past*: I used to smoke*
- A routine in the past*: I would wake up at six o'clock, go running and then have a shower.*
Both structures indicate past habits or routines that are no longer true. These can be considered as instances of a renewed or habitual past.

Similarly, various constructions express different shades of future time. In fact, there are different layers of aspect for future events with regards to phasal as well as speaker viewpoint. First, for phasal aspect, there are intentioned action, intentioned and planned action, scheduled, approximate action which can all be included under the term *relative future*.
- Intended future event: *I am going to travel this weekend*
- Intended and planned future event*: I am travelling this weekend*
- Scheduled future event: *My train leaves at 7:30 in the morning*
Second, from a speaker viewpoint, there are also different types of future which can be included under the term *absolute relative* as in the following:

- Future in the past: *Mary left at six o'clock, she would return an hour later*
- Future in the future*: At six o'clock, Mary will be about to leave*
- Future perfect in the past*: Mary left at six o'clock. She would return an hour later, by which time her son would have left for school.*
- Future perfect in the future*: When they have arrived home, she will have done cooking*

These forms cannot be fully explained through the basic tense-aspect grid. For example, *would return* expresses relative future with a past reference point, falling under Comrie's (1976) absolute-relative tense. Similarly, *going to travel* combines present tense with future reference, blurring the boundary between tense and modality.

In addition to active voice structures, there are corresponding passive ones. The passive voice is typically used when the agent is unknown, irrelevant, or purposefully omitted. Passive constructions are formed by combining the appropriate tense or aspectual form of *be* with the past participle of the main verb

Passive	*Verb to be + past participle*

Passive aspectual structures as such are expressed with the integration of the verb to be form, with the auxiliaries that mark the progressive and the perfect aspect.

Table (5) Structure of main aspects in English Passive Voice

Progressive passive	*Verb to be + being + bare infinitive (1) + ing*
Perfect passive	*Verb to have + been+ past participle (3)*
Perfect progressive	*Verb to have +Verb to be (been) + gerund*

In addition to active voice constructions, all of the aforementioned structures have corresponding passive forms. The passive voice is typically used when the agent is unknown, irrelevant, or purposefully omitted. Passive constructions are formed by combining the appropriate tense or aspectual form of *be* with the past participle of the main verb. For instance, *It is done*, *It was being done*, and *It has been being done* represent passive equivalents of simple, progressive, and perfect progressive constructions, respectively. The above active structures can have their counterparts in the passive voice, as represented in the following table.

Table (6) Tense and Aspect in English Passive Voice

Tense	Aspect	Present	Past	Future
Absolute	*(Simple)*	*Be(present)+ 3 =* *It is done* *They are done*	*Be (2) +3=* *It was done* *They were done*	*Will+ be (1) + 3=* *It will be done* *They will be done*
Absolute	*Progressive*	*Be(present) +be (1) + ing + 3 =* *It is being done* *They are being done*	*Be (2)+be(1)+ing+3=* *It was being done* *They were being done*	*Will +be (1) +b (1) +ing+3 =* *It will be being done* *They will be being done*
Relative absolute	*Perfect*	*Have(present)+be (3) +3=* *It has been done* *They have been done*	*Have (2) +be (3) +3 =* *It had been* *They had been done*	*Will + have (1) +be (3) +3=* *It will have been done* *They will have been done*
Relative absolute	*Perfect Progressive*	*Have(present)+be (3) +be (1) + ing+3 =* *It has been being done* *They have been being done*	*Have (2) + be (3) +be (1) + ing + 3 =* *It had been being done* *They have been being done*	*Will + have (1) + be (3) +be (1) +ing+3=* *It will have been being done* *They will have been being done*

It should be noted, however, that in contemporary spoken English, the use of *being* in continuous passives is often replaced by *getting*, as in *It is getting done*, *it was getting done*, or *it is getting done.*

Overall, the English tense-aspect system is characterized by its syntactic transparency and morphological richness, allowing for precise temporal distinctions. However, it also demonstrates the interaction of grammatical structure with discourse context, particularly in forms expressing future reference, intention, or habituality.

