

# The Arabic Language in Contrast to English and Italian: Future Tense Revisited

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## Abstract

This study investigates the nature of the future tense in Arabic language in contrast to English and Italian languages. A major question to be answered is whether Arabic language as well as English and Italian have a real future tense.

The methodology employed is based on contrastive linguistics theory which includes a full description of the expression of futurity in the languages under investigation, followed by a morpho-syntactic analysis of the forms used to express futurity. The data were obtained from three different, but rather similar in nature, sources. These include the prime ministers' speeches to the house of parliament in the case of Italian and Arabic languages (along with a description, frequency and percentages of the future forms used in the holy Quran) ; and a three hour recording of an American series ( Acapulco bay) translated into Arabic.

The results show that there are similarities ( though belonging to different language families) and differences among these languages in terms of their expression of futurity. Further, they

show that Italian and Arabic languages do have real future tense unlike English which does not have a morphologically marked forms to express futurity.

**Keywords:** Contrastive linguistics, tense, Arabic, Italian, futurity

## 1. Introduction

Lyons (1977) stated that grammatically, tense, as opposed to deictic temporal reference, is not a universal feature of language; he, further asserted that "whether a language has a tense or not can be decided only on the basis of a grammatical analysis of the language; though not all languages have tense, it is probably true to say that all languages have various deictic adverbs or particles of time" (ibid: 678).

From a linguistic point of view, the future tense is a controversial issue. Many grammarians (Leech, 1971; Quirk et al., 1972, 1985; Palmer, 1988; Pennington, 1988) have argued that the future is not a true tense, although more recently, it has been accepted as such by many grammarians (e.g., Dahl, 1985; Maslove, 1985; Comrie, 1985, 1989; Hornstein, 1990; Declerck, 1991). For the Arabic language, the situation is more complicated. It has been claimed that tense itself does not exist in Arabic (see Al-Khawalda, 1997). Even when authorities accept the existence of tense in Arabic, futurity and the future from /sayaf9alu/ ("he will do") are ignored. Many scholars, following the traditional analysis of English, claim that the present from /'af9alu/ ("I do") is used to express futurity (Hassan, 1990; Comrie, 1991; Fehri, 1993). Because agreement on the definition of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is not universal, Modern Standard Jordanian Arabic (MSJA), the language of official matters in Jordan, was used a reference point for this paper, although the authors believe there is no difference between the MSA and MSJA.

## 2. Data for the Study

The database for this study was collected from three sources. To investigate the use of futurity in classical Arabic (CA), the Quran was scanned. Although CA is not the focus, the aim of investigating the use of futurity in the Quran was for comparison purposes. To investigate the use of futurity in MSJA, two sources were used. The first was the Jordanian Prime Minister's policy statement to the lower House of Parliament on September 18, 1999. The reason the researchers selected this text was that such statements frequently include a large number of promises, which means intensive usages of futurity. The second source was the Arabic translation of an English television series, Acapulco Bay (recording was made of four episodes for a total of three hours). Expressions of futurity in the series were examined in both English and Arabic.

To examine the use of futurity in Italian, the speech of the Italian prime minister was analyzed. Because the aim of this study was to test the hypothesis that the future in Arabic is a true tense and that /sayaf9alu/ is basically a future form (Al-Khawalda, 1997) and to avoid complex statistical computations, the data were left as simple totals and percentages.

## 3. Analysis of the Data

It must be noted that the use of the negative particles such as /lan/ and /la/, and the use of modal verbs such as /'ara;da/ ("he wanted") were excluded from the data. In general, three expressions used to express futurity were taken into consideration: the use of the present form /yaf9alu/ ("he does/is doing") to refer to the future, the use of the prefix /sa-/ with the present form /sayaf9alu/ ("he will do"), and the use of the particle /sawfa/ with the present form

*/sawfa yafʕalu/* ("he will do"). In this paper, appropriate forms of */faʕala/* will refer to the verbs in Arabic, e.g., */faʕala/* for the past form, */yafʕalu/* for the present form, and */sayafʕalu/* for the future form.

Concerning the forms used in Italian language and English, these were obtained from the corpus used for the purpose of this study. Percentages and frequencies were calculated and presented in tables followed by a morpho-syntactic analysis to show whether they are real future markers. It must be also noted that this study focus only on simple future expressions.

The analysis of data is based on a full description of the systems under investigation followed by a morpho-syntactic analysis.

