

## **Contrastive Study of Aspect in English and Arabic**

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### **1. Introduction**

The idea of this paper is to compare (albeit briefly) “aspect” as a grammatical category commonly associated with the verb phrase in both English and Arabic. In view of the fact that much has been written on this category in English (cf. Allen, 1966; Comrie, 1976; Joos, 1964; Leech, 1971; Palmer, 1974; Quirk, et. al., 1985; Zandvoort, 1962) no attempt will be made to describe its status or uses in English. However, a brief review of the contrast between perfective and imperfective verbs in Arabic is necessary for the contrastive analysis (between English and Arabic perfective verbs) which is the main objective of this paper.

### **2. Aspect in Arabic**

Kurylowicz (1973) discusses “verbal aspect in Semitic” calling Arabic a *tense* language as opposed to an *aspect* language. His argument is that what is commonly claimed to be *aspect* in Arabic is context conditioned, which is incompatible with the original behavior of aspect as defined in Slavonic languages. His argument is in line with that of Zandvoort (1962) that does not allow English verbs to have aspectual distinctions.

Comrie (1976:80), on the other hand, contends that perfective verbs (pfv) in Arabic indicate both perfective meaning and relative past time reference. whereas,

- (1). *jalasuu* (pfv.) *9alaa l-baabi*. (They sat at the door)  
imperfective verbs indicate everything else (i.e. either imperfective meaning or relative non-past time). cf:
- (2). *?llahu ya9lamu* (imptv.) *bima ta9maluun* (iptv.)  
(God knows what you are doing)

His conclusion is that the Arabic opposition *imperfective/ perfective* incorporates both *aspect* and (relative) *tense*. The extent to which aspect or tense is predominant seems to have changed over the course of the development of Arabic. In modern written Arabic, overt tense markers, are usual even in the presence of temporal adverbs, although it still remains true that the *perfective* has perfective relative past meaning, and the *imperfective* has either imperfective or relative non-past meaning. Examples will be given later in a subsequent section.

McCarus (1976) makes a semantic classification of the verbs of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) dividing them into the following four main groups showing which group has aspect and which has no aspect:

A. *Stative verbs*: They are characterized by the lack of any activity in their imperfects and participles and cannot express habitual or progressive actions, i.e, *9arafa* (know -as root).

- (3). *ya9rifu* (ipfv) *Dalika* (He knows that)
- (4). *9arafa* (pfv) *Daalika* (He found that; he came to know that)

The active participle of state verbs is perfective in aspect or depicts a subsequent state: cf.

- (5) *?a9rifu smaka* (I know your name)
- (6) *?ana 9aarifun ismaka* (I am in the state of knowing your name) = I know your name now.

B. *Activity verbs*: They are verbs that express activities or processes, actions that continue over a period of time. Thus, the imperfect and the participle both have progressive meaning, and they can occur with adverbial expressions of extent of time as in the following examples:

- (7). *?ista9mala* (pfv.), *yasta9milu* (ipfv.) “to use” *musta9milun* (participle)

C. *Active verbs*: They are verbs which may have progressive meaning in the imperfect but only perfective meaning in the participle:

- (8). *darasa* (pfv.), *yadrusu* (ipfv.) « to study », *daaris* (participle) «having studied »

D. *Inchoatives*: They are verbs, which don't have progressive meaning in their imperfect forms, but may have various kinds of aspectual meaning in the active participle. The following are the different types of meanings:

- i. Developmental meaning:  
*Sakira* (pfv.), *yaskaru* (ipfv.) “in the process of becoming drunk”  
*Sakraan* (active participle) “drunk”
- ii. Inceptive meaning:  
*Naama* (pfv) “to fall asleep”, *naa?im* (participle) “having fallen asleep”
- iii. Movement meaning:  
*saafara* (pfv.) “traveled”, *musaafirun* (participle) “having set out” or “traveling” as progressive.

