

The Pragmatics of the Non-Temporal Uses of the Past Tense in Arabic

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Abstract: *This paper explores some of the non-temporal uses of the past tense in Arabic in an attempt to decipher the subtle pragmatic effects that such uses accomplish in discourse. It also examines the extent to which these uses will support the generalization proposed by Wallace (1982) to explain the non-temporal uses of the past tense in English and in the other group of languages he considered. The study analyzed contextualized instances of the past tense that were culled from different Arabic sources, including short stories and social and religious texts. Findings of the study show that the non-temporal uses of the past tense in Arabic are of two types: uses that support Wallace's generalization and others which do not. The paper discusses the pragmatic effects that both types of uses convey in discourse.*

1. Introduction:

The concepts of tense, aspect and modality are discussed in almost every English grammar reference or text (see Comrie, 1990; Leech, 1987; Quirk et al, 1985 and Quirk and Greenbaum, 1973). They are also discussed in some Arabic grammar books, though not as much as is the case in English (see Abdul-Kareem, 2001; Hassan, 1998; Nour Al-Deen , 1984, among others). Some of these studies have shown that in virtually all languages tense, aspect and modality do not exhibit clear-cut boundaries that characterize them but rather manifest a great deal of intriguing overlap (see Lyons, 1977; Schiffrin, 1981; Wallace, 1982; Comrie, 1985; Riddle, 1986; Binnick, 2005; Caudal and Roussarie, 2006, among others). Thus, while example (1) below is an instance of a straightforward deictic reference, example (2) is not.

1. He went to the zoo yesterday.
2. I was wondering if you could help me.

In example (2), the interlocutor is asking for help at the time of speaking, but for politeness reasons he uses the past form of the verb to soften his request.

More often than not, tense could perform its primary task, i.e., denoting time and concurrently convey other subtle non-temporal uses, as in the following example:

3. I will give you a ride to the airport.

In this sentence, the use of the future marker *will* does not merely imply futurity but also volitionality, among other things. This overlap in the uses of tense, aspect and modality is not language-specific but rather, as many studies have

demonstrated, a universal phenomenon (see Schiffrin, 1981; Wallace 1982; Comrie, 1985, for instance). Consider the following examples:

4. *Il sera malade.* (Wallace, 1982)
He will be sick

5. *sa 'anduru fi l-'amri*
 Will see-I in the-matter
I will look into the matter.

According to Wallace (1982: 202), example (4) could be translated as: *He will be sick* or *he is probably sick*. Thus, besides carrying out its characteristic time reference task, the future marker here conveys another sense, namely probability. In example (5), from Arabic, the use of the future marker *sa* 'will' conveys a promise sense besides indicating futurity.

This use of tense and aspect for purposes other than temporal reference accomplishes certain pragmatic or discourse effects. For instance, the use of the past tense to refer to the present or future conveys various senses including, politeness, distance, etc. Leech (1987: 15), for example, argues that in: "*I hoped you would give me a hand with the painting,*" uttered in the here and now is more polite than "*I hope...*" since the present seems to be more direct, a feature that is avoided in requests. Similarly, many linguists have shown that the future indicates desire, intention, and promise perhaps more than futurity. Lyons (1977: 677) states: "Futurity is never a purely temporal concept; it necessarily includes an element of prediction or some related notions."

Amouzadeh (2006) examines the peculiar uses of the preterite in Persian, saying, "in certain cases the speaker uses the preterite tense rather than the imperative to guarantee or emphasize the actualisation of the task which the addressee is obliged to do" (18).

In her study 'Tense and Variation in Narrative,' Schiffrin (1981) states: "the HP [historical present] is used to increase the dramatic impact of the story by making the audience feel as if it had been present at the time of the actual experience, seeing events as they actually happened" (46). In another place in her paper, she writes: "the HP makes the past more vivid by bringing past events into the moment of speaking ..." (58).

Riddle (1986) presents interesting examples that show that some uses of the past tense are motivated by past associations in which the subjective attitude of the speaker determines tense choice rather than the time at which the events occurred. Consider the following two examples, taken from Riddle (1986).

6. (The speaker, gesturing with an old potholder in her hand at a flea market, explaining why she just bought it). It did not have any stains on it. (Spontaneous speech, p. 270).

7. Anne: Jane just bought a Volvo.

John: Maureen has one.

