Tenses in Arabic Language

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ABSTRACT   *Arabic to some extent has a different grammatical structure. Tenses structure is the most controversial issue in most languages. Languages of the same family might have some similarities. Yet, there are some areas to be investigated to come to some common features among languages of the world. The present paper is investigating the structure of Tenses in Arabic. The researcher sheds light on four types of tenses in Arabic which are past or perfect, present or imperfect, imperative and future. Arabic past tense refers to a completed action and thus equates in most respects with English past tense and past perfect. Present tense expresses an action still unfinished at the time to which reference is being made. It is most frequently translated into English by the present or future. The imperative or command tense in Arabic is based upon the imperfect or present tense verb in the jussive mood. Some words or affixes are used to express future tense in Arabic. This paper is significant since it exposes the real structure of tenses in Arabic for non-Arab readers with examples and diagrams.*

KEYWORDS : Arabic, Tenses, Grammar, Jussive, Imperative

Introduction:

There is no any coincidence in the tenses of Arabic language compared with the Indo-European languages, especially English which involves twelve tenses. Duncan (1863) said that the Arabic grammarians arrange their moods and tenses differently from the Europeans, dividing their paradigm into five parts: 1st, the Preterit; 2nd the Aorist; 3rd the Imperative; 4th Participle; and 5th, the Infinitive. Arabic, in common with other Semitic languages, is deficient in tenses, and this does make for ease in learning. Moreover, the tenses do not have accurate time-significances as in Indo-European languages. There are two main tenses, the Perfect ٱلْمَـاضِي al-māḍi, denoting actions completed at the time to which reference is being made; and Imperfect ٱلْمُضَـارع al-muḍāri, for incomplete actions. There is also an Imperative, ٱلأمر al-amr, which may consider a modification of the Imperfect. (Haywood and Nahmad 95-96). The last view on tenses relating to Wightwick and Gaafar (2005) is that Arabic is relatively straightforward when it comes to tenses. Some languages have many tenses and are very specific about time of an action and whether or not the action has been completed. Arabic Grammar is vague about time and there are only two basic tenses: the Past (or perfect) ٱلْمَـاضِي, the Present (or Imperfect) ٱلْمُضَـارع.

Thus, the above controversy on the number of the Arabic tenses shows the wide different ideas. Duncan (1863) states five parts; the Preterit, the Aorist, the Imperative, the Participle and the Infinitive. On the other hand, Alsamerrai (2003), Abduhamid (1980), Mobarak (1992), and Hassan (1995), see that tense of the Arabic language involves three parts; 1st the Perfect ٱلْمَـاضِي al-māḍi, 2nd the Imperfect ٱلْمُضَـارع al-muḍāriᶜ and 3rd the Imperative, الأمر al-ᵓamr. However, Haywood and Nahmad (1965), Thatcher (1992), Alhawary (2011), and Wightwick and Gaafar (2005) say that there are only two tenses in Arabic, the Past (or perfect) ٱلْمَـاضِي; and the Present (or Imperfect) ٱلْمُضَـارع. Since the imperative, according to Haywood and Nahmad (1965) is a modification of the imperfect (present) verb form.

1.1 Past Tense or Perfect in Arabic:

Ryding (2005) stated that Arabic past tense refers to a completed action and thus equates in most respects with English past tense and past perfect. For example: فتَحَ الولدُ الرسالة 'fataḥa alwaladu alrisalah 'The boy opened/has opened the letter. As the action of opening the letter was already completed and finished long ago. She adds the past verb is formed by suffixing person-markers (indicators) to the past tense stem. The person markers in the past tense also denote

number (singular – dual - plural) and gender. It means that all these suffixes or endings telling you who the doer of the action is with no need to use any pronoun. For example: the ending تـَ 'at' refers to هِيَ 'hiya' she; رَسَمَتْ وردة 'rasamat warda' she drew a flower. Besides the above example, the table below has all the person markers in the three types of number and gender:

Gender	Singular	Dual	Plural
1st person	كَسَرتُ 'kasar**tu**' I broke (m+f)	_____	كَسَرنا 'kasar**na**' we broke
2nd person			
Male	كَسَرتَ 'kasar**ta**' you broke (m)	كَسَرتُما 'kasart**uma**' you broke (m)	كَسَرتُمْ 'kasar**tum**' you broke (m)
Female	كَسَرتِ 'kasar**ti**' you broke (f)	كَسَرتُما 'kasar**tuma**' you broke (f)	كَسَرتُنَّ 'kasar**tunna**' you broke (f)
3rd person			
Male	كَسَرَ 'kasar**a**' he broke	كَسَرَا 'kasar**ā**' they broke (2 persons / m)	كَسَرُوا 'kasar**ū**' they broke (m)
Female	كَسَرَتْ 'kasar**at**' she broke	كَسَرَتا 'kasar**atā**' they broke (2 persons / f)	كَسَرنَ 'kasar**na**' they broke (m)

