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VERBAL TENSE AS A LEXICOGRAPHICAL DEVICE: THE MADĪ–MUDARĪ‘–AMR DISTRIBUTION IN AL-ZAMAKHSHARĪ’S ASAS AL-BALAGHA

Abstract. *This article examines how the three finite forms of the Arabic verb al-madī (perfect), al-mudari‘ (imperfect) and al-amr (imperative) are distributed within the microstructure of the dictionary entry in Maḥmūd al-Zamakhsharī’s Asas al-balagha (composed before 538/1144). Working from the critical edition of ‘Uyūn al-Sūd (al-Zamakhsharī, 1998) and from a sample of entries drawn from nine alphabetical chapters, the study shows that the three forms are not interchangeable stylistic variants but occupy fixed and functionally distinct positions. The madī opens the entry and anchors the literal (ḥaqīqī) sense; the mudari‘ follows immediately, discloses the vocalic pattern of the root and, in the illustrative material, becomes the preferred vehicle of processual, imminent and personified readings; the amr appears almost exclusively inside quoted Qur’anic, prophetic and proverbial material, where it carries pragmatic rather than lexical information. The paper argues that this distribution constitutes independent lexicographical evidence bearing on the long-standing debate over whether the Arabic verb encodes tense or aspect, since a dictionary reveals which form its compiler treated as the unmarked citation form. It further shows that a substantial portion of the figurative layer introduced by the formula wa-min al-majaz is carried by the mudari‘ rather than by the perfect, which links verbal morphology directly to the rhetorical purpose announced in the work’s title.*

Keywords: Maḥmūd al-Zamakhsharī; Asas al-balagha; Arabic lexicography; verbal tense; aspect; madī; mudari‘; imperative; shawahid; majaz; dictionary microstructure.

INTRODUCTION

The question of whether the Arabic finite verb encodes tense or aspect has occupied Arabists for well over a century and remains unsettled. The indigenous grammatical tradition speaks of *al-zaman* and divides the verb into *maḍī*, *mudariʿ* and *amr*, yet the same tradition repeatedly observes that the actual temporal reference of a given form is settled by context and by accompanying particles rather than by the form itself. Western descriptions have oscillated accordingly: some treat the opposition as primarily temporal, others as primarily aspectual, and still others as a hybrid in which aspect is grammaticalised and tense is inferential (Comrie, 1976:78–82; Fischer, 2002:100–104; Versteegh, 2014:86–89).

Almost all of this discussion has been conducted on the evidence of grammars and of running text. Dictionaries have contributed comparatively little, which is unfortunate, because a dictionary supplies a kind of evidence that neither a grammar nor a corpus can. When a lexicographer must decide which form of a verb will stand at the head of an entry, he is obliged to identify the form that his linguistic intuition treats as least marked the form from which the others are felt to derive. That decision is not a theoretical statement, and precisely for that reason it is difficult to dismiss as a construction after the fact. *Asas al-balagha* is an unusually informative witness in this respect. It is the earliest large Arabic dictionary to arrange its lemmata in full alphabetical order beginning from the first radical of the root (Baalbaki, 2014:335), and its second and more consequential innovation is that it separates the literal from the figurative sense of every root by means of the explicit formula *wa-min al-majaz*, “and among the figurative usages” (Ḥajjī Khalīfa, 1894:89; al-Samarraʿī, 1970:142). The work is divided into twenty-eight chapters corresponding to the letters of the Arabic alphabet and contains 3,742 entries (Sulaymonova, 2007:21). Because it is a dictionary of usage rather than of vocabulary stock, it records not only what a form means but how it behaves.

Verbs dominate its macrostructure. On the basis of a structural analysis of the entries, Sulaymonova (2007:46) reports that roughly 65–70 per cent of the lemmata in *Asas al-balagha* are headed by a verb. This proportion is not incidental: in Arabic the principal mechanism of word formation is the mapping of a consonantal root onto a series of vocalic patterns, and the verb is the pivot of that system. Any account of the

lexicographical method of *Asas al-balagha* must therefore begin with its treatment of the verb.

The grammatical dimension of the work has nevertheless received little attention. Existing scholarship has approached *Asas al-balagha* chiefly from the standpoint of textual and manuscript study (Sulaymonova, 2007), while general surveys of al-Zamakhsharī's output treat the dictionary as one item among many (Islomov, 2024; Brockelmann, 1937:511). The verbs of his Arabic–Turkic dictionary *Muqaddamat al-adab* have been analysed in detail, but no comparable study exists for *Asas al-balagha*, and our own earlier comparison of the two works raised the issue only in general terms (Salimova, 2025:546).