Anne: John, you have got to quit talking about Maureen as if you were still going together. (p. 271)

In the first example, the speaker has just bought a potholder from a flea market. She waves to a friend who happens to be in the flea market and tells her that the potholder '*didn't have stains on it.*' Now since she is in the market and since the potholder is still stainless we expect the use of the present. Yet, she uses the past to convey the idea that the trigger that motivated her to buy the potholder was the fact that she found it stainless at the moment of purchasing. Thus, the use of the past here serves a different purpose other than the temporal reference. The second example is similar; Anne objects to John's use of the present when talking about his ex-girlfriend, since such a choice of tense conveys a subtle message, namely that he still remembers and cares about her. In other words, Anne's objection indicates that the use of the present tense signals on-going intimacy. In their discussion of this example in relation to the concept of intimacy, Taylor and Evans say:

In this example the use of the present tense form *has* by B [John], is interpreted by A [Anne] as a claim of (unwarranted) intimacy. John does not have direct knowledge as to whether Maureen still owns a Volvo. He is speaking as if they are in an on-going relationship, which would give him that knowledge. As such, in examples such as this the use of tense provides an intimacy reading. (WWW. 2006).

This intriguing fluidity or overlap in the use of tenses has made many linguists question the extent to which we can talk about tense, aspect and modality as autonomous or separate categories. In his renowned study "Figure and Ground: The Interrelationships of Linguistic Categories," Wallace (1982) makes reference to most of the studies that have attempted to characterize tense, aspect and modality and asks:

The fundamental question therefore is: if 'present' and 'past' tenses do not necessarily refer to present and past time, if the 'present' can refer to the past and the 'past' to the present, how are we justified in talking about tense and time with regard to these categories? (203).

Having scrutinized data from different languages that show the behaviour of the past and present tenses, Wallace concludes by saying: "One might argue that the distinction between 'present' and 'past' tense in the languages mentioned is not so much temporal as it is modal: *immediate-direct-certain 'present' mode* versus *remote-indirect-hesitant past mode*" (my emphasis) (203). In another place, he states that "the usual way of referring to the present is with the 'present tense' (or 'immediate' tense mode), and the usual way of referring to the past is with the 'past tense' (or 'remote' tense-mode) ... Using the 'past' to refer to the present has the effect of *downplaying the certainty, immediacy, or reality* of the assertion..." (emphasis added) (110).

There have also been some Arabic studies that have had tense and aspect and their temporal and non-temporal uses as their focus, yet such studies are not very many. Despite the fact that Arabic is one of the languages that have been studied extensively, studies that attempt to scrutinize the non-temporal uses of the past tense and their pragmatics or discourse functions tend to be scanty. Traditional Arabic linguistic studies place more emphasis on the form at the expense of the use or

function (see Al-Anbari, 1957; Al-zajaji, 1959; Ibn Al-Siraj, 1973; Al-Siouti, 1998, for instance). It is true that recent studies have focused on the concepts of time and verbs, but very little has been said about the pragmatics of the non-temporal uses of the past tense. Some of the recent studies that have investigated the behavior of the Arabic verb in relation to time include Hassan (1998), Nour Al-Deen (1984) and Abdul-Kareem (2001). These studies have shown that in certain cases the past could refer to either the present or the future provided that a trigger exists. The trigger could be syntactic and/or rhetorical. Syntactic triggers include conditional particles such as *law* 'if' and its synonyms, negative particles such as *maa* 'not', *laa* 'not,' as well as other types of particles such as *mahmaa* 'whatever', *lawlaa* 'if only', etc.

Rhetorical triggers are subtler and only through context can one decipher the elements motivating the use of the past to refer to the non-past. Some of the situations that Hassan (1998), Nour Al-Deen (1984) and Abdul-Kareem (2001) present to show how the past form of the verb can denote non-past reference include *suggesting, wishing, begging, praying and expressing a conditional*. As has already been mentioned, despite the fact that these recent studies and a number of similar others differ from the traditional ones in paying attention to the category of tense, virtually all of them focus more on the syntactically motivated cases than on the contextually- motivated ones. For instance, out of 27 uses of the past tense that Nor Al-Deen (1984) lists, eight constitute straightforward uses, i.e., uses that refer to past events. Fifteen of these uses have syntactic triggers such as conditional markers, which means only four uses are contextually motivated.

Abdul-Kareem's study focused on the uses of the verbs in the Holy Qur'an. He investigated the occurrences of the past form of the verb in 4 *surahs*, chapters, in the Holy Qur'an, highlighting the cases in which the past is used to refer to past events and the uses that have non-past reference. His findings showed that the normal function of the past is to refer to past events. For instance, in Surat Hood, the past form of the verb occurs 50 times, 45 of which (90%) refer to past events. The other five uses denote non-past reference (see Abdul-Kareem, p. 98).

Contrastive studies that have focused on the uses of the past tense in Arabic and English include Meziani (1978) and Al-Khawalda (2004), among others. Meziani (1978) compares the English non-past with the simple Moroccan Arabic non-past. His focus, though, was on Moroccan colloquial Arabic and how the many forms that represent the non-past in English confuse EFL Moroccan learners.

