A Reference Grammar of Modern Standard Arabic

KARIN C. RYDING
Georgetown University

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Verb inflection: a summary

1 Verb inflection

Arabic verbs inflect for six morphological categories: gender, number, person, tense, mood, and voice. These inflections are marked by means of prefixes, suffixes, changes in vowel pattern, and stem changes. The first three categories, gender, number, and person, are determined by the subject of the verb. That is, the verb agrees with the subject in all those respects.

1.1 Agreement markers: gender, number, and person

Agreement markers ensure that the verb inflects in accordance with the nature of its subject. Arabic verbs inflect by means of affixes attached to a verb stem. In the past tense, the inflectional marker is a suffix that carries all the agreement markers: gender, number, and person. For example: the suffix -at/ on a past tense stem such as katab- (katab-at كتبت) carries the information: third person, feminine, singular: i.e., "she wrote."

In the present tense, the verb stem has a prefix as well as a suffix. For example, prefix ya- on a present tense stem such as -ktub- carries partial information: third person. The suffix on the present tense stem carries more information: therefore the suffix -uuna (as in ya-ktub-uuna يكتبوون ‘they write’) gives information on number (plural) and gender (masculine), as well as mood (indicative). This combination of information is uniquely marked on each member in a verb paradigm.¹

1.1.1 Gender: masculine or feminine

Arabic verbs are marked for masculine or feminine gender in the second and third persons. The first person (I, we) is gender-neutral.

¹ In technical linguistic terms, Arabic is a "pro-drop" (i.e., "pronoun-drop") language. That is, every inflection in a verb paradigm is specified uniquely and does not need to use independent pronouns to differentiate the person, number, and gender of the verb. For Modern Standard Arabic that means that there are thirteen different inflections in every verb paradigm. Consult Haegeman 1994, 19–25 and 454–57 for more on pro-drop languages and the pro-drop parameter in general.
1.1.2 Number: singular, dual, plural
Arabic verbs are inflected for three number categories: singular, dual, or plural. The dual in Arabic verbs is used in the second person ("you two") and in the third person ("they two"), but not the first person.

1.1.3 Person: first, second, third
The concept of "person" refers to the individual/s involved in the speech act: the one/s speaking (first person), the one/s spoken to (second person), and one/s spoken about (third person). Arabic verbs inflect for: first person (I, we), second person (you), and third person (she, he, they).

1.2 Tense
The two basic Arabic verb tenses differ in terms of stems as well as inflectional markers.

1.2.1 Verb stems
Each Arabic verb has two stems, one used for the perfect/past tense and one for the imperfect/present. The past tense stem takes suffixes in order to inflect, and the present tense stem takes both prefixes and suffixes. Because of the salience of the prefix in the present tense and of the suffix in the past tense, certain scholars refer to these tenses as "the prefix set" and "the suffix set," respectively.\(^2\)

In Form I verbs, the present tense inflectional stem is not usually predictable from the past tense stem, but in the derived forms and quadrilateral verbs, the present stem is predictable. In this text, stems are usually written with a hyphen where they would connect with inflectional formatives,\(^3\) e.g.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Past tense stem</th>
<th>Present tense stem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>write</td>
<td>katab-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>complete</td>
<td>&quot;akmal-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>meet</td>
<td>ijtama'-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>use</td>
<td>istaxdam-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-ktub-</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-kmil-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-jtami'-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-staxdim-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1.2.2 Tense/Aspect
Arabic verbs show a range of tenses, but two of them are basic: past and present. These tenses are also often referred to as perfect and imperfect, or perfective and

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\(^2\) For example, see Holes 1995, 86–90 and Beeston 1970, 71–86.

\(^3\) Where the prefix or suffix merges with the verb stem (as in the past tense of defective verbs or the present tense of passive assimilated verbs) the morpheme boundary is blurred and therefore not indicated.
imperfective, but those latter terms are more accurately labels of aspect rather than tense.

