

Bahloul, Maher (2008)
Structure and function of the Arabic Verb

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The core of this book is to provide both semantic and syntactic analyses of verbal categories in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), with a particular focus on Aspect, Tense, and Modality (ATM). More specifically, two fundamental objectives this book aims to achieve: “first, to give a characterization of the ATM system of Standard Arabic; second, to bridge the apparent gap between syntax and semantics, through showing the extent to which semantic structures are mapped into syntactic representations” (p. 2).

The book is organized into nine chapters. The introductory chapter outlines the main motivation behind writing this book and the theoretical framework adapted to analyse the Arabic verb system. This book is motivated by the observation that the overwhelming majority of investigations of the Arabic verb system have always, since the era of Sibawayhi onward, kept analysing verbal forms and their corresponding meanings on the basis of isolated samples represented in a very limited inventory of examples. Hence, a sizeable corpus from a representative sample of actual use of the Arabic language is needed in order to have a degree of accuracy of any conclusions relevant to the meaning and function of Arabic verbal forms. In this regard, the author collected data from various corpus which can be whittled down to three sources: (i) 13 articles from 3 widely read newspapers: *Asharq Al-Ansat*, *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, and *Al-alam Al-Yawm*; (ii) 5 scholarly articles from 2 journals; and (iii) 5 contemporary short stories on a variety of interesting themes.

With respect to the theoretical framework, the book subscribes to two different theoretical frameworks to offer a comprehensive treatment of the ATM categories of the Arabic verb. One theory is functionally and semantically oriented referred to as “Theory of Enunciative Operations”; a theory articulated first by Culioli and Adamczewski and inspired by the early works of Guillaume and Benveniste (see Bahloul’s bibliography). The other one is syntactically oriented proposed by Chomsky (1991, 1995, 2002) in which has been commonly known as the Minimalist Program, though the author is insisting to call it Principles and Parameters approach.

Chapter 2, which is entitled as verbal categories, clause structure, and modality, introduces the two aforementioned theoretical frameworks and ending up showing a convergence in the thinking of the two approaches with respect to the constitutional structure of the clause. In this regard, Bahloul states that

The very fact that such different theories seem to share basic intuitions with respect to the constitutional structure of the clause, is very indicative, in our opinion, of the adequacy and the basis of this orientation, on the one hand, and the destiny of linguistics, on the other hand. Of course, these implications might be too strong, but we have reason to believe they will lead to substantial theoretical and analytical progress [p.27-28].

In this chapter Culioli’s analysis of Modality has been well-presented and significant concepts such as subjectivity, cross-categoriality, continuum, invariance and markedness, which all play major roles in analyzing the verbal system in any language, are discussed and illustrated.

Chapter 3 is concerned about seeking an understanding of the Arabic verbal morphology (the Perfect and the Imperfect). More specifically, the chapter first aims to show that the first vowel within both the Perfect and the Imperfect carries semantic feature distinguishing each verbal form from the other. However, “the boundary between both forms remains unclear and hard to discern” (p.37). Accordingly, “The question remains whether these verbs represent past/nonpast tense, perfective/imperfective aspect, both tense and aspect combined, or something else” (p.38). Before providing an answer to this question in chapter 4, the chapter presents the previous four approaches that have attempted to analyse the nature of the difference between the two forms of the Perfect and the Imperfect.

Chapters 4-8 provide an alternative analysis to previous analyses in order to capture the semantic essence of both the Perfect and the Imperfect in Arabic. To this end, chapter 4 starts off with highlighting the shortcomings of the previous approaches discussed in chapter 3. The author outlines two basic reasons leads the previous analyses to be “inconclusive and/or unsuccessful”. (i) one of these reasons is related to the fact that these analyses “have dealt too much in individual variants and not sought out semantic invariants, which are to be differentiated from the range of contextual variations found for a particular form” (p.44). (ii) The second reason is due to the lack of actual data that were absent in the previous analyses in which lead them to “have failed to recognize the contribution of the surrounding context to the particular variation of the meaning of the form they examined” (p. 44). In a large body of this chapter, Bahloul presents a detailed discussion of the Perfect construction, showing, Based on data from both the corpus and outside, that two forms of the Perfect are attested in MSA: the Simple Perfect and the Compound Perfect. The latter is discussed in the next chapter. Three aspects have been considered in terms of the Simple Perfect construction¹: (i) the temporal context in which the Simple Perfect it collocates with, (ii) its ATM system and (iii) the basic components which constitute the Simple Perfect invariant marks. The most interesting finding of this chapter is highlighting the observation that the interaction between the temporal interpretation and the Perfect in order to be understood perfectly needs us first to investigate the semantic–pragmatic and discourse functions/ properties of the Perfect form.

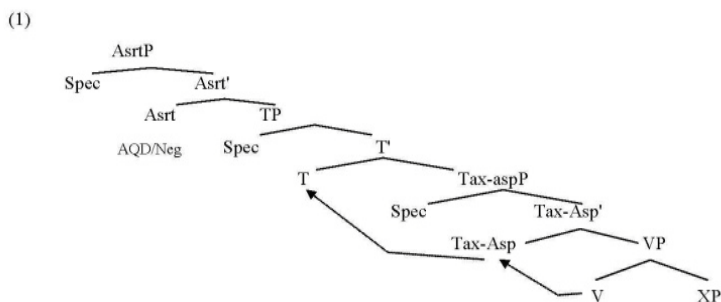
Chapter 5 examines the Compound Perfect, when the Perfect is preceded by the modal particle QAD ([QAD + Perfect])². This chapter itself is an outstanding work for providing a detailed comprehensive investigation of the semantic-pragmatic functions of the modal QAD (such an investigation, to my knowledge, has not been given before). This impressive investigation starts first with reviewing the previous major analyses that attempted to consider this interesting particle since the era of Sibawayhi till the present time with its different linguistics schools. And then the chapter discusses the shortcomings and inconsistencies of these analyses, ending up, after considering the semantic and syntactic characteristics of QAD, arguing that since QAD shares many features with ATM categories, the invariant of QAD “centres around assertive modality, and extends to embody some aspect–tense distinctions” (p.103). This conclusion is motivated by the observation that the modal shares common features with both the English DO and the French (BEL ET) BIEN (see p.98).