Al-Khawalda (2004) evaluated the translation of the Arabic copula *kaana* (past form of *be*) in the Holy Qur'an. His findings revealed cases of inadequate translation of this verb resulting from "*insufficient understanding of the mechanism of tense and aspect in both the Arabic and English languages.*" He also found that "*in most cases, the modal usage of kaana...is ignored by the translator(s)*" (my italics) (228). Such findings indicate that the non-temporal uses of tenses is a topic that has not received sufficient attention. This study is a step in that direction.

1.1. Objectives of the study

This study attempts to explore the non-temporal uses of the past tense in Arabic in order to identify the pragmatic effects such uses can convey in discourse. It also attempts to examine the extent to which the generalization proposed by Wallace (1982) to explain such uses in English and in the other languages he considered could also explain these uses in Arabic. The paper is not meant to provide an exhaustive list of the different non-temporal uses that exist in Arabic but rather discuss a sufficient number of such uses that enable us to clarify their major pragmatic functions in discourse.

1.2. Significance

The significance of this study stems from the fact that it attempts to investigate an important topic that has not been given enough attention in Arabic studies. The study differs from all the previous studies conducted on the subject as it focuses on examining the non-temporal uses of the past that are mainly contextually-motivated with a view to identifying the meaning effects they create in discourse. In addition, the study attempts to examine the extent to which Wallace's generalization that has been proposed to account for the non-temporal uses of the past tense in English and the other languages he considered could accommodate the non-temporal uses of the past in Arabic.

2. Methodology

The Arabic variety referred to in this study is Standard Arabic. An utterance is considered standard if it abides by the phonological, morphological, and syntactic rules of the standard form of the language. If a single non-standard feature occurs, the utterance is not considered standard. In some cases, the paper cites examples from the non-standard varieties, i.e. from regional Arabic to show that the non-temporal uses of past tense are not limited to the standard variety of Arabic but also manifest themselves in the colloquials.

2.1 Data collection and data analysis

Data were collected from many sources including short stories as well as texts of different types: religious, social, etc. Books on Arabic Grammar such as Hassan (1998), Nour Al-Deen (1984) and Richardson (1776) were also sources of data. Formal speeches such as religious talks and TV interviews that were conducted in Standard Arabic were another source of data. For a period of nearly two years, the author kept a diary in which he made notes of any non-temporal use of the past that he would hear.

A major source of data collection was the Holy Qur'an. Out of the 700 instances that were collected from different sources, nearly 60 of these (9%) were extracted from the Holy Qur'an. This relatively high number of instances from the Qur'an may be justified on grounds of the fact that the Qur'an is the best model of Standard Arabic. It is the primary source of the Standard form of the language that Arab grammarians resort to when explaining Arabic grammatical structures. Rarely would one find an Arabic grammar text or source that does

not cite from the Holy Book when addressing a semantic, syntactic or morphological point.

In the data collection process, the past forms of verbs in the texts were examined closely. Those indicating non-temporal senses were extracted together with the surrounding context. A follow up step involved scrutinizing the various senses that such uses convey.

3. Analysis and discussion

Analysis of the data shows that the past tense in Arabic exhibits many interesting non-temporal uses. In what follows, the paper will discuss the examples that tend to support Wallace's assertion and then proceed to highlight the cases that do not. The discussion will also include a brief analysis of the pragmatic effects that the non-temporal uses of the past create in discourse.

3.1 *Non-temporal uses of the past tense in Arabic supporting Wallace's generalization*

The analysis of the data reveal that many non-temporal uses of the past in Arabic support the generalization proposed by Wallace (1982) to explain the non-temporal uses of the past in English and in the languages he considered. He argues, "the distinction between 'present' and 'past' tense in the languages mentioned is not so much temporal as it is modal: *immediate-direct-certain 'present' mode versus remote-indirect-hesitant past mode*" (my emphasis) (203). The following are some uses that can be explained by this generalization.

3.1.1 *Using the past to convey a request*

One of the non-temporal uses of the past tense in Arabic is to achieve or convey a request sense, a use that exhibits itself in English and many other languages. Consider the following example:

8.	<i>šarraʿatnā</i>		<i>'aiyādīka</i>	<i>wa</i>	<i>'aṭrabnā</i>
	affected-us		your hands	and	entertained-we
	<i>l- ġunā</i>	<i>fa</i>	<i>bimā</i>	<i>ši'ta</i>	<i>billahi</i>
	the-singing	then	by-what	want-you	by God
	<i>ġanayta</i>				
	sang-you.	(Ghanim, 1975)			

Your looks have affected us, and your singing has entertained us. Therefore, please sing the song you like.

