Further considerations on the verbal aspect in Arabic

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The verbal aspect is one of the thorniest issues that Arabists must deal with, both theoretically and pedagogically. If teachers do not pay extreme attention to words, sooner or later they will fall into glaring contradictions, to remedy which they must invent a series of exceptions. Intrinsic and extrinsic causes are at the origin of such a quagmire: on the one hand, the complexity of the topic, due to the difficulty of finding a definition of aspect, both as a semantic and grammatical category, valid for all languages; on the other hand, the opinion and approach divergence among scholars, who hesitate to recognize at the basis of the Arabic verbal system an aspectual or temporal opposition. Finally, it should be added that the whole debate is grounded on an idea of aspect mirroring the linguistic reality of Slavic languages and which, in hindsight, does not fit well with Arabic. In this contribution, a definition of verbal aspect will be proposed considering the remarks included in a classic of linguistic studies, Bernard Comrie's *Aspect*, and in a short, decidedly less well-known but very important article by the Romanian linguist Coseriu. What follows is an overview of how the topic is introduced within a number of grammars and theoretical texts, the purpose of which is to show the different interpretations given by Arabists regarding aspect and other related features of the verbal system. In the belief that verbal aspect does not constitute an independent grammatical category in Arabic, an interpretation of the system is given as being built on tense as a complex, multidimensional category. In addition to the deictic dimension, serving to situate events with respect to a time reference, Coseriu identifies a second temporal dimension, the 'plane,' by which events are presented, in relation with the speech act, as either fully real or placed on a line of diminished reality. By applying the notion of plane to Arabic, an attempt is made to justify certain uses of the so-called "perfect" without referring it to the category of verbal aspect.

1. Introduction

This article is aimed at providing some insights for a broader discussion and further research. Given the complexity of the topic and its numerous implications on different levels, there is no claim to be exhaustive nor to get to an overall and complete definition of the *status quaestionis*. The idea, rather the

need, to expose another point of view concerning the category of aspect within the Arabic verbal system has been stimulated by some observations regarding scholars' theoretical and methodological assumptions. Some didactic concerns have also contributed to making such a need more pressing. As for now, it is worth making clear that the arguments developed in the following pages refer to the classical language and Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), especially in its literary register, which is typologically akin to the classical model. Therefore, pre-classical Arabic and the contemporary Arabic dialects, the so-called neo-Arabic, are excluded from the discussion.[1]

The first remark concerns the very definition of "verbal aspect," even before referring it to the Arabic language in a specific way. Compared to other linguistic categories or other verbal meanings, aspect seems less susceptible to receiving a universally valid definition. No one will question that tense is a grammaticalized way to express a relative notion with a deictic function, i.e. it serves to locate an event or situation[2] in time by presenting it as anterior to, contemporary with, or posterior to a point of reference. In the same way, no one will doubt that the different enunciation and utterance modalities are expressed through verbal moods, such as the subjunctive, the conditional and the imperative. Finally, it is generally acknowledged that the relationships between referential functions (agent, patient, primary participant, secondary participants) and syntactic functions (subject, predicate, direct object, indirect object, other types of determination) are expressed through the verbal voice or diathesis, that can be active, passive, reflexive, middle, etc. The same clarity of terms and convergence of opinions which applies to the aforementioned categories cannot unfortunately be found for aspect, which seems to be a more elusive notion.

This difficulty depends on the fact that the range of meanings labelable as aspectual is quite broad and their expression takes on several forms in different languages and even within the same language. Aspect can in fact show up as a part of the lexical content of a verb, and / or be grammaticalized in morphological forms by means of specific monemes,[3] as it happens in Russian and other Slavic

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[1] This exclusion is a first important limitation of which I am aware. An accurate and exhaustive description of the language, or of some of its features, cannot ignore the diachronic analysis, and the case of the Arabic verbal aspect is no exception. As a matter of fact, many an Arabist believe that the relation between the expression of an aspectual meaning and the expression of other verbal meanings, particularly the time reference, has undergone a change moving from one stage of the language to another. A detailed inquiry on Old Arabic and contemporary dialects will be therefore a necessary complement to this study.

[2] The words "event" and "situation" are used here with a generic meaning to indicate a single fact or a set of circumstances. These terms will occur whenever there is no need to refer to the type of meaning of a verbal lexeme, which in Arabic, as in other languages, can denote an action, a process, or a state / quality.

[3] The concept of moneme appears functionally more useful than that of morpheme, especially if applied to a language like Arabic, where signifiers corresponding to this or that meaning are very often discontinuous (Cf. Martinet 1985: 29 foll.).

languages, and / or be expressed through more or less constant periphrases, as in Romance languages.[4] However, from a general linguistics perspective, a definition of the verbal aspect cannot be inferred from its manifestation in a given language and subsequently be used to state whether this category does exist in other languages or not. A correct and satisfactory definition of aspect should be built on the assumption that it is a universal possibility of the language which can, but does not necessarily have to, be realized. A certain language may lack grammatical aspect, despite being able to express aspectual contents in its lexicon or by means of secondary uses of other grammatical categories (Coseriu 1980: 14).

As far as the Arabic language is concerned, we notice that there is no agreement among scholars about how its verbal system should be understood. A large number of Arabists and Semitists see in its two fundamental conjugations, the suffix conjugation or s-stem and the prefix conjugation or p-stem, respectively called *al-māḍī* and *al-muḍāriᶜ* in the traditional grammar, the opposite elements of an aspectual system, or at least originally aspectual. Other Arabists and Semitists instead see a time reference distinction. However, even for those scholars who consider Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) retaining the Classical Arabic (CA) dual aspectual system, the former would be more tense-specific, with clear division between past, present and future tense (Corriente 2002: 148; Ryding 2005: 439-440; Badawi-Carter-Gully 2016: 410). It has been argued that at a certain stage of its evolution, following the assimilation of Greek philosophy, especially Aristotelian logic, Arabic would have developed a system of three distinct grammatical tenses (Fleisch 1979: 204; Carter 2011). Such an interpretation, regardless of its accuracy, would imply at least a close connection between tense and aspect in Arabic. While admitting an original aspectual opposition, it would be necessary to establish how it was transformed into a tense opposition and to what extent it is still productive in MSA. How to explain, for example, that in some cases an aspectual distinction prevails, while in others tense overcomes aspect?

A twofold terminological problem must then be considered. In the Arabic grammatical tradition, we do not find any term with aspectual denotation to describe the verbal system, whereas Western Arabists and Semitists use terms such as perfect and imperfect, perfective and imperfective, *accompli* and *inaccompli*, etc. The temptation to which it is easy to succumb is to match terms referring to two

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[4] In French, for instance, the verb *aller* loses its meaning as a verb of motion and is used periphrastically to indicate an imminent situation in expressions such as *il va faire* or *il allais faire*, but it cannot be used with the same function associated with other tenses as in *il alla faire* or *il est allé faire*, where the verb *aller* regains its original sense. In Italian the periphrasis consisting of the verb *stare* followed by a gerund to express the progressive meaning is possible with some tenses but not with others: *sta / stava / starà leggendo* (the future here can imply a nuance of eventuality or probability), but one cannot say *stette leggendo, **era stato leggendo*, **sarà stato leggendo* (Coseriu 1980: 17).

rather different representations of the verbal system, with pernicious effects from both a theoretical and pedagogical standpoint. Moreover, some scholars have pointed out that the words perfect(ive) and imperfect(ive) are used by Arabists in a way that is different from how these two terms are usually employed in general linguistics or in relation to languages provided with the grammatical category of aspect. Such use of technical terms could cause quite a few difficulties for students who want to learn Arabic and, for example, Russian, or who are simply trying to apply to the Arabic language the general principles they have assimilated during a linguistics class. For this and other reasons, it seemed appropriate to make a certain room for the issue of the grammatical aspect as it is dealt with in Arabic grammar textbooks and some works displaying a pedagogical focus.