Table (1) the Person Markers of Numbers (Singular – Dual - Plural) and Gender

According to Hassan (1995) and Alsamerrai (2003) we find that there are four cases of the past. They are as follows:

➢ First, the verb is morphologically and semantically past. That is, it is in the past form and it is used to indicate past actions whether these took place in the near or far past, and this use is the most common for the past.

➢ Second, the verb is morphologically past but not semantically. The verb is in the past form, but it could be used for present actions. For example, in what they call „contract" terms, the verb is in the past but it is used to indicate present situations such as (بعت 'biᶜt' sold, اشتريت 'ishtarayt' bought).

➤ Third, the past verb form could be used for future actions especially in some religious expressions such as in supplications: (سَاعَدكَ الله) 'saᶜadaka allah', May Allah help you) or (بَاركَ الله فيكَ) 'Baraka allah fiːka', May Allah bless you). The past can also be used for future actions to show that these actions are sure to happen. Besides this, the particles: (إنَّ 'inna', اذا 'itha') convert the meaning of the past verb into future. (Qtd. in Alesawe 2015).

The following clarify these points:

● وَنُفِخَ في الصور 'wa nufikha fi alṢūr'. "And the trumpet shall be blown" (Yasin, verse 51) (emphasized future event).

● ان عُدْتم عُدنا 'in ᶜutum ᶜudna'. "but if return to your previous state, We will too" (Al-Israᵒ, verse 8).

● اذا جاء الرجل 'idha jāᵒa alrajulu', if the man came.

● والله لا كلمتك بعدها 'wallahi la kalamtuka baᶜdaha', by my God, I will not talk to you after that.

➤ Fourth, when the verb is morphologically in the past but semantically it refers to the past, present or future as in:

● سَواء عليكَ قُمتَ أو قَعَدت 'sawaᵒun ᶜalika qumta am qaᶜata', whether you stand up or sit down.

● هلَّا ساعدت المحتاج؟ 'halla saᶜata almuḥtaj?', will you help the poor/needy?

1.2 The Present Tense or Imperfect in Arabic:

The imperfect tense (المضارع) 'almuḍariᶜ' expresses an action still unfinished at the time to which reference is being made. It is most frequently translated into English by the present or future. It expresses by prefixes and has also some suffixes to denote number and gender, (Haywood and Nahmad 110). The imperfect itself denotes only to unfinished action, but it also indicates future by putting the independent word سَوْفَ before the verb or prefixing the contraction سَ, e.g. سَوْفَ يَكْتب 'sawfa yaktub', he will write. However, there are some indicator words which make the context clear, either in future, present continuous, habitual or even past continuous. The following are some examples for each case:

- Tomorrow, غداً 'ghadan'makes it clear that the verb refers to future time; وصل اليوم ويرحلُ غداً 'waṢala alyaūm wa yarḥalu ghadan' He arrived today and will leave tomorrow.

- Now, الآن 'alʾān' gets the context in continuous time; يلْعب الآن 'yalʿab alʾān' He is plying now.

- Every day, كل يوم 'kulla yaum' gives an impression that the action is a habit; يلْعب كلّ يوم'yalʿab kulla yaum' He plays every day.

- Was, كان 'kana' the past continuous and habitual are expressed by the perfect of كان followed by the verb; كان يلعب كرة قدم كل يوم ، kana yalʿab kurat qadam kulla yaum' He was playing football every day.

Singular Pronoun		Gender	Root Verb with Prefixes & Endings		
أنا	I	masc./fem	أكْتبُ	I write	ʾaktubu
أنْتَ	You	masc.	تكْتبُ	you write	taktubu
أنْتِ	you	fem.	تكْتبينَ	you write	taktubiiina
هُوَ	he/it	masc.	يكْتبُ	he writes	yaktubu
هيَ	she/it	fem.	تكْتبُ	she writes	taktubu

Plural Pronoun		Gender	Root Verb with Prefixes & Endings		
نَحْنُ	we	masc./fem	نكْتبْ	we write	naktub
أنْتُمْ	you	masc.	تكْتبُونَ	you write	taktubūna
أنْتَنَّ	you	fem.	تكْتبْنَ	you write	taktubna
هُمْ	they	masc.	يكْتبونَ	they write	yaktubūna
هُنَّ	they	fem.	يكْتبْنَ	they write	yaktubna