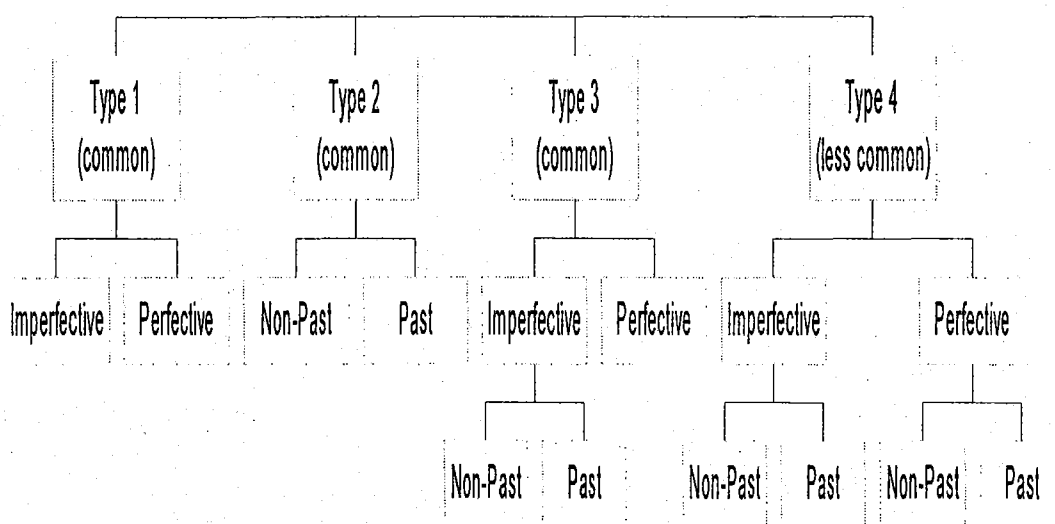
In his study of “aspectual distinctions in English and Arabic”, El-Hassan (1987) adopts the view of Maslov (1985) which says that we would not be justified in demanding that formal markers of aspect should necessarily be synthetic, as they are in Slavonic languages. El-Hassan then draws a rather limited comparison between English and Arabic to illustrate the distinctions between perfective and imperfective aspects. His examples show that Arabic has a great deal of similarity with English:

*“Aspect in both English and written Arabic is signaled by features occurring at different points in the sentence. However, neither English nor Arabic has any specific aspectual affixes (i.e. inflectional or derivational morphemes of aspect) analogous to those attested in, say, Slavonic languages.”*

To see where Arabic stands in relation to other languages, let us look at the following figure which shows types of aspect in world languages as given by Osten Dahl (1998):

### Combinations of core gramtypes

Type 0: No core categories (common)



It seems that the first type applies to Arabic verbs because they don't have morphological affixes to mark aspect. The verbs are only perfectives or imperfectives, which involve the tense and the semantic meaning of aspect as conditioned by the context of the sentence.

After this brief review of literature on aspect in Arabic, we will adopt Comrie's definition in this study as it stems from a universal application. Progressive/non-progressive aspect will be used here instead of perfective/imperfective terms. A contrastive analysis will be presented based on the universal uses of the progressive/simple aspect.

### 3. Uses of Aspect in English and Arabic

Linguists tend to agree on the following uses of the progressive aspect as opposed to simple aspect:

- |                    |                              |                 |
|--------------------|------------------------------|-----------------|
| 1. Duration        | 2. Incompletion of an action | 3. Overlapping  |
| 4. Habitual action | 5. Futurity                  | 6. Descriptions |

#### 3.1. Duration

Duration with the progressive is seen as limited or temporary. Leech (1973) gives the following examples to show the meaning of duration:

- (9)a. *My watch works perfectly.*
- b. *My watch is working perfectly.*
- c. The watch is reliable in (9a) but is not reliable in (9b).

The Arabic counterparts would be as follows:

- (9)a. *saa9atee ta9malu bishaklin mumtaaz.*
- b. *saa9atee ta9malu bishaklin mumtaaz l?aan.*

The morphological difference between the two aspects in English is not found in Arabic. However, the temporary meaning conveyed by the English progressive marker *-ing* morpheme is rendered by the time adverbial *l?aan* (now) in Arabic to show duration.