2. How to consider verbal aspect

An old fashion to explain things, sometimes still employed with students with a maieutic aim, is by stating what they are not. Following this method as for verbal aspect, one could say it is a grammatical category whose content is not person, number, voice (or diathesis), tense, mood. Since stating that a certain word or expression does not designate this or that thing is not the same as saying what it corresponds to, scholars are required to take a second step. Within any science, the use of a word designating a given notion should be the result of a number of choices aimed at describing first the field to which that notion belongs, then its scope. That is to say, among all the potential meanings for that word, only one and always the same will be used relative to that field and with that scope. The consistent and simultaneous observance of these two parameters, the field and the scope, makes of that word a technical term. However, there is another issue that must be considered in this regard: «the meaning (or value) of a word is not the idea we attach with a sound, neither is the word just a label for an object. The meaning of a word emerges from the differences and oppositions between neighbouring terms in a linguistic system» (Nerlich-Clarke 2000: 129), as Saussure had already highlighted in his *Cours de linguistique générale.* Only as part of a whole the content of a lexical item is fully realized. To outline the scope of a given term, it must be seen in opposition to, but also in continuity with (i.e. as complementary to) that of other terms belonging to the same field.[5]

Regarding aspect as a linguistic notion, its field is located within the verbal system, more precisely in that part of the system that governs the connection between verbal lexemes and those grammatical

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[5] This assumption gave rise to various versions of what we could call, to cut it short, "semantic field theory" about which one can find good summaries in Lyons (1977: I, 250 ff.) and Nerlich-Clarke (2000).

categories, compatible with verbs, through which specific semantic features or values are added to the lexical content. Aspect can be described as one of such categories, although in many languages some aspectual features are included in the lexical meaning of the verb. Other similar categories are tense, mood and voice, whose values might be found variously combined or even overlapped in one single verbal form. This happens especially with tense and aspect contents, due to their link with time. One more reason for the need to establish the scope of both notions with the utmost accuracy.

Tense, as has been said, is a grammatical category with deictic function, in the sense that it locates an event or a situation as anterior, contemporary, or posterior relative to a point of reference. The latter can be primary, i.e. coinciding with the moment when communication takes place (the enunciation of that event or situation), or secondary, i.e. coinciding with some other event or situation presented as anterior, contemporary, or posterior relative to the primary reference.[6] Be that as it may, what distinguishes tense is the fact that it relates the time of a situation to another time-point.

There is, however, another, non-deictic way of connecting an event or situation to time, that is, looking at it from an internal point of view. The event can be presented, for instance, as momentary or lasting, having happened once or several times, oriented or non-oriented towards an aim or a point to be rejoined, completed or not completed, partial or global, seen in its beginning or end, in its various phases (including those preceding and following its development), in its positioning with respect to other events (Coseriu 1980: 15). This other way of dealing with time is what is meant here by aspect, in accordance with Comrie's statements (1976: 3, 5) that "aspects are different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation,"[7] and that the difference between aspect and tense is "one between situation-internal time (aspect) and situation-external time (tense)." Since the temporal constituency of an event or a situation—some would say the 'verbal action as such'—can be considered from different points of view, aspect should be seen as a complex or multidimensional category (Coseriu 1980: 15), meaning that the oppositions discernible in it are many. For this reason, any attempt to reduce aspect to a single dimension, for example the dimension of achievement by which completed situations are opposed to uncompleted ones, is misleading and should be refused.

Moreover, in a given language not all aspectual values exist and not all those actually existing must be conveyed by a specific grammatical category provided with a formal expression. Some

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[6] These two temporal references are what Comrie (1976: 2) calls respectively "absolute time reference" and "relative time reference."

[7] Comrie grounds his own definition of aspect on that given by Jans Holt (1943: 6): "les manières diverses de concevoir l'écoulement du procés même."

aspectual meanings can arise lexically, possibly through derivation (derivational morphology),[8] or periphrastically (Coseriu 1980: 16). As an example of the first possibility with regard to the durativity of a situation, let's consider the following couples of French verbs (very similar couples can be found in other Romance languages): *chercher* (to look for / to search for) / *trouver* (to find) and *disputer* (to compete) / *gagner* (to win); *sauter* (to jump) / *sautiller* (to skip) and *chanter* (to sing) / *chantonner* (to sing softly with frequent interruptions). The verbs *chercher* and *disputer* denote situations lasting for a certain period of time and involving more than a single act ('looking for something' includes moving through space, moving or removing objects, looking in different directions, etc.; similarly, 'competing' is made of acts such concentrating, making movements with the body, keeping the adversary under control, etc.). Conversely, the verbs *trouver* and *gagner* denote situations taking place in one moment, i.e. in one time-point, and this is why they are called punctual.[9] Finally, the verbs *sautiller* and *chantonner*, compared to *sauter* and *chanter* from which they are derived by means of verbal diminutives, describe iterative or intermittent-irregular actions. Such aspectual content of a verbal lexeme, totally independent from its time reference or from interaction with other verbal forms in the same utterance, is usually called 'lexical aspect,' 'objective aspect' (Coseriu 1980: 18-19; Larcher 2012: 133 n. 1)—in opposition to 'subjective aspect' or 'aspect' *tout court*, that is grammaticalized aspect—or *Aktionsart* (pl. *Aktionsarten*), a German word meaning 'type or mode of action.' Concerning aspect expressed periphrastically, the use of stable periphrases is extensive in languages like the Romance languages and English, inasmuch they lack aspect as an independent grammatical category, or at least as a fully grammaticalized category. Some examples can be given here to illustrate this use: Fr. *j'étais sur le point de*; It. *stavo / andavo dicendo*; Sp. *voy / cojo y escribe*; En. *I am writing*, *I used to write*.

Both Comrie and Coseriu, who authored their writings on verbal aspect more or less in the same years, have highlighted some ambiguities concerning the usage of *Aktionsart* by linguists. These ambiguities are due to the fact that the distinction between grammatical aspect and lexical aspect or *Aktionsart* was originally conceived by Agrell (1908) for Slavic languages and only subsequently applied by scholars to other languages, on the assumption that what is lexical in the former should be in the latter too: "Mais on ne peut pas de ce fait exclure en général les Aktionsarten de la grammaire [...] et les attribuer partout au lexique, sous prétexte qu'elles y appartiennent dans les langues slaves. D'autre

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[8] In the Romance languages, as in Arabic, it happens that the aspectual content of a verbal lexeme is associated with certain features of its derivational morphology, such as specific monemes added to the verbal stem or the verbal root (see below).