The present article addresses one specific and tractable question: how are the three finite forms of the verb distributed within the entry, and what lexicographical work does each of them perform? Three subsidiary questions follow from it. Does the position of a form in the entry correlate with the kind of information it conveys? Is the distribution of forms in the illustrative material (*shawahid*) governed by the same principles as their distribution in the definitional part of the entry? And does the resulting picture support a temporal or an aspectual reading of the Arabic verbal opposition?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The primary source is the two-volume critical edition of *Asas al-balagha* prepared by Muḥammad Basil 'Uyūn al-Sūd and published in Beirut (al-Zamakhsharī, 1998). This edition was chosen because the boundaries between entries are clearly marked, Qur'anic quotations are typographically distinguished, and the headwords together with their derivatives are set off from the surrounding text, all of which makes systematic collation feasible. All page references in what follows are to volume one of this edition unless otherwise indicated. The Cairo lithograph of 1881 and the edition of Maḥmūd Fahmī were consulted as control texts at points where the reading affected the analysis.

The grammatical framework combines two descriptive traditions. The first is the indigenous *ṣarf* tradition, and in particular al-Zamakhsharī's own account of the verb in *Al-Mufaṣṣal fī ṣan'at al-i'rab* (1993), which allows his lexicographical practice to be measured against his grammatical theory; the parallel treatment of the verb in *Al-Unmūdḥaj fī l-naḥw* has been analysed by Nosirova (2005:64). The second is the

Western descriptive tradition, chiefly Wright (1896:51–63) and Fischer (2002:98–112), whose terminology for the vocalic classes of the trilateral verb is used here for convenience. Ryding (2005:438–447) is cited for the aspectual terminology.

Sampling proceeded as follows. From nine alphabetical chapters *alif*, *baʿ*, *taʿ*, *ḥaʿ*, *raʿ*, *sīn*, *ṣad*, *ṭaʿ* and *ʿayn* consecutive runs of pages were read in full and every verb-headed entry within them was recorded. For each entry the following were noted: the form standing in initial position; the presence and shape of the *mudariʿ*; the *maṣdar* or *maṣdars* given; any further derived forms; and the finite forms occurring in the illustrative material, distinguished according to whether the *shahid* was a Qurʾanic verse, a *ḥadīth*, a proverb, a line of verse or an unattributed idiom. Entries that gave no illustrative material at all were excluded, since they cannot bear on the questions posed.

The analysis is descriptive and comparative. Forms are first identified morphologically and then classified by the function they discharge in their position within the entry. Where a form appears in a *shahid*, its reading is established from the immediate context supplied by al-Zamakhsharī himself rather than imposed from outside. Comparison with the earlier tradition draws on *Kitāb al-ʿayn* (al-Khalīl ibn Aḥmad, 1980) and on the typological accounts of Arabic lexicography given by Belkin (1975:164) and Rybalkin (1990:13).

Two limitations should be stated at the outset. First, the quantitative figures reported below rest on sample readings and are approximate; a full statistical description of the work would require a complete digital corpus, which does not yet exist. Second, the sample is weighted towards chapters with a high density of verbal roots, and the proportions given should therefore be read as indicative rather than as population values.

RESULTS

The most immediately visible feature of the verbal entry in *Asas al-balagha* is its opening formula. An entry does not begin with a bare root, nor with a *maṣdar*, nor with a definition; it begins with the third person masculine singular of the perfect, which is then followed by the imperfect and by one or more verbal nouns. The sequence *maḍī + mudariʿ + maṣdar* is remarkably stable across the sample, and it functions as what modern lexicography would call the citation form of the lemma.

Table 1. The opening triad in selected entries (*al-Zamakhsharī, 1998, vol. 1*)

Entry	Opening formula	Literal sense	Page
أبر	أَبَرَ النَّحْلُ يَأْبُرُهُ أَبراً	to pollinate a date palm	17
بخل	بَخِلَ يَبْخُلُ بُخْلاً وَبَخَالاً	to be miserly, to withhold	48
حرم	حَرَّمَ يَحْرُمُ حُرْمَةً وَحَرِيمَةً	to be forbidden, prohibited	185
رجع	رَجَعَ يَرْجِعُ رُجُوعاً	to return, to come back	340
رجف	رَجَفَ يَرْجِفُ رَجْفاً وَرَجْفَاناً	to tremble, to quake	340
سرق	سَرَقَ يَسْرِقُ سَرْقاً وَسَرْقاً	to steal	451
صدر	صَدَرَ عَنِ الْمَاءِ يَصْدُرُ صُدُوراً	to turn back from water	540
صنع	صَنَعَ يَصْنَعُ صَنْعاً وَصَنْعاً	to make, to manufacture	561
طهر	طَهَّرَ يَطْهِّرُ طَهَارَةً وَطُهوراً	to be clean, to be pure	620

