العدد 19 تشرين الثاني 2025
المجلة العراقية للبحوث الانسانية والاجتماعية والعلمية
No.19 – Nov 2025 Iraqi Journal of Humanitarian, Social and Scientific Research
Print ISSN 2710-0952 Electronic ISSN2790-1254

Tenses in English and Arabic: A Contrastive Study

الأزمنة في اللغتين الإنجليزية والعربية: دراسة مقارنة

Assistant Lecturer Anas Saleh Jassim, College of Arts – Department of English Language

المدرس المساعد أنس صالح جاسم

كلية الآداب – قسم اللغة الإنجليزية

Anas.Saleh@tu.edu.iq

الملخّص

يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة الأزمنة في اللغتين الإنجليزية والعربية، وبيان أوجه المقارنة والاختلاف بينهما من حيث الأنواع والاستخدامات. ومن المنظور اللغوي، يُنظر إلى علاقة الزمن بالعالم الخارجي من خلال "الزمن النحوي" (Tense)، الذي يُعدّ فئة لغوية خاصة بكل لغة. فاللغة الإنجليزية تتضمن زمنين أساسيين هما المضارع والماضي؛ إذ يُستخدم المضارع – كما يشير اسمه – للدلالة على الزمن الحاضر، بينما يُستخدم الماضي للدلالة على الزمن المنصرم. أما من حيث "الصيغة" أو "الهيئة" (Aspect)، فهي تشير إلى الكيفية التي يُنظر بها إلى الفعل أو يُجرَّب من خلالها، إذ تعبّر عن وجهة نظر معينة تجاه الحدث أو طبيعته. وتضم اللغة الإنجليزية مجموعتين من التقابلات الصيغية: الكمال/اللا كمال (Perfective/Non-Perfective) والاستمرارية/اللا استمرارية (Progressive/Non-Progressive).

تتيح اللغة الإنجليزية بناء ما يصل إلى ست عشرة بنية زمنية من خلال الجمع بين الفئات الزمنية والصيغية. فهناك أربعة أزمنة أساسية هي: الحاضر، الماضي، المستقبل، والمستقبل في الماضي (المعروف أحياناً بالشرطي). ولكل زمن من هذه الأزمنة الأربع أربع صيغ دلالية هي: البسيطة، المستمرة، التامة، والتامة المستمرة.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

الزمن، الصيغة، المقارنة اللغوية، اللغة الإنجليزية، اللغة العربية، الدلالة الزمنية

Abstract

This paper aims at studying the tenses in English and Arabic and how they contrasted with reference to their types and uses. In this study, we linguistically refer to the extra-linguistic existences of time-relations using the tense, which is regarded as a language-specific category. Thus, the present tense and past tense are the two English tenses. As the name implies, the present tense is typically used to indicate the present time, whereas the past tense is used to indicate the past period. In contrast, aspect "refers to the way the verb action is regarded or experienced. The choice of aspect is a comment on or a particular view of the action. English has two sets of aspectual contrasts: PERFECTIVE/ NON-PERFECTIVE and PROGRESSIVE/ NONPROGRESSIVE". Tense English allows building up to sixteen structures by combining categories. There are four different tenses for it: present, past, future, and future-in-the-past, sometimes known as conditional. Simple, progressive, perfect, and perfect progressive are the four aspectual references for each tense.

Keywords:

Tense, Aspect, Linguistic Contrast, English Language, Arabic Language,

Introduction

The Contrastive Analysis is geared towards generating predicated on the idea that language can be contrasted and incorporated two valued typologies (James, 1980:3). The goal of the contrastive analysis is to explain the similarities and contrasts between two or more languages, which is more descriptive and superior instructional material to the language learners. By using a foreign language, individuals can commit errors due to an influence of our mother tongue, pronunciation, grammatical, and other language levels errors. Understanding the

distinctions between the target language (L2) and the mother tongue (Li) is necessary to acquire the foreign language properly. The idea behind the contrastive analysis that will be used for language instruction is that learning a second language involves using one's original tongue. Sometimes the influence of the mother tongue is very evident, but when they use contrastive analysis, they pay particular attention to the methodical comparison of the mother tongue and the foreign language in order to identify areas of difficulty that could be causing the interference and to describe similarities and differences (Johansson 2008:10).

Time and Its Expression and Tenses

The discussion of time and its expression is by no means a simple matter, for several reasons : time is not a single concept; the expression of different kinds of time is not a one-to-one relation between meaning and form; the traditional description of time expressions gives semantic labels to particular forms - "present", "past", "perfect", "imperfect", and so on - which simultaneously confuse different kinds of time and imply a unitary function for each description. Lyons (1977, II : 683) states : "It is no exaggeration to say that there is probably no tense, mood or aspect in any language whose sole semantic function is the one implied by the name that it is conventionally given to it in grammars of the language. In this context, To explicate the expression of time, it is necessary first to consider the major concepts of time, second to make terminological definitions of its expression in tense, modality, and aspect, and third to relate the semantic structure of the first with the expressive form of the second.