[9] These verbs always entail that there is one moment in which the action has not yet taken place, followed by the moment of its accomplishment, without any time passing between the two moments.

part, assez souvent entre Aktionsart et aspect il n'y a pas de différence de nature" (Coseriu 1980: 18). For his part, Comrie (1976: 6, footnote 4) remarks that such distinction can be sketched at least in two different ways. According to the first one, aspect is seen "as grammaticalisation of the relevant semantic distinctions, while aktionsart represents lexicalisation of the distinctions, irrespective of how these distinctions are lexicalised. This use of aktionsart is similar to the notion of inherent meaning." According to the second one, that is peculiar to Slavists, *Aktionsart* is viewed "as lexicalisation of the [semantic] distinction provided that the lexicalisation is by means of derivational morphology. [...] This restriction of the use of the term 'aktionsart' in Slavonic linguistics was introduced by Agrell (1908)." For this reason, he prefers to avoid the word *Aktionsart*, that is replaced in his book by 'inherent meaning.'

What has been just said about *Aktionsart* and its distinction from grammaticalized aspect is indicative of a more general issue, whose relevance is fundamental for any study on the topic of verbal aspect. The whole discussion on aspect is affected by its interpretation referring to the Slavic languages. In other words, much of what has been stated concerning aspect in various languages, including Arabic, mirrors the functioning of this grammatical category in Russian and other Slavic languages. This fact is probably due to some reasons connected with the history of linguistic sciences. It is obvious that such a way to understand aspect may have generated some wrong or strained interpretations, when applied to other languages. Faced with this risk, we must be aware that in each language some aspectual values or 'dimensions,' as Coseriu calls them, may appear in one of the three aforementioned modalities and others in the remaining two modalities. Certain aspectual values can also combine with each other or with the values of other categories, prevailing on them or being prevailed by them, both semantically and grammatically. Aspectual oppositions, for instance, might be prior to temporal oppositions or, conversely, be a consequence of them. One should certainly take into account all these possibilities; however, our attention will focus above all on the analysis of grammaticalized forms. Dealing with grammar, there is one further assumption that we must keep in mind: the existence and effective operativity of a category in the grammatical system of a language depends on its autonomy, which is fully established when its oppositions are not reducible to other categories (Coseriu 1980: 17).[10]

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[10] We find the same assumption formulated in different terms by Kuryłowicz (1973: 79 foll.), when he states the difference between primary function and secondary function(s) of verbal forms, referring them to Semitic in general and to Arabic.

3. Convergence and divergence of opinions on the verbal aspect in Arabic

As mentioned in the introduction, the CA verbal system is built on the opposition of two fundamental conjugations. While in the Arabic grammatical tradition they are almost always designated by the same couple of words, i.e. *al-māḍī* and *al-muḍāriʿ*,[11] Western scholars use a variety of expressions, such as past / present, perfect / imperfect, perfective / imperfective, whose number will increase, if we also consider their synonyms (in French, for example, both *accompli / inaccompli* and *achevé / inachevé* may occur). Moreover, the intrinsic ambiguity of terms such as 'perfect' and 'imperfect,' that have a different meaning if considered in relation to a specific European language or to the classical grammar tradition, rather than to the Arabic verbal system, should not be neglected. It is therefore undeniable that such terminological heterogeneity further complicates the task of stating the nature of the original opposition. Not even the apparent consistency of the Arabic metalanguage can help, given that, while *māḍī* denotes an evident temporal notion, *muḍāriʿ* ('resembling') expresses an analogy between the verb and the agent noun (*ism al-fāʿil*) in relation to their syntactic behavior and, therefore, is hardly interpretable as the second member of a temporal or aspectual opposition. In this respect, many a scholar has pointed out the 'surprising' asymmetry (Carter 2011) or heterogeneity (Larcher 2012: 12) of the Arabic terminology. However, assuming that in a closed system the meaning of a term is also determined by the meaning of the other terms in the system, especially those in direct opposition with it, it would be worth checking for other ways of correlating *māḍī* and *muḍāriʿ*. Instead of limiting the analogy between the latter and the agent noun to syntactic compatibilities, one should consider it semantically. Actually, within the Arabic grammatical tradition we can find, alongside the well-known formalism due to the relevance attributed by grammarians to the desinential inflection (*ʾiʿrāb*) and what directly relates to it, a concern for the semantic analysis in general and of the verbal forms in particular. The two kinds of interests, the formal one and the semantic one, are not exclusive to each other but can coexist in the same stage of the tradition and even in the same scholar (Ayoub 2005: 387).[12] Thus, for instance, Rāḍī al-Dīn al-ʾAstarabāḏī (d. 1287) explains the resemblance between

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[11] Since Sībawayhi's age, other words are occasionally found instead of the most common term, especially for *muḍāriʿ*, as in the case of the well attested *ḥāḍir* (present) and *ḥāl* (concomitant present). This is true also for *mustaqbal* (future tense), that is sometimes replaced by *muntaẓar* or *mutawaqqaʿ*, respectively translatable with 'awaited' and 'expected' (Carter 2011).

[12] It is my personal belief that the very metalanguage developed within the Arabic grammar tradition often reveals a semantic perspective. Many technical terms such as *fāʿil / mafʿūl*, *mubtadaʾ / ḫabar*, *ʾiʿrāb*, *ʾiḍāfa*, *ḥāl* can denote semantic or pragmatic functions to which specific morphological forms and syntactic constructions correspond. Formal variations due to the desinential inflection are considered by several grammarians closely related to variations in meaning. ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Ǧurǧānī (d. 1078) devoted many sections of his works, especially the *Dalāʾil al-ʾiʿǧāz*, to demonstrating how syntactic variations

the noun and the *muḍāriᶜ* invoking their generic or undetermined referentiality due to the polysemy (*ištirāk*) peculiar to both. An isolated noun lacking any determination can't indicate a specific referent, but only an indistinct class of referents; in a similar way, a verb conjugated in the *muḍāriᶜ* applies to the present as like as the future tense. In both cases the undetermined referentiality can turn into a determined one only by means of an anteposed grammatical marker, i.e. the definite article *al-* for nouns and the preverb *sa-* for verbs.

'Astarabāḏī also draws on the principle of polysemy for the desinential variation in the *muḍāriᶜ*, to be correlated with the polysemy of the particles preceding it. The example he gives is that of the negation *lā*, which can be followed by the indicative (*rafᶜ*) or the apocopate (*ǧazm*). In other words, the same negation is to negate an utterance in the assertive or imperative modality, being able to express a negative assertion (*nafy*) or a prohibition (*nahy*). The ending of the *muḍāriᶜ* disambiguates the value of the negation, which in turn specifies the modal content of the verbal form (Ayoub 2005: 393-395). This semantic relationship between particle and verb, which would also exist in connection with other particles, leads to the conclusion that the *muḍāriᶜ* is itself neuter with respect to its temporal and modal content. Incidentally, such a neutrality concerning the time reference is a further factor of similarity with the *ism al-fāᶜil* (Anghelescu 1988: 348), which like the 'similar verb' takes its past, present or future meaning from the sentence context or from that of the communicative situation (Holes 2004: 219-220). We thus have a two-term verbal system in which one, the *māḍī*, would be temporally marked, while the other, the *muḍāriᶜ*, in addition to the lexical meaning of the verb, brings information only about the person, i.e. the agent (or the patient in the case of a passive voice).[13]