Three observations follow from this material. The first is that the perfect is invariably the form in initial position. In the sample not a single verbal entry opens with an imperfect, an imperative or an isolated *maṣḍar*. The second is that the sense glossed in the opening line is always the concrete, physical one, even in roots whose figurative use was by the twelfth century far more frequent in learned prose. Thus *ṣadara* is defined by reference to livestock turning back from a watering place, and only later in the entry does the reader reach *ṣadara* ‘an al-ra’y, “to proceed from an opinion” (*al-Zamakhsharī, 1998:540*). The third is that the *maṣḍar* slot is often filled by more than one form, and the alternatives are not free variants: *rajfan* and *rajafanan* differ in the durativity they suggest, and *al-Zamakhsharī* allows the difference to stand without comment.

The stability of this triad is significant for the argument of this paper. It establishes that, for the compiler, the perfect was the form from which the lexical identity of the verb was read off. Whatever the semantics of the opposition may be, the perfect is the unmarked member in the lexicographical sense of the term.

If the perfect identifies the lexeme, why is the imperfect given immediately afterwards in every entry? The answer is morphological rather than semantic. In the triliteral verb

the vowel of the second radical in the imperfect is not predictable from the perfect, and it is precisely this vowel that assigns the verb to one of the six vocalic classes of the bare stem. A user who knows only *ṣadara* does not know whether the imperfect is *yaṣduru* or *yaṣdiru*; the entry supplies the information that no rule could supply.

Table 2. Imperfect forms and the vocalic class they disclose

Imperfect	Perfect base	Class	Semantic tendency of the class
يَأْبُرُ	أَبْرَ	yaf'ulu	Transitive action upon an object
يَضْرِبُ	ضَرَبَ	yaf'ilu	Directed physical action
يَرْجِعُ	رَجَعَ	yaf'ilu	Motion and change of position
يَصْدُرُ	صَدَرَ	yaf'ulu	Change of state
يَظْهَرُ	ظَهَرَ	yaf'ulu	Acquisition of a quality
يَخْلُ	بَخِلَ	yaf'alu	Inherent disposition or state
يَسْرِقُ	سَرَقَ	yaf'ulu	Deliberate, concealed action
يَصْنَعُ	صَنَعَ	yaf'alu	Productive, manual activity
يَحْرُمُ	حَرَّمَ	yaf'ulu	Permanent condition

The correlations set out in the last column of Table 2 are tendencies rather than rules, and al-Zamakhsharī nowhere formulates them. They are, however, consistent with the classification of the six classes found in the grammatical tradition, including his own (al-Zamakhsharī, 1993; Wright, 1896:51–63). What matters for the present argument is that the imperfect in this position carries information about form, not about time. It is a morphological index, and the reader is expected to use it as such.

The picture changes completely once the imperfect leaves the citation triad and appears inside a *shahid*. Here it is no longer an index of pattern but a semantic instrument, and it is used with a consistency that suggests deliberate selection rather than accidental attestation. Its first function is to present an action as unfolding or as imminent. Under the entry *ṭ-l-b* al-Zamakhsharī cites the idiom *al-siraj yaṭlub an yanṭafi'a*, “the lamp is asking to go out”, that is, it is on the point of going out. The imperfect *yaṭlub* does two things simultaneously: it places the event at the threshold of realisation, and it attributes volition to an inanimate object. To support the reading, al-Zamakhsharī adduces the

Qur'anic phrase *jidaran yurīdu an yanqadda*, “a wall about to collapse” (Qur'an 18:77). The parallel is instructive. In both cases an imperfect of a verb of wanting governs a subordinate verb of destruction, and in both cases the effect is personification. The compiler is not merely recording an idiom; he is showing the reader a productive rhetorical device and identifying the grammatical form that carries it.

Its second function is to project inevitability into the future. In the entry *ṣ-l-w* the *shahid* is the Qur'anic *yaṣla al-nara al-kubra*, “he shall burn in the greater fire” (Qur'an 87:12). The imperfect here denotes neither present time nor mere futurity but a future presented as certain and as continuing, and the stylistic effect warning, admonition depends entirely on that reading.

