Arabic Imperfect Verbs in Translation: A Corpus Study of English Renderings

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Arabic Imperfect Verbs in Translation: A Corpus Study of English Renderings

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RÉSUMÉ
Cet article propose pour traduire en anglais des verbes arabes standard à l’inaccompli un modèle basé sur les références contextuelles. Il commence par une brève introduction sur le temps et l’aspect en anglais et en arabe. Ensuite, il présente le but et la technique d’étude. Il fournit une analyse des résultats d’étude en s’appuyant sur les diverses traductions des verbes arabes à l’inaccompli dans les traductions de deux romans de Naguib Mahfouz. L’étude compare les traductions aux textes originaux pour accentuer les différents réalisations en anglais de ces verbes arabes.

ABSTRACT
This paper proposes a model for translating Standard Arabic imperfect verbs into English based on their contextual references. It starts with a brief introduction to tense and aspect in English and Arabic. Then, it shows the study aim and technique. After that, it provides an analysis of the study results by discussing the various translations of Arabic imperfect verbs in the translations of two novels written by Naguib Mahfouz. The study compares the translations with the original texts to highlight the different English renderings of the Arabic imperfect verbs.

MOTS-CLÉS/KEYWORDS
corpus study, Arabic, imperfect verbs, contextual references

Introduction

One of the definitions of translation is that it is “the replacement of a representation of a text in one language by a representation of an equivalent text in a second language” (Hartmann & Stork 1972, in Bell 1991: 20). Therefore, translation must be a text-oriented process. While English has sixteen tense forms, Arabic has only two aspeccal forms. Therefore, each Arabic form can be rendered by several English tenses, which causes a problem for the translator. However, a good Arabic-English translator who fully understands the Arabic context in which a verb form occurs will have no difficulty in choosing the suitable tense for that form.

This paper attempts to show the contextual clues that can assist a translator to select the proper English equivalents of Arabic imperfect verbs. It starts with a brief background about tense and aspectual distinctions in English and Arabic. Then, it explains the study aim and technique. Section (3) presents an analysis of the results of the study by discussing the different translations of Arabic imperfect verbs in the English translations of two novels written by Naguib Mahfouz. For the phonemic symbols used to transcribe Arabic data, see Appendix (1) and for the abbreviations employed in the paper, see Appendix (2).

Meta LI, 1, 2006
1. **Tense/Aspect Distinctions in English and Arabic**

In Standard Arabic, the basic distinctions in the verb are fundamentally aspectual, not tense-related. However, they are often treated as tense distinctions for the sake of those who speak such a language as English. The earliest grammar book of the Arabic language, the /kitaab/ of Sibawayh states that there are three forms of the Arabic verb: one signaling the past time, the other indicating the present or future, while the third expresses commands or orders. The early Arab grammarians call the first form /?al-maaDi/ which merely means ‘the past’ and call the second form /?al-muDaari9/ which means ‘that which is similar (to the noun).’ Modern linguists now use the terms perfect(ive) and imperfect(ive) for the two forms, respectively. The two forms are distinguished morphologically as stated by Gadalla (2000: 76): “The perfect form is obtained by the attachment of suffixes only, whereas the imperfect form is obtained via the addition of prefixes, i.e., combinations of prefixes and suffixes.”

While some linguists, such as Eisele (1990), propose that the distinction between these two forms corresponds to a distinction between past and non-past, others assert that there is no one-to-one correspondence between aspect and tense. Therefore, Radwan (1975: 30) affirms that:

Aspect and tense should be treated as two independent categories. … Both terms are used to name two different features of verbal patterns. The term ‘Aspect’ covers the semantic ranges of completion versus non-completion and continuation versus non-continuation, whereas ‘Tense’ covers time reference.

Nida (1964: 198-9) indicates that while tense marks the relative time of events, aspect defines the nature of the action. He also asserts that “when translating from one language to another, it is necessary not only to adjust to quite a different system, but also to reckon with the special restrictions which may exist within such a system.” Needless to say that the tense/aspect systems differ from one language to another, particularly in languages which belong to different families such as English and Arabic. That is why Nida (1964: 199) affirms that “regardless of the formal or semantic differentiations made in the tense system, the important fact is that no two systems are in complete agreement.”

Shamaa (1978: 32-3) also explains the reason behind the difficulty encountered in translating Arabic tenses into English:

temporal contrasts in Arabic are less systematic, i.e., they are not clearly marked by verb-forms. … temporal reference in Arabic is expressed by means of verb forms in conjunction with time adverbials and other lexical items. It is, however, the context which … finally places the action or event in its true temporal and aspectual perspective. But since context may not provide the same clear-cut and easy determinations afforded by some European [e.g. English] tense systems, it is therefore a source of occasional ambiguity.