While Arab grammarians, as a rule, deal with the values of the two conjugations in temporal terms, most Arabists lean towards an aspectual interpretation of the verbal system of CA and, at least partially, of MSA, albeit with some distinctions in the terminology and methodology. By reviewing some Western grammars of Arabic and other didactic or descriptive works from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 21st, one can identify a few trends. Dealing with the binary verbal system of Arabic, some authors use perfect / imperfect (Fischer 1972: 90-94; Badawi *et al.* 2016: 410-419), *accompli /*

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have their semantic counterparts, a principle already known to Sībawayhi (d. 793) and his commentators (Giolfo 2014: 122). Although complex semantic analyses are more common in late grammarians, from the 11th century onwards, already in the introductory part of Sībawayhi's *Kitāb* we find the following statement about the similarity between the *muḍāriᶜ* verb and the agent noun: "[Similar verbs] are similar to the agent noun because they have the same meaning (*maᶜnā*)" (quoted in Ayoub 2005: 391).

[13] According to Kuryłowicz (1973: 91), the marked element of the system (*qatala*) is defined by its primary semantic function, while the unmarked element (*yaqtulu*), semantically empty or negative (i.e., 'non-past'), would be defined structurally by its noun-like inflection.

inaccompli (Blachère and Gaudefroy-Demombynes 1975: 245-254; Fleisch 1979: 179 foll.; Larcher 2012: 11-12, 133-136, 141-145), *perfectivo / imperfectivo* (Corriente 2002: 148-149) or the neuter labels s-stem and p-stem (Holes 2004: 217-218) explicitly referring them to verbal aspect. At times they provide the reader with an explanation of how aspect must be intended, possibly relating it to the Semitic verbal system, or how it could be connected to tense. In some books (Wright 1896: II 1-44; Veccia Vaglieri 1937: I 110, II 90-94; Cantarino 1974: I 59-67) the terms perfect / imperfect are found without any explicit reference to aspect, which however might be inferred from the way the author outlines their values and uses. Sometimes perfect and imperfect are analyzed keeping separated their aspectual and temporal value (Fischer 1972; Corriente 2002). In only one case (Kuryłowicz 1973: 79-84) perfective and imperfective are understood as denoting *per se* a time content, as forms expressing anteriority and non-anteriority / simultaneity with regard to a time reference (not necessarily the moment of speaking).[14] Finally, few scholars use the terms past and present or the corresponding terms in other languages (Vernier 1891: I 37-44; Ryding 2005: 439-444).[15]

Fischer uses 'perfect' (*Perfekt*) and 'imperfect' (*Imperfekt*) referring to both tense and aspect. If related to aspect, which is considered an inherent meaning of the two conjugations, they are equated to the perfective and imperfective aspects (*perfektiver / imperfektiver Aspekt*), denoting a completed action and an uncompleted action in process respectively. If related to tense, they correspond to past and present-future. His description of the verbal system is generally focused on aspect (Fischer 1972: 90-91).

Blachère and Gaudefroy-Demombynes make a clear distinction, without however considering all its implications, between absolute and context-conditioned values of what they call *accompli* and *inaccompli.* Even though this argument is integrated in the discussion from a diametrically opposite perspective, trying to demonstrate that the Arabic system is originally grounded on the opposition between aspects and only subsequently between tenses, it is the same kind of distinction proposed by Kuryłowicz regarding primary and secondary functions of verbal forms.

Fleisch, who credits Blachère and Gaudefroy-Demombynes with recognizing aspect as the basis of verb organization in Arabic, devotes a section of his *Traité* to a number of studies on verbal aspect from 1924 to the early 1970s, especially those discussing verbal aspect in Arabic. In doing so, he shows

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[14] Kuryłowicz's use of these two terms is actually unrelated to any semantic implications and refers only to the morphological structure (Kuryłowicz 1973: 80, footnote 2; 83).

[15] This list of authors is purely indicative. Many other names could be added, as well as those indicated could be gathered differently, applying other criteria to establish affinities and differences. Cf. as an example what Eisele (2011) says in this respect.

awareness that "dans la tradition des études linguistiques, la notion d'aspect était généralement définie par rapport aux données slaves. C'est le verbe slave qui a fourni à la théorie de l'aspect son cadre et ses oppositions" (Fleisch 1979: 171). Among the studies mentioned, he openly disagrees with Kuryłowicz's, mainly for his peremptory statement that "verbal aspect as grammatical category does not exist in Semitic" (Kuryłowicz 1973: 83), from which he infers that, for the Polish linguist, the primary function is temporal, while aspectual considerations are secondary.[16] To Kuryłowicz's statement he replies affirming that in Semitic "l'aspect est une *corrélation*, et non une catégorie grammaticalisée ; de plus le modèle fourni par le verbe slave s'est montré d'un type exceptionnel, donc ici inadapté" (Fleisch 1979: 174). There follows a lengthy discussion from which emerges the difficulty of giving a single, universally valid definition of aspect. However, some ideas seem to bring what appears as a vague discourse onto a more solid ground: aspect has to do with the various ways of understanding duration, is objective and manifests itself through oppositions. Fleisch then starts to deal with aspect in classical Arabic, analysing how aspectual and temporal content interact in the *accompli* and *inaccompli*. For this purpose, he contrasts action verbs with stative verbs, making a further distinction within each group of verbs between *récit historique* and *discours*. In his exposition he tries to keep the two semantic contents (aspect and time) separate at all times, in order to check their degree of realization for each possible combination. With action verbs, the *accompli* of the *récit historique* expresses chiefly a time notion, while the aspectual content is minimized or neutralized. When used in the *discours*, it conveys equally a temporal and aspectual meaning: past tense and accomplishment, that often becomes resultative (Fleisch 1979: 181-182). With the *inaccompli* things are easier, because aspect and tense are always dissociated, being the "process" described by the verb always presented in its aspectual value, while the temporal denotation is derived from the sentence. At times, the aspectual content of the *inaccompli* gives the meaning of the verb a nuance of possibility: "l'inaccompli peut signifier la *possibilité* d'effectuer, l'*aptitude* à effectuer le procès" (Fleisch 1979: 184, 186). With stative verbs there is no correlation of aspects, since for both conjugations the aspectual content is lexicalized. Both the ongoing and the achieved / completed acquisition of a condition or quality are implicit in the verbal lexeme, the context being solely responsible for the emerging of one sense or the other.[17] This being

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[16] This claim of Fleisch is contradicted by Larcher (2012: 145), who states, regarding the same study by Kuryłowicz, that for the latter neither tense nor aspect are grammatical categories of classical Arabic.

[17] What Fleisch describes as "le devenir dans l'acquisition de la qualité" and "l'acquisition réalisée," i.e. the "verbe résultatif," is better labelled in linguistics as the 'ingressive' and the 'static' value of stative verbs. Whether in CA or MSA, such verbs can be translated in two ways: *qāma* (to stand / to be standing), *ǧalasa* (to sit / to be seated), *ḥazina* (to become sad / to be sad), *fariḥa* (to rejoice / to be happy), *qaruba min* (to become close to / to be close to), etc.

the case, it is a question of how the process is situated in time. The terms *accompli* and *inaccompli* are retained, although they are less appropriate for the discussion (Fleisch 1979: 193 foll.).