Curme (1935) gives the following examples to look at the durative meaning using the progressive-*ing* marker and the persistency at work without the *-ing* marker:

- (10)a. *He is working in the garden.* (Strong durative force)
- b. *He kept working in the garden until he was tired.*  
    (Persistency of the man at work)

In Arabic, we have seen no morphological difference in the form of the verb to show the durative/non-durative meaning. Let us now see the Arabic counterparts of Curme's examples:

- (10) a. *?innahu ya9malu fi lhadeeqati l?aan*  
    He works in the garden now.

b. *Dalla ya9malu fi lhadeeqa hatta ta9ib.*

Kept work in the garden till he tired

He kept working in the garden till he became tired.

In (10.a) the duration is expressed by the adverbial *l?aan* (now); while in (10.b) the adverbial *Dalla* (continued) expresses the limited duration of the action. The duration is limited because of the adverbial *hatta ta9ib* (until he became tired). These examples show that aspect in Arabic is understood by the adverbial.

The following examples for the *simple aspect* show the unlimited duration in contrast with the limited duration of the progressive:

(11)a. *The moon shines at night.*

b. *He goes to Germany once a year.*

The Arabic counterparts are:

(11)a. *?al qamaru yashi9u fil layl.*

b. *yusaafiru ?ila ?almania marratan kulla sana.*

It seems obvious that English and Arabic behave in the same way in this respect. In both examples, we have unlimited duration and repetition of the action as indicated by the adverbials *fil layl* (at night) and *kulla sana* (once a year).

### 3.2. Incompletion of an action

This concept is best explained by *event verbs* that signal a transition from one state to another. Leech (1973) gives the following examples, cited above as (2.a&b), to illustrate such meaning:

(12)a. *The man was drowning.*

b. *The man drowned.*

In (a) one may add "but I saved him", but we cannot do that in (b) because the action was over. In Arabic, the situation is almost the same. However, the past progressive form is formed by adding a particle "*kaana*" (was). This particle in Arabic has no counterpart like "*yakuun*" (is) for the present progressive form as seen in the following translation:

- (12)a. *kaana rrajulu yagharaqu.* (past progressive)  
was the man drown
- b. *ghariqa rrajulu.* (simple past)  
drowned the man
- c. *arrajulu yaghraqu.* (simple present)  
the man drown
- d. *\*yakuunu rrajulu yaghraqu.* (present progressive)  
be the man drown

It seems that Leech's example is good only for the past form in both English and Arabic because in both languages the "be" particle marks the temporary duration. However, the present progressive may also express the concept of limited duration as in the following example from Murcia and Freeman (1983):

- (13). *I am studying at the University of Colorado.*

It seems that limited duration in this example is the same for both English and Arabic because this meaning is derived from the context. The difference is that the Arabic verb does not have a particle like "be" to form the progressive as it is the case with English as seen in the following translation:

- (13)a. *?anaa ?adrusu fi jami9ati kolorado.*  
I study at university Colorado

### 3.3. Overlapping

The progressive aspect as opposed to the simple aspect has the effect of surrounding (overlapping) a particular event or moment by a "temporal frame" as seen in the following examples:

- (14)a. *He was walking to school at 8:00 this morning.*  
(Walking began before 8:00 and continued after 8:00)

Arabic has the same meaning in the translation of this example.

- (14)b. *kaana yamshii ?ila lmadrasati assa9ata athaminata haDa ssabah.*

Was he walk to the school hour eight this morning

To see overlapping around an event, the following example is given:

- (15)a. *Karen was washing her hair when the phone rang.*  
(Washing began before ringing and continued after it)

The Arabic counterpart of this example is similar to the English version as both progressive forms show an overlap round the event of “ringing”.