To stress the role of aspectual reference in Arabic English translation problems, Shamaa (1978: 36-7) states that:

It is the aspectual rather than the temporal reference of an Arabic verb, that can lead to difficulties in translation. To render the original meaning as faithfully as possible, it is therefore essential to determine whether a given action is completed or in progress, instantaneous or enduring, momentary or habitual, etc.
A translator must give primary attention to the context, as “context is the over-riding factor in all translation, and has primacy over any rule, theory or primary meaning” (Newmark 1995: 113). Therefore, the process of translating Arabic verb forms into English must be based on the context in order to convey the correct aspectual reference of each form. A good translator must fully understand the context of an Arabic tense form before attempting to render it into English. Understanding the context helps him to understand the meaning of each form, which is very important for translation. The importance of meaning in translation has been stressed by many scholars. For instance, Larson (1984: 6) affirms that: “To do effective translation one must discover the meaning of the source language and use receptor language forms which express this meaning in a natural way.”

2. Study Aim & Technique

This study aims at analyzing the translation of two literary Arabic texts, namely two novels written by Naguib Mahfouz to find out how Arabic imperfect verbs are rendered into English. The first novel is Al-Simman wa l-Kharif, translated by Roger Allen (1985) as Autumn Quail. The second is Afrah Al-Qubbah, translated by Olive E. Kenny (1984) as Wedding Song. These literary texts have been chosen because Mahfouz was the first Arab literary figure to win the Nobel Prize and his works are highly representative of Modern Standard Arabic.

The study compares the translations with the original texts to shed light on the various English translations of Arabic imperfect verbs. A corpus of 430 sentences was randomly selected from the two novels, 215 sentences from each novel. The sentences chosen from each novel are then sorted into six groups:

– 100 sentences represent the use of the bare imperfect form,
– 25 sentences represent the use of the construction ‘/sa-, sawfa/ + imperfect’,
– 25 sentences represent the use of a subjunctive particle before the imperfect,
– 25 sentences represent the use of ‘/lam/ + imperfect’,
– 25 sentences represent the use of ‘/kaana/ + imperfect’, and
– 15 sentences represent other imperfect constructions.

All the sentences are compared with their equivalents in the target texts and analyzed in terms of syntactic and semantic features. A frequency count of the different translations of the imperfect constructions was performed to explain the ways in which Arabic imperfect verbs can be rendered into English.

In this study, two methods are utilized for the comparison of the Arabic source texts with the English target texts. The first is the parallel texts technique mentioned in (Hartmann 1980: 37) and the other is the parallel reading technique adopted by Lindquist (1989: 23). The first method was employed at the beginning in the contrastive analysis of languages, and after that adapted to compare “translationally equivalent texts” (Hartmann 1980: 37). Lindquist (1989: 23) says about the second method: “the most natural way of analysing or evaluating a translation is to read the SL text in parallel with the TL text, noting anything that is remarkable, and then to list deficiencies (or felicities) of all kinds.”
3. Analysis of the Results

This section analyzes the findings of the study. The structures in which Arabic imperfect verbs occur are sorted into ten classes, the last two of which are not represented in the corpus. These classes are related to:

1. the bare imperfect form,
2. the construction /sa-, sawfa/ + imperfect,
3. a subjunctive particle + imperfect,
4. the construction /lam/ + imperfect,
5. the construction /kaana/ + imperfect,
6. the construction /qad/ + imperfect,
7. the construction /maa zaala/ + imperfect,
8. the construction /li-/ + imperfect,
9. a conditional particle + imperfect, and
10. the construction /la-/ + imperfect.

For each class, the various English translations are provided with a count of the examples representing them in the corpus and their percentages. Then, the contextual reference of each translation is studied and accounted for.

3.1. Translation of the Bare Imperfect Form

Table (1) indicates the frequency of occurrence of the different translations of the Arabic bare imperfect form in the corpus selected from 'Autumn Quail' and 'Wedding Song'. The term 'bare imperfect' here means the imperfect form of the verb when it is used alone, i.e., without any preceding words or phrases that might modify its aspectual function.

Table (1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English Translation</th>
<th>Autumn Quail</th>
<th>Wedding Song</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Present simple</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>33.5 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Present progressive</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>16 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Past simple</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>14.5 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. -ing participle</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>13.5 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Past progressive</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Future simple</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4.5 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Present conditional</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.5 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Present perfect</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. be going to + base verb</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.5 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Past perfect</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.5 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Present progressive conditional</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.5 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>100 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown in Table (1), one third of the translations of the Arabic bare imperfect form are in the English present simple. Examination of the corpus reveals that this
translation is used when the imperfect form expresses an action that happens regularly or habitually. This is the basic meaning of the Arabic bare imperfect form. Regular actions are exemplified by (1) from *Autumn Quail* and habitual actions are illustrated by (2) from *Wedding Song*:

(1) a. ?inna-naa na-stanšiq-u
    certainly-1pl impf.1pl-inhale-indic
    l-fasaad-a ma9a l-hawaa? (Simman 20)
    the-corruption-Acc with the-air
    b. We *inhale* corruption in the very air we breathe. (Autumn 24)

(2) a. ?al-mar?at-u laa ta-kuff-u
    the-woman-Nom not impf.3fsg-stop-indic
    9an il-?a laam (Afrah 40)
    from the-dreams
    b. The woman never *stops* dreaming. (Wedding 21)

The Arabic bare imperfect form can also be used to refer to all-time truths or scientific facts. In this case, it can be called the “gnomic” or “generic” form, defined by Trask (1993: 119) as “denoting the aspectual form expressing a general or universal truth.” It is also expressed in English by the present simple tense. All time-truths are illustrated by (3) from *Wedding Song* and scientific facts are exemplified by (4) which is not in the corpus:

(3) a. ?al-?afyuun-u ya-hdim-u
    the-opium-Nom impf.3msg-ruin-indic
    kull-a shay (Afrah 50)
    every-Acc thing
    b. Opium ruins everything. (Wedding 27)

(4) a. ta-tamaddad-u l-ma9aadin-u bi-t-tasxiin
    impf.3fsg-expand-indic the-metals-Nom on-the-heating
    b. Metals expand on heating.

The English present progressive has the second rate of occurrence in the translation of the Arabic imperfect in Table (1). The corpus shows that this translation is employed when the imperfect form denotes an activity that is occurring at or around the moment of speaking:

(5) a. ?al-jayš-u ya-tahadda l-malik (Simman 34)
    the-army-Nom impf.3msg-defy the-king
    b. The Army’s *defying* the King. (Autumn 36)

In Table (1) the third rank of occurrence in translating the Arabic bare imperfect form is occupied by the English past simple tense. The corpus shows that this tense is utilized when the imperfect form indicates an action that happened in the past, i.e., before the moment of speaking:

(6) a. 9ayn-aa-hu ta-9kis-aani
    eye-Nom.du-3msg impf.3fsg-give off-indic.du
    naZrat-an gariibah (Afrah 52)
    look-Acc queer
    b. His eyes *gave off* a queer look. (Wedding 29)
The fourth rank of occurrence in the translation of the Arabic imperfect form, as indicated in Table (1), is occupied by the English -ing participle. This happens when the Arabic imperfect verb refers to an action that is/was continuous at the time of another action:

(7) a. fa-hataf-a  wa-huwa ya-xuð-u
    so-yell.pf-3msg while-he impf.3msg-start-indic
    fi  l-jary  (Simman 6)
    at the-running

b. The man yelled, moving on.  (Autumn 12)

The fifth rank of occurrence in the translation of the Arabic bare imperfect form is filled with the English past progressive, as revealed by Table (1). This is resorted to when the imperfect form signifies continuous actions in the past. So, when the novelist, for example, uses the stream of consciousness to describe continuous past actions, the translator employs the past progressive to render Arabic imperfect verbs, as in:

(8) a. ?al-juu9-u ya-Truq-u
    the-hunger-Nom impf.3msg-knock-indic
    baab-a  l-bayt-i l-qadiim  (Afrah 61)
    door-Acc the-house-Gen the-old

b. Hunger was knocking at the old house’s door.  (Wedding 32)

Table (1) also reveals that the Arabic bare imperfect form can be translated into English by the future simple construction, which includes ‘will’ or ‘shall’ and the base form of the verb. This happens when the imperfect verb refers to a future action:

(9) a. θumma nu-saafir-u ?ila ?uurubbaa
    then impf.1pl-travel-indic to Europe
    ba9da  ðaalika mubaašarat-an  (Simman 32)
    after that directly-Acc

b. And afterwards we’ll travel directly to Europe.  (Autumn 35)

The Arabic bare imperfect is also translated into English future simple when it occurs in the result clause of a conditional sentence, as in:

(10) a. nu-?ayyid-u š-šayTaan-a ?iða
    impf.1pl-support-indic the-devil-Acc if
    ta-Tawwa9-a li-?inqaað-i s-safiinah
    volunteer.pf-3msg for-saving-Gen the-ship (Simman 21)

b. We’ll support the devil himself if he volunteers to save the ship.  (Autumn 25)

The English present conditional, i.e., ‘would/could/should + base verb’ is sometimes used to translate the Arabic bare imperfect form. The corpus shows that this translation is adopted when the imperfect form expresses a hypothetical meaning:

(11) a. limaaða ya-qtul-u tahiyyah  (Afrah 45)
    why impf.3msg-kill-indic Tahiya

b. Why would he kill Tahiya?  (Wedding 23)

According to Table (1), the Arabic imperfect form can sometimes be rendered into English by the present perfect tense. The corpus shows that this translation is employed when the imperfect form refers to actions that began in the past and still continue up to the present moment or still have their effects in the present:
(12) a. 
\[\text{?inna-ka } \text{tu-hmil-u } \text{Si}hhat-ak\]
certainly-2msg impf.2msg-neglect-indic health-2msg (Afrah 18)
b. You’ve neglected your health. (Wedding 8)

It has to be stated here that since the verb in (12a) expresses an action that started in the past and still continues to the present, it can also be translated by the English present perfect progressive:

(12) c. You have been neglecting your health.