Corriente (2002: 148) speaks of *coordenadas aspect-temporales* of the finite forms of the verb, reflecting a basic opposition of objective time or aspect. When a situation (*proceso*) is conceived in its totality, the Arabic verb is put in its perfective form; when it is conceived as an ongoing or iterated situation, the verb appears in the imperfective form. A parallel opposition of subjective time, whose opposite terms are perfect (*perfecto*) and imperfect (*no-perfecto*), would have evolved from the original one.

Speaking of aspect and factuality, Holes (2004: 217-223), who puts the modern Arabic dialects next to CA and MSA in his discussion of the verbal system, observes that the notion of pastness is not central to the meaning of s-stem. This would be demonstrated by its use in conditional clauses, with verbs of emotion and cognition—referring to which he makes a relevant distinction between punctual / dynamic and durative / static value (Holes 2004: 218, 221)[18]—with performative verbs and in optative expressions involving exhortations to God. As for the p-stem, in all varieties of Arabic it marks the non-completeness of an action or situation. He concludes by affirming that "in the absence of other elements that make the relative timing of actions clear—time adverbials, the optional future markers *sa-* or *sawfa*, or dependent clauses (such as conditionals)—the only variety of p-stem or s-stem verb form that is intrinsically time marked is that of the s-stem of verbs with dynamic value, for example, *katabtu risa:latan* 'I wrote a letter.' Because the verb [...] (a) denotes a dynamic action and (b) is in the s-stem, indicating completion, it is necessarily understood as having occurred in the past relative to the time of utterance" (Holes 2004: 219-220).

For didactic clarity, Ryding prefers to present the Arabic verbal system as structured on the distinction of two basic tenses, past and present, from which all other tenses derive. At the same time, she states that "these tenses are also often referred to as perfect and imperfect, or perfective and imperfective, but those latter terms are more accurately labels for aspect rather than tense" (Ryding 2005: 439-440). Then she describes tense and aspect as "two different ways of looking at time," the former dealing with linear points in time, the latter with the degree of completeness of an action or a situation. Finally, she declares that 'past tense' and 'present tense' in her book will refer to "what is

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[18] Despite the apparent similarity, it is something different from the distinction between ingressive and static value of stative verbs. With the verbs of emotion and cognition the use of the s-stem has often «little or no implication of pastness. [...] The s-stem form is used not only when the sense is dynamic and the action is conceived of as having (just) occurred, but also when the sense is of an ongoing state» (Holes 2004: 218). The examples reported by Holes in this respect are dialectal, and as such are beyond our scope of interest, however they are not far from what might be found in CA and MSA.

also called the perfect, or the perfective aspect [...] and [...] the imperfect tense or the imperfective aspect" (Ryding 2005: 440).

The last two scholars who will be considered here are Kuryłowicz and Larcher, although their works are chronologically distant from each other and separate from some of the studies mentioned above. They have been placed at the end of this overview because, for different reasons, they stand out from the other authors. Kuryłowicz's standpoint can be considered basically opposite to that of the Arabists reviewed so far, which can be summarized, with some simplification, in Fleisch's approach. In other ways, it can be seen connected to that of Coseriu and Comrie, who wrote their works a few years after the publication of Kuryłowicz's book. As for Larcher, his work is an accurate and very detailed description of the CA verbal system from the morphological, syntactic and semantic perspectives. As he had stated in the preface to the first edition of *Le système verbal de l'arabe classique* (Larcher 2003), the various issues are debated as within a course; all the content of the book comes indeed from a course he taught for many years at the Université de Provence. This educational tone seems particularly suitable for our purposes, as we are going to see. Additionally, the sections of the book devoted to the verbal aspect stand in apparent continuity with what Kuryłowicz said on this regard.

Before approaching Kuryłowicz's interpretation of the CA verbal system (Kuryłowicz 1973: 79 foll.), it is opportune to recall some of his methodological premises. First, even if it were possible to establish an opposition of aspect between the imperfective *yaqtulu* and the perfective *qatala*,[19] such opposition should be seen in another sense than in Greek or in Slavic grammar, where it is active also in the different moods and in the nominal forms of the verb. Nonetheless the terms perfective and imperfective can be retained referring them to morphological structure. Secondly, for an opposition to be relevant, in the sense that it effectively contributes to determining the system, it must be established in syntactical or / and semantic slots where it is not affected by the context, i.e. where the opposed members are used in their primary function. In the third place, the various meanings attributed by Reckendorf (1921: 10-15) to the perfective and imperfective are to be reduced to the opposition between the neuter-negative member *yaqtulu* and the positive or marked member *qatala*. With regard to each member, one should consider the total meaning (*Gesamtbedeutung*), the primary meaning (*Hauptbedeutung*) and the secondary meanings (*Nebenbedeutungen*). The total meaning or 'value' is an abstraction indispensable in establishing the system (Kuryłowicz 1973: 80). Finally, these

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[19] Unlike other authors, Kuryłowicz always analyzes first the functions and meanings of the form *yaqtulu*, then he moves on to those of the form *qatala*. For this section of my article, I have chosen to follow the same order of his exposition.

forms are used in their primary function when they are related to the moment of speaking, in their secondary functions when they are related to a past or future moment.

By analyzing the examples collected by Reckendorf, Kuryłowicz comes to affirm that the total meaning of *yaqtulu* is non-anteriority / simultaneity, depending on whether it is taken as the neuter or negative member of the opposition. Its primary function is present, being the secondary functions future, i.e. simultaneity with a future moment, and preterite (*praesens historicum*), i.e. simultaneity with a past moment. The future or past moment must be mentioned immediately before or after the imperfective, or inferred from a broader context, e.g. narration:

1. أنا أبعث إليك بنيه يكونون معك في الرواق

ʾanā ʾabʿaṭu ʾilayka banayhi yakūnūna maʿaka fī l-riwāqi

'I am sending/I shall send you his sons so they will be with you in the tent'

2. خرج بين رجلين يخط رجلاه الأرض

ḫarağa bayna rağulayni yaḫuṭṭu riğlāhu l-ʾarḍa

'He emerged between two men, his feet trailing along the ground'

3. لما تقتلون أنبياء الله من قبل

limā taqtulūna ʾanbiyāʾa llāhi min qablu

'Why did you kill God's prophets before?'

4. إني لأقودهما إذ رآه بلال معي

ʾinnī la-ʾaqūduhumā ʾiḏ raʾāhu Bilālun maʿī

'I was leading both of them when Bilāl saw him with me'

In these examples the time exponents, in relation to which the imperfective forms express simultaneity, are, respectively, 1. *ʾabʿaṭu*, 2. *ḫarağa*, 3. *min qablu*, and 4. *raʾāhu*.

Another context-conditioned secondary function of *yaqtulu* is that of conveying shades of modality, as in:

5. أيقتله

ʾa-yaqtuluhu

'May he/has he the right to kill him?'