Aziz (1989:39) highlights that time is a universal extra-linguistic concept usually divided into past, present and future. It is often represented in the form of a line with the present moment (moment of speaking) la the middle, past to the left and future to the right. Past Present Future Fig: 1

Past Present Future

Division of Time

Languages refer to these three divisions of time by various means including verbal contrasts (e.g. write: wrote: كتبَ و يكتبُ), nouns (yesterday, now, later) particles (e.g. (future), p (past)). Particular languages also differ in the use they make of these devices. Some languages use more verbal devices than others do; other languages favour non-verbal devices.

Tenses in English

Tense is the inflection on a verb with reference to the time of the utterance. Tense is the correspondence between the form of the verb and our concept of time. Aspect is a term used to describe the state of verb action as beginning, in progress, completed, etc.

Since the expression of time present and past cannot be considered separately from aspect, time and aspect will be combined. Al-Jurf (2005)

Lyons (1968: 305) indicates a crucial effect of tense in English, in that, as a deictic category, it is simultaneously a property of the sentence and the utterance". The use of the non-past as a means of expressing a past action achieves its dramatic effect by fusing the tense of the utterance with that of the event; the using the past tense in the same form separates event time from speaker's time and has the effect of a report rather than a dramatic presentation.

Forms of English Tenses

The simple application of both tenses with an example is going to be briefly stated. The simple usage of the tenses given here is decided based on the grammatical writers like Lewis (1986).

The Present

The third person singular does not have the Simple Present tense marked, and only the third person singular can use the suffix - {S3}. For example, I play, we play, you play, they play, he plays, she plays, and it plays. The morpheme's allomorphs are distributed similarly to the noun's possessive suffix -S2 and plural suffix -S1: /-s/ /-z/ /-iz/ (sleeps, brushes, changes, raises).

The Past

There are two variations of the Simple Past form: regular and irregular. Common type words like "played," "walked," and "closed" include the suffix "ed" at the end. A voiceless consonant (stopped, possessed, marked/it) is articulated with a vowel [t] after the past tense suffix -ed. A voiced consonant (believed, closed, played) is articulated with a vowel [id] after another /t/ /d/ /started, landed. There are a lot of various ways to produce the irregular past tense. Some verbs are unchanged, while others use a suppletive form or a whole different stem, like in go, went, taught, written, smelt, took, made, said, sent, spoken, said, left, drew, started, and set. The past tense form of the verb does not mark (inflect) pronouns or first, second, or third person nouns.

The Progressive

The be + present participle in the + -ing form is what forms up the current and past progressive. Be can be employed as the first part of verb phrases in seven different suppletive forms: am, is, are, was, were, be, and been. This means that only the first member of the verbal phrase is inflicted based on the subject. There is no variation in the second individual member. Additionally, there is no

variation in the participle suffix {-ing}. The following order is required when using auxiliaries in two or three groups: be + present participle.

The perfective

Have + past participle is the formula for the past and present perfect. The past participle -ed is the verb's ultimate form. The first members of the verb phrase are the three forms of have: have, has, and had. The latter, which is the primary verb's past participle, does not accept alteration in line with the subject. The following structure must be followed when using auxiliaries in twenties and trios: have + past participle. The verb can be regular or irregular in its past tense. The suffix {-ed} is used to end the regular past participle, such as passed and played. The allomorphs of the suffix -ed are distributed and pronounced exactly like those of the past tense. Go, went, e.g. gone, run, taught, smelt, taken, made, said, left, sent, spoken, met, drawn, begun, set, and so on are examples of irregular past participles, such as the irregular past tense -. Some verbs have the same form in the past, while others have their entire stem changed to a completely different one. The most prevalent ones are allomorphs of -d2, yet they terminate in the same three sounds as the ones previously discussed. The past participles have, had, had, and having are used to build verbal statements.

The Perfect Progressive

Have + been + present participle is the formula for the past and present progressive. There is a mandatory order when using auxiliaries in the combination of three: have + be + present participle.

Forms of Arabic Tenses

According to other scholars, the Arabic language does not employ tenses; instead, it has just a couple tenses: the perfect and the imperfect (the past and the present). As it was stated in the introduction, in Arabic, the tenses are most likely to be manifested through the verb. Arabic grammarians break down the Arabic verb into three which are past, present and imperative. This paper applies the term past and present to replace the terms perfect and imperfect largely. This is to prevent confusion, ambiguity, when aspect is being explained as well as when tenses are being compared with tenses in the English language.

The present tense

The imperfect verb form (المضارع) is more or less an allusion to the present moment when the point of reference is the moment of speech.

