

SEMANTIC CHANGES IN ARABIC MORPHOLOGY (SARF): THE MEANING LAYERS OF WORD FORMS

Abstract. *This article analyzes semantic changes of word forms and their layers of meaning within the framework of Arabic morphology (sarf). The study highlights the interrelation between word form and meaning on the basis of Arabic verbal patterns (wazn) and the system of verbal nouns (masdar), demonstrating how morphological changes influence semantic functions. In particular, it discusses the role of the different verb patterns (Forms II–X) in expressing causative, reflexive, reciprocal, and stative meanings, as well as their tendency to undergo semantic opacity or idiomatization over time. The study further examines the role of verbal nouns in forming abstract meanings and their importance in developing terminological systems. The article compares the classical Arabic grammatical tradition with modern linguistic approaches, arguing that word forms function not only as grammatical structures but also as deep semantic systems. The findings show that the Arabic morphological system is not a random collection of forms but a coherent and multilayered system of meaning production.*

Keywords: morphology (sarf), verbal noun (masdar), morphological system, apophony, classical Arabic linguistics.

INTRODUCTION

Arabic, the central representative of the Semitic language family, differs fundamentally from the Indo-European languages in its morphological system. Whereas in the Indo-European languages the processes of word-formation and inflection are carried out mainly by adding various affixes to a root, in Arabic the morphemes interpenetrate one another. This system is known in linguistics as the 'root-and-pattern' model (جذر and وزن). The root (jidhr) usually consists of three, and sometimes of four or five, consonants,

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and carries the most general and abstract lexical-semantic meaning belonging to a given word family. Because the root contains no vowels, however, it cannot be pronounced on its own. In order to convert the abstract meaning of the root into a real word with a definite grammatical and lexical form, it must be cast into a particular pattern, or wazn.

The pattern (الوزن) comprises both a structural skeleton, which fixes the arrangement of the consonants, and a system of vowels. The combination of these two interrelated morphemes – root and pattern – produces the real words of the language. For example, while the root ك-ت-ب {k-t-b} carries the meaning 'writing,' applying the verbal pattern كَتَبَ {kataba} yields the form 'he wrote,' whereas applying the noun-of-place pattern مَكْتَبَ {maktab} yields the noun 'office, writing desk.' In linguistics such a morphological change is termed 'apophony,' that is, the alternation of internal vowels (Kastner, 2020; Saiegh-Haddad, 2015).

The aim of the present article is to examine how, within the science of sarf, the form of a word systematically encodes its meaning, and how these form–meaning relations shift over time through processes of semantic extension, opacity, and idiomatization. The study draws on the classical Arabic grammatical tradition and compares it with the methods and findings of modern linguistics.

MAIN PART

The Classical Tradition of Arabic Morphology

The representatives of the Basra school gave priority to a strict analogical approach in linguistic analysis, while those of the Kufa school paid greater attention to attested speech samples (سَمَاع) and to preserving the distinctive variations of the living dialects (Sopian, 2026). Sibawayhi and his teachers, relying on an empirical approach, studied closely the speech of the Bedouin tribes and the recitations of the Holy Qur'an, and on this basis worked out the grammatical and morphological rules (Sopian, 2026; Carter, 2004). In the field of morphology (الصَّرْف), Sibawayhi emphasized that every word-pattern possesses a particular semantic basis and that there is a logical connection between the sound structure of a word and the meaning that issues from it.

In the classical period the science of sarf was not limited to the formation of word forms; it also served to explain the relations of meaning among words. Among the linguists of the fourth century AH, various scholarly debates arose concerning certain of Sibawayhi's views. One such debate concerned the relation between the verbs طَمَنَ

(ṭamana) and طَمَّنَ (ṭam'ana). Sibawayhi held that one of these two verbs derived from the other, and Abu 'Ali al-Farisi and al-Rummani supported this view. Later scholars, by contrast, held that each of these verbs has its own masdar, the one derived from اِطْمِنَّانَ (iṭmi'nan) and the other from the root طَمَنَ (ṭaman) (Al-Shammari, 2025).