6. فقلت يتمنى أمير المؤمنين ثم أتمنى

fa-qultu yatamannā ʾamīru l-muʾminīna ṯumma ʾatamannā

'I said: "Let the Commander of the believers utter a wish, then will I utter a wish"'

Once again, the imperfective is neuter as regards modality, whose exponents are to be found in the context or in the speech situation. The general neuter character of *yaqtulu* leads us to recognize the tense and mood exponents of its secondary functions somewhere outside the verbal form itself.

As for the second member of the opposition, *qatala*, it is to be seen as preterite, i.e. an action prior to the moment of speaking, in its primary function, and as pluperfect or second future with relation to a past or future moment (secondary function). Furthermore, Kuryłowicz (1973: 82) sees as a consequence of the inherent anteriority of *qatala* the resultative effect of a previous action in expressions such as:

7. كفروا

kafarū

'They have given up true faith' > 'They are infidel'

8. بعتك هذا

biʿtuka hāḏā

'I sold this to you (= sold!)' > 'I sell / I'm going to sell this to you'

9. حلفت

ḥalaftu

'I swore' > 'I swear'

If this is true for 7., the other two expressions could instead be examples of the performative use of the *māḍī*, little known or ignored altogether by several Arabists and Semitists, as Larcher has pointed out (2012: 143). Another secondary function is the context-conditioned modality to express wish or irreality in conditional clauses, where nevertheless the distinction between *yaqtulu* and *qatala* rather corresponds to that between past tense and pluperfect in English and other Western languages:

10. يفدونني لو يستطيعون أن يفدوا

yufaddūnanī law yastaṭīʿūna ʾan yafdū

'They would ransom me, if they could ransom'

11. لو شاء الله لجعلكم أمة واحدة

law šāʾa llāhu la-ǧaʿalakum ʾummatan wāḥidatan

'If God had willed, he would have made you a single people'

To conclude, the semantic relation between *yaqtulu* (imperfective) and *qatala* (perfective) is grounded on a general, 'total' (in the sense of *Gesamtbedeutung*) opposition 'non-anteriority *versus* anteriority,'

where *yaqtulu* is the unmarked, neuter member and *qatala* the marked, positive one. Any other temporal, modal and even 'aspectual' distinction should be seen as a secondary function entailed by the primary relation and conditioned by the context. Within the secondary function, the originally neuter member *yaqtulu*, if opposed to *qatala*, becomes marked as negative, i.e. as 'simultaneous *vs.* anterior.' Moreover, what primarily expresses a relative deictic distinction may assume a more or less defined semantic content and be interpreted differently. Thus, the difference existing between, for instance, *kuntu ʾaktubu* ('I was writing;' Fr. *j'écrivais*; It. *scrivevo*) and *katabtu* ('I have written;' Fr. *j'ai écrit*; It. *ho scritto*) should be intended as a deictic opposition 'simultaneous with a past moment *vs.* prior to the moment of speaking;' only subsequently, and only as an effect of the context, it can be taken as the expression of an imperfective and perfective meaning. In other words, verbal aspect is subordinate to the deictic function and does not exist as an independent category.

After pointing out the substantial difference between the terminology of the Arabic grammatical tradition and Western terminology, and warning of the disastrous effects caused by their promiscuous use, Larcher defines the notions of time and aspect. The latter is said to be "la façon dont un procès se déroule dans le temps. Si le procès se déroule dans la période de temps concernée par l'énonciation, l'aspect est inaccompli [...] S'il est présenté comme la trace, dans cette période, d'un accomplissement antérieur, l'aspect est accompli" (Larcher 2012: 133). A concise and *tranchant* definition, one might say. The discussion keeps going with some remarks on the terms generally used by Arabists to translate *māḍī* and *muḍāriʿ*, then gets to the point by showing that, on the one hand, aspectual opposition does not exclude temporal opposition in CA; on the other hand, aspectual and temporal denotation cannot coexist in the same verbal form. The examples given to prove the thesis include the following:

12. رأى جاك فتاة جميلة تمر أمامه

raʾā ǧāk fatātan ǧamīlatan tamurru ʾamāmahu

'Jaques a vu (ou vit) une belle jeune fille qui passait (ou passer ou passant) devant lui'

'J. saw a beautiful young girl passing by him'

13. أجيئك إذا احمر البسر

ʾaǧīʾuka ʾiḏā ḥmarra l-busru

'Je viendrai chez toi quand les dattes auront muri'

'I shall come to you when the unripe dates ripen / have ripen'

14. لما تقتلون أنبياء الله من قبل

limā taqtulūna ʾanbiyāʾa llāhi min qablu

'Pourquoi tuiez-vous les prophètes d'Allah auparavant ?'

'Why did you kill God's prophets before?'

According to Larcher (2012: 135), in 12. the verb *tamurru* denotes only the imperfective aspect (*inaccompli*), having no temporal content. This is so, because it is situated in the range of another verb, *rāʾa*, that implies only the past tense. If it were outside the range of that verb, it would only denote the non-past tense. In 13. the semantic content of the imperfective *ʾaǧīʾuka* displays only present-future tense, while the perfective *iḥmarra*, that does not refer to the time of speaking but to another temporal reference, i.e. the moment of coming, denotes only the perfective aspect (*accompli*). While in French the imperfect and future perfect (*future antérieur*) would mark, at the same time, past tense and imperfectivity and future tense and anteriority, i.e. perfectivity, in Arabic only one meaning can be realized in one verbal form, depending on the time-reference of the latter.[20] In 14. *taqtulūna* only indicates the aspect, being the tense denoted by *min qablu* (cf. the interpretation of the same example provided by Kuryłowicz).[21] When a verb refers directly to the time of speaking, that is «rien ne vient faire écran entre lui et le présent de l'énonciateur», it denotes tense; otherwise, if it is situated in the range of a second verb or another element denoting tense, as in the third example, it marks aspect.

What is surprising here is the shift from a temporal deictic function to an aspectual semantic function determined by context with no other implications. The opposition is no longer between two members of the same grammatical category, but between one member belonging to one category (tense) and one member belonging to the other category (aspect). This representation is completed by an additional consideration, which introduces a new element into the system, namely a modal opposition in the sense of 'necessary *vs* possible,' traces of which can be found in the Arabic grammatical tradition (Larcher 2012: 141-145; Anghelescu 1988: 349).[22] This modal opposition is first referred to the verbal forms *kāna* and *yakūnu*, then extended to the *māḍī* and *muḍāriᶜ* of other verbs, the only difference being that, while the modal value of *yakūnu* survives in MSA, the other cases pertain only to CA. Within the sentence:

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[20] Cf. the way Comrie (1976: 79) explains this example.

[21] Cf. above the interpretation of the same example provided by Kuryłowicz.

[22] Larcher quotes examples from two post-classical grammatical works: *al-Kāfiya* by Ibn al-Ḥāǧib and *Šarḥ al-Kāfiya* by ʾAstarābāḏī. From the latter he also quotes a fragment with the explanation for the *māḍī*'s performative use.