### 3.1 Futurity in the Quran

Table 1. tabulates the distribution of expressions of futurity in the Quran

<i>Sawfa yafʕalu</i>	42	21.5%
<i>Yafʕalu</i>	53	25.4%
<i>Sayafʕalu</i>	114	54.5%
Total	209	100%

As the table shows, the number of occurrences of futurity is around 209 times. Out of the total 209, */sawfa yafʕalu/* ("he will do") is used 42 times, which represent 20% of total occurrences. Seventeen of the occurrences (40.4%) of */sawfa/* are with the verb */taʕlamu:n/* ("you (pl.) know"): */sawfa taʕlamu:n/* ("you (pl.) will know").

The present form */yafʕalu/* ("he does") is used 53 times to express the future ("he is going to do"; "he will do"), which represents 25.3% of total occurrences. However, it must be noted that 12 of these occurrences appear in compound structures coordinated by */wa/* and */or / thumma/* ("then") in which */sayafʕalu/* or */sawfa yafʕalu/*, ("he will do") is used in the coordinate clause. In other words, */yafʕalu/* in separate structures is used 41 times, representing about 20% of the total. The other important issue is that */yafʕalu/* ("he does"), when used to express future time, is generally accompanied by a future temporal adverb, such as */yawm al-qiyama/* ("the day of resurrection"), */al-janna/* ("paradise"), *al-naar* ("hell-fire"), *al-hashr* ("The gathering day"), etc. in other words, */yafʕalu/* in itself, without a future temporal adverb, does not express futurity. */sayafʕalu/* ("he will do") accounts for 114 future expressions, the most frequent construction of the total: 54.5%.

It seems that the difference between */sayafʕalu/* and */sawfa yafʕalu/* is not significant. That is, it is difficult to identify any syntactic or semantic reason why either of them is used since they are used interchangeably in several situations. For example, it is mentioned above that */sawfa taʕlamu:n/* ("you (pl.) will know") is repeated 17 times, at the same time the verb */yaʕlamu:n/* ("they know") is used with */sa/* in different places to express the same idea, e.g.,

/saya9lamu:na/ ("they will know") /sata9lamu:na/ ("you (pl.) will know"), etc. (see, e.g., Qur., 20:135; 67:17,29).

### 3.2 Futurity in the Speech of the Jordanian Prime Minister

Table 2 summarizes the occurrences of futurity in the speech of the Prime Minister.

Table 2. Distribution of futurity expressions in the Prime Minister's speech

<i>Sawfa yaf9alu</i>	4	5.5%
<i>Yaf9alu</i>	2	2.7%
<i>Sayaf9alu</i>	67	91.8%
Total	73	100%

As the table indicates, the total number of occurrences of futurity is 73. with /sawfa yaf9alu/ ("he will do") occurring four times, or 5.4% of the total. Again, /sawfa yaf9alu/ appears interchangeably with /sayaf9alu/ ("he will do") for example, /sawfa yakuunu/ ("he will be") alongside /sayaku:nu/ ("he will be") and /sawfa nuwa:Sl/ ("we will continue") as well as /sanuwa:Sl/ ("we will continue"). /yaf9alu/ appears twice, for 2.7% of the total. The two cases in which /yaf9alu/ is used to express futurity are found in result clauses in the same sentence: /min xhila:li hadha al-nahj tata9amaq al-musharaka 'al-ka:mila fi:T'iTa:r mumara:sat al-Hurriya:t wifqa mabda' seya:dat 'l-qa:nu:n mimma: yakfalu 'ija:d al-tawazun al-maTlu:b/(Through this way [of democracy] full participation is strengthened within the framework of freedom according to the principle of the sovereignty of the law, which guarantees the required balance").

It seems that the use of /sawfa yaf9alu/ ("he will do") and /yaf9alu/ ("he does") to express futurity is accidental. When we compare the number of their occurrences with the number of the occurrences of /sayaf9alu/ ("he will do"), we found that 67, or 91.7%, of the total expressions of futurity are /sayaf9alu/.