In a few instances the English construction ‘be going to + base verb’ can be used in the translation of the Arabic imperfect form, as revealed by Table (1). This occurs when the imperfect form signifies an action that is going to happen in the near future:

(13) a. 
\[\text{hal } \text{yu-msii } \thetaa\alaa\at-u}\]
interrog impf.3msg-spend night three-Nom
\[\text{malaa\yiina } \text{min } \text{l-ba\sa\r-i } \text{bila}\]
millions of the-people-Gen without
\[\text{ma?waa } \text{(Simman 7)}\]
shelter
b. Are three million people going to spend the night without any shelter? (Autumn 13)

A few examples of the bare imperfect form in Autumn Quail are translated into English by the past perfect tense. This translation is adopted when the imperfect shows the completion of an action before another action or time in the past:

(14) a. \[\text{fa-hiyya } \text{tu-hibb-u-haa } \text{min } \text{qadiim}\]
and-she impf.3fsg-be fond of-indic-3fsg
\[\text{for } \text{long time } \text{(Simman 23)}\]
b. She had been fond of Isa’s mother for a long time. (Autumn 27)

The least frequent translation of the Arabic bare imperfect form is the English present progressive conditional, i.e., ‘would/ could/should + be + V + ing’. This is illustrated by one example in Autumn Quail that expresses continuous future in the past:

(15) a. 
\[\text{turaa } \text{kayfa } \text{yu-fakkir-u}\]
I wonder how impf.3msg-think-indic
\[\text{haa\da } \text{\^s-\sa\y}\]
this the-old man
\[\text{(Simman 10)}\]
b. I … wondered what this old man would be thinking. (Autumn 16)

3.2. Translation of /sa-/ + Imperfect

Table (2) reveals the frequency of occurrence of the various translations of the Arabic construction “/sa-, sawfa/ ‘will’ + imperfect” in the corpus selected from Autumn Quail and Wedding Song.
Table (2)

English Translations of the Arabic Construction
‘/sa-/ + Imperfect’ in Autumn Quail & Wedding Song

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English Translation</th>
<th>Autumn Quail</th>
<th>Wedding Song</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1- Future simple</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2- Present conditional</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3- be going to + base verb</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4- Future progressive</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5- Present progressive</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6- Present simple</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table (2) indicates that the most frequent English translation of the Arabic construction ‘/sa-, sawfa/ + imperfect’ is the future simple construction which includes ‘will’ or ‘shall’ and the base form of the verb. This translation is adopted when the construction ‘/sa-/ + imperfect’ signifies prediction or determination that something will happen in the future:

(16) a. sa-ta-tasarrab-u  l-?axbaar-u
    fut-impf.3sg-leak out-indic the-new-Nom
    bi-Tariiqat-in   ?aw bi-uxraa  (Afrah 8)
    in-way-Gen or    in-another

b. One way or another, the news will leak out.  (Wedding 2)

One fifth of the English translations of the Arabic construction ‘/sa-, sawfa/ + imperfect’ are in the present conditional, according to Table (2) above. This translation is utilized when that Arabic construction expresses a hypothetical action:

(17) a. haaða  T-Tuufaan-u sa-ya-qtali9-u
    this the-flood-Nom fut-impf.3msg-uproot-indic
    l-hukuumah    (Simman 7)
    the-government

b. This flood would uproot the government.  (Autumn 12)

The third rank of occurrence in the translation of the Arabic construction ‘/sa-, sawfa/ + imperfect’ is occupied by the English construction ‘be going to + base verb’. The corpus reveals that this translation is adopted when that Arabic construction denotes future of present intention or future of present cause (cf. Quirk et al. 1972: 88):

(18) a. ?al-mahruus-u  sa-ya-tazawwaj-u
    the-mama’s boy-Nom fut-impf.3msg-marry-indic
    min tahiyya   (Afrah 20)
    of Tahiya

b. Mama’s boy is going to marry Tahiya.  (Wedding 9)

According to Table (2), the English future progressive can be employed to translate the Arabic construction ‘/sa-, sawfa/ + imperfect’. This occurs when such a construction implies continuous future action:
(19) a. sa-nu-arrix-u bi-haaða
    fut-impf.1pl-date-indic with-this
    l-yawm-i Tawiil-an (Simman 10)
    the-day-Gen long time-Acc
    b. We’ll be dating things from today for a long time to come. (Autumn 16)