In this example, the speaker is very thrilled with both the looks of this singer and her entertaining songs. Therefore, he begs her to continue singing. To make his request most effective, he expresses it via the past, thus creating a congenial space that conveys both his respect and admiration and that also leaves room for her to decide whether to accommodate the request or not. The use of *billah*, 'by God',

softens the request further, for this expression here means ‘please’. The following example further illustrates the use of the past tense in Arabic to express a request or a negotiating sense.

9. A: *'aḥtāḡu qarḍ*
Need-I loan
I need a loan

B: *Kam turīdu?*
How-much want-you
How much do you want?

C: *mā ḡudta bihi xayr.*
What **gave**-you with-it well.
Whatever you could give is fine.

Here the first interlocutor seeks a loan, and when asked about the amount he desired, he left it to the loan lender. The use of the present form of the verb *taḡŪd* is absolutely acceptable and in fact what is usually expected in such situations. Yet, the use of the past here serves a pragmatic purpose; it lends a vivid sense of politeness on the part of the requester and serves as a signal that conveys the requester’s gracious attitude no matter how much the loan lender decides to offer. The understood stance of the requester here can be read as follows: “whatever you would like to give, a large or a little amount, will be appreciated.”

Related to this is the use of the past in contexts where the requester shows a negative attitude toward the addressee, as in the following example:

10. *halla sakata qawmun ṣadda'Ūna bi-ṣurāxihim*
Could **stopped-talking** people gave-headache-to-us with-their-screams.

Would those who have bothered us with their screams be quiet?

In this example, the speaker uses the past to request those people who have bothered him with their criticism to stop or ‘knock if off.’ Of course the word *ṣurāxihim* ‘their screams’ in this utterance could be metaphorical. However, what concerns us here is the fact that the past rather than the present form of the verb is utilized to convey this request. The speaker could have used the emphatic imperative form *liaskut qawmun* ‘let these people be quiet,’ yet the use of the past appears more fitting as it conveys a mixture of senses including warning, annoyance and threat, leaving it to the addressee to figure out the exact sense the addressor intended. For example, it could be read as: *Could these people keep quiet?*, but it also can very well be read as: *Would these people shut up?* The word *ṣadda'Ūna* in the example lends more weight to the second reading, though.

All these examples with the use of the past form of the verb resemble the use of the past tense for requests in English, where the use of the past sounds more polite than the present in instances such as:

11. I wondered/was wondering if you could help me.
12. Would you give me a loan?

3.1.2. Using the past to convey a suggestion

The past tense in Arabic can also be used to express a suggestion or a decision that is taken on the spur of the moment, as the following example shows:

13. [A Chair of a meeting addresses his colleagues]:
ḥasanan ya sādah, halla bad'anā (Esetch, WWW)
 Well, gentlemen can **started**-we?
Well, shall we start, gentlemen?

The speaker here suggested that he and his team start working. He used the past form of the verb to communicate this suggestion. The marker *halla* can be translated into Arabic as *can*, *could* or *shall* and may precede a verb to communicate certain functions. However, with or without this marker, the past here coupled with appropriate intonation is used to express a suggestion. This does not mean, though, that the present form of the verb cannot be used in such cases. Instance (13) can also be expressed via the present as in (14).

14. (*halla nabda'*)
 (Can) *start*-we?
Shall we start?

As the meaning of the example shows, the meaning is the same, yet the use of the past in Arabic sounds more polite but also swifter. That is, the addressor is suggesting that they start and it is really time to start.

3.1.3 Using the past to express a choice sense

In example (13) above, the speaker (chair of a meeting) suggested that they start working if they desired. The addressees' response in case of agreement can also be expressed via the past, as in the following example:

15. A: *bad'anā yā ḡamā'ah?*
Started-we (hey) group
Shall we start fellows?

B: *bad'anā.*
Started-we
Yes, let's start.

This example shows that the past tense can be used to communicate a choice. The workmates had to make the choice whether to start or not. Saying *bad'anā* 'let's start' is their decision or choice.

This intriguing use of the past tense is not limited to the standard variety of Arabic; it also manifests itself in the colloquials. Consider the following example:

- [A father asks his eight year-old child]
 16. Father: *nirawwiḥ willā niḡlis šīwayyah?*
 go-home or stay-we a little bit
Shall we go or shall we stay for a little more?

Child [*thinks for a little while and then says*]: *rawwaḥnā*.

went-home-we

Let's go home.

[*Yemeni Arabic-- Spontaneous speech*]

In this example, the father who was visiting a friend asked his son whether they should leave or stay longer, i.e., consulting with him. The child paused and then said: *rawwaḥnā*, 'let's go.' The child used the past to communicate his choice.

