



Beyond Morphology: A Multi-Layered Model of Tense and Aspect in Arabic

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Abstract:

This paper examines the analysis of tense and aspect in Arabic through the integration of contemporary linguistic theory with the Arabic grammatical tradition. It argues that the long-standing debate over whether Arabic is fundamentally a tense-based or an aspect-based language stems largely from differences in the analytical level at which temporal meaning is examined. Building on Tammām Ḥassān's distinction between morphological tense and grammatical tense, the study demonstrates that temporal interpretation in Arabic cannot be reduced to verbal morphology alone but emerges through the interaction of morphology, syntax, particles, auxiliaries, adverbials, and discourse context. The paper further reinterprets Arabic aspect within contemporary aspect theory by distinguishing lexical aspect, viewpoint aspect, and phasal aspect, and shows that many constructions traditionally grouped together under a single notion of aspect belong to different aspectual domains. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Reichenbach, Comrie, Vendler, and Ḥassān, the study proposes a unified multi-layered model of temporal meaning in Arabic consisting of four interacting dimensions: the expression of temporal meaning, temporal anchoring, lexical aspect, and grammatical aspect. This framework reconciles insights from classical Arabic grammar and modern linguistic theory by demonstrating that their apparent disagreements reflect different analytical perspectives rather than incompatible accounts of the language. More broadly, the proposed model offers a comprehensive framework for analyzing temporal meaning in Arabic and contributes to cross-linguistic theories of tense and aspect by distinguishing the expression of temporal meaning from its semantic and aspectual interpretation.

Keywords:

Arabic language, Grammatical Tense, Morphological Tense, Lexical Aspect, Phasal Aspect.

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ما وراء الصيغة الصرفية: نموذج متعدد المستويات للزمن والجهة في العربية

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يتناول هذا البحث تحليل الزمن والجهة في اللغة العربية من خلال دمج النظريات اللسانية المعاصرة مع التراث النحوي العربي. وينطلق من فرضية مفادها أن الجدل الممتد حول ما إذا كانت العربية لغة قائمة على الزمن أم على الجهة يرجع في جانب كبير منه إلى اختلاف المستوى التحليلي الذي تُدرس في ضوءه الدلالة الزمنية. واستناداً إلى التمييز الذي وضعه تمام حسان بين الزمن الصرفي والزمن النحوي، يبين البحث أن التأويل الزمني في العربية لا يمكن اختزاله في الصيغة الصرفية للفعل وحدها، بل يتولد من التفاعل بين البنية الصرفية والتركيب النحوي والأدوات النحوية والأفعال المساعدة والظروف والسياق الخطابي. كما يعيد البحث تفسير نظام الجهة في العربية في ضوء النظريات المعاصرة للجهة، من خلال التمييز بين الجهة المعجمية والجهة النحوية والتي تشمل الجهة المنظورية والجهة المرحلية، ويبيّن أن كثيراً من التراكيب التي اعتادت الدراسات السابقة إدراجها ضمن مفهوم واحد للجهة تنتمي في الواقع إلى مجالات جهتيّة مختلفة. وانطلاقاً من الأطر النظرية لكل من رايشنباخ وكومري وفندلر وتام حسان، يقترح البحث نموذجاً تحليلياً موحداً متعدد المستويات للمعنى الزمني في العربية، يقوم على أربعة أبعاد متفاعلة هي: التعبير عن المعنى الزمني، والارتكاز الزمني، والجهة المعجمية، والجهة النحوية. ويُوفق هذا الإطار بين معطيات النحو العربي التقليدي والنظرية اللسانية الحديثة، مبيّناً أن ما يبدو من اختلاف بينهما يعكس تبايناً في مستويات التحليل أكثر مما يعكس تعارضاً في تفسير النظام الزمني للعربية. وعلى نطاق أوسع، يقدم النموذج المقترح إطاراً شاملاً لتحليل المعنى الزمني في العربية، ويسهم في تطوير الدراسات المقارنة للزمن والجهة من خلال التمييز بين وسائل التعبير عن المعنى الزمني وبين تأويله الدلالي والجهتي.

Introduction

The study of tense and aspect has long occupied a central position in linguistic theory, yet it remains one of its most debated domains due to the complex interaction among morphological form, lexical semantics, syntax, and discourse context. Traditional approaches have conceptualized tense and aspect either as grammatical categories encoded in verbal morphology or as semantic-functional systems operating across multiple levels of linguistic structure. Influential typological and theoretical studies, including those of Reichenbach (1947), Vendler (1957, 1967), and Comrie (1976, 1985), established foundational distinctions between absolute, relative, and relative-absolute tense, as well as between lexical aspect, viewpoint aspect, and related aspectual categories. Despite their explanatory value, these models often assume a relatively direct correspondence between morphological marking and temporal interpretation, an assumption that becomes problematic when applied to languages whose temporal systems are highly context-dependent or distributed across several grammatical levels.

Arabic presents a particularly challenging case for traditional theories of tense and aspect. Classical Arabic grammarians primarily classified verbs according to their morphological forms, distinguishing between past and non-past as the principal temporal opposition. By contrast, many Western Arabists, most notably Wright (1974), have argued that Arabic is fundamentally an aspectual language whose verbal system primarily expresses the perfective-imperfective distinction rather than grammatical tense. Although influential, this binary interpretation reduces the complexity of Arabic temporal reference to verbal morphology alone. More recent studies, particularly those of Hassan Tammam (1994), have attempted to reconcile these positions by distinguishing between morphological tense and grammatical tense, thereby advancing a more functional account of temporal interpretation. Nevertheless, even these approaches do not fully explain how verbal morphology interacts with syntactic structure, lexical semantics, and discourse-level temporal anchoring to produce temporal meaning.

Against this background, this study investigates how tense and aspect can be theoretically conceptualized beyond morphology-centered accounts by integrating formal, functional, and lexical-semantic perspectives. It further examines the extent to which Arabic encodes temporal and aspectual meaning through the interaction of morphological, syntactic, and discourse-level mechanisms. Methodologically, the study adopts a comparative-analytical and descriptive approach. Rather than introducing new empirical data, it critically evaluates existing theoretical frameworks and applies them to Arabic, assessing their explanatory adequacy, analytical strengths, and limitations in accounting for the expression of temporal and aspectual meaning.

The paper argues that existing models, whether morphology-based, binary aspectual, or hybrid functional accounts, remain insufficient for a comprehensive explanation of Arabic tense and aspect because they generally treat temporal meaning as a property of the verb or clause in isolation. Consequently, they fail to account adequately for the interaction of the multiple linguistic levels through which temporal interpretation is constructed.

To address this limitation, the study proposes a multi-layered model of tense, aspect, and temporal anchoring in Arabic. The proposed framework distinguishes three interconnected levels of analysis. The expression level comprises grammatical tense and morphological tense as linguistic forms. The temporal level captures temporal interpretation through absolute tense, relative tense, relative-absolute tense, and temporal remoteness. The aspectual level encompasses lexical aspect (states, activities, accomplishments, and achievements), viewpoint aspect, and phasal aspect. Together, these layers explain how temporal meaning emerges from the interaction between linguistic form and semantic interpretation rather than from verbal morphology alone.

Furthermore, the model argues that discourse-level operators such as negation, interrogation, and modality do not constitute components of the tense-aspect system itself. Instead, they operate at a higher structural level, indirectly constraining or modifying temporal interpretation. By integrating these interacting layers within a unified analytical framework, the study moves beyond morphology-centered analyses and offers a more comprehensive account of how temporal meaning is constructed in Arabic. It ultimately demonstrates that a layered model provides greater explanatory adequacy than existing approaches by systematically capturing the interaction among linguistic form, semantic structure, and discourse context.