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5. Tense and Aspect in Arabic: Between Morphology and Context

Unlike English, which overtly marks tense through a combination of inflection and auxiliary verbs, Arabic relies primarily on a binary morphological system that distinguishes between the perfective (*al-māḍī*) and imperfective (*al-muḍāriʿ*) verb forms. The perfective form generally describes completed events and is most frequently associated with past tense. The imperfective is used for incomplete, habitual, or future events, depending on contextual cues. However, these forms do not map neatly onto the English tense categories. Instead, their temporal and aspectual interpretation is highly context-dependent, shaped by syntactic environment, discourse function, and lexical semantics. It should be also mentioned that these two forms are not the only morphological forms related to Arabic verbs as there are other forms as shown in the following table:

Table (7) Arabic verb forms and related derivations

Active Voice مبني لمعلوم				Passive Voice مبني للمجهول		Active participle اسم الفاعل	Passive participle اسم المفعول
Perfective ماضي A2	Imperfective مضارع A1	Verbal noun مصدر	Imperative أمر	Perfective ماضي P2	Imperfective مضارع P1		
كَتَبَ Kataba	يكْتُبُ yaktubu	كتابة kitaaba	أكْتُب uktub	كُتِبَ kutiba	يُكْتَبُ yuktabu	كاتِب kaatib	مكتوب maktuob

There are two main observations with regards to verb forms and the expression of tense and aspect in Arabic. First, verb forms alone generally do not specify tense and aspect. For example, the imperfective form can be used to express both the present simple and the present continuous. The continuation aspect is marked using lexical words, as illustrated in these examples.

- هو يدرسُ اللغة العربية
  Huwwa   ya-drusu   al-ʿArabiyya
  He   3.MS-study-NOM   the-Arabic
  "He studies Arabic"

- هو يدرسُ الآن
  Huwwa   yadrusu   al-ʿaan
  He   3.MS-study-NOM   now
  "He is studying now"

The same applies to the perfect aspect, especially the present perfect continuous. Classically, the perfective form which is used to express past simple tense is also used to express the present perfect. Even the use of the particle قد *qad* with the past tense form of the verb was considered by classical grammarians as a device for emphatic effect only. However, modern grammarians—perhaps influenced by English and other Latin-based languages—tend to argue that Arabic marks the perfect aspect through the use of the particle *qad* plus the perfective form of the verb, as well as the use of *kāna* كان *"was/were"* for the past perfect and سيكون *sayakun* *"will be"* for the future perfect.

The past perfect aspect is marked by the use of the verb *kāna*, conjugated according to the subject, followed by the past form of the main verb. Similarly, the future perfect is marked by the conjugated form of *sayakunu*, also followed by the perfective form of verb. It is evident that the verb *to be* plays a major role in marking aspect in Arabic. As for the perfect continuous aspect, Arabic does not appear to have a dedicated structure; rather, it uses the same forms as those of the simple perfect aspect.

Thus, Arabic verbs do not inherently express absolute tense values (past, present, or future); instead, the temporal reference is grammatically constructed, often through the interaction of the verb with particles, negation, modality markers, and sentence structure. For instance: سيكتب *(sa-yaktubu) – he will write* and لن يكتب *(lan yaktuba) – he will not write* both use the imperfective form (يكتب *yaktubu),* but the presence of سـ *(sa- – will) or* لن *(lan – will not)* defines their temporal orientation. Also كان يكتب *(kāna yaktubu) – he was writing* introduces a past progressive interpretation via the auxiliary كان *(kāna – was)* and an imperfective main verb.

The second observation is that verbal noun (المصدر *al-maṣdar),* active participle (اسم الفاعل *ism al-fāʿil),* and passive participle (اسم المفعول *ism al-mafʿūl)* are noun forms that can sometimes replace verbs. The verbal noun can substitute for an أن + verb construction, as in:

- أريد أن أذهبَ إلى السوقِ
  u-rīd-u   ʾan   ʾa-dhhab-a   ʾila   as-suq-i
  1.S-want COMP 1.S-go-ACC   to   the-market-ACC
  "I want to go to the market"

The subjunctive verb and the non-finite complementizer 'an can be replaced by the verbal noun of the verb, as such the above sentence becomes

- أريدُ الذهابَ إلى السوق
  Urīdu   adh-dhhāb-a   'ila as-sūq-i
  1.S-want   the-going-ACC   to the-market-GEN
  "I want the writing of the letter."