The English present progressive tense can also be used in the translation of the Arabic construction '/sa-, sawfa/ + imperfect', as indicated by Table (2). This occurs when that construction refers to future arrangements or planned events:

(20) a. sawfa na-tazawwaj-u fi l-aal (Afrah 22)
    will impf.1pl-marry-indic on the-spot
    b. We’re getting married right away. (Wedding 10)

The English present simple can also be employed in translating the Arabic construction '/sa-, sawfa/ + imperfect', according to Table (2). This happens when such a construction signifies a fixed time-table or programmed event:

(21) a. sa-ya-bda?-u t-tadriib-u
    fut-impf.3msg-begin-indic the-rehearsal-Nom
    gad-an (Afrah 25)
    tomorrow-Acc
    b. Rehearsals begin tomorrow. (Wedding 12)

At the end of this section it can be noted that in very few cases, the verb /ya-kuun/ ‘be.impf’ is inserted between the particle /sa-/ or /sawfa/ and the imperfect form, to imply a continuous future action. In such cases, the English future progressive tense is utilized, as in the following example which is not in the corpus:

(22) a. mataa sa-ta-kuun-u tu-Daakir
    when fut-impf.2msg-be-indic impf.2msg-study
    b. When will you be studying?

3.3. Translation of Subjunctive Particle + Imperfect

Table (3) shows the frequency of occurrence of the various translations of the Arabic construction ‘subjunctive particle + imperfect’ in the corpus selected from ‘Autumn Quail’ and ‘Wedding Song’. Subjunctive particles are /?an/ ‘to’, /lan/ ‘not’, /li-, kay, likay/ ‘in order that’ and /hattaa/ ‘until’. They are employed before the imperfect form to convey the subjunctive mood which the Arab grammarians call /haalatu n-naSh/.

01.Meta 51-1.indd 59 3/22/06 1:30:56 PM
Table (3)

English Translations of the Arabic Construction ‘Subjunctive Particle + Imperfect’ in Autumn Quail & Wedding Song

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English Translation</th>
<th>Autumn Quail</th>
<th>Wedding Song</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1- Infinitive</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2- Neg. future simple</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3- Present conditional</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4- Present simple</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5- Neg. present progressive</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6- Past simple</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7- Past conditional</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As indicated by Table (3), nearly one third of the translations of the construction ‘subjunctive particle + imperfect’ are in English infinitive, i.e., ‘to + base verb’. The corpus shows that this translation is adopted for the construction ‘/?an/ ‘to + imperfect’, as in:

(23) a. ?a-lam ya-kun-Ø il-?ajmal-u
interrog-not impf.3msg-be-juss the-best-Nom
?an /a-tazwwaj-a
(Simman 17)
to impf.1sg-marry-subj
b. Wouldn’t it be better … to get married? (Autumn 21)

The English infinitive is also used in the translation of the Arabic construction “/li-/ ‘in order to’ + imperfect.” In Arabic grammar books, the subjunctive prefix /li-/ ‘in order to’ is called /laamu t-ta9liil/ ‘the /i-/ of justification’ because it is used “to indicate the purpose for which, or the reason why, a thing is done” (Wright 1967: 291):

(24) a. sa-?a-bðul-u maa ?a-staTii9-u
fut-impf.1sg-do-indic what impf.1sg-be able to-indic
li-?u-waffir-a la-kumaa
to-impf.1sg-give-subj for-2du
hayaat-an kariimah (Afrah 83)
life-Acc decent
b. I’ll do all I can to give you a decent life. (Wedding 45)

The English negative future simple, i.e., ‘will not + base verb’ is adopted in the translation of the Arabic construction “/lan/ ‘not’ + imperfect.” This signifies the negation of a future action, as in:

(25) a. lan ya-ta9aaTaf-a
not impf.3msg-sympathize-subj
I-jumhuur-u ma9a-hu (Afrah 25)
the-public-Nom with-3msg
b. The public won’t like him. (Wedding 12)

Table (3) shows that a subjunctive particle followed by the imperfect can be translated into English by the present conditional. The corpus reveals that this is
particularly true when the subjunctive particle is translated by ‘in order that’. This applies to the /li-/ of justification, /kay/, /likay/ and /hattaa/.