1- The Concept of Tense

The notion of tense is inseparable from the broader concept of time. Before examining how languages encode temporal relations, it is necessary to consider how humans conceptualize time itself. Although the nature of time has long been debated in philosophy and physics, linguistic theory is primarily concerned not with the ontological status of time but with how speakers perceive, organize, and express temporal relations. Human experience of time is closely associated with change and succession. Observable changes—such as the Earth's rotation, the alternation of day and night, or the movement of a clock's hands—provide reference points through which temporal succession is perceived and measured (Callender, 2011; Dyke, 2011; Oaklander, 2004). These experiences enable speakers to distinguish between what has already occurred, what is occurring, and what is expected to occur.

Philosophers disagree about whether the past and the future possess the same ontological status as the present. Presentism, for example, maintains that only the present exists, whereas the past and future exist only as conceptual or psychological constructs (Dyke, 2011; Mozerky, 2021). Other philosophical approaches regard all temporal moments as equally real. Regardless of these ontological debates, human languages consistently organize events in relation to temporal reference points, most commonly distinguishing between past, present, and future. Consequently, linguistic analyses of tense are concerned with the representation of temporal relations rather than with the metaphysical nature of time itself.

One useful way of visualizing temporal reference is to represent time as a continuous line extending in two directions, with the present serving as the reference point between past and future. As time progresses, the reference point continually shifts, transforming future events into present events and present events into past events. This conceptualization illustrates that temporal categories are relational rather than absolute, since the interpretation of an event depends on its position relative to a particular temporal reference point. Such a perspective provides an intuitive foundation for later linguistic models, particularly those that distinguish between speech time, event time, and reference time.

The human capacity to conceptualize temporal relations is reflected in language through the grammatical category of tense. Broadly speaking, tenses are the linguistic means by which a language locates a situation in time relative to a reference point, typically the moment of speaking (Comrie, 1976; Binnick, 1991). It is therefore important to distinguish between time and tense. Time is an extralinguistic concept referring to the temporal organization of events in the world, whereas tense is a grammatical or semantic category through which languages encode temporal relations. While every language enables speakers to refer to temporal distinctions, languages differ considerably in the mechanisms they employ. Some rely primarily on verbal morphology, whereas others make extensive use of adverbials, syntactic constructions, discourse context, or combinations of these resources.

Temporal location alone, however, is insufficient to account for the richness of temporal meaning. Languages also distinguish how an event unfolds internally, whether it is completed or ongoing, punctual or extended, or viewed as a whole or from within. These distinctions are captured by the category of aspect. Consequently, tense and aspect constitute complementary components of temporal interpretation. Understanding the relationship between these categories is therefore essential for developing a comprehensive account of temporal meaning, particularly in languages such as Arabic, where temporal interpretation extends beyond verbal

morphology to include lexical, syntactic, and discourse-level factors.

1- Theories of Tense and Aspect

Tense and aspect are essential syntactic features of the human language utilised to show how events or activities are perceived in relation to time. Tense is traditionally perceived as the expression of the relation between the time of speaking and the time in which an event or action takes place. An event before the time of speaking is past, an event at the time of speaking is present, and an event after the time of speaking is future (Jespersen, 1093). However, in 1947 Reichenbach presented a theory that changed the way tense in language is viewed, as it defined tense by means of three-place temporal ordering; the (present) “point of speech time” (S), the “point of event time” (E), and an abstract “point of reference time” (R) (Reichenbach, 1947:297).

Table (1) list of possible tenses with English examples according to Reichenbach (1947:297)

Structure	New Name	Traditional name	English Example
E<R<S	Anterior past	Past perfect	I had done it
E,R<S	Simple past	Simple Past	I did it
R<E<S R<S,E R<S<E	Posterior past	-	(she did not think) I would do it
E<S,R	Anterior present	Present perfect	I have done it
S,R,E	Simple present (simultaneous)	Present	I do it
S,R<E	Posterior present	Simple future	I shall do it
S<E<R S,E<R E<S<R	Anterior future	Future perfect	I shall have done it
S<R,E	Simple future	Simple future	I shall do it
S<R<E	Posterior future	-	I shall be going to do it

The relationships among these points are formalized by using sigla less than (<) for temporal precedence and a comma (,) for simultaneity. Note that Reichenbach's dichotomy does not locate events on the timeline absolutely with respect to the present time of speaking, but always relatively mediated by the point of reference time R.

Speech time is when the sentence is spoken. Event time is when the event happens. Reference time is the temporal viewpoint from which the event is considered. The terms anterior, simultaneous, and posterior describe the relationship between the event time (E) and the reference time (R)—not necessarily between the event and the speech time. Anterior means the event occurs before the reference point, = E < R. For example, in “John **had left** before Mary arrived.” E = John leaves. R = Mary's arrival (the reference point). S = the time of speaking. Posterior means the event occurs after the reference point, = R < E. There is also simultaneous which means the event and the reference point coincide, E = R.

While traditional grammar compares events directly with the speech time (past, present, future), Reichenbach

argued that many tenses—especially perfect and future-in-the-past forms—are better explained by introducing a reference point. This distinction allows Reichenbach's framework to account for complex tense meanings more precisely than simply labelling events as past, present, or future. This theory is especially useful for explaining perfect tenses, future-in-the-past and complex temporal relationships. However, it does not account for aspects or discourse context.

Comrie (1976) refined and developed Reichenbach's reference time theory and introduced his relative tense theory. As such, he distinguished between absolute tense, relative tense, and relative-absolute. Absolute tense is the tense that uses the present moment as their reference point (R), i.e., event time is directly related to speech time. Relative tense, however, uses a reference point (R) that is contextually determined by an absolute tense in an adjacent clause, i.e., event time is located with respect to a reference time that is itself distinct from speech time. Absolute relative tense possesses a temporal reference of an absolute and relative tense, i.e., both relations are simultaneously encoded, often through complex verbal constructions (Comrie 1985).

Table (2) Comrie's taxonomy of tense with English examples (1985)

Absolute Tense		Example
Past	E < S	John ate an apple
Present	E, S	John is eating an apple
Future	S > E	John will eat an apple
Relative Tense		
Relative past	E < R	Those having sung were asked to leave the stage
Relative Present	E, R	Those singing were told to be quite
Relative future	R > E	Those about to sing were asked to go onto the stage
In all the above examples, R is contextually [were asked/told] located before S: R < S		
Absolute Relative		
Pluperfect	E < R < S	Mary had left by six o'clock
Future perfect	S < E < R	Mary will have left by six o'clock
Future in the future	S < R < E	At six o'clock Mary will be about to leave
Future in the past (= conditional)	R < E < S	Mary left at six o'clock. She would return an hour later
Future perfect in the past (perfect conditional)	R2 < E < R1 < S	Mary left at six o'clock. She would return an hour later, by which time her son would have left for school

Thus, Past–Present–Future are deictic (absolute) temporal locations relative to the speech time. Relative tense is organized around anteriority, simultaneity, and posteriority relative to another reference point, not directly around past/present/future. Absolute-relative tense combines both a deictic anchor and a reference-time relation (e.g., *future in the past*).