The active participle often expresses a continuous or current action, especially with verbs like ذهب (*dhahaba* – to go), نام (*nāma* – to sleep), جلس (*jalasa* – to sit), and وقف (*waqafa* – to stand), e.g. هو نائم (*huwa nāʾim*) – "he is sleeping," and هو ذاهب إلى المدرسة (*huwa dhāhib ilā al-madrasah*) – "he is going to school.". The same applies to past continuous as well as the future continuous as in the following examples:

- كان يدرس اللغة العربية
  Kāna   yadrus-u   al-ʿArabiyya
  3.SM.was   3.SM-study-NOM the-Arbic
  "He was studying Arabic"

- كان ذاهبًا إلى السوق
  Kāna   dhāhib-an   ila as-sūq-i
  3.SM.was 3.MS.going-ACC   to the-market-GEN
  "He was going to the market"

- سيكون يدرس اللغة العربية
  Sa-ya-kūn-u   yadrus-u   al-ʿArabiyya
  Will-3.MS-be-NOM 3.MS-study-NOM the-Arabic
  "He will be studying Arabic"

- سيكون ذاهبًا إلى السوق
  Sa-ya-kūn-u   dhāhib-an   ila as-sūq-i
  Will-3.MS-be-NOM 3.MS-going-NOM to the-market-GEN
  "He will be going to the market"

The passive participle can express a resulting state from a passive action, as in الكتاب مقروء (*al-kitāb maqrūʾ*) – "the book is read" and الباب مفتوح (*al-bāb maftūḥ*) – "the door is open." Though nominal in form, these structures often carry verbal meaning, allowing for flexible and stylistically rich expression in Arabic.

Thus generally speaking, the traditional 12-tense model in English, which includes combinations of tense, aspect, and modality (e.g., *present simple*, *past perfect continuous*, etc.), can be effectively mapped onto Arabic verbal structures using primarily two core verb forms: the perfective (A1) and the imperfective (A2). These two forms serve as the foundation for expressing tense and aspect in Arabic.

Table (8) Tense and Aspect in Arabic Active Voice

Tense	*Aspect*	Present	Past	Future
Absolute	*(Simple)*	A1 يفعل *Yaf?al*	A2 فعل *Fa?al*	Fut. Particle + A1 سيفعل *Sayaf?al*
Absolute	*Progressive*	A1 (or active participle) يفعل / فاعل *Yaf?al/fa'il*	A2 of be +A1 كان يفعل *kāna yaf?al*	Fut. Particle + A1 of be+ A1 سيكون يفعل *Sayakunu yaf?al*
Relative absolute	*Perfect*	(la)qad +A2 لقد فعل/قد فعل *(la)qad fa?al*	A2 of be (+qad) +A2 كان فعل/كان قد فعل *kāna qad fa?al*	Fut. particle + qad +A2 سيكون قد فعل *Sayakunu qad fa?al*
Relative absolute	*Perfect progressive*	A1 يفعل *yaf?al*	A2 of be +A1 كان يفعل *kāna yaf?al*	Fut. Particle + A1 سيكون يفعل *yaf?al*

To express more specific temporal or aspectual distinctions such as past, habitual, or progressive actions, Arabic frequently combines the imperfective with the copular verb *kāna/yakūnu* (كان / يكون, "to be"). Additionally, the perfective particle *qad* (قد) is often used to mark perfect aspect, while the future particle *sa-* (س) or *sawfa* (سوف) precedes the imperfective to express future tense. Through these combinations, using the verb forms كان / يكون, the particles قد and سوف / س, and the base perfective and imperfective stems, Arabic is able to mirror a wide range of the tense-aspect meanings conveyed in English, despite having a fundamentally different verbal system.