15. كان تكون ناقصة... وتكون تامة

kāna takūnu nāqiṣatan [...] wa-takūnu tāmmatan

that literally means '[the verb] *kāna* is incomplete [...] and is complete,' *yakūnu* brings a sense of possibility, so that the final and correct translation is '[the verb] *kāna* can be incomplete [...] and can be complete.' The logical consequence of this fact is that by contrast *kāna*, deprived of any temporal and aspectual value, brings a sense of necessity, as in:

16. ما كان محمد أبا أحد من رجالكم ولكن رسول الله... وكان الله بكل شيء عليما

mā kāna muḥammadun ʾabā ʾaḥadin min riǧālikum wa-lākin rasūla llāhi [...] wa-kāna llāhu bi-kulli šayʾin ʿalīmun (Q. 33, 40)

that Larcher (2012 : 142) translates 'Mahomet *n'est effectivement* le père d'aucun homme parmi vous, mais *il est effectivement* l'envoyé d'Allah [...] Allah *est nécessairement* de toute chose informé.' Related to this distinction between necessary and possible is to be seen the performative use of *māḍī* and what he calls *parfait de prophétie*, as in:

17. هل تبيع لي بكذا – بعت

hal tabīʿu lī kaḏā bi-kaḏā – biʿtu

'Me vendrais-tu telle chose à tel prix ? - Je [te la] vende.'

'Will you sell me this thing for this price? – I will sell [it to you]!'

18. ونادى أصحاب الجنة أصحاب النار أن قد وجدنا ما وعدنا ربنا حقا

wa-nādā ʾaṣḥābu l-ǧannati ʾaṣḥāba l-nāri ʾan qad waǧadnā mā waʿadanā rabbunā ḥaqqan (Q. VII, 44)

'Les élus crieront aux damnés : "nous avons constaté que ce que notre Seigneur nous avait promis est vrai."'

'The dwellers of Paradise will call out to the dwellers of the Fire: "We have indeed found true what our Lord had promised us"'

What in 17. has been translated with 'I will sell [it to you]!' could be better said by means of expressions such as 'sold!' 'agreed!' or 'done deal!,' given that, at the moment the answer is uttered, the sale is necessarily considered concluded. The situation described in 18. clearly refers to the Resurrection Day. The verb *nādā* therefore cannot be understood as past tense. It can neither be seen as perfective (*accompli*), for in such a case, the prerequisites for its perfectivity would be lacking (we have here the expression of a non-punctual event, situated in the future time and not representing the required condition for something). The only way to justify the *māḍī* in this context would be the necessity

inherent in God's prediction reported through the voice of the Prophet. This last example is particularly relevant because it portrays a case where the aspectual interpretation creaks the most, showing its weakness.[23] However, Larcher defines his own view of the Arabic verbal system as 'relativistic,' meaning that a verbal form has not temporal, aspectual or modal value but in relation to the context. It is precisely in this relativism that he recognises a link with the thesis outlined by Kuryłowicz.

This overview shows that while some scholars fully espouse the aspectual interpretation, others focus more on the tense distinction. However, most Arabists put themselves halfway between these two extremes, calling into question now the aspectual value and now the temporal one, often depending on the context. Such a divergence of opinions, which at times borders on contradiction, has two main reasons: the inconsistent use of terms designating the opposite members; the assumption that, in the case of the aspectual interpretation, the perfective / imperfective opposition should be understood in the sense of completed / uncompleted (achieved / unachieved) action, process or situation, as if the very notion of aspect must coincide with this type of distinction. The terms perfect and imperfect are sometimes used with aspectual denotation, sometimes with temporal denotation; in some cases, they are made to coincide with the couple perfective / imperfective, in others these two pairs of terms are kept separate. Referring to certain languages such as English, perfect seems to have a double denotation, temporal and aspectual. By indicating "the continuing present relevance of a past situation [...] it expresses a relation between two time-points, on the one hand the time of the state resulting from a prior situation, and on the other the time of that prior situation" (Comrie 1976: 52). The relation between the two time points could be regarded as its temporal content, while the present relevance of a past situation as its aspectual denotation. It is opposed to non-perfect, that in English is expressed through the opposition between present perfect and past simple. In Arabic the resultative effect of a prior action or situation is expressed by means of the *māḍī*, the 'perfect,' but only with certain verbs, depending on their lexical meaning and / or the context. Such a perfect is not grammaticalized in Arabic, being opposed to nothing else. The opposition between perfect and imperfect has a completely different meaning and cannot be compared to the opposition perfect / not perfect of other languages.

As for perfectivity and imperfectivity, we have seen that aspect as a semantic category is concerned with different ways of viewing the internal constituency of a situation. If we consider the

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[23] That the Arabic perfect(ive) cannot be used for a future time reference had already been noted by Comrie (1976: 18, footnote 2).

opposition between perfective and imperfective as that by which the category of aspect is primarily characterized and on which a number of other oppositions depend, we can state that «perfectivity indicates the view of a situation as a single whole, without distinction of the various separate phases that make up that situation; while the imperfective pays essential attention to the internal structure of the situation» (Comrie 1976: 16). This is something different from depicting an event or a situation as completed or not completed, in which case our attention would be focused on its end more than any other moment. Thus, of the two members, perfective could be considered as the unmarked one, denoting a situation with beginning, middle, and end without any possibility to distinguish them and without any further implication. [24] However, this different way of looking at perfectivity / imperfectivity contrasts with the Arabist tradition, and Comrie himself is aware of this fact. At the end of the section dedicated to Arabic, within a paragraph meaningfully titled *Combined tense / aspect oppositions* (Comrie 1976: 78-80), he concludes by stating that in Arabic the opposition between perfective and imperfective incorporates both aspect and relative tense.

4. Full reality *vs* diminished reality

We have seen above that a modal value has been related at times by some scholars to the s-stem or the p-stem or to their mutual opposition. So far, such modal content, which can be displayed in the expression of the desire, the possibility, the unreal condition and the opposition between what is necessary and what is possible, has been presented, as a rule, as a context-conditioned secondary function. There are, however, Arabists who ascribe a fundamental role within the framework of the verbal system to the expression of modality. The part played by the latter is seen basically in two different ways by scholars: as closely related to the semantic and grammatical categories of tense and aspect, in the sense that the expression of one of them conveys, as a secondary function, significations

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[24] According to this perspective, the suffix conjugation of classical Arabic would be the verbal form (*ṣīġa*) to represent perfectivity, i.e. an event or situation stripped of any idea of development or change caused by its unfolding over time, as well as of other temporal or modal implications. A very similar idea can be found in the *Natāʾiğ al-fikr fī al-naḥw* by the Andalusian grammarian ʾAbū al-Qāsim al-Suhaylī (d. 1185), who acknowledges the *māḍī* for its function of representing the event (*ḥadaṯ*) in an absolute manner, without any temporal or circumstantial denotation (*ʿalā l-ʾiṭlāqi min ġayri taʿarruḍin li-zamānin wa-lā min ḥālin min ʾaḥwāli l-ḥadaṯ*) added to the expression of the agent. He exemplifies this function of the *māḍī* by referring it to the *mā al-ẓarfiyya* – the subordinating *mā* with the meaning of "as long as" – and to the speech act of equalizing two events with regard to their effect on the situation (*taswiya*). In sentences such as *lā ʾafʿaluhu mā lāḥa barqun wa-lā mā ṭāra ṭāʾirun* (I will not do that as long as a flash shines, nor will I do as long as a bird flies) and *ʾinna llaḏīna kafarū sawāʾun ʿalayhim ʾanḏartahum ʾam lam tunḏirhum lā yumiʾnūna* (Indeed, those who disbelieve - it is all the same for them whether you warn them or do not warn them, Q. II, 6), the *māḍī* implies neither the positioning of the event in a past time nor its completeness (Suhaylī 1992: 56).

of the two other categories (Anghelescu 1988); as the backbone of the system and the key to interpreting the opposition between the two types of conjugation, in the sense that the modal notions of certainty and uncertainty are what distinguishes originally the different uses of the *māḍī* and the *muḍāriᶜ*, especially in its apocopate form (Giolfo 2012; 2014). In both cases, the possibility that the suffix and prefix conjugations were initially opposed based on a specific aspectual content is ruled out.