Of course the boundary between the functions of requesting, suggesting and choosing as expressed here via these examples is not really clear-cut. A use can be an example of choice or suggesting or even requesting. For instance, the child here is given a choice whether to stay a little longer or leave, after thinking he chose/suggested that they leave. What concerns us here is that the past tense is used to communicate functions such as requesting, suggesting and choosing.

3.1.4 Using the past to convey a conditionality sense

The use of the past to refer to the present can have a syntactic motivation as in the following example.

- | | | | |
|---------------|--------------|---------------|---------------------|
| 17. <i>mā</i> | <i>šādda</i> | <i>d-dīna</i> | <i>aḥadun 'illa</i> |
| Whenever | exaggerated | the-religion- | someone then |

ḡalabah
overcame-him

Those who exaggerate in religion, religion defeat them. (Prophetic saying)

In Arabic, *mā* 'whenever' is one of the adverbial particles that denote conditionality, as mentioned above. Other conditionality particles include *idha*, 'if' *law*, 'if' *mahma*, 'no matter' *lawla*, 'if only,' etc. In addition to the conditionality sense conveyed via such uses, one can feel that this use conveys a factual sense. That is, as the translation of the example indicates, if a believer becomes too strict in practicing religion, religion defeats him.

Thus, here the use of the past lends a proverbial meaning in the sense that what is expressed via the past in such contexts indicates that it is acknowledged as a fact. The use of the past tense here is motivated by a syntactic trigger, a use that is also common in English, as in:

18. If I had time, I would visit you tomorrow.

In all these instances, (8-17), it is observed that the past tense is used in place of the present or future to convey certain subtle senses that indicate that the interlocutor is attempting to be diplomatic, polite, or does not expect to receive positive responses to what s/he is saying, suggesting or requesting. In the case of a request, for instance, the requester uses the past tense to sound polite and to leave some room for the party requested to turn down the request. Thus, such non-temporal uses of the past tense support Wallace's characterization, i.e. they in one way or another

reflect the speaker's lack of certainty, hesitance, etc. These examples, however, are merely a sample of the non-temporal uses of the past tense in Arabic, which agree with Wallace's generalization. As stated above, our objective is not to attempt an exhaustive account of all the non-temporal uses that can fall in line with this generalization. Rather, we just meant to highlight a few ones and proceed to discuss the more subtle uses, i.e., the ones that Wallace's generalization cannot accommodate.

3.1 *Non-temporal uses of the past that do not support Wallace's generalization*

This section will highlight certain non-temporal uses of the past tense in Arabic, the ones that do not support Wallace's generalization.

3.2.1 *Using the past to convey a determination/certainty sense*

The past tense in Arabic can be used in place of the present or the future to convey a sense of determination and/or certainty, as the following example illustrates:

19. 'ayyuha ṣ-ṣulṭān 'i'lam
 Oh, the Sultan know
- 'annanā fī hā ḍ ihī l-madīnati
 that-we in in this the-city
- fī xalqin kathīrin, wa 'innamā
 in people much and but
- yatawaqqafūna mina l-qitāli raḡā'a
 stop-they from the fight for
- l-amān fa'idā ra'aynā 'anna l-mawta
 peace but if saw-we that the-death
- lā budda minhu fa-wallahi lanaqtulanna
 no escape from-it then -by-God we-will-kill
- 'awlādanā thumma xaraḡnā 'alaikum kullanā
 children-our then rushed forth-we against-you all-of-us
 (Richardson, 1776: 65-55)

Oh, Sultan! Be aware that we are in this city in great numbers and have only desisted from the fight in expectation of peace but when we see death unavoidable, then by God we will kill our children ... After this we shall all rush forth against you.

As can be seen from this example, the highlighted verb in Arabic is in its past form, but it really indicates futurity as the translation shows. The speaker could have used the present form *naxruḡu* 'rush forth,' but it would not have conveyed the strong sense of determination that the past form conveys in this context. In fact, the

speaker could have used the emphatic form *lanaxruġanna*, ‘we shall certainly rush forth’, but it seems that the amount of emphasis or illocutionary force gained from the use of the past surpasses that which can be obtained from the emphatic form itself. If we attempt to replace the past tense form with the emphatic form in the example, we certainly will discover that the past form of the verb does sound more emphatic. This should not strike us as odd; in scrutinizing the example, one could observe easily that the normal tense (the unmarked one) is the future, which is in fact the case with all the verbs in the example, except for the last one. Using the past here is marked -- it violates the norm. This markedness, however, is not without a purpose. The speaker, through the use of the past, accomplishes two objectives: a) drawing the attention of the listener very closely due to the unexpected use of the past, and b) portraying revenge as something inevitable, so inevitable that the speaker uses the past to indicate its certainty. The following example further illustrates this use:

20. " 'atā 'amru l-lāhi falā tasta^ʿġilŪh..."
 came command of-Allah so-don't rush-it (Holy Qur'an, 16:1)

(Inevitable) cometh (to pass) the Command of Allah. Seek ye not then to hasten it... (Yusufali's Translation)

This verse addresses those who are skeptical about the advent of the Day of Judgment. Since the verse talks about a forthcoming event, the future tense, *say'ati* ‘it will come’ is what is expected. There is no syntactic barrier that makes it unacceptable. Yet, probably due to skepticism about this day on the part of the non-believers, the Qur'an needs a form that plainly asserts the approaching of this day. The emphatic form *lay'atianna 'amru Allah*, ‘the Command of Allah shall certainly come’ could have been very appropriate for this purpose. Yet, this again, it appears, won't convey the strong momentum carried out by the use of the past form of the verb, as the past here portrays the advent of this day as something so definite and so unavoidable that it is expressed by means of the past to assert its absolute certainty. Observe that the translation agrees with our explanation.

The meaning effects expressed in these examples do not support Wallace's (1982) assertion. The past in its non-temporal uses sounds, according to Wallace, remote, indirect, uncertain and hesitant. Here, it is the one that is so certain and so determined that no other tense can convey such a strong sense.

3.2.2 Using the past to convey a command sense

Another interesting use of the past is conveying an imperative sense -- a command. The following is an example:

21. *laqad kathura šākŪka*
 it-has bcame-many complainers-against-you
 wa qalla šākirŪka,
 and became-less those-who- thank-you

fa'imma a' c tadalta *wa* *'imma* *'a c tazalta.*
 So-either straightened-up-you and or you-got-demoted
 Nour Al-Deen (1984:55)

Those who are displeased with you far exceed those who are not. Therefore, you either straighten up or you shall be demoted.

This instance is an example of how the past is used to convey a command that implies a threat. To fully appreciate the kind of sense conveyed through the past, we will attempt to restate this example using the present. Consider:

22. *laqad* *kathura šākŪka*
 it-has became-many complainers-against-you

wa *qalla* *šākirŪka,*
 and became-less those-who- thank-you

fa'imma 'an *ta c tadila wa* *'imma 'an* *ta c tazila*
 So- either straighten-up-you and or you-get-demoted

Those who are displeased with you far exceed those who are not. Therefore, you either straighten up or you shall be demoted.

Reading both utterances (21) and (22), it appears that the use of the past form *fa'imma a' c tadalta wa 'imma 'a c tazalta* sounds more commanding than the present. It passes on a strong sense that the decision is final; this governor has to behave or he 'shall' be demoted. Thus, due to the fact that the decision is final and unalterable, it is expressed via the past as a means of assuring the fulfillment of the threat. The words of this superior authority could be paraphrased as "we have received too many complaints against you, now you have the choice: either you change your attitude or you consider yourself discharged."

This kind of use exists in Standard Arabic and in some non-standard varieties of Arabic. The following is an example from Yemeni Arabic. Recall that the father who is visiting a friend together with his family, example (16) above, asked his child whether they should leave or stay longer and that the child, after thinking, said *rawwahñā* 'let's go.' The father stayed for some time and then turned to his children telling them that it was time to leave. However, one of the children did not want to leave and the father got a little angry. The conversation proceeded as follows:

23. Father: *ya-llā rawwahñā*
 Well, went-home-we?
Shall we go home?

Child: [*shows reluctance for he does not want to go home*].

Father: [*angrily*] *rawwahñā!*

went-home-we
Let's go! (Yemeni Arabic-- Spontaneous speech)

In this example, the father suggested that they leave. Again the suggestion is expressed here by means of the past *rawwahñā?* When the child showed reluctance, the father, in a decisive, commanding tone, yelled: *rawwahñā!* Let's go! (Move it!).

3.2.3 Using the past to convey a supplication sense

The past form of the verb in Arabic can also be used when praying to God for or against somebody. Such uses are very common in daily communication. Consider the following instances, which are similar to the ones found in Hassan (1998) and Nour Al-Deen (1984):

24. *ğazāka* *allāhu* *xayran*
 Rewarded-you God good
May God reward you.
25. *bāraka* *allahu* *fika*
 Blessed God in-you
May God bless you.
26. *ībat* *lailatuka*
 Became-pleasurable night-your
Have a good night.
27. *lā* *bārak* *allahu* *fī* *l-mu'tadi*
 No **blessed** God with the-aggressor
May Allah not bless the aggressor!