¹ qaama Zaydun
stand.Pf up Zayd
“Zayd stood up” (p.73).

² QAD qaama Zaydun
QAD stand.Pf up Zayd
“Zayd (has) just stood up” (p.73).

Chapter 6 investigates the Imperfect. This chapter can be divided into two parts. Part one is devoted to a detailed discussion of the semantico-pragmatic and discourse properties of the Imperfect, focusing mainly on two issues: (i) the major temporal contexts (present, gnomic, future, and past) in which the Imperfect participates³ and (ii) its status and representation within the Arabic verbal ATM system and its interaction with negation. Having done that, the chapter turns to suggest an alternative analysis to those previously discussed in Chapter 3. In the second part, in addition to examining some aspects of the similarities between the Perfect and the Imperfect, the nature of the invariant features which distinguish the functioning of the two verbal forms, is interestingly well-considered. Finally, the chapter concludes with an extended summary of the major discussed issues.

Chapter 7, ATM Categories, Derivation, and the Verbal Clause, deals with the syntax of Aspect/ Tense or what is reanalyzed in this chapter as Taxis–Aspect, and agreement features. Accordingly, Bahloul argues contra analyzing INFL/Modality as a singular host to multiple grammatical categories, such as aspect, tense, agreement, modality, and so on (as in Ouhalla 1988, Pollock 1989, Chomsky 1991, Johnson (1991) among several others), and alternatively he argues that each morphological category should project its own projection. He, building on some facts from compound tenses, negation, conditionals and subject position in Arabic and other languages, first suggests that the INFL node should be decomposed into two projections, namely a TP and a Tax–AspP. And further he surprisingly suggests that the NegP hypothesis should be extended in favour of a more general category, which he calls AsrtP (see p.162-66 and the references cited there). Recall from chapter 5 that this category is also shown to include the particle QAD. Under this analysis, verbal sentences contained QAD or Neg will have the derivation outlined below⁴.



The next chapter, chapter 8, is solely concerned with the syntax of verbless sentences, where no lexical verb appears in present tense (2).

- (2) al-walad-u fii al-bayt-i
the-boy-nom in the-house-gen
‘The boy (is) at home’ (p.167)

³ This stresses the compatibility and the unrestricted nature of this verbal form.

⁴ According to Bahloul (p.164), the verb obligatorily moves into Tax-AspP then, whenever possible, into a TP headed by a morphologically null T.

This chapter seeks to achieve that the modality in nonverbal sentences should be treated similar to those which contain verbs, all of which are discussed in more detail in the preceding chapters. The only difference is that while the [\pm taxis–Aspect] feature in INFL/Modality component selects for a VP complement headed by a lexical verb in verbal sentences, it does not do so in nonverbal sentences and hence it must select any complement but a VP. Briefly, the case is that the salient role which “the content of Modality [plays] imposes some restrictions as to what type of complement Mod takes” (p.167).

The final chapter of this book, chapter 9, is devoted to a brief summary of the main findings achieved in the preceding chapters of this book and emphasizing the need for further research.

This book is a comprehensive source of information on the Arabic verb system; a line of inquiry which very little research has been conducted on within the framework of Generative Grammar. The author has done a good research work for collecting most facts needed to analyze the Arabic verb system and then presenting them all in a lucid language, making the book highly accessible. One way contributes to this accessibility is the large number of tables that are made explicit between the different parts of the book and a very effective way to clear a path for the reader through the interesting amounts of information presented in this book.

As for the content, the novelty of this book, as it were, which signals it out from the previous work lies in three interesting aspects. First, the book successfully attempts to bridge the apparent gap between syntax and semantics by adopting two different schools of thought to offer a comprehensive treatment of the ATM categories of the Arabic verb. Second, the depth and detail of description and discussion throughout the book is based on a sizeable corpus from a representative sample of actual use of the Arabic language and not on the basis of isolated samples of examples as most of the preceding studies used to do. Third, in very well written and amply illustrated, chapter 5 has a leading role in investigating in some detail the distributional properties of the modal particle *QAD* from different linguistic aspects such as its frequency, its semantics, and its syntax.

Although the author convincingly argues, in chapter 3, against the four approaches that have attempted to analyze the nature of the difference between the two forms of the Perfect and the Imperfect, the alternative analysis he provides, throughout 4–8, is rather complex and in terms of the Minimalist conventions (the most influential framework of syntactic theory today) is not preferable. A significant criticism in this respect is that there is, in fact, no need to assume that the INFL node should be extended into two projections: a TP and a Tax–AspP as in (1) above. Adopting such an assumption must lead to assume that the verb moves into the head of both projections, whereas the standard assumption assumes that the verb in Arabic moves only to T (see Fassi Fehri 1993, Rahhali & Souâli 1997).

Despite this shortcoming, the book of *Structure and function of the Arabic Verb* is without any doubt an extremely valuable for providing a detailed description and discussion for the complexity of Arabic verbal system. Without any reservations, this book will remain a major reference guide for those who are interested in Arabic syntax, morphology, semantics and language typology alike.

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