Klien (1994) proposed topic time theory that builds on and refines earlier accounts of tense by distinguishing three temporal notions: Time of utterance (TU), the time at which a sentence is spoken (equivalent to Reichenbach's speech time); Time of situation (TSit), the time at which the event or situation occurs (similar to Reichenbach's event time); and topic time (TT), the time span about which the speaker makes a claim. Unlike Reichenbach's model, which explains tense through the relations between speech time, event time, and the more abstract reference time, Klein replaces reference time

with the more intuitive concept of topic time. Topic time is not necessarily the time when the event occurs; rather, it is the temporal interval on which the speaker directs the listener's attention.

A key contribution of topic time theory is its unified account of tense and aspect. In Klein's framework, tense is determined by the relationship between topic time and time of utterance, whereas aspect is determined by the relationship between topic time and time of situation. This distinction enables the theory to explain systematically how different aspectual forms, such as the simple, progressive, and perfect, can describe the same event from different temporal perspectives. In contrast to Comrie's distinction between absolute and relative tense, which focuses primarily on temporal relations, Klein integrates both tense and aspect within a single explanatory framework.

However, aspect seems more complex than simply the relationship between topic time (TT) and situation time (TSit). Rather, it concerns "the internal temporal constituency of the situation" (Comrie, 1976, p. 3). Consequently, aspect encompasses several dimensions, including situational aspect, phasal aspect, and viewpoint aspect (Comrie, 1976; Smith, 1997). Situational aspect refers to the inherent temporal properties of an event, independent of the speaker's perspective. It captures the intrinsic temporal structure of situations, which is closely linked to the lexical semantics of verbs (Vendler, 1957, 1967; Dowty, 1979; Smith, 1991). Based on these inherent temporal properties, Vendler (1957, 1967) proposed a four-way classification of lexical aspect, distinguishing states, activities, accomplishments, and achievements.

Table (3): Vendler's (1967:97) aspectual categories with English examples

States	Activities	Accomplishments	Achievements
Desire	Run	Run a mile	Recognize
Want	Walk	Walk to school	Find
Love	Swim	Paint a picture	Win a race
Hate	Push a car	Grow up	Stop/ start/ resume
Know	Drive	Recover from an illness	Be born/ die
Believe			

Vendler's classification is particularly significant because it shows that the compatibility of verbs with grammatical aspects, especially the progressive, is constrained by their inherent semantic properties. In other words, certain verbs are naturally incompatible with the progressive because of the temporal characteristics associated with their lexical aspect. These characteristics are defined by a set of semantic features that distinguish each aspectual class. Although scholars have proposed slightly different representations of these defining features (e.g., Smith, 1997, p. 20; Olsen, 1997, p. 51; Rothstein, 2004, p. 12), the core distinctions remain largely consistent and can be summarized in the following table

Table (4) The semantic features associated with verbs

Situation	Static	Durative	Stages	Telic	Example
State	+	+	-	-	Know, be, have
Activity	-	+	+	-	Run, paint, sing
Accomplishment	-	+	+	+	Destroy, create
Achievement	-	-	-	+	Notice, win
Semelfactive	-	-	-	-	Wink, Tap, cough

The (+) mark means that the verb has this feature, whereas the (-) marks means that it lacks it. These features play a crucial role in determining the grammatical temporal function of these verbs. For instance, verbs that are + stative +durative but -stages and -telic cannot be in the progressive. You can't say **I am knowing you* or **I am being a student*, or **I am having a car*.

Phasal aspect refers to the division of an event or activity into successive phases through which it unfolds over time. It captures how a situation develops from its initial onset through to its culmination or completion, thereby highlighting its internal temporal segmentation. In this sense, phasal aspect distinguishes stages such as the pre-initial, initial, medial, and completion phases (Brinton, 1988; Dik, 1997; Kranich, 2010). Accordingly, a situation or activity can be analysed as progressing through a sequence of distinct temporal stages, as illustrated in the following table

Table (5) The different phases of development of an activity or situation

Phase Focus	Definition	Example
Pre-initial phase	Before the beginning of an action	
- Intention	- Intention to do an action	- <i>I want/ going to leave</i>
- About to start:	- About to start an action	- <i>I am about to leave</i>
Initial phase	The beginning of an action	- <i>I began travelling</i>
Middle phase:	The middle of an action after start	
- Continuative:	- Continued after beginning without a pause	- <i>I am still/continued reading</i>
- Resumptive	- Resumed after a pause	- <i>I resumed reading</i>
- Iterative	- repetition of a minimal activity event	- <i>He knocked for five minutes</i>
Pre-final phase	Before the end of completion of event or activity	
- Intention	- Intention to end/finish	- <i>I want/ going to stop reading</i>
- About	- About to end/finish	- <i>I am about to stop reading</i>
Final phase	The end of an event or activity	
- Cessative	- To stop doing something	- <i>He stopped reading</i>
- Completive	- To complete doing something	- <i>He finished reading the book</i>

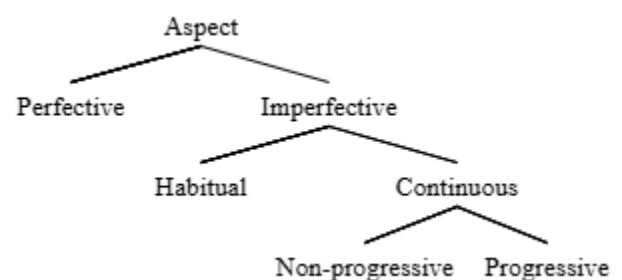
It should be noted that the semantic nature of verbs—that is, their inherent lexical features—determines which phases an event can conceptually or grammatically pass through. Not all verbs allow the full range of phasal distinctions, as some event types lack internal dynamics or agentive control. Stative verbs, for instance, typically do not progress through all phases because a *state* cannot normally be initiated, maintained, or terminated through deliberate human action (Comrie, 1976; Vendler, 1967; Smith, 1997). Consider the state of *illness*: it is possible to say *He is about to get sick* (pre-initial phase), *He started to get sick* (initial phase), *He became sick*, and *He is still sick* (continuation or medial phase). It is also possible to say *He recovered from his illness* (completion or final phase). However, we cannot naturally say *He*

stopped and then resumed being sick, unless the situation is non-literal or pretended, since genuine states lack the dynamic, controllable qualities required for such phasal alternation. The most common phasal aspects are inchoative, continuative, terminative, resultative, and approximative.

From a grammatical perspective, aspect reflects the speaker's viewpoint on the temporal structure of an event; that is, how a situation is linguistically presented rather than how it unfolds in the external world (Smith, 1997; Comrie, 1976). Viewpoint aspect therefore concerns the temporal perspective from which an event is viewed. This notion is closely aligned with Klein's (1994) topic time, which Comrie's (1976, p. 3) refers to as "different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation," or what Smith's (1997, pp. 2–3) characterizes as the presentation of a situation "with a particular perspective or focus, rather like the focus of a camera lens." In this sense, viewpoint aspect determines whether a situation is presented in its entirety or from within, thereby encoding either a global or a partial temporal perspective on the event.

Comrie (1985) further observes that aspectual constructions commonly encode distinctions such as completion, duration, iterativity, or habituality. More broadly, however, aspect is typically analysed in terms of the opposition between perfective and imperfective viewpoints. According to Comrie (1976, p. 16), perfectivity presents a situation as a complete whole, without reference to its internal phases, whereas imperfectivity focuses on the internal temporal structure of the situation. In other words, the perfective aspect adopts an external perspective on the event as a bounded whole, while the imperfective aspect adopts an internal perspective that highlights its ongoing or unbounded nature.