A) Like in the present tense of English, it can be used to mean the overall present i.e. repeated activities, a way, a fact of a power of the present.

اسبوع كل مرة المسبح الى اذهب. I attend the swimming pool one time in a week.

الاجتماعات احمد يحضر قلما. Ahmed is not a regular attendance person.

تكريت من واسعة مساحات دجلة يروي. Tigris feeds on huge sections of Tikrit.

B) The Arabic present tense may be used to refer to the current situation more often than the English past tense, which is the modern form.

طويلة قصة يكتب انه He is writing a long story

Two other minor applications of present tense in Arabic must be mentioned (C).

future and past time. (Present tense usage in reference to an action in

The future will be covered later in the book, sec chapter 5)

An appropriate adverbial is when the present tense is applied to the future time.

usually required

غدا الموصل إلى اخي يغادر

Tomorrow my brother starts to Mosul.

In newspaper headlines, writing about the past time is habitually done by use of the present tense.

فينا في لهم اجتماع اول يعقدون الأوبك منظمة دول نفط وزراء

(The first meeting of OPEC oil ministers is held in Vienna.)

The imperfect form was the name given by the Arab grammarians due to its being more resemblant to the noun since it also has the three vowelizations.

The Past Tense

The ideal form (الماضي) is basically those things, conditions, circumstances, the past(absolute tense). The following are some of the applications of this tense:

(a) Those are all kinds of acts that were executed prior to the present time: long acts, short.

actions, repetitive actions, etc. which point to definite past time.

طفلا كان عندما باريس في احمد عاش

As a child, Ahmed was living in Paris.

(b) Everything that has been done in the past that is not finite. They can be related to the present through their effect or outcome. These are normally communicated in English using the perfect aspect and the present tense. qad also takes the form of the perfect, which is only limited to affirmative assertions.

- The plane has arrived الطائرة وصلت
- 2. I have lost my book كتاب فقدت

(c)Another minor application of this tense is in future actions of which the speaker is so confident that he makes the perfect form to act as though they have been performed already. We find this application most commonly in (negative) promises; the most common nowadays is literary style.

I will most certainly sell you this. هذا بعتك

Similarities between English and Arabic Tenses are:

1. The verbs can be classified as either transitive (متعي عل) or intransitive (لاوم فعل) in both Arabic and English. Transitive verbs are those that need a direct object. For instance:

She closed the door

محمad al-bab yafthuri Muhammmad is opening the door.

Verbs that do not require an object are known as intransitive verbs.

For example: - Horses walk -

تلميذ اخسن``(The top student)

2. In English as well as in Arabic, there are three main forms of tenses, (الماض فعل), Simple Past Tense, (المضaar فعل) Simple Present Tense, and Future Tense, each has its own adverb to show when he speaks.

3. The similarities in the verb functions of English and Arabic are as follows:

a. The general statement or fact is expressed in the simple present in order to indicate the habitual activities or what happens at the time of speaking and theoretical meaning when used in conditional sentences , expressing the future time.

b. The simple past is used to express a completed activity (past time) and denote a prayer or a wish. This meaning is stated in English by the use of the infinitive or the auxiliary.

c. The future tense is used to express the future time or predictions for something that we want to do. In Arabic, the word سوف/ or the prefix sa-(س) are added to the front of the verb to indicate the future as well as in English that added Will/shall before the verb to indicate the prediction or future time.

The English and Arabic Tenses have the following differences:

1. The subject or pronoun has an impact on the phrase in Arabic. Arabic has the single, two-person form, and plural (more than two), while English can only have the singular and plural. Additionally, the number of pronouns differs between Arabic and English, with fourteen pronouns in Arabic and seven in English, which has an impact on verb structure.

2. The present tense, past tense, and future tense are the three basic tenses shared by Arabic and English. In Arabic, verbs are categorized based on the actor, actor number, and actor gender.

3. There are three typologies of gender in the English language: male, female, and neutral. Only the two genders—male (مذكر) and female (مؤنث)—that are intended for humans, animals, and objects are recognized in Arabic.

4. The English language contains regular and irregular verbs that the Arabic language does not have.

References

- Aziz, Y. Y. (1989). *A contrastive grammar of English and Arabic*. Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, University of Mosul.
- Lyons, J. (1968). *Introduction to theoretical linguistics* (Vol. 510). Cambridge university press.
- Al-Jurf, R. (2002). A contrastive analysis of English and Arabic for translation students. King Saud University.
- Lewis, M. (1986) The English Verb: An Exploration of Structure and Meaning. Commercial color Press, England
- James, C. (1980). Contrastive Analysis.
- Johansson, S. (2008). Contrastive analysis and learner language: A corpus-based approach. *University of Oslo*, *9*.
- Tanjung, K. F. (2015). *A Contrastive Analysis of English and Arabic Tenses* (Doctoral dissertation, UNIMED).