(26) a. θumma  rafa9-a-hu  muqaTTib-an
then lift.pf-3msg-3msg frowning-Acc
li-ya-taTalla9-a  ?ilay-h
so that-impf.3msg-look-subj at-3msg  
(Simman 10)

b. Then, frowning, he lifted it again so that he could look at the Pasha.  
(Autumn 16)

The Arabic construction ‘/hattaa/ ‘until’ + imperfect’ is rendered into English by the present simple, as in:

(27) a. ?intaZir  h attaa na-9rif-a  ?ayna
wait until impf.1pl-know-subj where
r-ra?s-u  wa-?ayna  l-qadam  
(Simman 12)

b. Wait till we find out where the head and feet are.  
(Autumn 18)

The English negative present progressive is employed in the translation of the Arabic construction ‘/lan/ ‘not’ + imperfect’ to negate the arrangement of future actions, as in:

(28) a. lan  ta-?Dur-a  ta?iyyat-u ?ila hunaa  
not impf.3fsg-come-subj Tahiya-Nom to here  
(Simman 12)

b. Tahiya isn’t coming here.  
(Wedding 8)

The least frequent translations of an Arabic imperfect verb preceded by a subjunctive particle are the English past simple and past conditional. The former is used for past actions and the latter for hypothetical actions in result clauses with past reference, as in the following examples, respectively:

(29) a. ya-gTus-u  ?a?yaanan  h attaa
impf.3msg-flounder-indic sometimes until
yu-Zann-a  bi-hi  l-garaq  
(Simman 16)

b. Floundering at times to such an extent that people gave him up for lost.  
(Autumn 20-21)

(30) a. fa-man  kaan-a  la-hu  qariib-un
and-anyone be.pf-3msg with-3msg relative-Nom
ka-9ali  bik  sulaymaan  wajab-a
like-Ali Bey Sulaiman  should.pf-3msg
9alay-hi  ?an  yu-wa?iq-a
on-3msg to impf.5msg-strengthen-subj
9alaqat-a-hu  bi-hi  
relation-Acc-3msg with-3msg  
(Simman 18)

b. Anyone with a relative like Ali Bey Sulaiman should have kept in as close contact as possible.  
(Autumn 22)
3.4. Translation of /lam/ + Imperfect

Table (4) illustrates the frequency of occurrence of the various translations of the Arabic construction “/lam/ ‘not’ + imperfect” in the corpus selected from ‘Autumn Quail’ and ‘Wedding Song’.

**Table (4)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English Translation</th>
<th>Autumn Quail</th>
<th>Wedding Song</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1- Neg. past simple</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2- Neg. present perfect</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3- Neg. present simple</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4- Neg. past perfect</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5- Neg. present conditional</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6- Neg. past perfect prog.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7- Neg. present progressive</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As revealed by Table (4), nearly half of the translations of the Arabic construction ‘/lam/ + imperfect’ are in the English negative past simple. This is due to the fact that this construction is utilized to negate the Arabic perfect form and usually signifies the negation of past actions.

(31) a. lam ya-truk-Ø ?ab-ii šay?-an (*Afrah 33*)
   not impf.3msg-leave-juss father-1sg thing-Acc
   b. My father left me nothing. (*Wedding 16*)

According to Table (4), one fifth of the translations of the Arabic construction ‘/lam/ + imperfect’ are in the English negative present perfect. This translation is employed when that Arabic construction negates the occurrence of a past action until the moment of speaking. That is why it is sometimes followed by such words and phrases like /ba9d/ ‘yet’ or /hatta l-?aan/ ‘so far’.

(32) a. lam ?a-staTi9-Ø il-?ittiSaal-a
    not impf.1sg-be able to-juss the-contact-Acc
    bi-wazir-ii hatta l-?aan (*Simman 11*)
    with-minister-1sg till now
    b. I haven’t been able to contact my minister so far. (*Autumn 17*)

The third rank of occurrence in the English translations of the Arabic imperfect preceded by /lam/ is occupied by the negative present simple, as indicated in Table (4). The corpus shows that this translation is employed when the construction ‘/lam/ + imperfect’ negates the occurrence of actions at or around the moment of speaking:

(33) a. dulla-nii 9ala rukn-in waahid-in lam
    show-1sg to sector-Gen one-Gen not
    ya-nDaØ bi-l-fasaad (*Simman 21*)
    impf.3msg-ooze-juss with-the-corruption
    b. Just show me a single sector that doesn’t ooze with corruption. (*Autumn 25*)
Table (4) also shows that the Arabic construction '/lam/ + imperfect' can be rendered into English by the negative past perfect. This occurs when that Arabic construction negates the completion of past actions:

(34) a. ?al-9ašarat-u lam
  the-ten-Nom not
  ta-Sna9-Ø min-nii šay?-an
  impf.3fsg-turn into-juss of-1sg thing-Acc
  radii?-an (Simman 30)
  awful-Acc
b. Ten years hadn’t turned me into something awful. (Autumn 33)

In a few cases, the English negative present conditional ‘could + not + base verb’ can be utilized to translate the Arabic construction '/lam/ + imperfect'. This is used as a variant of the negative past simple:

(35) a. wa-laakinna-hu lam ya-jid-Ø ?a
  and-but-3msg not impf-find-juss one-Acc
  fii ?intiZaar-i-h (Simnan 5)
  on waiting-Gen-3msg
b. He could see no one waiting for him. (Autumn 11)

The least frequent translations of the Arabic construction '/lam/ + imperfect' are the English negative past perfect progressive and negative present progressive. The former is used to negate the duration of completed past actions and the latter to negate the duration of present actions, as in the following examples, respectively:

(36) a. wa-lam ya-ntaZir-Ø-hu ?a
  and-not impf.3msg-wait-juss-3msg one
  h ta  miZallah (Simman 153)
  under umbrella
b. No one had been waiting for him. (Autumn 11)

(37) a. ?a-lam ta-hDur-Ø tahiyyah (Afrah 19)
  interrog-not impf.3fsg-come-juss Tahiya
b. Isn’t Tahiya coming? (Wedding 8)

3.5. Translation of /kaana/ + Imperfect

Table (5) indicates the frequency of occurrence of the various translations of the Arabic construction “/kaana/ ‘be.pf’ + imperfect” in the corpus selected from ‘Autumn Quail’ and ‘Wedding Song’. According to this table, nearly one third of the English translations of the Arabic construction '/kaana/ + imperfect' are in the past progressive. This is due to the fact that the basic function of this construction is to stress the continuity of past actions:

(38) a. kaan-at riiri ta-šažil-u ta-ilis-u
  be.pf-3fsg Riri impf.3fsg-sit-indic
  tahta miZallah (Simman 153)
  under umbrella
b. Riri was sitting under an umbrella. (Autumn 139)
Table (5)

English Translations of the Arabic Construction

'/kaana/ + Imperfect' in Autumn Quail & Wedding Song

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English Translation</th>
<th>Autumn Quail</th>
<th>Wedding Song</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>1- Past progressive</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2- Past simple</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
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<td>3- used to + base verb</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4- Past perfect</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5- Present perfect</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6- Present conditional</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7- Past perfect prog.</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8- Present simple</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9- Past conditional</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The second rank of occurrence in the English translation of the Arabic construction '/kaana/ + imperfect' is filled by the past simple. This is resorted to in the case of English nonprogressive verbs:

(39) a. kaan-a yu-hibb-u l-marhuum-a
    be.pf-3msg impf.3msg-love-indic the-late-Acc
    waalid-a-k (Simman 17)
    father-Acc-2msg
    b. He loved your late father. (Autumn 21)

When the Arabic imperfect form of the verb is preceded by /kaana/, it can indicate a reiterative action in the past. In that case, it is rendered into English by the construction 'used to + base verb':

(40) a. kun-tu ?a-shar-u l-layl (Afrah 137)
    be.pf-1sg impf.1sg-stay up-indic the-night
    b. I used to stay up late at night. (Wedding 74)

Equally frequent in the English translation of '/kaana/ + imperfect' is the past perfect. This is when that Arabic construction expresses the completion of a past action:

(41) a. wa-qadiim-an kaan-a yu-maaris-u
    and-old-Acc be.pf.-3msg impf.3msg-live-indic
    hayaat-a l-?a9yaan (Simman 112)
    life-Acc the-notables
    b. In the old days, he had lived like a notable. (Autumn 105)

Table (5) also shows that the construction '/kaana/ + imperfect' can be translated into English by the present perfect, when it denotes a relationship between the past and the present:

(42) a. kun-tu ?a-miil-u ?ila ?umm-i
    be.pf-1sg impf.1sg-like-indic for Umm-Gen
    haani (Afrah 108)
    Hany
    b. I have always had a liking for Umm Hany. (Wedding 58)
The English present conditional can also be employed in the translation of the Arabic construction '/kaana/ + imperfect', as indicated by Table (5). This expresses hypothetical meanings:

(43) a. lam ya-kun yu-waafiq-u
not impf.3msg-be.juss impf.3msg-agree-indic
9ala #ayaat-i-naa (Afrah 45)
to life-Gen-1pl
b. Abbas just couldn’t accept our way of life. (Wedding 23)

The least frequent translations of the Arabic construction '/kaana/ + imperfect' are the past perfect progressive, the present simple and the past conditional. The past perfect progressive is used when that Arabic construction expresses the duration of completed past actions. The present simple is employed when the translator makes past events run at the present time. The past conditional is utilized when '/kaana/ + imperfect' signifies a hypothetical past action. The three translations are represented respectively in the following examples:

(44) a. kun-naa na-siir-u fi šaari9-i
be.pf-1pl impf.1pl-walk-indic along street-Gen
jalaal-in fi n-niSf-i T-Taani
Galal-Gen in the-half-Gen the-second
mina l-layl (Afrah 16)
of the night
b. We’d been walking after midnight along Shari’ Galal. (Wedding 7)

(45) a. kun-tu ?a-taraddad-u 9ala l-masra- i
be.pf-1sg impf.1sg-visit-indic to the-theater-Gen
bayna l-hiin-i wa-l-hiin (Afrah 80)
between the-time-Gen and-the-time
b. I make frequent visits to the theater. (Wedding 42)

(46) a. man kaan-a ya-taxayyal-u tilka
who be.pf-3msg impf.3msg-imagine-indic that
l-ayaat-a maSiir-an li-haliimah (Afrah 121)
the-life-Acc lot-Acc of-Halima
b. Who could have imagined that this kind of life would become the lot of … Halima? (Wedding 65)

3.6. Translation of Other Imperfect Constructions

Five imperfect constructions remain to be discussed in this section, the last two of which are not represented in the corpus:

1. /qad/ + imperfect,
2. imperative /li-/ + imperfect,
3. /maa zaala/ + imperfect,
4. conditional particle + imperfect, and
5. emphatic /la-/ + imperfect.