Drawing on the traditional Slavic distinction between perfective and imperfective aspects, Comrie (1976, p. 25) proposes a hierarchy of major aspectual viewpoints, which can be summarized as follows:



Languages may encode both perfective and imperfective aspectual oppositions. The imperfective aspect can be further subdivided into habitual and continuous forms. The continuous aspect, in turn, is often distinguished into non-progressive and progressive variants: the non-

progressive typically occurs with stative verbs, whereas the progressive is generally associated with dynamic actions or activities (Comrie, 1976; Smith, 1997). This hierarchical organization of aspectual categories allows languages to capture fine-grained temporal distinctions in how events are viewed from either internal or external perspectives.

To summarise, existing theories of tense are primarily concerned with how temporal relations are conceptually represented in the mind and the principles on which such representations are based. Some approaches analyse tense in terms of the interaction between Speech Time and Event Time, while others extend this model by introducing a Reference Time as an additional mediating point. In Klein's framework, by contrast, tense is understood as the relation between Utterance Time and Situation Time, whereas aspect is defined in terms of the relation between Topic Time and Situation Time. Taken together, these approaches provide foundational perspectives on the expression of temporal location and temporal relations in language. Among these, one of the most influential classifications of tense is the distinction between absolute, relative, and relative–absolute tense, which helps clarify how different languages morphologically encode temporal relations.

Aspect, by contrast, can be divided into lexical, phasal, and viewpoint aspect, as summarised in the table below

Types of Aspect	Source of Aspectual Meaning	Main Question
Lexical Aspect	The inherent semantics of the predicate	What kind of situation is being described?
Phasal Aspect	The phase or stage of a situation that is highlighted	Which part of the situation is in focus?
Viewpoint Aspect	The speaker's perspective on the situation as a whole	How is the situation presented?

Lexical aspect concerns the intrinsic temporal properties of a situation, independent of grammatical marking. It classifies predicates according to features such as dynamicity (dynamic vs. stative), telicity (having an inherent endpoint vs. lacking one), and duration (punctual vs. durative). Phasal aspect, by contrast, focuses on the internal stages of an event. Rather than asking what kind of event is being described, it asks which phase of the event is in focus. Typical phases include inception (ingressive or inceptive), continuation (progressive or continuative), repetition (iterative), completion (completive), and termination (cessative). Viewpoint aspect concerns how the speaker chooses to present a situation. The same event may be viewed from different perspectives, commonly distinguished as perfective (the situation viewed as a bounded whole), imperfective (the situation viewed from within), progressive (the situation as ongoing), and habitual (the situation as regularly repeated).

These theoretical frameworks also provide a foundational basis for the analysis of tense and aspect in Arabic, as Arabic appears to encode not only the major distinctions of absolute, relative, and relative–absolute tense, but also the full range of aspectual types discussed above, including lexical, phasal, and viewpoint aspect. However, certain language-specific categories are not fully captured within these models. Existing models do not always account for categories that are especially relevant to Arabic, such as temporal remoteness, which plays a significant role in distinguishing future temporal reference in the language (near future vs far future). Despite this limitation, these theories remain essential for providing a structured framework within which Arabic tense–aspect relations can be systematically analysed and compared cross-linguistically.

2- Tense and aspect in Arabic

Within the literature of Arabic linguistics, there are three main scholarly opinions that vary significantly regarding the classification of tense in Arabic, although they are all based on the morphological form of verbs: Classical Arab grammarians regarded tense as an intrinsic property of the verb, linking it to temporal reference through both lexical form and morphological inflection. Western Arabists contradict this view and assume that Arabic is an aspect-based language. Modern Arab linguists, specially Hasssan (1994) reconcile this conflict by arguing against morphologically based analysis and demonstrating that Arabic has both tense and aspect but has its unique way of expressing them.

5-1. Classical Arab Grammarians

This classical framework was profoundly influenced by Sibawayh's analysis, which identifies three primary verb forms in Arabic: *fa'ala* (فعل), *yaf'alu* (يفعل), and *if'al* (افعل). Each form corresponds to a specific tense: *fa'ala* (e.g., *darsa* "he studied") marks the past; *yaf'alu* (e.g., *yadrusu* "he studies") marks the present; and *if'al* (e.g., *udrus* "study") functions as the imperative, associated with future actions. This view was reiterated by Ibn Ya'ish (2001), but he placed greater emphasis on the relationship between event time and speech time; an event that precedes the speech time is classified past; one that follows it is as future; and one that coincides with it as present.

By contrast, al-Zajjājī (1974) approaches time from a more philosophical standpoint, arguing that the present moment is an illusion, with only past and future truly existing. He proposes that past events are anchored to both event time and speech time; that is the event has already occurred and is now being referenced at the moment of speech. Future events, by contrast, are not anchored to any temporal reality, as they have not having not yet occurred. Although his theory is somewhat ambiguous, it aligns conceptually with Reichenbach's (1947) and Comrie's (1994) reference point models.

Regarding the present, al-Zajjājī offers contradictory observations: he at times treats *yaf'alu* as a future form, while elsewhere recognizing its potential to express both current and imminent actions.

Critique to the classification of tense on the morphological form of verbs came early from Ibn Jinnī (1952), who while acknowledging the traditional association of tense with verb forms, argues that these forms are not fixed in their temporal reference and may convey various tense values depending on context. His view implicitly prioritizes syntactic and pragmatic context over morphological form in determining verbal tense.

It is evident from these classical perspectives that a fully developed, systematic theory of tense was never articulated. Al-Makhzūmī (1986) attributes this limitation to a conceptualization of time as comprising three parts: past movement, future movement, and a transitional moment between them. Another key factor is the traditional grammatical focus on *al-illa* (grammatical cause) *al-āmil* (governing element), which prioritized syntactic function and case marking (الإعراب *al-i'rāb*) over semantic or pragmatic interpretation. This theoretical orientation led to a treatment of tense as a structural phenomenon tied to form rather than a functional category informed by discourse context.

5-2. Western Arabists' Perspective:

Another prevailing perspective on tense and aspect in Arabic comes from Western Arabists scholarship, which often advanced broad generalizations about so-called Semitic languages. Moscati (1964), for instance, asserts that Semitic languages lack absolute tense forms that specifically indicate past, present, or future, because they do not distinguish between states and actions, or between continuous activities and discrete events. Building on such views, Wright (1974) critiques early Arab grammarians' classification and adopts a similarly morphologically oriented approach, arguing that the two main verbal forms *fa'ala* and *yaf'alu* encode aspect rather than tense: *fa'ala* denotes a completed or perfective action, while *yaf'alu* indicates an ongoing or imperfective event. Wright further contends that his model accommodates additional temporal nuances such as the past perfect and future perfect, which he claims are neglected in traditional analyses. His claim has exerted considerable influence on subsequent studies of Arabic tense and aspect.

Ryding (2005) supports this aspect-oriented interpretation, arguing that aspectual distinctions in Arabic are more salient than tense-based ones. Similarly, Comrie (1976, p. 78) sees that Arabic lacks strong tense distinctions as it employs "two sets of verb forms to refer to perfective and imperfective." However, Comrie (1976, p. 80) clarifies that the perfective form conveys both aspectual meaning and relative past time reference,

whereas the imperfective encompasses imperfective meaning and relative non-past reference. He ultimately argues that the perfective/imperfective contrast in Arabic reflects an interaction of aspectual and relative temporal functions. In essence, Arabic verbs encode the degree of realization of an event, focusing on whether the action is complete or ongoing; hence the opposition between perfective and imperfective.