Its third function, and the one most closely tied to the purpose of the work, is to carry figurative sense. In a number of entries the literal meaning is stated in the perfect while the figurative extension introduced by *wa-min al-majaz* is formulated with an imperfect or with a derived stem in the imperfect. The point is not that the perfect cannot be figurative it frequently is but that when al-Zamakhsharī wishes to present a transferred sense as habitual and established in usage rather than as a single event, he reaches for the imperfect.

Table 3. Selected figurative extensions introduced by wa-min al-majaz

Figurative expression	Rendering	Literal base	Page
اسْتَبَحَرَ فِي الْعِلْمِ	to range widely in knowledge	baḥara, the open sea	47
بَحَثَ فِي الْكَلَامِ	to dig into a text, to scrutinise it	baḥatha, to dig the ground	—
رَجَعَ إِلَى نَفْسِهِ	to return to oneself, to reflect	raja'a, physical return	340
رَجَمَهُ بِالظَّنِّ	to pelt someone with conjecture	rajama, to stone	341
سَرَقَ السَّمْعَ	to steal a hearing, to eavesdrop	saraqa, to steal	451
صَدَرَ عَنِ الرَّأْيِ	to proceed from an opinion	ṣadara, to leave the water	540
طَهَّرَ قَلْبَهُ مِنَ الذُّنُوبِ	to purify the heart of sins	ṭahara, physical cleanliness	620
حَرَّمَ عَلَيْهِ لِقَاؤَهُ	meeting him was denied to him	ḥaruma, religious prohibition	185

The imperative behaves quite differently from the other two forms. In the sample it never appears in the definitional part of an entry. It occurs only inside quoted material, and there its contribution is pragmatic rather than lexical: it supplies the illocutionary force of command, exhortation or entreaty which the surrounding prose then exploits. Two examples from the sample illustrate the range. Under ‘-k-s the shahid is the prophetic saying i‘kisū anfusakum ‘aksa al-khayli bi-l-lujum, “rein in your souls as horses are reined in with bridles”. The bare stem ‘akasa denotes physically turning something back; the imperative in the ḥadīth transfers that action to the moral domain, and the transfer is effected by the quotation rather than by an explanatory gloss. Under f-r-gh the shahid is Qur’anic: rabbana afrigh ‘alayna ṣabran, “our Lord, pour out upon us patience” (Qur’an 2:250). Here the imperative of the causative stem is addressed upward, from the worshipper to God, and the ordinary directionality of command is inverted into supplication. The lexical information conveyed is minimal; the stylistic information is considerable.

The rarity of the imperative in the definitional portion of entries is easily explained. An imperative is inseparable from a speech situation, and a dictionary entry has no speech situation. It can only be shown at work, and al-Zamakhsharī accordingly shows it at work in borrowed contexts.

The functional division described above operates within a macrostructure in which verbs are heavily dominant. Sample readings taken from six chapters yield the proportions given in Table 4. The figures are approximate and were obtained by counting the lemmata on consecutive sample pages; they nevertheless agree closely with the overall estimate of 65–70 per cent reported by Sulaymonova (2007:46).

Table 4. Verb-headed and noun-headed entries in sample pages

Chapter	Sample pages	Verb-headed	Noun-headed	Verb %
alif (أ)	17–20	≈12	≈8	60
ba’ (ب)	46–48	≈9	≈4	69
ra’ (ر)	340–342	≈11	≈4	73
sīn (س)	450–451	≈8	≈4	67
ṣad (ص)	540–542	≈8	≈3	73
‘ayn (ع)	660–662	≈9	≈4	69

The variation between chapters is itself of interest. Chapters with a high proportion of verbal roots in the inherited lexicon, such as ra’ and ṣad, show correspondingly higher

figures, while *alif* is depressed by the number of nominal and particle lemmata it must accommodate. No chapter in the sample falls below sixty per cent.

DISCUSSION

The distribution described above bears on three distinct questions, and it is worth separating them.

The first is the tense–aspect question with which this article opened. *Asas al-balagha* does not, of course, contain a theory of the verb; but its practice implies one. Three features of that practice are relevant.

The perfect occupies the citation position without exception. Had al-Zamakhsharī understood the opposition as primarily temporal, the choice of a past-tense form as the neutral, dictionary-entry form would be difficult to motivate, since dictionaries of tensed languages ordinarily cite a non-past or a non-finite form. If, on the other hand, the perfect is understood as the form denoting a complete, bounded event the form which presents the action as a whole and therefore as identifiable its use as the citation form follows naturally. This is an aspectual rather than a temporal rationale, and it accords with the analysis of the perfective as presenting a situation “as a single unanalysable whole” (Comrie, 1976:16–18; see also Ryding, 2005:441).