To overcome the impasse of the aspectual interpretation of the two main conjugations of the Arabic verbal system and avoid resorting to a grammatical category other than tense, I propose to apply to that system the notion of 'plane,' as Coseriu describes it in his aforementioned article. According to the Romanian linguist, in fact, tense, like aspect, is to be considered a complex, multidimensional category, albeit to a lesser degree than the latter. He proposes to distinguish two possible[25] temporal values or dimensions, plane and perspective, that can be interconnected, like time and aspect, or like certain aspectual values with others. Of the two dimensions, the one with a deictic function is the perspective, which, however, will not be dealt with here. The plane is the dimension opposing *actuel*, i.e. the expression of a full reality, to *inactuel*, i.e. the expression of a diminished reality. In other words, certain events or situations are placed in direct relationship to the speech act as fully real, while other events or situations are placed on a line of diminished reality, in the background, so to speak, with a limited effectiveness, as in the case of conditions, circumstances, consequences of the fully real situations, hope, wish, etc. In Romance languages like French and Italian, such diminished reality of the action is often expressed by means of imperfect, which is to be considered in this respect the centre of the *plan inactuel*, and not a tense of the past. This function of the imperfect can be observed in various situations: *imperfait d'imminence* or imperfect of imminence (Fr. *Jean a dit qu'il venais immédiatement*; It. *Giovanni ha detto che veniva subito*), *imperfait de politesse* or imperfect of courtesy (Fr. *je voulais te demander un service*; It. *volevo chiederti un favore*), *imperfait préludique* or ludic imperfect (Fr. *alors, tu étais le gendarme et moi le voleur*; It. *facciamo che tu eri la guardia e io il ladro*), imperfect in the conditional clause (Fr. *ah! si mon père était riche!, si j'avais le temps, je passais te voir*; It. *ah! se mio padre era ricco!, se avevo tempo, passavo a trovarti*), etc.[26].

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[25] To be understood once more as possible universals, i.e. possibilities of language that can be realized in a specific language.

[26] A typical use of this type of imperfect can be found in many Italian police reports, where the situation is often described in the following way: *il furto veniva commesso nei pressi della fermata della linea 5; scesa dall'autobus, dopo pochi passi, la vittima era avvicinata da uno sconosciuto...* (the theft was committed near the bus stop of line 5; after getting off the bus, the victim was approached by a stranger a few steps later...). Relative to the speech act (or rather the act of writing), the situation is presented here in the dimension of a diminished reality, being the police report perceived not as the actual reality, but as a reconstruction of such reality.

At this point, one might assume that the role played in Romance languages by the imperfect, referring to the plane of reality, is played by the *māḍī* in Arabic. This means that for many of its uses, when it does not have a relative temporal value (anteriority), there would no longer be a need to invoke an aspectual connotation (perfectivity). There would no longer be any need to assume the existence of an independent grammatical category represented by its own oppositions not attributable to the effect of the oppositions of another category. Thus, in the example 11. God's will is presented through a conditional structure whose condition (protasis) is irreal and the apodosis impossible. The whole situation described in the two clauses is thus projected onto a plane totally separate from effective reality. In 13. the ripening of the unripe dates is set as a condition (if) or eventuality (in case). In other words, my coming (full reality) is subordinate to the circumstance of the ripening (diminished reality). The example 17., which Larcher explains by the performative function of the *māḍī*, could also be interpreted by assigning *biʿtu* the role of representing a still slightly veiled reality: 'will you sell me this thing for this price? (full reality) – Sold! = consider it sold, as it were sold (diminished reality).' Beyond the legal value of the performative speech act (the finalisation of the sale), one could paraphrase the verb *biʿtu* as follows: consider the sale a done deal, but to make it a reality, you still have to give me the money and I will hand over the object to you. The same can be said for example 9., insofar as an oath invokes, anticipates, conditions a reality that is not yet fully effective. However, the performative explanation is not to be dismissed a priori, as it is likewise free from aspectual implications. Some further research on cases of *māḍī* with possible performative value will help evaluate which interpretation is most suitable.

Finally, in 18. we have the more evident example of the inadequacy of a system built on an aspectual opposition. Although this is a quite rare case, it is of great interest because it leads us to exclude not only the aspectual interpretation, but also the temporal deictic one. The verb *nādā* cannot in any way denote anteriority, either with respect to the present or a future moment. As we have seen, Larcher's analysis of this sentence is grounded on a third modal opposition between necessary, expressed by the *accompli*, and possible, expressed by the *inaccompli*. Incidentally, according to him, the performative function of the *accompli* would derive from such opposition. There is no doubt that the situation described in Q. VII, 44 will necessarily take place, since it is the word of the Lord. Nonetheless, it is told in the form of a prophecy, that is, as an anticipation in the present of a reality that has not yet taken a concrete shape. It is as if we could see what will happen in our future life projected on a screen. The flowing images are true, but for the moment their reality stays on the screen (diminished reality). This is not the case for the other two verbs, *waǧadnā* and *waʿadanā*, whose function is purely relative deictic.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, from this last perspective the CA and MSA verbal system would stand on a single autonomous grammatical category, which is tense. Its main functions are:

a. to situate events with respect to a time reference point as anterior to, contemporary with, or posterior to that reference;

b. to arrange events on the 'plane' of reality, which may be full or diminished at various degrees, in relation to the speech act.

This category includes two elements in mutual opposition, one of which is marked and usually called 'perfect,' while the other is unmarked and usually called 'imperfect.' The unmarked character of the latter should be seen not only relative to tense, but also to the possible aspectual and modal values it takes from the context (the sentence in which it is used or the speech situation). Even the perfect can in some cases be influenced by the context, thus showing its semantically neuter character. This means that aspectual values are not excluded from the two members, but they must be seen as depending on the lexical content of the verb, or as subsequent effects of the primary opposition. Putting it differently, they do not give rise to a category of their own. This being so, the use of terms such as perfect(ive) / imperfect(ive), *accompli / inaccompli* and the like can give rise to misunderstandings, if any semantic meaning is associated with them. It would be better to seek after less semantically oriented terms, or not at all oriented, knowing that, however, it is a difficult task finding a pair of words suitable for all situations and for the various European languages. Apparently, the only acceptable solution for the time being is to keep in use terms such as s-stem and p-stem, whose denotation is purely structural.

This hypothesis certainly needs further testing to be carried out on CA, MSA and modern dialects. Discussion with experts from various fields (Arabic grammatical tradition, Arabic dialectology, Semitic studies, general linguistics) is also desirable for a first assessment of its soundness, before moving on to more targeted research.

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