Table (2-3) Prefixes and Endings Defining the Subject (singular, plural, male or female)

Wightwick and Gaafar (2008) made a reference to the present, as it is used for continuous or habitual action (or state) which is still going on (unfinished.), and the present stem is formed from the three root letters with a vowel after the second (ktub, shrab, jlis) e.g. يكْتب 'yaktub', يشْرَب 'yashrab', يَجْلِس 'yajlis'. Prefixes and sometimes endings are added to the stem, show the subject of the verb if it is singular, plural, male or female. The tables below clarify all these varieties:

Furthermore, Wightwick and Gaafar (2005) point out that verbs in every day Arabic; the final short vowels are dropped and ـنـ 'na' on the end verbs. The verb تشْرَبينَ 'tashrabina' (you, fem. drink) becomes تشْرَبي 'tashrabi', and يشْرَبُون 'yashrabūna (they, masc. drink) becomes يشْرَبُو ' yashrabū', that is in the present tense. Likely in the past tense فتَحَ 'fataḥa' (he, masc. opened) becomes فتَحْ 'fataḥ' , فتَحْتُ 'fataḥtu' (I opened) and فتَحَتَ 'fataḥta' (you, masc. opened) both become فتَحْتْ ' fataḥt' , but the ending i in فتَحْتِ 'fataḥti' (she, fem. opened) is remaining as it is without any dropping or change.

1.3 The Imperative:

The imperative (فعل أمر) is formed from the jussive, of which it may be considered a modification, by taking away the pronominal prefix, and replacing it by an ᵓalif, .e.g. كَتَبَ 'kataba' he wrote; jussive يَكْتُبْ 'yaktub' he writes will be in the imperative form أُكْتُبْ ، 'ᵓuktub' write. This alif, أ 'alif' is changeable, as it might be vowel with ḍamma ٌ or kasra ٍ, (Haywood & Nahmad 134). All these types will be explained later on. Ryding (2005) argued that the imperative or command form of the verb in Arabic is based upon the imperfect or present tense verb in the jussive mood. Consequently, we have to know that the difference between jussive and subjunctive is not much, as in the jussive there is a sukūn ْ over the final root letter: يَكْتُبْ 'yaktub' but a fatḥa َ is in the subjunctive: like يَكْتُبَ 'yaktuba'. Moreover, in the book *Arabic Verbs and Essential of Grammar*, Whightwick and Gaafar (2008) discussed the imperative by asserting the previous views as they said the imperative (for command or request) is also from the jussive by removing the initial prefix. If this leaves a sukūn ْ over the first letter, an alif, أ is added at the beginning. The following examples will shed light on this point for more explanation regarding to Whightwick and Gaafar.

There are many situations and forms to make imperative according to the verb forms in its jussive condition. The 1st type is when verbs with sukūn ْ over the first root letter in the jussive; the letters at beginning (prefix) are taken off and replaced by an alif, أ 'ᵓalif' and this ᵓalif will have a ḍamma ٌ, but a kasra if the middle vowel of the present is either fatḥa َ or kasra ٍ . Some examples:

- يَكْتُبْ 'yaktub' (jussive), he writes becomes أُكْتُبْ 'ᵓuktub' ; the prefix يَ is removed and replaced by an alif, أ 'ᵓalif' with ḍamma ٌ.

- تَشْرَبْ 'tashrab' (jussive), you drink becomes إِشْرَبْ 'ᵓishrab' ; the prefix تَ is dropped and substituted by alif, إ 'ᵓalif' with kasra ٍ.

- يَغْسِلْ 'yaghsil' (jussive), he washes becomes إغْسِلْ 'ᵓighsil', يَ is crossed out and alif, إ 'ᵓalif' with kasra ٍ is instead of it.

However, in the second type there are verbs with a vowel over the first root letter of the jussive rather than a sukūn ْ. Here, verbs do not have an alif 'ᵓalif' like what occurs with the forms II, III, V, VI,. For example:

Form II تُكَسِّرُ 'tukassir', jussive, she breaks, becomes in the imperative كَسِّري 'kassiri' crossed out the prefix تُ 'tu' and suffix ي 'ya' is added. Form III يُشَاهِدْ 'yushahid', jussive, he watches, changed into imperative شَاهِدْ 'shahid'. The same procedure also will be with

the other forms; as the form V تَتَذَكَّر 'tatadhakkar' becomes تَذَكَّرْ 'tadhakkar' and the form IV تَتَعَاون 'tataᶜāwan' becomes تعَاوَنْ 'taᶜāwan'.