As can be seen, the Arabic verbs are in their past forms but in English, they are in the present. This is a normal way to express one's prayer for or against somebody in Arabic. The present is not as frequent as the past in such a context. Out of 40 well wishes post cards written in Standard Arabic, 29 contained wishes and prayers that were stated by means of the past. However, it should be pointed out that such use of the past tense in this context is restricted to certain types of verbs including those that express supplication. The understood meaning of sentence 24, for instance, is: "I pray to God to reward you." Despite the fact that these examples show that the motivation of such non-temporal uses boils down, at least partially, to politeness, we can feel that precision as well as other religious factors are also a major cause of such a use. In other words, Wallace's generalization cannot account for this use, since the speaker's trust that God will respond to his prayer is strong.

3.2.4 Using the past for emphasis

The past tense can also be used in place of the present when emphasizing a belief, as in the following example:

28. *šan'ā* *hawāt* *kulla* *fan*
 Sana'a contained every artistic thing

Sana'a is home to all arts. (Ghanim, 1975)

- | | | | | |
|-----|---------------------------|-----------|--------------------------------|--------------|
| 29. | <i>ğama^cat</i> | | <i>'aš-šāriqatu</i> | <i>baina</i> |
| | combined | | Sharjah | between |
| | <i>l-'ašālati</i> | <i>wa</i> | <i>l-mu^cāsarati</i> | |
| | traditional | and | modernity | |

The city of Sharjah combines tradition and modernity.

The normal tense in examples (28) and (29) is either the present or the present perfect. However, the use of the past here communicates important nuances including emphasis. The actual meaning of (29) for instance, is either 'Sana'a possesses all forms of Arts' or 'Sana'a is home to all arts'. The speaker could have used the present to express this generally accepted belief in Yemen, as in:

- | | | | | |
|-----|-------------------------|--------------|--------------|----------------|
| 30. | <i>šan^cā</i> | <i>taḥwī</i> | <i>kulla</i> | <i>fan</i> |
| | Sana'a | contains | every | artistic thing |

However, the use of the past lends a strong sense of emphasis to this 'fact' about Sana'a, i.e. that it is home to all forms of arts.' Similarly, the use of the past in (30) emphasizes the fact that Sharjah is a city that combines both tradition and novelty. The following examples further illustrate the use of the past as a means of emphasis:

- | | | | | | |
|-----|--------------|-----------------|---------------------------|----------------|--------------------|
| 31. | <i>'inna</i> | <i>l-laḏīna</i> | <i>'āmanu wa</i> | <i>'amilu</i> | <i>š- ṣaliḥāti</i> |
| | Surely | those | believed and | worked-they | the-good deeds |
| | <i>kānat</i> | <i>lahum</i> | <i>ğannātu l-firdawsi</i> | <i>nuzula.</i> | |
| | Was | for-them | Gardens the-Paradise | houses | |
- (Holy Qur'an, 18.107)*

As to those who believe and work righteous deeds, they have, for their entertainment, the Gardens of Paradise. (Yusufali's Translation)

- | | | | | | | |
|-----|-------------|-----------------|-------------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|
| 32. | <i>qāla</i> | <i>rabbī</i> | <i>'annā</i> | <i>yakŪnu</i> | <i>lī</i> | <i>ğulāmun</i> |
| | Said-he - | God-my | how | be | for-me | a son |
| | <i>wa</i> | <i>kānat</i> | <i>'imra'at ī</i> | <i>'āqiran</i> | <i>wa qad</i> | <i>balağtu</i> |
| | and | was-she | wife-my | barren | and have | arrived-we |
| | <i>mina</i> | <i>l-kibari</i> | <i>' itīyya.</i> | | | |
| | From | the-age | decrepit | | | |
- (Holy Qur'an, 19.08)*

He said: "O my Lord! How shall I have a son, when my wife is barren and I have grown quite decrepit from old age?" (Yusufali's Translation)

In these two examples, the copula is in the past form, but the intended meaning is not the past. The question then is why using the past form of the verb? The speaker in (32) and his wife have been together throughout their long life but have

had no children and at this age won't even dream to have a child. To utter this meaning, he says: "*wa kānat 'imra'at ī 'āqiran.*" Now, he could have said "*wa 'imra'at ī 'āqirun*", 'my wife is barren' without the past form of the verb. The omission of the past form of the verb here doesn't result in an ill-formed structure, nor does it lead to a different meaning. Similarly, omitting the verb from example (31) won't change the meaning of the sentence. However, in examining these two instances carefully, we can see that the only reason for such a use is to create a strong sense of emphasis. Thus, with the verb in the past, sentence (31) tells us that Paradise is definitely home for believers. Similarly, in example (32), the speaker uses *kānat* as a marker to emphasize a well-known fact about his wife, i.e., that she is unquestionably infertile. Therefore, the past is used here for emphasis purposes, a use that, again, does not support Wallace's generalization about the non-temporal uses of the past tense.

