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THE SEMANTIC AND DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF TIME IN ARABIC

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Özet

Bu çalışma Arap dilinde zamanın yalnızca fiil çekimleriyle belirlenen dilbilgisel bir kategori olmadığını, aksine leksik, semantik ve söylemsel etkileşimler yoluyla inşa edilen çok katmanlı bir anlam alanı olduğunu ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Araştırma, klasik Arap rahiv geleneği ile modern anlambilim ve söylem yaklaşımlarını birleştirerek zaman kavramının nasıl üretildiğini incelemektedir.

Geleneksel gramer anlayışında zaman, mâzî, muzâri' ve emir fiil biçimleriyle tanımlanır. Ancak bu biçimsel sınıflandırma, gerçek söylem ortamlarında zamanın nasıl algılandığını ve yorumlandığını açıklamakta yetersiz kalmaktadır. Bu çalışmada Tamam Hassan'ın anlam-merkezli yaklaşımı esas alınmış; fiil biçimlerinin mutlak zamanı değil, eylemin tamamlanmışlık, süreklilik ve niyet gibi içsel durumlarını kodladığı savunulmuştur. Zamanın kesin yorumu ise bağlam ve zaman bildiren leksik birimler aracılığıyla belirlenmektedir.

Makale, özellikle sabah, gündüz ve geceyle ilişkili zaman leksemelerinin Arapçada zamanın kademeli ve geçişli bir süreç olarak kavramsallaştırıldığını gösterdiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Kur'an metinleri ve klasik şiirde fiil zamanlarının yer değiştirmesi, anlatımın anlamsal yoğunluğunu artıran söylemsel bir strateji olarak değerlendirilmektedir. Bu bağlamda zaman, Arapçada dilbilgisel bir arka plan değil, metnin anlam örgüsünü yönlendiren merkezi bir semantik alan olarak ele alınmalıdır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Zaman, Arapça, Semantik, Söylem, Fiil

ABSTRACT

This study aims to demonstrate that time in Arabic is not a purely grammatical category defined by verb inflection, but rather a multi-layered semantic construct shaped through the interaction of lexical items, discourse structure, and contextual interpretation. By integrating classical Arabic grammatical theory with modern semantic and discourse-based approaches, the article examines how temporal meaning is produced in actual language use.

In traditional Arabic grammar, time is primarily classified through three verbal forms: the past (mâzî), the imperfect (muđârî'), and the imperative (amr). While this classification provides a formal framework, it fails to adequately explain how temporal reference is interpreted in real discourse. Drawing on Tammam Hassan's meaning-centered approach, this study argues that Arabic verb forms encode aspectual properties—such as completion, continuity, and intention—rather than absolute temporal location. Precise temporal interpretation emerges through contextual cues and temporal lexemes.

The analysis further reveals that Arabic possesses an exceptionally rich inventory of temporal lexemes, particularly in relation to dawn, daylight, and transitional periods. These lexemes conceptualize time as a gradual and dynamic process rather than a sequence of discrete units. In Qur'anic discourse and classical Arabic poetry, shifts between tense forms function as deliberate discourse strategies that enhance semantic intensity and rhetorical impact. Accordingly, time in Arabic should be understood as a central semantic and discursive domain that organizes meaning and narrative coherence, rather than as a simple grammatical parameter.

Keywords: Time, Arabic, Semantics, Discourse, Verb.

1. INTRODUCTION

Time constitutes a fundamental organizing principle in human language, shaping how events are structured, interpreted, and narrated. In Arabic, temporal reference is not confined to grammatical

tense alone; rather, it emerges from the interaction of verbal morphology, temporal lexemes, and discourse context. This interaction produces a highly nuanced system in which temporal meaning is dynamically constructed rather than mechanically encoded.

Classical Arabic grammar provides a rigorous framework for verbal forms, traditionally classifying them into past (*māḍī*), imperfect (*mudāriʿ*), and imperative (*amr*). While this classification is structurally coherent, it does not fully account for the ways in which time is interpreted in real discourse. Arabic texts—especially the Qurʾan and classical poetry—frequently employ tense shifts and temporal lexemes that transcend strict chronological sequencing. These phenomena indicate that time in Arabic functions as a semantic and discourse-driven category rather than a fixed grammatical parameter.