1.4 Future:

Regarding the tenses in Arabic as has been mentioned, tense is merely divided into two, past and present including the imperative. However, future tense can be expressed by one of these tenses. Similarly, Ryding (2005) and Wightwick and Gaafar (2008) agreed that if you want to talk about the future in Arabic, you also use present tense with adding the prefix سَ 'sa' or سَوفَ 'sawfa' 'will' to the front of the present verb to indicate the future. For example: سأعود على الفور 'saᵒaᶜūdu ᶜala alfaūr' 'I will be back immediately', سوف أبذل قصارى جهدي 'sawfa ᵒabdhilu quṢara jahdi' 'I will do my best'. In addition, the verb may be active or passive, e.g. سَيُعْقَدُ الإجتماع غداً 'sayuᶜqadu alᵒijtimaᶜu ghadan', The conference will be held tomorrow. Ryding points out that the particle سَ 'sa' is identified by some grammarians as an abbreviation of سَوفَ 'sawfa'.Nevertheless, Abdel-Hafiz (2006) and Alsamerrai (2003) distinguished between سَ 'sa' or سَوفَ 'sawfa'. They saidسَ 'sa' is used for near future, while سَوفَ 'sawfa' is for remote future. The latter supported his view by the following example from the Holly Quran:

وَيَقُولُ الْإِنسَانُ أَإِذَا مَا مِتُّ لَسَوْفَ أُخْرَجُ حَيًّا

'wa yaqūlu alᵒinsanu ᵒᵒidha ma mitu la sawfa ᵒukhraju ḥayya', And says man: What! When I am dead shall I truly be brought forth alive? Maryam, Verse 66. The particle (لَسَوفَ) is used because; s/he thinks that resurrection is very far away.

Moreover, there are other words used for expressing future time either in past or in present. Such as, لن 'lan' will not, لو 'law' if, يكاد 'yakad' almost/about to, and القادم 'alqadim' next', all of these are used in present but denote to future. Some examples:

➢ لن يذهبَ معي 'lan yadhhaba maᶜi' , He will not come with me.

➢ يكادُ البئرُ يجف 'yakdu albiᵒru yajif', Almost the well dries up.

➢ تنتهي الفعاليات الأسبوع القادم 'tantahi alfaᶜaliat alᵒusbūᶜ alqadim' The activities will be finished next week. Whereas, إن 'in' and لا 'la' are used in past context to indicate future time. For example:

➢ إن حَضضرَ خالد، حَضضرتْ 'in ḥaḍara khalid ḥaḍart' , if Khalid comes, I will come.

➢ لا شاركت بعدها 'la sharakt baᶜdaha' , I will not take part any more.

Conclusion:

To sum up, this paper has discussed tense in Arabic, which considers as an essential category in the Classical Arabic. As a matter of fact,tense in Arabic is a controversial subject, as the researcher displayed the different views regarding to its types. At first, he pointed out the five types of tense regarding to Duncan (1863), as the latter said that tense composed of the Preterit, the Aorist, the Imperative, the Participle and the Infinitive. After that, the three types of tense according to the view of Alsamerrai (2003), Abduhamid (1980), Mobarak (1992), and Hassan (1995), as they all agreed that they are the Perfect ٱلْمَاضِي al-māḍi, the Imperfect ٱلْمُضَارع al-muḍāriᶜ and the Imperative, الأمر al-ᵓamr, as the latter used for command or request which essentially based on present tense in the jussive mood. There are two types of forming imperative according to all forms of the verb. Then the last view is clarified by Haywood and Nahmad (1965), Thatcher (1992), Alhaits view is clarified by Haywood and Nahmad (1965), Thatcher (1992), Alhawary (2011), and Wightwick and Gaafar (2005) who said that there are only two tenses in Arabic, the Past (or perfect) ٱلْمُضَارع; and the Present (or Imperfect) ٱلْمَاضِي. Since, the past tense is used for completed and finished actions, while present is for unfinished actions and still happening. Furthermore, it is obviously acknowledged how the doer is recognized in terms of number or gender in both tenses either in the past or in present through the person markers shown in tables. Besides, these two tenses also are used to express future time by adding the morpheme سَ 'sa' ,the particle سَوفَ 'sawfa', لَن 'lan' , يكاد 'yakad' , إِن 'in' , لا 'la' andالقادم 'alqādim'.

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