3.2.5 Using the past to convey all times

Finally, the past form of the verb can be used, in certain contexts, to indicate all time reference. The following are some illustrative examples.

33. ..."*wa kāna allahu 'ala kulli šay'in muqtadirā*"
and was God on every thing capable

...*It is God who prevails over all things . . .* (Holy Qur'an, 18:45)

(Yusufali's Translation)

34. *sabbha lillahi mā fī s-samawāti wa mā*
Praised for God what in the-heavens and what
fī l-'arḍi
in the-earth. (Holy Qur'an, 61:1)

Whatever is in the heavens and on the earth, let it declare the praises and Glory of Allah. (Yusufali's Translation)

The verbs in these two examples are in their past forms. The first sentence, as the literal translation shows, means that God was capable, and the second one indicates that God used to be praised. These interpretations are not accurate since, if they were, it would mean that God is no more the prevailer. Similarly, it would mean that once all creatures used to praise Him but not any longer. In other similar contexts, the present is used as the following example shows:

35. *yusabbihu lillahi mā fī s-samawāti*
wa
praise to God what in the-heavens
and

mā fī l-'arḍi
what in the-earth.

(Holy Qur'an, 62:1)

Whatever is in the heavens and on the earth doth declare the praises and

Glory of Allah (Yusufali's Translation)

As can be seen, the only difference between 34 and 35 is that the verb in the former is in the past, whereas in the latter, it is in the present. The fact that the two examples are identical motivates us to examine the verbs in both utterances, not in terms of their 'tense' function, but rather in terms of the overall meaning in these utterances. In scrutinizing example 34, we can assert that time is not a factor here, since if it were, it would mean that God is not praised any longer. That is, the principal function of the verb in example 34 appears to be a modal one rather than temporal. In scrutinizing the example further, we can observe that the past is used here to convey an imperative sense just as is the case with example 23 above. God, before the creating process began, had already ordained that every creature should praise Him. In other words, everything was destined (ordered) to praise Him. Unlike Wallace's assertion, the use of the past here can be looked at as a way of assuring the fulfillment of the command. Again, the imperative form *sabbih* 'praise' could have been used, but it seems that the past form of the verb *sabbaha* 'praised' conveys an additional sense, namely that the carrying out of the command by God's creatures is so certain that it is expressed via the past as if it had already happened.

4. Conclusion

This paper has endeavored to investigate the non-temporal uses of the past tense in Arabic in order to identify the subtle pragmatic effects that such uses carry out in discourse. It also examined the extent to which such uses will be in accord with the generalization that Wallace (1982) proposed to explain the non-temporal uses of the past tense in English and in the other languages he considered. The findings of the study revealed interesting non-temporal uses of the past in Arabic. Some of these uses lend further support to the fact that tense is used for purposes other than temporal reference. However, Wallace's generalization (p. 210) which states "... using the 'past' to refer to the present has the effect of downplaying the certainty, immediacy or reality of the assertion..." is not supported fully by our data. It is the case in English and probably in the many other languages he considered, but certainly not in Arabic. Most of the examples in our data indicate very clearly that the past, when used to refer to the present or future, can be as certain, as immediate, and as real as the present. In fact, in certain contexts, as illustrated above, it conveys a much stronger sense of certainty and determination than the present and even the emphatic present. This means that the generalization proposed by Wallace has to be modified so that it can accommodate these intriguing non-temporal uses of the past in Arabic if it is to claim some universality.

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Appendix:

Arabic Phonetic Symbols Used in the Examples of the Study

Consonants:

DESCRIPTION	SYMBOL USED
Voiceless interdental fricative	<i>th</i>
Voiced interdental fricative	<i><u>d</u></i>
Voiced emphatic interdental fricative	<i><u>d</u></i>
Voiceless emphatic alveolar fricative	<i>s</i>
Voiceless emphatic alveolar stop	<i>t</i>
Voiced emphatic alveolar stop	<i><u>d</u></i>
Voiceless palatal fricative	<i>š</i>
Voiced palatal affricate	<i>ğ</i>
Voiceless velar fricative	<i>x</i>
Voiceless uvular stop	<i>q</i>
Voiced uvular fricative	<i>ğ</i>
Voiceless pharyngeal fricative	<i>ħ</i>
Voiced pharyngeal fricative	<i>ʕ</i>
Voiceless glottal stop	<i>ʔ</i>

Vowels:

High front long vowel	ī
High front short vowel	i
High back long vowel	ū
High back short vowel	u
Low central long vowel	ā
Low central short vowel	a