- (15)b. *kaanat Karen taghsilu sha9raha 9indama ranna ttilifoon.*  
Was she Karen wash hair her when rang the telephone.

In other cases, two progressive actions are expressed in one sentence as in the following example:

- (16)a. *While my wife was cooking, I was writing my essay.*

According to Allen (1966), the two events are simultaneous because they overlap the same reference point. However, Leech (1971) says that there is no overlap here because we know nothing about the starting point or finishing point of the actions.

The Arabic counterpart (14b) for this sentence is similar in structure and meaning because of the auxiliary “*kaana/kuntu*” (was) and the present form of the verb that usually makes a progressive meaning. However, the adverbial “*baynama*” (while) gives the duration meaning of the action for both events.

- (16)b. *baynama kaanat zawjatee taTbukh kuntu ?aktubu maqaali.*  
While was she wife my cook was I write essay my

According to Jespersen (1933) stative verbs like “know” which does not admit expansion can express overlapping of a progressive action as seen in the following example:

- (17)a. *Rousseau knows he is talking nonsense.*



Knowing overlaps talking. In other words, talking is seen as temporary event surrounded by knowing because of the nature of the verb “know” which expresses a state. The Arabic counterpart is also similar to the English sentence here. The structural difference is seen in Arabic because of the absence of an auxiliary or the inflection at the end of the verb. The meaning is the same for the two sentences in the two languages.

- (17)b. *Rousseau ya'rifu ?annahu yatakallamu haraa?an.*  
Rousseau know he talks nonsense.

### 3.4. Habitual or Iterative Use of the Progressive

Of the meanings conveyed by the progressive aspect is the habitual or the iterative use. The following are examples of the difference in aspectual meaning expressing habit or iterative use:

- (18)a. *I take dancing lessons this winter.*  
b. *I am taking dancing lessons this winter.*

Leech (1973) says “*taking*,” indicates a temporary habit which is shorter than “*take*”. Palmer (1974) gives two other examples:

- (19)a. *We are eating a lot of meat these days.* (limited habit)  
b. .... *eat* ..... (always have)

In Arabic, counterpart examples include:

- c. *sa?ata9allamu duruusan fi rraqsi hatha shshitaa?*  
Will learn lessons in dancing this winter.

It seems there is only one translation for the two sentences (15a&b). In other words, the form of the verb *sa?ata9allamu* (*will learn*) is the translation for both simple and progressive forms of the English verb. Therefore, there is no Arabic match for the English distinction in this aspect. The same thing may apply to Palmer’s example:

- (19)a. *na?kulu katheeran minal lahm hathihi l?yaam.*  
we eat much of meat these days.

The Arabic form of the verb *na?kulu* (*we eat*) follows the same pattern of behaviour as *sa?ata9allamu* (*will learn*).

There is the meaning of “emotional coloring” conveyed by the English progressive form as in the following examples:

- (20)a. *She is always breaking the dishes.* (Emotional coloring, disapproving)  
 b. *She always breaks dishes.* (She is like a machine-her nature)

Change of the habit is possible in (20a) but not expected in (20b). The counterpart for both English examples in Arabic is as follows:

- (20)c. *daa?iman taksiru ssuhuuna.*

Like the previous examples, this Arabic translation *daa?iman taksiru* (always breaks) does not show the contrast between the progressive and the simple aspect of English. The result is that Arabic in this regard is not like English. English allows for the distinction between meaning of the progressive and the simple through the form of the verb and the adverbial; while Arabic has the same form of the verb for both English aspects. However, the meaning in Arabic depends on the adverbial rather than the form of the verb. For example, the following English sentence in the past progressive form is translated with an adverbial and an auxiliary:

- (21)a. *Jake was coughing all night long.*  
 (Iteration in a series of similar ongoing actions)  
 b. *Dalla Jake yas9ulu Tuula llayl.*  
 continued he Jake coughs all night.

The adverbial *Dalla* (continued) carries the meaning of continuity and the past tense mark. However, for the action of “coughing” to be understood as continuous the *-ing* form is needed in English and the adverbial *Dalla* is needed in Arabic.