However, Wright's claims and those of his followers cannot be regarded as an entirely accurate representation of Arabic, as they remain grounded in the binary, morphology-based classification of verbs, offering little substantive departure from the classical model. The primary contribution lies in re-labelling existing categories; substituting tense with aspect and replacing past and present with perfective and imperfective, respectively. Nevertheless, their aspect-based mode encounters limitations in explaining certain uses of the past form in contexts such as supplications as in (1), wishes as in (2), and conditional sentences as in (3), which clearly do not denote completed actions.

1. ghafara -llāhu laka.
forgave.3MSG -Allah.NOM for.you.MS.
'May Allah forgive you.'
2. rahima -llāhu al-mayyita.
had.mercy.3MSG -Allah.NOM the-deceased.ACC
'May Allah have mercy on the deceased.'
3. 'in jā'a-ka Zaydun fa-'akrim-hu
if came.3MSG-to.you Zayd.NOM then-honor.IMP.2MSG-him.
'If Zayd comes to you, then honor him.'

Furthermore, not every instance of the verb form *yaf'alu* is inherently imperfective. As evidenced extensively in the Qur'ān, this form can function beyond the aspectual value Wright assigns to it (see Binnick, 1991, p. 437; Al-Dobaian, 2018).

5-3. Modern Arab Linguists and Ḥassān's Contribution

Attempts to impose a rigid tense or aspect only model on Arabic, based exclusively on verbal morphology, fails to capture the functional and interpretive complexity of Arabic verb usage, particularly in Qur'ānic discourse. As Fassi Fehri (1993) argues, any adequate account of Arabic temporality must integrate both tense and aspect within a unified theoretical framework. He critiques the traditional two-form classification (*fa'ala* vs. *yaf'alu*), noting that while it suffices for simple temporal contrasts, it cannot explain the full range of Arabic temporal and aspectual constructions. Similarly, Juhfah (2006, p. 49) rejects both classical and Western Arabists models as theoretically inadequate, proposing instead a tripartite system that incorporates tense, aspect, and mood as interrelated categories signalled through lexical, morphological, and syntactic cues.

Tense to express the relation between event time, and speech time, aspect to refer to the internal temporality of an event, and mood refers to the discourse function of the structure.

Tammām Ḥassān's (1994) also rejects the tendency to classify Arabic as either a tense language or an aspect language on the assumption that temporal meaning is determined by verbal morphology.

Instead he offers an influential distinction between morphological tense and grammatical tense. Morphological tense refers to the inflectional form of the verb in isolation, whereas grammatical tense refers to the temporal interpretation that arises in context. Under this view, temporal reference in Arabic is not a property of verbal forms alone but results from the interaction of morphology, syntax, particles, adverbials, and discourse context. Hassan's framework therefore provides a theoretical basis for explaining how Arabic expresses temporal relations beyond the limits of verbal morphology and serves as the foundation for the analysis developed in this study.

In Ḥassān's model, Arabic comprises three basic tenses, which, when combined with aspectual variations, yield sixteen tense–aspect configurations. Tense distinctions surface primarily in declarative sentences—affirmative, negative, and interrogative, through both *fa'ala* (past) and *yaf'alu* (non-past) forms. While the present form *yaf'alu* may convey past reference in negative or modalized constructions, the past form *fa'ala* can extend to present or future meanings in contexts of exhortation, supplication, or conditionality. The interpretation of temporal reference thus depends heavily on contextual specification, particularly through temporal adverbs such as *al-'ān* “now” and *ghadan* “tomorrow,” which anchor the verb's temporal meaning.

As for aspect, Ḥassān adds Arabic specific details to the current dichotomy, and as such, distinguishes three interpretive domains: First, aspect related to tense, conveyed by temporal adverbs and particles.

Adverbs such as *ams* “yesterday”, *ghadan* “tomorrow”, *al-'ān* “now”, and particles such as *qad*, *sa-*, *sawfa*, and negation particles like *la*, “doesn't/don't” *lam*, “didn't” *lan*, “won't”. For example,

4. *Yusafir-u* *Ali ghadan*.
3MS-travel-NOM Ali tomorrow.
'Ali travels tomorrow'
5. *Yusadfir-u* *Ali al-'ān*.
3MS-travel-NOM Ali now.
'Ali is travelling now'

In these examples, it is the adverb that defined the tense of the sentence whether it is present continuous or future simple. Simialrly, the negation particles that identified the tense of the sentence not the verb.

6. *la yusafir-u* *Ali kull yaum*,
Neg-Pres 3MS-travel-NOM Ali every day.
"Ali does not travel everyday"
7. *lam yusafir* *Ali*.
Neg.pst 3MS-travel Ali.
"Ali did not travel"
8. *lan yusadfir-a* *Ali*.
Neg-Fut 3MS-travel-ACC Ali.
"Ali will not travel".

Second, aspect related to event structure can be expressed morphologically through derived verb patterns that encode causativity, intensity, repetition, reciprocity, or reflexivity, which relate to aspectual interpretation. For instance, the form I verb *kasara* mean only broke, but form II *kassara* encodes intensity so that it means "smashed or broke into pieces". Similarly, the form I verb *darasa* means "he studied", but *daarasa* form III means "he studied repeatedly or intensively".

Third, aspect related to syntactic predication (الإسناد). Here, aspect emerges through syntactic configuration: the way the verb combines with objects, prepositional phrases, and locatives can indicate progression, completeness, or habituality. For instance, locative adverb marking ongoing action as in (9), an accusative complement marking telicity/completion as in (10), or a prepositional phrase marking habitual or ongoing action as in (11).

9. *Yajlisu Muḥammadun fī al-ghurfah al-ān*.
3MS-sit Muhammad in-the-room now.
"Muhammad is sitting in the room now"
10. *akala Muḥammad at-tuffāḥah*.
ate-3MSG Muhammad the-apple.
"Muhammad ate the apple"
11. *yasīr-u Muḥammadun 'alā at-ṭarīq kull ṣabāḥ*,
3MS-walk-NOM Muhammad on the-road every morning.
"Muhammad walks on the road every morning".

These adverbs, particles, derived verb forms, and syntactic configurations demonstrate that aspectual meaning in Arabic is distributed across morphology, syntax, and semantics. Ḥassān's analysis is particularly noteworthy for its breadth, as it encompasses temporal and aspectual categories often absent from Indo-European frameworks, such as the affirmative form and phasal aspects. It also includes verbs like *kāda* (“almost”), which marks pre-initial phases, and *dhalla* (“remain”), which indicates continuity. The following table presents Hassans classification of tense and aspect in Arabic:

Table (6) Hassan's classification of tense and aspect in Arabic

Tense and Aspect		Declarative Positive	Declarative Affirmative
Tense	Aspect		
Past	Distant, disconnected	كان فعل	لقد كان فعل
Past	Recent, connected	كان قد فعل	إنه كان قد فعل
Past	renewed	كان يفعل	لقد كان يفعل
past	Ending with the present	قد فعل	لقد فعل
Past	Connected to the present	ما زال يفعل	إنه ما زال يفعل
Past	Continuous	ظل يفعل	لقد ظل يفعل
Past	Simple	فعل	إنه فعل
Past	Approximative (about to happen)	كاد يفعل	لقد كاد يفعل
Past	Inchoative/ inceptive	طفق يفعل	لقد طفق يفعل
Present	Simple	يفعل	إنه يفعل
Present	Renewed	يفعل	إنه يفعل
Present	Continuous	يفعل	إنه يفعل
Future	Simple	يفعل	ليفعلن
Future	Near	سيفعل	ليفعلن
Future	Distant	سوف يفعل	لسوف يفعل
Future	Continuous	سيحصل يفعل	لسوف يظل يفعل