As one of the fundamental principles of the science of sarf, Ibn Jinni advanced the maxim “زِيَادَةُ الْمَعْنَى تَدُلُّ عَلَى زِيَادَةِ الْمَعْنَى” (ziyadat al-mabna tadullu 'ala ziyadat al-ma'na), that is, ‘an increase in form indicates an increase in meaning.’ According to him, the expansion of a word’s form or the increase of its sounds leads to an intensification of its meaning (al-Suyuti, 1986; Al-Shammari, 2025). For example, while كَسَرَ (kasara, ‘he broke’) denotes a simple action, the form كَسَّرَ (kassara, ‘he smashed, shattered’) indicates that the action was performed more intensely and repeatedly. This principle plays an important role in producing new meanings and in coining terms in Arabic.

In modern linguistics the view of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign was given a scientific basis by Ferdinand de Saussure; yet this question had been discussed much earlier by Ibn Jinni. Ibn Jinni explained the link between word and meaning chiefly as the result of social convention, but he also stressed that this link is not entirely arbitrary. In his view, in certain words there is a natural affinity between sound and meaning, of which onomatopoeic words are an example. He therefore sought to show that there is a connection between the properties of the consonants and the phenomena they express.

In his theory of “الإِشْتِقَاقُ الْأَكْبَرُ” (al-ishtiqaq al-akbar, ‘the greater derivation’), Ibn Jinni maintained that words composed of the same three consonants and formed through the permutation of those sounds share a common nexus of meaning. In his view, such words, although they appear in different forms, are close to one another in meaning. For example, the various words formed on the consonants ج-ب-ر {j-b-r} – جَبَرَ (jabara), جَرَبَ (jaraba), بَجَرَ (bajara), بَرَجَ (baraja), رَجَبَ (rajaba), رَجَبَ (rabaja) – he explained as being linked by the common notions of strength, firmness, and union.

The Verbal Patterns and Their Semantic Functions

The basic Arabic verb forms – فَعَلَ (fa'ala), فَعِلَ (fa'ila), and فَعُلَ (fa'ula) – play an important role in shaping the meanings of words (Ryding, 2005). The change of vowels in these forms affects the meaning and function of the verb (Kastner, 2020; Drozdik, 2009). For instance, the form فَعَلَ (fa'ala) usually denotes an active action; the form فَعِلَ (fa'ila) expresses temporary emotional or mental states, as in فَهِمَ (fahima, ‘he understood’); and

the form *فَعْلٌ* (fa‘ula) denotes a permanent quality or state, as in *حَسُنَ* (ḥasuna, ‘he became beautiful’). The vowel system of these forms also depends on the properties of certain consonants within the verb.

Form II – *فَعَّلَ* (fa‘‘ala) – and Form IV – *أَفْعَلَ* (af‘ala) – usually express a causative meaning, but there is a difference in their use. Form II often denotes an intensification or repetition of the action, or a complete change in the object as a result of it; that is, the internal effect is stronger. Form IV, by contrast, expresses a simple and direct action that takes place through an external agent. For example, *كَسَّرَ* (kassara) means ‘he smashed to pieces,’ whereas *أَخْرَجَ* (akhraja) means ‘he took out’ (Ryding, 2005).

Form III – *فَاعَلَ* (fa‘ala) – denotes a two-sided action; that is, the action usually takes place between two persons and often begins at the initiative of one of them. For example, *كَاتَبَ* (kataba) means ‘they corresponded with one another’ (Ryding, 2005; Wright, 1967).

Form V – *تَفَعَّلَ* (tafa‘‘ala) – and Form VI – *تَفَاعَلَ* (tafa‘ala) – are, respectively, the reflexive or middle counterparts of Forms II and III. Form V usually denotes the gradual, step-by-step accomplishment of an action and the resulting attainment of a particular state. For example, *تَعَلَّمَ* (ta‘allama) means ‘he learned gradually and became knowledgeable.’ Form VI often expresses a mutual, reciprocal action, or sometimes a feigned state; for example, *تَمَارَضَ* (tamarada) means ‘he pretended to be ill.’

Form VII – *إِنْفَعَلَ* (infa‘ala) – and Form VIII – *إِفْتَعَلَ* (ifta‘ala) – often express reflexive and passive meanings. Form VII usually denotes that the action occurs of itself, that is, cases in which the agent is not specified; for example, *إِنْكَسَرَ الزُّجَاجُ* (inkasara al-zujaju, ‘the glass broke’) does not say who broke it, and the event is understood to have happened by itself. Form VIII often denotes an action carried out by the subject himself; for example, *إِسْتَمَعَ* (istama‘a) means ‘he listened attentively.’