However, it must be emphasized that Arabic tense and aspect are not limited to fixed patterns as in the table. In fact, the same structure can be translated into different meanings depending on the context. Consider the following English sentences and their corresponding Arabic translations:

- كنتُ أفعلُ

  Kunt-u a-f'al-u
  Was-1.S 1.S.do-NOM
  "I was doing"
- كنتُ أفعلُ

  Kunt-u a-f'al-u
  Was-1.S 1.S.do-NOM
  "I used to do"
- كنتُ أفعلُ

  Kunt-u a-f'al-u
  Was-1.S 1.S.do-NOM
  "I had been doing"

This fluidity highlights a fundamental characteristic of the Arabic verbal system: a single verb form can correspond to multiple tense or aspectual interpretations. As a result, tense and aspect in Arabic are not strictly encoded through verbal morphology alone but are instead largely inferred from contextual and lexical cues.

More interestingly, the passive voice in Arabic exhibits patterns similar to those of the active voice. The two primary forms, the perfective passive (P2) and the imperfective passive (P1), function independently in much the same way as their active counterparts. Additionally, they can be combined with the same aspectual particles to convey various temporal and aspectual meanings, as illustrated in the table below.

Table (9) Tense and Aspect in Arabic Passive Voice

Tense	*Aspect*	Present	Past	Future
Absolute	*(simple)*	P1 يُفعَل *yuf?alu*	P2 فُعِل *fu?ila*	Fut. Particle + P1 سيُفعَل *sayuf?alu*
Absolute	*Progressive*	P1 يُفعَل *yuf?alu*	A2 of be +P1 كان يُفعَل *kāna yuf?alu*	Fut. Particle + A1 of be+ P1 سيكون يُفعَل *Sayakunu yuf?alu*
Relative absolute	*Perfect*	(la)qad +P2 لقد /قد فُعِل *(la)qad fu?ila*	A2 of be (+qad) +P2 كان (قد) فُعِل *kāna (qad) fu?ila*	Fut. particle + A1 of be+ qad +P2 سيكون قد فُعِل *Sayakunu qad fu?ila*
Relative absolute	*Perfect progressive*	P1 يُفعَل *yuf?alu*	A2 of be +P1 كان يُفعَل *kāna yuf?alu*	Fut. Particle + A1of be + P1 سيكون يُفعَل *Sayakunu yuf?alu*

In Modern Standard Arabic, particularly in formal and journalistic contexts, the passive voice is often expressed through a periphrastic construction involving the support verb *(SV)* تَمَّ *(tamma)* or يَتِمُّ *(yatimmu)*, followed by the verbal noun *(VN)* of the main lexical verb. This structure combines a light/support verb with a nominalized verb phrase, which together function as the main predicate of the clause. Within this construction, the verbal noun remains morphologically fixed, unaffected by tense, aspect, or mood. Instead, these grammatical features are marked on the support verb itself, which is conjugated accordingly.

Moreover, this structure can be further modified by the inclusion of the copular verb كَانَ *(kāna)* or يَكُونُ *(yakūnu)* to indicate tense and aspect (e.g., past or habitual), as well as by the perfective particle قَدْ *(qad)* or the future particle سَـ *(sa)* to convey additional temporal or modal nuance.

Table (10) Tense and Aspect in MSA Passive Voice

Tense	*Aspect*	Present	Past	Future
Absolute	*(simple)*	A1of SV+ VN يتم عمل *yatimu ?amal*	A2 of SV+ VN تم عمل *tamma ?amal*	sa + A1of SV+ VN سيتم عمل *sayatimu ?amal*
Absolute	*Progressive*	A1of SV+ VN يتم عمل *yatimu*	A2 of be +A1 of SV +VN كان يتم عمل *kāna yatimu ?amal*	sa+ A1 of be+ A1of SV+ VN سيكون يتم عمل *sayakunu yatimu ?amal*