### 3.3 The translation of Acapulco Bay

Table 3. Summarizes the usage of futurity in the Arabic translation of the English-language television series

<i>Sawfa yaf9alu</i>	2	1.5%
<i>Yaf9alu</i>	1	0.8%
<i>Sayaf9alu</i>	131	97.7%

Total	134	100%
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As the table indicates, a total of 134 expressions of futurity occur. Of this total, /*sawfa yaf9alu*/ ("he will do") is used twice (1.4%). It seems that /*sawfa yaf9alu*/ is used randomly and there is no explanation why it is selected rather than /*sayaf9alu*/ ("he will do"). The present from /*yaf9alu*/ ("he does") is used once (0.8% of the total), where it is a structure coordinated by /*aw*/ ("or..."), e.g., /*aw'aqtuluka*/ ("or I kill you").

As can be noted, the use of /*sawfa yaf9alu*/ and the present from /*yaf9alu*/ to express futurity is very low in comparison with the use of /*sayaf9alu*/, which appears 131 times, or 97.7%, of the total.

### 3.4 Futurity in English

As mentioned above, a three-hour recorded videotape from the English-language series Acapulco Bay is used to analyze how futurity is expressed in English. Table 4 summarizes the ways in which futurity is expressed in Acapulco Bay.

Table 4. Distribution of Futurity expressions in an American TV series.

"will"	42	30.9%
Present from	31	22.8%
"be going to"	27	19.9%
Present progressive form	19	14.0%
Modals	17	12.5%
Total	136	100%

As can be noted, unlike Arabic in which futurity is expressed in three ways (/*yaf9alu*, /*sayaf9alu*/, or /*sawfa yaf9alu*/), five ways are used to express futurity in English. Of 136 cases, will appears 42 times, or 30.8%, of the total usage of futurity, which is the highest percentage. The present form is used to express futurity 31 times, or 22.7%; be going to is used 27 times, or 19.8%. the present progressive form appears 19 times, for 17% of the total. The rest, such as the use of would, have to, etc., are classified under modals, which are used 17 times, or 12.5% of the total.

### 3.5 Futurity in Italian

Table 5. summarizes the occurrences of futurity in the speech of the Italian prime minister to the house of parliament.

Form	Freq.	Percentages
<i>Futuro semplice</i>	31	29.2%
<i>Presente</i>	26	24.5%
<i>Congiuntivo present</i>	09	8.4%
<i>Perifrasi dovere + infinito potere + infinito</i>	40	37.7%
<i>Perifarsi progressive</i>	0	0%
Total	106	100%

As table 5 shows, the total number of occurrences of futurity is 106. It also shows that the use of Italian modals (*dovere* (must), and *potere* (can)) respectively, to express futurity have the highest frequency (40) among the other forms used to donate futurity in Italian (37.7%), a usage which expresses modality.

This intensive use of futurity is lexical rather than syntactic; it is a lexical choice preference. In fact, this high percentage of the use of the periphrastic construction *dovere + infinito* (must + infinitive) and *potere + infinito* (can + infinitive) is justified on the basis that this speech is a speech of a prime minister addressing the house of parliament asking for confidence and explaining the future obligations and promises of the government.

On the other hand, the typical future marker in Italian language (*futuro semplice* (simple future)) comes in the second position with 31 frequencies (29.2%). In fact, the form of *futuro semplice* in Italian covers almost all of the meanings that constitute the semantic core of the category type future (Schneider, 2006).

The present form is used to express futurity 26 times, or (24.5%); the *congiuntivo presente* (subjective) is used 9 times, or (8.4). However, concerning *perifrasi progressivo* (*Stare + gerundio*) is not used in the Italian prime minister speech, though sometimes, it is used as periphrastic construction to express futurity,:

1. *state venendo anche voi domain?* [lecche].

However, regardless of the high frequency of the modal use ( *dovere*, *potere* ), the typical future marker in Italian is the *futuro semplice*. This form in Italian language regularly expresses prediction – based future time reference:

(2) *La sera il cielo sarā sereno.*

In the evening the sky will be serene.

The *futuro semplice* could also convey one's intentions where these intentions can take the shape of definite plans:

(3) *tornerò a casa lunedì prossimo.*

I am going to go home next Monday.

It also can appear in contexts referring to officially predetermined situations (4) and scheduled events (5)

(4) *Lunedì prossimo sarà il 10 Aprile.*

Next Monday will be the 10th of April.

(5) *I primo ministro visiterà Parigi la settimana prossima.*

The prime minister is going to visit Paris next week.

Further, the *futuro semplice* may indicate hopes in the future:

(6) *sepro che arriverà.*

I wish that (3<sup>rd</sup>) he/she will come.

The *futuro semplice* could denote commands (obligations) imposed by persons and laws.