Despite its empirical richness, Ḥassān's framework raises several issues that limit its theoretical clarity and cross-linguistic comparability. Most notably, his system does not clearly separate different types of aspect, especially phasal aspect (inceptive, continuative, terminative), lexical aspect (Aktionsart), and grammatical aspect (perfective vs. imperfective). Instead, these are combined in a single classificatory matrix. As a result, categories that belong to different levels of linguistic analysis—such as phase verbs (*kāda*, *ẓalla*), morphological derivation (*form II, III*), and temporal adverbs—appear side by side as if they were equivalent indicators of aspect. This conflation can make the model difficult to map onto established typological frameworks and obscures the distinction between inherent event structure and contextual modification.

Another aspect of Hassan's analysis is that his inclusion of negative and interrogative structures in the classification of tense and aspect. Of course, these structures are shown as a clear indication that

that tense and aspect in Arabic cannot be based on the morphological form of verb, because different negation particles in Arabic are associated with different tenses. This can be clearly noticed in the following table which presents negation in Arabic in both declarative and interrogative constructions:

Table (7) negation and interrogation in Hassan's classification of tense and aspect in Arabic

Tense and Aspect		Declarative Negative	Interrogative Yes/No questions	
Tense	Aspect		Positive	Negative
Past	Distant, disconnected	لم يكن فعل	هل كان فعل	ألم يكن فعل
Past	Recent, connected	لم يكن قد فعل	هل كان قد فعل	ألم يكن قد فعل
Past	renewed	ما كان يفعل/لم يكن يفعل/كان لايفعل	هل كان يفعل	أما كان يفعل/ألم يكن يفعل/أكان لايفعل
past	Ending with the present		أقْد فعل	أما فعل
Past	Connected to the present	ما فعل	أما زال فعل	ألما فعل
Past	Continuous	لما يفعل	هل ظل فعل	هل لم يفعل
Past	Simple	لم يفعل	هل فعل	ألم يفعل
Past	Approximative (about to happen)	لم يفعل	هل كاد فعل	ألم يكْد فعل
Past	Inchoative/ inceptive	لم يكْد فعل	هل طفق فعل	أما فعل
Present	Simple	ليس يفعل	هل يفعل	أليس يفعل
Present	Renewed	هل يفعل	هل يفعل	أما يفعل
Present	Continuous	لايفعل	هل يفعل	ألايفعل
Future	Simple	لا يفعل	هل يفعل	ألا يفعل
Future	Near	لن يفعل	أسيفعل	ألن يفعل
Future	Distant	ما كان ليفعل	أسوف يفعل	أما كان ليفعل/ألن يفعل
Future	Continuous	لن يفعل	أسيعضل يفعل	ألن يفعل

Despite the noted limitations, Hassan's contribution represents one of the most sophisticated attempts to systematize the tense–aspect distinctions of Arabic in a way that reflects the language's internal logic rather than imposing external, Indo-European categories. His model's principal strength lies in its multilayered approach: instead of reducing tense and aspect to verbal morphology alone, he distributes temporal and aspectual meaning across morphology, syntax, lexical items, and discourse-level cues. This holistic orientation allows him to explain a wide range of empirical data that more rigid tense-based or aspect-based models fail to accommodate; particularly interpretations found in Qur'ānic and Classical Arabic discourse, where contextual specification plays a decisive role.

Moreover, the distinction between morphological tense and grammatical tense is methodologically powerful. It enables Ḥassān to account for cases in which the past form expresses futurity (e.g., in supplication or conditionality) or where the non-past expresses past meaning (e.g., under negation). By foregrounding the role of adverbials, particles, and syntactic configurations, his model captures the actual interpretive mechanisms speakers rely on, rather than assuming that morphology alone encodes temporal reference.

On balance, Ḥassān offers an exceptionally detailed and context-sensitive analysis that addresses many of the shortcomings of earlier Arab and Western accounts. His work also exposes a limitation of current theories of tense and aspect, many of which have been developed primarily from languages in which temporal relations are strongly grammaticalized through verbal inflection. Arabic, by contrast, demonstrates that temporal interpretation may arise from the interaction of morphology, syntax, semantics, and discourse rather than from verbal morphology alone. In this respect, Ḥassān's approach is particularly valuable for its descriptive breadth and its recognition of the distributed nature of aspectual meaning in Arabic. Nevertheless, the absence of a principled distinction between different aspectual domains results in a complex and sometimes unwieldy classificatory system. Even so, integrating Ḥassān's distinction between morphological and grammatical tense has the potential to broaden the explanatory scope of contemporary tense–aspect theory by providing a more flexible framework for analysing languages in which temporal meaning is distributed across multiple grammatical domains.

Reinterpreting Ḥassān within Contemporary Tense–Aspect Theory

It is evident that none of the existing theories provides a comprehensive account of tense and aspect that adequately explains both how these phenomena are conceptually represented and how they are morphologically encoded. Existing theories of tense tend to focus on one of two main perspectives. The first examines how temporal relations are conceptually represented in the mind and the principles underlying such representations. Within this approach, tense is typically analysed in terms of the relationship between speech time and event time, sometimes with the addition of a reference time or topic time as an intermediate point of temporal interpretation. The second perspective focuses on the typological classification of languages and the morphological encoding of tense and aspect. Most studies of tense and aspect in Arabic have been conducted within this second perspective, as reflected in the long-standing debate between the classical Arabic grammatical tradition and Western Arabists over whether Arabic should be analysed as a tense-based or an aspect-based language.

Tammām Ḥassān's (1994) contributions can be viewed as an attempt to move beyond this debate by offering a distinct perspective on the analysis of tense and aspect. His distinction between morphological tense and grammatical tense introduces an analytical dimension that is largely absent from dominant cross-linguistic models. Whereas most theories focus on the semantic categories of tense and aspect themselves, Ḥassān addresses a more fundamental question: how temporal meaning is encoded and interpreted in language. Morphological tense refers to the temporal value conventionally associated with a verbal form in isolation, whereas grammatical tense refers to the temporal interpretation that emerges from the interaction of verbal morphology with syntactic structure, particles, temporal adverbials, and discourse context. This distinction separates the formal expression of temporal meaning from the temporal interpretation ultimately conveyed in actual language use, thereby providing a framework that links morphological marking with contextual interpretation.

This distinction complements rather than replaces Reichenbach's (1947) framework of speech time (S), event time (E), and reference time (R). Reichenbach's model specifies the temporal relations underlying tense interpretation but remains largely neutral with respect to the grammatical mechanisms through which those relations are realized. In Arabic, the alignment of E, R, and S often depends on contextual and grammatical cues that extend beyond verbal morphology. Constructions involving particles such as *qad*, *sa-*, and *sawfa*, as well as auxiliary verbs such as *kāna*, demonstrate that temporal interpretation is distributed across multiple grammatical elements rather than encoded in a single verbal form. From this perspective, Ḥassān's contribution does not alter Reichenbach's temporal architecture; instead, it provides an account of how those temporal relations are grammatically instantiated in a language whose tense system relies relatively less on verbal inflection and more on the interaction of morphology, syntax, and discourse context

A similar relationship exists between Ḥassān's framework and Comrie's (1976, 1985) distinction between tense and aspect. Comrie defines tense as the grammatical expression of temporal location and aspect as the speaker's perspective on the internal temporal structure of a situation. However, many of the categories identified by Ḥassān cannot be adequately accounted for within a single aspectual domain; rather, they reflect several distinct layers of temporal meaning. Once aspect is differentiated into lexical aspect, phasal aspect, and viewpoint aspect, a more precise analysis becomes possible.