Form IX – *إِفْعَلَ* (if‘alla) – denotes mainly a change of colour or of physical state; for example, *إِحْمَرَّ* (ihmarra, ‘it turned red’). Form X – *إِسْتَفْعَلَ* (istaf‘ala) – usually expresses the meanings of asking or demanding something, or of considering something to be in a certain state; for example, *إِسْتَغْفَرَ* (istaghfara) means ‘he asked for forgiveness.’

Sam Zukoff has explained that the {t} element conveying the reflexive meaning in Arabic verbs is prefixed in some patterns and infixes within the root in others. According to him, this difference is connected with the syntactic order of word structure and with

constraints of pronunciation. In Forms V, VI, and X, the {t} element stands in a higher position and is therefore prefixed to the beginning of the word (for example, تَكْتَبُ); in Form VIII, by contrast, it is placed inside the root (for example, اِكْتَبُ), because here the sound structure and ordering rules require such a placement (Zukoff, 2016). In a broader approach, the Arabic word-formation system is regarded as a single system operating on the basis of fixed templates, and the various word forms are explained through these templates (Booij, 2005).

Semantic Opacity and Lexicalization

In Arabic morphology the patterns yield, in theory, a precise meaning; but over time some words lose their original structural meaning and become independent lexical units. This phenomenon is known as semantic opacity or lexicalization, and it occurs especially in Form VIII verbs – اِفْتَعَلَ (ifta‘ala). The meaning of the derived patterns may expand over time and fuse several semantic functions, so that a new, independent lexical meaning arises. Moreover, if the basic Form I verb is little used or falls out of use, it becomes difficult to understand the original meaning of the higher patterns derived from it, and that meaning grows opaque. For this reason the full reconstruction of the historical meaning of ancient Arabic verbs is today a complex undertaking (Drozdik, 2009).

The fixed expressions and idioms of Arabic are formed precisely through such morpho-semantic opacity. Corpus analyses show that many fixed collocations do not fully obey ordinary grammatical rules and that their meaning does not follow from the sum of their parts. They are therefore among the most difficult units for language learners and translators (Abdou, 2012).

The Masdar (Verbal Noun)

The masdar (المَصْدَر, 'verbal noun') is, in the Arabic science of sarf, the nominal form of the verbal system that expresses an abstract action unconnected with tense. It is derived from the verbal root and expresses the action in a general and abstract sense, detached from the notions of past, present, or future; for this reason it is regarded as the 'form of the essence' of the verb. The masdars of Form I occur in various shapes and do not fully obey a single fixed template, yet a certain relation exists between their form and their meaning: for example, the pattern فَعْلَان (fa‘alan) denotes the speed or oscillation of an action (غَلَيَان, ghalayan, 'boiling'), while فُعَال (fu‘al) often expresses

sounds, pain, or states of illness (سُعَال, su‘al, ‘cough’). On the other hand, the masdars of Forms II–X have relatively stable and predictable patterns; for example, the Form II masdar usually takes the shape تَفْعِيل (taf‘il), and Form IV the shape إِفْعَال (if‘al) (Wright, 1967).

The semantic functions of masdars in the sentence and in the language are very wide. They express, first of all, the essence of the action detached from tense and from the agent, that is, they present the action as a general and abstract concept. Masdars also follow the verb in order to reinforce the meaning of the action and to emphasize its importance or certainty. In addition, they play an important role in expressing abstract concepts in Arabic and in enriching the terminological system (al-Jurjani, 1998). For example, masdars such as عَطَاء (‘aṭa’, ‘giving’), from the verb أَعْطَى (a‘ṭa, ‘he gave’), or طَاعَة (ṭa‘a, ‘obedience’), from the verb أَطَاعَ (aṭa‘a, ‘he obeyed’), express abstract meanings.

CONCLUSION

In sum, every form in the Arabic sarf system is not accidental but constitutes a complex system grounded in deep logical and semantic regularities (Ryding, 2005; Wright, 1967; al-Suyuti, 1986). The root-and-pattern model, the semantic distinctions among the verbal patterns, the principle that an increase in form signals an increase in meaning, the processes of semantic opacity and lexicalization, and the abstracting function of the masdar all show that Arabic morphology operates as a coherent and multilayered system of meaning production. The findings of this study confirm that the Arabic sarf system is not a random aggregate of forms but a structured mechanism in which form and meaning are systematically interrelated, and that the insights of the classical Arabic grammarians anticipate, in many respects, the concerns of modern morphological and semantic theory.

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