### 3.5. Indicating future activity

According to Richards (1981), the progressive future events should be under the control of the subject or under the human control as seen in the following examples:

- (22)a. *I am leaving at six.*  
(Arrangement already made regardless of the present feeling)
- (23)a. *I am going to leave at six.*  
(Strong intention, now at the present moment)
- (24)a. \**The sun is rising earlier next month.*  
(Rising is governed by nature, therefore it is not acceptable)
- (25)a. *I leave tomorrow.* (Fixed plan by the subject or someone else)
- (26)a. *The train leaves at six.* (It is planned for the train to)
- (27)a. \**It rains tomorrow.* (Planning is beyond human control)
- (28)a. *He will be leaving for London next week.* (In the course of time)
- (29)a. *He will leave for London next week.* (Decision taken now)

The Arabic counterparts to these examples do not show the fine distinctions between the aspects, as it is the case in English:

- (22)b. *?ana mughadirun 9inda ssadisa.*  
I leaving at six.

*Mughadirun* “leaving” is a verbal noun in Arabic used to indicate futurity with the adverb *9inda ssadisa* (at six). The “going to” form does not have an equivalent in Arabic. However, the simple present *?ughadiru* (leave) form is used like English to indicate futurity with the help of an adverbial as seen in

- (25)a. *?ughadiru ghadan.*  
I leave tomorrow

Here one could say that *mughadirun* indicates the strong present feeling about the intention of the speaker; while *?ughadiru* is seen like fixed plan regardless of the present feeling.

The Arabic way of expressing actions under the control of nature, like “rising of the sun” or “falling of rain” is as follows:

- (24)a. \* *satushriqu ashshamsu ?abkara fish shahri lqaadim.*  
will rise the sun earlier in month next.

- (27)a. *\*tumTiru ghadan.*  
Rains it tomorrow.

Both sentences do not seem to be acceptable in Arabic. Instead, one may use *satushriqu shshamsu* (the sun will rise) and *satumTiru* (will rain) to indicate prediction rather than planning which is acceptable in English as well.

Using “will” with the progressive in English indicates routine and it indicates, “decision taken now” with the simple. It seems that Arabic counterparts have similar interpretations as in the following though (28b) is less likely than (29b):

- (28)b. *sayakuunu mughadiran ila London fi lisbuu9 lqaadim.* (routine)  
will be leaving to London in the week next.
- (29)b. *sayughadiru ila London fi lisbuu9 lqaadim.* (decision taken now)  
will leave to London in

### 3.6. Descriptive Function

According to Scheffer (1975), the non-progressive forms suggest a photographic snapshot, whereas the progressive suggest prolonged action receiving more attention as seen in the following example:

- (30)a. .... *Mary was sewing, Lucy was playing* the piano ... and suddenly the door *opened* ... (*sewing* and *playing* suggest the background for *opened*).

The Arabic counterpart for this example is as follows:

- (30)b. ... *Mary kaanat tukhayyiTu, Lucy kaanat ta9zifu 9ala libyaano* ... wa faj?atan *fataha lbaab*

It seems that both languages convey the same meaning of the progressive making the action descriptive of the background for the event of opening the door.

#### 4. Conclusion

It has been noticed that aspect marking in English is indicated by the -ing morpheme for the progressive while there is no mark for the simple whether it is past or non-past. However, in Arabic the marking is only obvious in the past with the modal auxiliary (kaana) followed by the present form of the verb. But in the present or past forms of Arabic verbs, the mark for aspect to show progressive or simple is made by the adverbial *l?aan* (now) for present or *?inda ?ithin* (at that time) for the past. These observations must be of great help to both teachers and translators. For teachers, the areas of disagreement should be brought to the attention of students through materials relevant to developing their abilities in producing correct structures and meanings. For translators, attention should be given to such areas of disagreement which cause problems in translation where aspect marks exist in different ways in both languages.

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