Several categories traditionally treated as aspectual can more accurately be analysed as instances of phasal aspect. For example, *kāda yaf'alu* highlights the pre-initial phase, *tafiqa yaf'alu* foregrounds the initial phase of an event, *zalla yaf'alu* foregrounds its continuation, *kāda yaf'alu* highlights a pre-initial or approximative phase, and *qad fa'ala* often expresses a resultative phase. Other

constructions correspond primarily to viewpoint distinctions. Thus, *fa'ala* typically encodes a perfective viewpoint, whereas *kāna yaf'alu* presents the event from an imperfective or progressive perspective.

The same aspectual dichotomy can include Vendler's (1957) theory of lexical aspect which concerns the inherent temporal structure of situations, distinguishing states, activities, accomplishments, and achievements. Arabic derived verb forms do not constitute aspectual categories in themselves, but they frequently interact with lexical aspect to modify event structure. Forms such as *kassara* may introduce iterative, distributive, or intensive readings that alter the lexical profile of the predicate. Consequently, Arabic morphology operates simultaneously at different levels of temporal representation, contributing not only to grammatical interpretation but also to the semantic structure of situations themselves.

Taken together, these observations suggest that Arabic temporal meaning is best analysed through a layered architecture consisting of: (i) the expression of temporal meaning (morphological versus grammatical tense), (ii) temporal location (past, present, and future), and (iii) aspectual interpretation (lexical, phasal, and viewpoint aspect). Within such a framework, Ḥassān's distinction occupies a higher analytical level than those proposed by Reichenbach, Comrie, and Vendler. Whereas the latter describe temporal and aspectual categories, Ḥassān explains how those categories are realized and interpreted in Arabic.

A Multi-layered Model of Tense and Aspect in Arabic

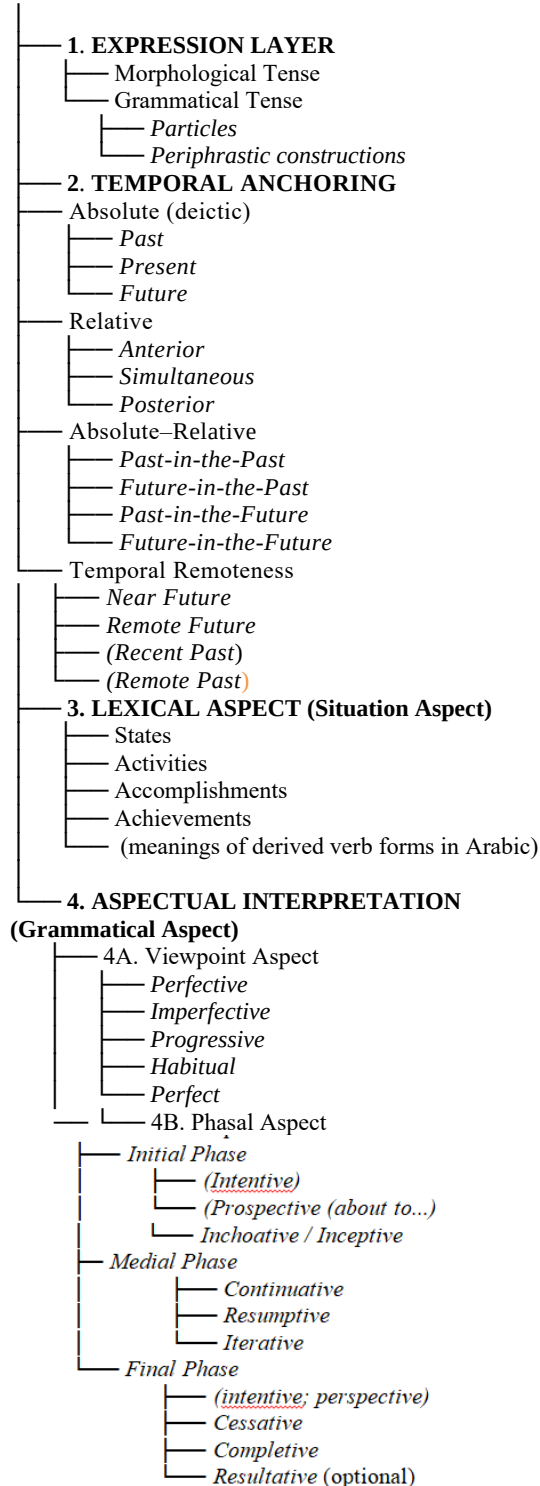
Based on the preceding discussion, this section proposes a unified analytical framework for the study of tense and aspect in Arabic that integrates insights from Tammām Ḥassān (1994), Reichenbach (1947), Comrie (1976, 1985), and Vendler (1957). The framework departs from approaches that treat tense and aspect as properties directly encoded by verbal morphology. Instead, it adopts a stratified architecture in which temporal meaning emerges through the interaction of multiple, hierarchically organised levels. This architecture distinguishes the formal expression of temporal meaning from temporal anchoring and aspectual interpretation, thereby separating grammatical form from semantic interpretation.

The framework consists of four independent but interacting dimensions of temporal meaning: (i) Expression, (ii) Temporal Anchoring, (iii) Lexical Aspect, and (iv) Aspectual Interpretation. Each dimension addresses a distinct analytical question. The Expression dimension examines how temporal meaning is encoded through verbal morphology and other grammatical devices. Temporal Anchoring determines how an event is located in time relative to the speech event and other temporal reference points. Lexical Aspect captures the inherent temporal properties of the predicate, asking what kind of eventuality is being described. Aspectual Interpretation concerns the

speaker's perspective on that eventuality, examining how the event is viewed or presented in discourse.

Together, these four dimensions provide a decomposition of temporal meaning that mirrors developments in contemporary theories of tense and aspect while accommodating the distinctive characteristics of Arabic. Rather than attributing temporal interpretation to verbal morphology alone, the framework treats it as the outcome of the interaction between formal expression, temporal anchoring, lexical event structure, and aspectual perspective

TEMPORAL MEANING IN ARABIC



Following Ḥassān, the first analytical layer distinguishes between morphological tense and grammatical tense. Morphological tense refers to the inherent temporal value associated with a verbal form in isolation, such as *fa'ala* (traditionally associated with past reference) and *yaf'alu* (non-past). Grammatical tense, by contrast, refers to the temporal interpretation that arises from the interaction of verbal morphology with syntactic structure, auxiliary elements, particles, adverbials, and discourse context. This distinction is crucial for Arabic, where temporal reference is frequently distributed across multiple grammatical elements rather than encoded in a single inflectional form. Constructions such as *kāna yaf'alu*, *qad fa'ala*, *sa-yaf'alu*, and *sawfa yaf'alu* illustrate that temporal interpretation cannot be reduced to morphology alone, but is the result of a compositional process at the clause and discourse levels.