The imperfect, correspondingly, is deployed wherever the action must be presented as internally structured: as ongoing, as habitual, as repeated, or as approaching its endpoint. The lamp that *yaṭlub* an *yanṭafi’a* is not located in present time; it is located inside the event, at a point before its completion. It is difficult to describe such a usage in purely temporal terms without loss.

The imperative, finally, has no place in a system of temporal reference at all, and its confinement to quoted material in the dictionary reflects this. It is a modal category that the lexicographer can exhibit but cannot define.

None of this settles a debate that will not be settled by a single source. It does, however, add a class of evidence that has been largely absent from it. A grammarian may describe the verb as he thinks it ought to be described; a lexicographer must decide, thousands of times over, which form to write first, and those decisions are harder to reinterpret.

The second question concerns the relation between the verbal forms and the rhetorical purpose of the work. *Asas al-balagha* is entitled “the foundation of eloquence”, yet it contains no theoretical chapter on rhetoric. Eloquence is taught in it obliquely, through the systematic exhibition of how literal senses give rise to figurative ones.

The material presented in section 3.3 shows that verbal form participates directly in this process. The imperfect is not a neutral container into which figurative meaning happens to be poured. Because it presents an action as unbounded and in progress, it is intrinsically suited to the personification of inanimate subjects, to the depiction of processes that have no observable agent, and to the expression of dispositions rather than acts. A lamp cannot perform a completed act of asking; it can only be represented as continuously about to. The figure and the form are not independent.

This observation connects the treatment of tense to the treatment of the derived stems, where a comparable relation obtains: the extended stems, carrying more semantic information than the bare stem, likewise generate a disproportionate share of the figurative senses. Taken together, the two findings suggest that in *Asas al-balagha* morphology is not the background against which meaning is described but one of the principal instruments through which meaning is generated.

The third question is historical. In the tradition inaugurated by al-Khalīl ibn Aḥmad the dictionary served primarily to record and preserve the lexical stock of the language, and the phonetic arrangement of *Kitab al-‘ayn* was designed to guarantee exhaustiveness rather than accessibility (al-Khalīl ibn Aḥmad, 1980; Rybalkin, 1990:13). Ibn Faris sought the semantic nucleus shared by all derivatives of a root. Al-Zamakhsharī pursued a third aim: to show how a word behaves in use. Baalbaki (2014:340–342) identifies this reorientation as the distinguishing feature of *Asas al-balagha*, and the evidence assembled here specifies where it is located. It is located in the microstructure in the decision to give the imperfect in every entry, in the selection of shawahid according to the form they exemplify, and in the confinement of the imperative to quoted speech.

It is worth adding that this orientation has a practical corollary noted by Belkin (1975:169): a dictionary organised around usage necessarily records derivational relationships, and *Asas al-balagha* does so more consistently than any Arabic dictionary before it. Three limitations qualify these conclusions. The figures in Table 4 rest on

sample readings and cannot support fine-grained comparison between chapters. The classification of shawahid by function involves interpretive judgement, particularly where a form admits both a processual and a habitual reading. And the sample, drawn from nine chapters, does not include the chapters with the smallest number of entries, where the compiler's practice may have been less regular. A complete digital edition of the work would allow all three limitations to be addressed.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the *madī–mudariʿ–amr* distribution in *Asas al-balagha* supports four conclusions.

The verbal entry in the work is built on a stable citation triad consisting of the perfect, the imperfect and one or more verbal nouns. The perfect stands in initial position without exception and carries the literal sense; the entry is anchored in the concrete meaning of the root even where the figurative meaning was by the compiler's time the more frequent.

The imperfect performs two entirely different tasks in two different positions. Within the citation triad it is a morphological index, disclosing the vocalic class of the verb, information that no rule supplies. Within the illustrative material it is a semantic instrument, marking processes as unfolding, events as imminent and future outcomes as certain.

The imperative is excluded from the definitional part of the entry and confined to quoted Qur'anic, prophetic and proverbial material, where it contributes illocutionary rather than lexical information. This confinement follows from the nature of the category: an imperative presupposes a speech situation that a dictionary entry cannot provide.

Finally, the distribution constitutes lexicographical evidence bearing on the tense–aspect question. The consistent use of the perfect as the unmarked citation form and of the imperfect for internally structured situations is more readily explained on an aspectual than on a temporal analysis of the opposition. Verification of this claim on a larger scale, and its extension to the derived stems and to the passive, remain tasks for further research.

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