Tense and aspect can be described as two different ways of looking at time. Tense usually deals with linear points in time that stretch from the far past into the future, in relation to the speaker. Aspect, on the other hand deals with the degree of completeness of an action or state: is the action completed, partial, ongoing, or yet to occur? So the perspectives of tense and aspect are different: tense focuses on the point on the timeline at which the action occurs, whereas aspect is focused on the action itself — whether it is complete or not. ⁴

The difference between tense and aspect can be subtle, and the two categories may overlap to a significant extent. It is theorized that Classical Arabic was more aspect-specific than tense-specific, but in dealing with the modern written language, some linguists and teachers find it more pragmatic to describe Arabic verbs in terms of tense.⁵

In this work, I often use the term “past tense” to refer to what is also called the perfect, or the perfective aspect; and I use the term “present tense” to refer to what is also called the imperfect tense or the imperfective aspect. In general, I prefer to stick with timeline terms (“past” and “present”) when using the term “tense” because I have found this to be less confusing to learners.⁶

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⁴ “Tense involves the basic location in time of an event or state of affairs, in relation to the time of speaking (or writing), while aspect relates more to the internal nature of events and states of affairs, such as whether they are (or were) finished, long-lasting, instantaneous, repetitive, the beginning of something, the end of something, and so on” (Hurford 1994, 240). Abboud and McCarus use the terms “perfect tense” and “imperfect tense” (1983, part 1:263): “The perfect tense denotes completed actions; the imperfect tense denotes actions which have not taken place or have not been completed.”

Likewise, Haywood and Nahmad state (1962, 95–96): “Arabic, in common with other Semitic languages, is deficient in tenses, and this does not make for ease in learning. Moreover the tenses do not have accurate time-significances as in Indo-European languages. There are two main tenses, the Perfect الماضي al-ma₃ādi, denoting actions completed at the time to which reference is being made; and the Imperfect المضارع al-ma₃₃a₃art, for completed actions.”

⁵ For a thorough and lucid discussion of Arabic verb aspect and tense see Blachère and Gaufroy-Demombynes 1975, 245–56. More concisely, Wright states the following: “A Semitic Perfect or Imperfect has, in and of itself, no reference to the temporal relations of the speaker (thinker or writer) and of other actions which are brought into juxtaposition with it. It is precisely these relations which determine in what sphere of time (past, present, or future) a Semitic Perfect or Imperfect lies, and by which of our tenses it is to be expressed — whether by our Past, Perfect, Pruperfect, or Future-perfect; by our Present, Imperfect, or Future. The Arabian Grammarians themselves have not, however, succeeded in keeping this important point distinctly in view, but have given an undue importance to the idea of time” (1967, I:51).

⁶ The terms “perfect” and “imperfect” are sometimes misleading for English-speaking learners of Arabic because they often compare the terms to European languages they have studied, such as French, for example, where “imparfait” refers to a continuing state or action in the past. Note the definition of “imperfect” in Webster’s Third (unabridged: 1986, q.v.): “of or relating to or being a verb tense used to designate a continuing state or action esp. in the past” (my italics).
1.2.3.1 **FORM:** The present tense is formed from the present tense stem of a verb, to which both a prefix and a suffix are added. The stem by itself is not an independent word; it needs the prefixes and suffixes to convey a complete meaning. The prefixes are subject markers of person while the suffixes show mood and number. In MSA, thirteen present tense inflectional forms are used.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Present tense stem -ktub- ‘write’</th>
<th>Present tense indicative conjugation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Singular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>First person</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>أكتبٌ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a-ktub-u</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Second person</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m.</td>
<td>تكتبٌ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ta-ktub-u</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f.</td>
<td>تكتبَينْ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ta-ktub-îînâ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Third person</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m.</td>
<td>يكتبُ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ya-ktub-u</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f.</td>
<td>تكتبٌ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ta-ktub-u</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The prefix and suffix together give the full meaning of the verb. They are sometimes referred to together as a “circumfix” because they surround the stem on both sides.8

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7 The term *muDaari* literally means ‘resembling.’ This term was adopted because of the fact that the present tense mood markers on the verb (the suffixed *Damma* of the indicative and the *fatâla* of the subjunctive) resemble the case markers on nouns (especially the nominative and accusative). In other words, whereas the past tense verb has only one mood (the indicative) the present tense verb shifts its mood depending on the syntactic context, just as a noun shifts its case depending on its role in the sentence. The present tense therefore “resembles” a noun in this ability to shift its desinence.

8 The term “circumfix” refers to a combination of prefix and suffix used with a stem to create a lexical item, such as the English word “enlighten.” As Anderson states, they “involve simultaneous prefixation and suffixation that correspond to a single unit of morphological form” (1992, 53). The discontinuous inflectional affixes on Arabic present tense verbs may be considered circumfixes, but the concept of circumfix as a separate morphological category is disputed. See Golston 1996, 731, esp. note 8, as well as Anderson 1992, 53, 59, and 389.
1.2.3.2 MEANING: The present tense, or imperfect, refers in a general way to incomplete, ongoing actions or ongoing states. It corresponds to both the English present and present continuous tenses. There is no distinction between these in Arabic.