The present study investigates the semantic and discursive mechanisms through which time is constructed in Arabic. It focuses on the interaction between verbal aspect, temporal lexemes, and contextual cues, arguing that temporal interpretation arises from meaning in discourse rather than from verb form alone.

2. METHOD

This study adopts a descriptive and analytical methodology grounded in semantic, pragmatic, and discourse analysis. The data set consists of examples drawn from classical Arabic grammatical sources, Qurʾanic texts, and classical Arabic poetry. These sources provide a broad spectrum of temporal usage across genres and registers.

The analysis integrates classical grammatical insights with modern linguistic theories, particularly aspectual models and discourse-based approaches. Rather than isolating verb forms, the study examines how temporal meaning emerges through the interaction of morphology, lexicon, and discourse structure. This integrated approach allows for a more comprehensive account of Arabic temporality.

3. FINDINGS

The analysis demonstrates that Arabic verbal forms primarily encode aspectual meanings rather than absolute temporal reference. The past form typically signals completion or certainty, the imperfect expresses continuity, habituality, or openness, and the imperative projects action into the future through intention and directive force.

Temporal interpretation is frequently determined by temporal lexemes and contextual indicators. As a result, the same verbal form may yield different temporal readings depending on its lexical and discursive environment. This confirms that Arabic tense cannot be interpreted independently of context.

3.1. Aspectual Structure And Temporal Interpretation

Arabic verb forms establish aspectual frameworks that structure how actions are perceived. The past form presents events as bounded and complete, while the imperfect depicts actions as ongoing, repetitive, or indeterminate. These aspectual distinctions provide the cognitive foundation upon which temporal meaning is constructed.

Crucially, aspectual meaning does not automatically correspond to a specific point in time. Instead, temporal anchoring is achieved through contextual cues and lexical markers. This explains why Arabic frequently employs past forms to describe future events in contexts of certainty and inevitability.

3.2. Lexical Stratification Of Time In Arabic Discourse

Arabic exhibits an exceptionally rich system of temporal lexemes, particularly in relation to dawn, daylight, and transitional periods. Rather than conceptualizing time as a sequence of discrete units, Arabic divides it into gradual phases marked by perceptual and environmental change.

Lexemes associated with dawn encode subtle transitions from darkness to light, while daytime and evening lexemes reflect varying degrees of intensity, stability, and decline. These lexical distinctions allow speakers and writers to situate events within a finely calibrated temporal continuum.

In discourse, temporal lexemes function as meaning-bearing units that shape narrative progression and rhetorical emphasis. Their use is rarely neutral; instead, lexical choice reflects the speaker's perspective on change, anticipation, or closure.

3.3. Discourse Functions Of Temporal Shifts

One of the most distinctive features of Arabic temporal expression is the strategic shifting of tense forms within discourse. In Qur'anic narratives, future events are often expressed through past forms to convey certainty and divine inevitability. Conversely, present forms may be used to depict past events vividly, creating immediacy and engagement.

These shifts are not grammatical anomalies but deliberate discourse strategies. They guide interpretation, intensify meaning, and structure narrative flow. Temporal meaning in Arabic is therefore inseparable from discourse organization.

4. CONCLUSION, DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study confirms that time in Arabic constitutes a complex semantic and discursive system rather than a purely grammatical category. Verbal forms encode aspectual meanings, while temporal lexemes and discourse context determine precise temporal interpretation. This interaction reflects a cognitive perception of time grounded in continuity, transition, and experiential awareness.

Understanding Arabic temporality thus requires moving beyond form-based analysis toward an integrated semantic-discursive approach. Such an approach provides a more accurate account of temporal meaning in classical texts and offers valuable insights for translation studies and Arabic language pedagogy.

Future research may extend this framework through comparative Semitic analysis, corpus-based studies, or applied linguistic research focusing on temporal interpretation in contemporary Arabic usage.

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