The second layer corresponds to temporal anchoring in the sense of Reichenbach's (1947) model of Speech Time (S), Event Time (E), and Reference Time (R), further developed in Comrie's typology of tense relations. At this level, temporal meaning is formalized in terms of the relationship between E, R, and S. Four main configurations are relevant for Arabic: Temporal Domains: *Past*, *Present*, *Future* are deictic (absolute) temporal locations relative to speech time. Anchoring type include *Absolute*, *Relative*, *Absolute-Relative* (the mechanism of anchoring, following Reichenbach and later tense theories). They express temporal relations (the relation between the event and its reference point). Relative tense is organized around anteriority, simultaneity, and posteriority relative to another reference point, not directly around past/present/future. Absolute-relative tense combines both a deictic anchor and a reference-time relation (e.g., *future in the past*). Temporal Remoteness: distinctions such as *Recent* vs. *Remote Past* and *Near* vs. *Remote Future*, which are particularly relevant cross-linguistically and in Arabic through markers like *sa-* versus *sawfa*.

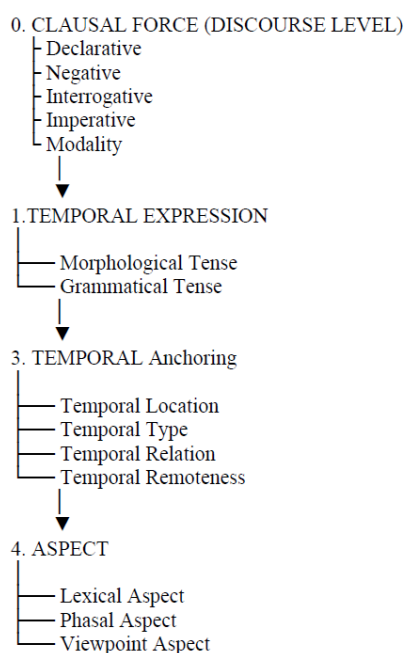
The third layer concerns lexical aspect, following Vendler's classification of situation types into states, activities, accomplishments, and achievements. Lexical aspect is an inherent property of the predicate and is independent of tense or grammatical aspect marking. In Arabic, lexical aspect interacts systematically with verbal derivation and argument structure. Certain derived patterns may shift the lexical class of a verb or introduce iterative, intensive, or causative readings, thereby affecting the event's internal temporal structure. This layer thus provides the semantic foundation upon which higher grammatical categories operate.

The fourth layer concerns aspectual interpretation is divided into two distinct but interacting sublayers: phasal aspect and viewpoint aspect. Phasal aspect concerns the internal segmentation of an event into stages, including inception, continuation, termination, and approximation. Arabic constructions such as *tafiqa yaf'alu* (inchoative), *zalla*

yaf'alu (continuative), *kāda yaf'alu* (approximative), and *qad fa'ala* (resultative) primarily operate at this level by highlighting specific phases of an event rather than its global temporal structure. Viewpoint aspect, following Comrie (1976), reflects the speaker's perspective on the event as a whole. The distinction between perfective and imperfective construals is central here. For instance, *fa'ala* typically encodes a perfective viewpoint, presenting the situation as a bounded whole, whereas *kāna yaf'alu* expresses an imperfective or progressive perspective, presenting the event from within its internal structure. Habitual and perfect readings are also located at this level.

The fourth dimension, labelled aspectual interpretation, can also be termed grammatical aspect, with viewpoint aspect and phasal aspect constituting its two principal subtypes. This terminology makes the distinction from lexical aspect explicit: whereas lexical aspect (or *Situation Aspect*) concerns the inherent temporal structure of an event, grammatical aspect concerns the speaker's perspective on or construal of that event. This distinction between lexical aspect and grammatical aspect is well established in the literature on tense and aspect and provides a familiar and theoretically transparent framework for readers.

It is worth noting that in this model, negation and interrogation in Arabic do not constitute independent tense or aspectual categories. Rather, they function as clausal operators located at the level of discourse force. These operators scope over fully specified temporal and aspectual structures and may alter their interpretation without modifying their underlying classification. Negation, for instance, may cancel event realization or shift aspectual interpretation toward non-actualization, while interrogatives suspend assertion and introduce epistemic uncertainty over an otherwise fully specified temporal–aspectual proposition. The same applies for modality which is outside the domain of tense and aspect.



1- Conclusion

This study has argued that the long-standing debate over tense and aspect in Arabic cannot be satisfactorily resolved within a single theoretical framework because existing approaches operate at different levels of analysis. Contemporary theories such as those of Reichenbach, Comrie, and Vendler primarily describe the conceptual organization of temporal and aspectual meaning, focusing respectively on temporal anchoring, grammatical aspect, and the inherent temporal structure of situations. By contrast, traditional discussions of Arabic, whether those of the classical Arab grammarians or many Western Arabists, have largely centered on the temporal interpretation of verbal morphology, leading to the familiar question of whether Arabic should be classified as a tense-based or an aspect-based language. This study has shown that these perspectives are not necessarily incompatible; rather, they address different components of a more complex temporal system.

Within this context, Tammām Ḥassān's distinction between morphological tense and grammatical tense represents a significant theoretical advance. His model shifts attention from the temporal meanings themselves to the mechanisms through which those meanings are encoded and interpreted. By distinguishing the inherent temporal value of verbal forms from the temporal interpretation that emerges through the interaction of morphology, syntax, particles, auxiliaries, adverbials, and discourse context, Ḥassān provides an explanatory dimension that complements rather than competes with contemporary theories of tense and aspect.

Building on this insight, the paper proposed a multi-layered model of temporal meaning in Arabic that separates four analytically independent but interacting dimensions: the expression of temporal meaning, temporal anchoring, lexical aspect, and grammatical aspect, the latter comprising both viewpoint aspect and phasal aspect. This layered architecture makes it possible to locate individual grammatical constructions within the component of the temporal system to which they properly belong. It also demonstrates that many constructions traditionally grouped together under the label of "aspect" in Arabic actually belong to different aspectual domains. Likewise, it clarifies that temporal interpretation cannot be reduced to verbal morphology alone but emerges compositionally through the interaction of multiple grammatical and discourse-level factors.

The proposed model also provides a principled explanation for the apparent disagreement among previous scholars. Rather than reflecting fundamentally incompatible analyses, many competing accounts arise because they privilege different analytical layers. Studies concerned with verbal morphology naturally emphasize the expression layer, semantic theories focus on temporal anchoring and viewpoint, while analyses of event structure concentrate on

lexical aspect. Once these layers are distinguished, the traditional opposition between tense-based and aspect-based accounts of Arabic becomes considerably less problematic. Arabic cannot be adequately characterized by reference to verbal morphology alone, nor can its temporal system be captured solely through semantic categories divorced from their grammatical realization. Instead, tense and aspect emerge from the interaction of multiple, hierarchically organized components.

Beyond Arabic, the proposed framework has broader implications for tense–aspect theory. It suggests that the study of temporal systems benefits from distinguishing questions of expression from questions of interpretation, and from treating temporal location, lexical aspect, viewpoint, and phasal aspect as separate but interacting dimensions. Such an approach offers a more comprehensive account of how languages encode temporal meaning and provides a framework that can accommodate both morphologically rich and morphologically impoverished tense systems. For Arabic in particular, the model offers an integrative account that reconciles insights from the Arabic grammatical tradition with contemporary linguistic theory, while providing a more precise analytical framework for future research on tense, aspect, and related temporal categories.

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