I write; I am writing  
?a-ktub-u  
أكتب

we study; we are studying  
na-drus-u  
ندرس

they (m.) translate, are translating  
yu-tarjim-uuna  
يترجمون

they (f.) meet; they are meeting  
ya-jtamiʿ-na  
يجتمعن

Examples:

يلعبون مباراة.  
ya-lʾab-uuna mubaaraat-an.  
They are playing a match.

يجلس على المقعد.  
ya-jlis-u ḫala l-maqʿad-i.  
He is sitting on the seat.

يعمل في الإدارة.  
ya-ʾmal-u fī l-ʾidaarat-i.  
He works in the administration.

يختلف عن غيرها.  
ta-xtalif-u ḫan ghayr-i-haa.  
She differs from others.

1.2.4 Future tense: al-mustaṣqabal

المستقبل

1.2.4.1 FORM: The future tense is formed by prefixing either the morpheme sa- or the particle sawfa to a present tense indicative verb. The verb may be active or passive. The particle sa- is identified by some grammarians as an abbreviation of sawfa.

1.2.4.2 MEANING: This procedure conveys an explicitly future action.

سيساعد إلى حد كبير.  
sa-yu-saaʾid-u ḫila Hadd-in kabiir-in.  
It will help to a great extent.

سيفكر في ذلك.  
sa-ʾu-fakkir-u fī ḥaalika.  
I’ll think about that.

القرار سيُتخذ.  
al-qaraaar-u sa-yu-ttaxadh-u.  
The decision will be taken.

سوف يمثلون بلادهم.  
sawfa yu-maththil-uuna bilaad-a-hum.  
They will represent their country.

1.2.5 Past tense: al-maaDii

الماضي

1.2.5.1 FORM: The past tense in Arabic is formed by suffixing person-markers to the past tense verb stem. The person markers in the past tense also denote
number (singular, dual, plural) and gender. In MSA, thirteen person markers are used in the past tense paradigm:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Past tense stem katab- 'wrote'</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>First person</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>مكتبتَ</td>
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<td>مكتبتُ</td>
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<td>مكتبتَ</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Second person</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>مكتبتَ</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Third person</strong></td>
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<td>كتبَ</td>
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<td>كتبْ</td>
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<td>كتبَ</td>
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<td>كتبْ</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

1.2.5.2 SPELLING: The third person masculine plural suffix, /-uu/ is spelled with a final ʼalif, which is not pronounced, sometimes called “otiose” ʼalif.⁹ It is simply a traditional spelling convention. It is deleted if the verb has a pronoun object suffix, e.g.,

- كتبواَ katab-uu
- كتبواَ-ها katab-uu-haa.
- استخدموُ istaxdam-uu
- استخدموُ istaxdam-uu-hu.

They wrote They wrote it. they used They used it.

1.2.5.3 MEANING

1. Action in the past: The Arabic past tense refers to a completed action and thus equates in most respects with English past tense and past perfect.¹⁰

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⁹ See Chapter 2, section 4.2.1.3, subsection (3.3).
¹⁰ See Wright 1967, II:1–4 for further analysis of the past tense.
حاول اقناش حياة رجل.
\textit{Haawal-a ̣ ʿ inqaadh-a Hayaat-i rajul-in}
He tried to save a man’s life.

سُلِموا بيانا.
\textit{sallam-uu bayaan-an.}
They (m.) delivered a statement.

عادت من إجازة.
\textit{ʿaad-at min ʿ ijaazat-in.}
She returned from a vacation.

شكراً لكل ما فعلتموه.
\textit{shukr-an li-kull-i maa faʿal-tum-uu-hu.}\textsuperscript{11}
Thank you for everything you (m.pl.) have done.

(2) Non-past action: Depending on the context, the Arabic past tense may also be used to convey other meanings.\textsuperscript{12} For example:

وصلنا تقريباً.
\textit{waSal-naa taqriib-an.}
We are almost there (lit. ‘we have almost arrived’).

بارك الله فيك.
\textit{baarak-a ilaah-u fiī-ka.}
God bless you (lit. ‘God has blessed you’).