(7) *Fra un'ora finirai questo lavoro.*

Within / after an hour you must finish this work.

The above stated forms are those usually used to express futurity in Italian.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusions

The difference between the three languages (Arabic, English and Italian languages), in expressing futurity is significant. The dispute over whether the future is a tense in English, mentioned above, cannot be applied to Arabic and Italian. In other words, the arguments that are used to show that English lacks a future tense are not applicable to Arabic and Italian. For instance, it is contended that *will* indicates a general tendency, probability, willingness, etc., rather than future time, e.g. "Boys will be boys" (Pennington, 1988, p. 71). The data demonstrate that such usages typical of English (the non-temporal reference of the future morpheme) are not found either in CA or MSJA. Furthermore, /sayaf9alu/, ("he will do") has one and only one usage: locating the situation sometime after the moment of speech. That is, it truly expresses future temporal reference.

Another argument against treating the future as a tense and that *will* is the future morpheme is that there are many ways to express futurity in English. The data support this argument. Table 4 shows the five general ways to express futurity in English, and none of them could be considered marginal. The situation in Arabic and in particular MSJA, which is the focus of this paper, is different. The data indicate that futurity in MSJA is expressed basically by the future verb form /sayaf9alu/. It



scores 91.7% in the speech of the Jordanian Prime Minister and 97.7% in the translation of Acapulco Bay, whereas /sawfa yaf9alu/ and /yaf9alu/ are used marginally in both.

The other important argument is that the use of "will," "be going to," the present form, the present progressive form, or modals is not arbitrary. Each of them has its own semantic meaning in addition to futurity. In other words, the differences among them are significant. For example:

- It will rain (general future).
- It is going to rain (there is an evidence for that)
- It is raining (ungrammatical for expressing the future since the progressive indicates argument).
- I will visit him (sudden decision).
- I am going to visit him (the decision has already been made).
- I am visiting him tomorrow (arrangement).

In Arabic, such distinctions are not found. It seems that the selection of /sawfa yaf9alu/ and /sayaf9alu/ is arbitrary, since as mentioned above it is difficult to find any semantic or syntactic reason for selecting one expression over the other to express futurity. Moreover, unlike the simple present and past forms, future in English is expressed in a periphrastic way, that is, will is not an inflection (Qurik et al., 1985; Palmer, 1988). The future (i.e., /sayaf9alu/) in Arabic is not periphrastic. It is an orthographic whole and must be considered a syntactic-basic morpheme.

Infact, this is also the case of Italian language. It is quite evident that Italian language has a true future tense based on the use of a syntactic morpheme which operates on the base form of the verb, e.g. *parlero'* ( I will talk) is derived from the base form of the verb *parlare* (to talk). Thus, it is evident that the morpheme ( *ero'*) has just one function which is locating the action in a moment after the moment of speech. This, in fact, is exactly what the ( *sa/sawfa*) morpheme in Arabic language does; it has the same function of its Italian counter morpheme; and as mentioned earlier the form (sayaf9alu) is a basic Arabic form. This provides further evidence that Arabic language has a real future tense.

In contrast to English and Italian, the use of other constructions like the present tense to express futurity, the statistics revealed above show that this use is very marginal in Arabic language and is used in restricted situations with presence of temporal reference in most cases. In fact, the three languages employ the same temporal construction when it comes to the use of the simple present tense to express futurity.

Italian and English languages share the fact that both languages employ periphrastic constructions to express futurity. However, in the case of the of Italian language the *futuro semplice* (simple future) is employed to cover almost all of the meanings that constitute the semantic core of the category type future unlike like English language, as stated above

(Schneider, 2006). On the other hand, Arabic language does not share this intensive use of periphrastic constructions with Italian and Arabic languages.

In spite of these arguments against treating the future as a tense, many scholars argue that the future in English is a tense and that *will* is the future morpheme. They state that it is possible for a given morpheme to have more than one reading, and it is possible for *will* to express modal meaning in addition to the temporal one (for the discussion of this issue and why *will* is treated as a future morpheme, see Comrie, 1985; Hornstein, 1991; Decklerck, 1991).

To sum up, according to our data and based on a morho-syntactic analysis, frequency and distribution of the verb forms used to express futurity in the three languages, the future tense in Arabic in contrast to English and Italian languages is a true tense expressed primarily by the verb form /sayaf9alu/ which is a basic form in Arabic language.

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