Relative absolute	Perfect	qad/laqad + A2 of SV+ VN لقد /قد تم عمل (la)qad tamma ?amal	A2 of be (+qad) + A2 of SV+ VN كان (قد) تم عمل kāna qad tamma ?amal	sa+ A1 of be+ qad + A2 of SV+ VN سيكون قد تم عمل Sayakunu qad tamma ?amal
Relative absolute	Perfect progressive	A1of SV+ VN يتم عمل satimu ?amal	A2 of be + A1of SV+ VN كان يتم عمل kāna yatimu ?amal	sa + A1of be + A1of SV+ VN سيكون يتم عمل sayakunu yatimu ?amal

The main difference between Classical Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is that the latter seems to be influenced lexically and grammatically by languages like French and English. As such, there is a tendency to provide a similar dichotomy of tense and aspect in Arabic to that of English as shown in the tables above. However, such an elegant representation of tense and aspect for Modern Standard Arabic collapses because there is no clear-cut distinction between Classical Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic.

To account for the complexity of tense and aspect in Arabic, this study draws on Tammām Ḥassān's (1994) influential distinction between morphological tense (al-zaman al-ṣarfī), the verb form itself, and grammatical tense (al-zaman al-naḥwī), the temporal meaning derived from syntax and context. According to Ḥassān, Arabic verbs do not express absolute tense through morphology alone; rather, temporality emerges from the interaction between verbal aspect, sentence structure, and discourse context. For instance, the verb yaktubu, while morphologically imperfective, carries no fixed temporal value unless it is situated within a broader syntactic or pragmatic framework.

This perspective aligns with broader linguistic analyses that maintain Arabic encodes aspect morphologically and tense grammatically, effectively inverting the tense-aspect relationship found in languages like English. While English constructs aspectual distinctions on a tense base using auxiliaries, Arabic projects temporality onto aspectual forms through contextual and syntactic means. In this light, Arabic should not be viewed as lacking tense marking but rather as operating according to a distinct temporal-aspectual logic. Such a framework enables a more accurate contrastive analysis, avoiding the imposition of Indo-European categories onto the fundamentally different structure of a Semitic language.

6. Conclusion

This study has argued for a fundamental reconceptualization of the Arabic tense-aspect system, moving beyond the long-standing aspect-prominent hypothesis. By applying a contrastive framework that distinguishes between morphological form and grammatical function—a distinction powerfully articulated by Tammam Hassan—we have demonstrated that Arabic possesses a robust, grammaticalized tense system that operates in tandem with its aspectual distinctions. Our analysis reveals that while English codifies tense and aspect through a system of auxiliary verbs and inflections, Arabic achieves comparable semantic scope through the sophisticated interaction of the imperfective verb form (al-muḍāriʿ), temporal particles, and auxiliary chains. These findings challenges monolingual and Eurocentric analyses that have historically mischaracterized Arabic's temporal logic.

The theoretical implications of this research are significant. It resolves the apparent paradox in the Arabic verbal system by showing that the perfective/imperfective dichotomy is a morphological substrate upon which grammatical tense is constructed, not a contradiction to it. This model offers a more coherent account of temporal reference in Arabic, reconciling traditional grammatical insights with modern syntactic and semantic theory.

Practically, the findings provide a definitive, empirically grounded framework for applied linguistics. For pedagogy, the identified functional equivalents offer a clear blueprint for curriculum development, enabling instructors to move beyond rote memorization toward concept-based instruction. For translation studies, the analysis of conceptual mismatches, particularly in the domain of the perfect, provides translators with a metalinguistic toolkit for navigating non-isomorphic structures, promoting translations that capture temporal meaning rather than merely replicating form.

Future research should explore the diachronic stability of this tense-aspect interface and its manifestations in various Arabic dialects. Furthermore, the pedagogical efficacy of the proposed contrastive model warrants quantitative investigation in classroom settings. In conclusively establishing Arabic as a language that distinctly grammaticalizes both tense and aspect, this study not only advances linguistic theory but also provides a powerful, actionable foundation for enhancing cross-linguistic pedagogy and professional translation practice

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Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.