1.3 Moods of the verb
Mood or “mode” refers to the Arabic verb properties \textit{indicative}, \textit{subjunctive}, \textit{jussive}, and \textit{imperative}. These categories, or morphosyntactic properties, reflect contextual modalities that condition the action of the verb. For example, the indicative mood is characteristic of straightforward, factual statements or questions, while the subjunctive mood reflects an attitude toward the action such as doubt, desire, intent, wishing, or necessity, and the jussive mood, when used for the imperative, indicates an attitude of command, request, or need-for-action on the part of the speaker.

In Arabic, mood marking is done only on the present tense or imperfective stem; there are no mood variants for the past tense. The Arabic moods are therefore non-finite; that is, they do not refer to specific points in time and are not differentiatated by tense. Tense is inferred from context and other parts of the clause.\textsuperscript{13} For more extensive description of the moods and their uses, see Chapters 34 and 35.

\textsuperscript{11} The second person plural masculine suffix -tum requires a long vowel -uu as a helping vowel before a suffixed personal pronoun.

\textsuperscript{12} For example, the past tense is used in conditional sentences, as well as in optative (wishing) expressions. For more on this function of the past tense, see Chapter 39.

\textsuperscript{13} The question of mood marking (on verbs) is a central one in Arabic grammar, along with case marking (on nouns and adjectives). Moods fall under the topic of morphology because they are reflected in Arabic word structure, that is, they are usually indicated by suffixes or modifications of suffixes attached to the present tense verb stem, and the phonological nature of the verb stem determines what form the suffix will take. Moods also, however, fall under the topic of syntax because their use is determined either by particles which govern their occurrence, or by the narrative context in general, including attitude of the speaker and intended meaning. They are therefore referred to in some reference works and theoretical discussions as “morphosyntactic” categories.
1.3.1 Indicative mood

nu-raft Hurricane.  
yu-ghadir-u l-qahirat-a l-yawm-a.

We welcome our customers.  
He leaves Cairo today.

1.3.2 Subjunctive mood

yab-an na-quum-a bi-ziyarat-in.  
It is necessary that we undertake a visit.

1.3.3 Jussive mood

The jussive mood in MSA is used most often with the negative particle lam to negate the past tense, and as a basis for forming the imperative.

lam na-‘ti.  
We did not come.  
renovations that haven’t been completed for two years

1.3.4 Imperative

iftah yaa simsim-u!  
Open, Sesame!

ismaH liti.  
Permit me.  
Don’t forget!

1.4 Voice: active or passive

Whereas the tense of a verb conveys temporal or time-related information, the “voice” of a verb conveys information on the topical focus of a sentence. The active voice is used when the doer of the action is the subject of the verb (“I ate the cake”), and the passive voice is used when the object of the verbal action is the subject (“The cake was eaten.”).

Generally speaking, the passive voice is used in Arabic only if the agent or doer of the action is unknown or not to be mentioned for some reason. This contrasts with English where one may mention the agent in a passive construction through use of the preposition “by” (“The cake was eaten by me.”) Rarely is the agent mentioned when the passive is used in Arabic.

The Arabic passive may be internal, through a change in the nature of the internal vowels (e.g., ‘uqid-a ‘it was held’) or derivational (e.g., in‘aqad-a ‘it was held’).

For example, the following sentence is in the active voice:

‘aqad-a l-malik-u l-jitmaa‘-a.  
The king held the meeting.
where al-malik-u ‘the king’ is the subject of the verb as well as the agent or doer of the action, ʿaqad-a, and the object of the verb is al-ʿijtimaaʿ-u ‘the meeting.’

If the sentence were re-phrased as a passive construction, the object of the verb becomes the subject of the sentence, and the verb is marked for passive. The internal morphological change that signals the Arabic passive is a change in the vowel pattern of the verb:

ущاق-ٌالجتمع
ʿuqid-a ʿl-ʿijtimaaʿ-u.
The meeting was held.

where al-ʿijtimaaʿ-u is now the subject, and the verb is inflected for passive voice through the vowel sequence /-u-i/ instead of /-a-a/.

Another way of expressing the passive is to use another form of the verb which is passive or reflexive in meaning, usually the Form VII verb, if it exists, or Form V:

انعق-ٌالجتمع
inʿaqad-a ʿl-ʿijtimaaʿ-u.
The meeting was held.

where the Form VII verb is active in form, but passive in meaning, and the subject of the Form VII verb is al-ʿijtimaaʿ-u. Passive and passive-like structures are described at greater length in Chapter 38.