The corpus shows that the examples representing the first construction, “/qad/ ‘may’ + imperfect,” are mostly transferred into English by ‘may/might/would + base verb’. This is due to the fact that such a construction usually suggests the possibility, probability or uncertainty of present or future actions:
The English construction ‘may/might + have + past participle’ can be utilized in the translation of Arabic ‘/qad/ + imperfect’. This is resorted to when the reference is to past possibility:

(47) a. qad na-jid-u 9amal-an fii šarikah (Simman 40)
   impf.1pl-find-indic job-Acc in company
   b. We might find a job in a company. (Autumn 42)

The construction ‘/qad/ + imperfect’ can also be rendered into English by ‘it is possible that’ or ‘maybe’ followed by past simple or present perfect, if it expresses present possibility:

(48) a. qad ta-kuun-u faatirat-a
   may impf.3fsg-be-indic phlegmatic-Acc
   T-Tab9 the-nature
   b. She might have been a little phlegmatic by nature. (Autumn 50)

The corpus also indicates that the Arabic construction ‘/qad/ + imperfect’ can be transferred into English by ‘it is possible that’ or ‘maybe’ followed by present simple or present perfect, if it expresses present possibility:

(49) a. qad ya-mra h-u
   may impf.3msg-be in high spirits-indic
   jawaasiis-u l-ʔinjiįliz (Simman 14)
   spies-Nom the-English
   b. It is possible that English spies are in high spirits. (Autumn 18)

The construction ‘/qad/ + imperfect’ can also be rendered into English by ‘it is possible that’ or ‘maybe’ followed by past simple, if that Arabic construction expresses past possibility:

(50) a. qad ya-kuun-u li-safar-i-him
   may impf.3msg-be-indic to-journey-Gen-3mpl
   9alaqqat-un bi-l-ʔarakah (Simman 35)
   relation-Nom with-the-movement
   b. Maybe their journey abroad has got something to do with the movement. (Autumn 37)

The second Arabic construction, formed by the imperative prefix /li-/ ‘let’ and the imperfect, is mostly rendered into English by ‘let + base verb’. This is because such an Arabic construction basically expresses a command, a direct or an indirect request.

(52) a. fa-l-ya-bqa fii makaan-i-h (Afrāh 107)
   so-let-impf.3msg-stay.juss in place-Gen-3msg
   b. Let him stay where he is. (Wedding 57)

The construction ‘/li-/ + imperfect’ can also be translated by the English ‘hope + will + base verb’ when the reference is to hopes or wishes:
(53) a. fa-l-ta-kun-Ø sa9aadat-u-naa
so-let-impf.3sg-be-juss happiness-Nom-1pl
haqiqiyyat-an ?ayDan (Simman 28)
real-Acc too
b. I hope our happiness will be real too. (Autumn 31)

When the construction '/li-/ + imperfect' implies a hypothetical meaning, suggestion or supposition, it is transferred into English by the present conditional:

(54) a. li-ya-kun-Ø il-bayt-u l-qadiim-u
let-impf.3msg-be-juss the-house-Nom the-old-Nom
huwa l-makaan (Afrah 169)
it the-place
b. The setting would actually be the old house. (Wedding 93)

In very few cases, the construction '/li-/ + imperfect' can express a prayer or a curse. Here it is rendered into English by '(May) + base verb'. The word 'may' is placed between brackets to show that it is optional in this position.

(55) a. li-ya-hfaZ-Ø illaah-u zawjat-ii (Afrah 164)
let-impf.3msg-protect-juss God-Nom wife-1sg
b. May God protect my wife! (Wedding 90)

Thirdly, the construction “/maa zaala/ ‘be still’ + imperfect” is usually transferred into English by ‘still + present simple/present progressive’. This is because its basic function is to indicate the present duration of an action that started in the past. The present simple is used for non-progressive English verbs:

(56) a. maa zaala ya-hqid-u 9ala 9abbas (Afrah 43)
be still.3msg impf.3msg-resent-indic on Abbas
b. He still resents Abbas. (Wedding 23)

(57) a. maa zaala 9umar-u ya-9iiš-u
be still-3msg Omar-Nom impf.3msg-live-indic
fi-l-?iskandariyyah in-Alexandria
b. Omar is still living in Alexandria.

Sometimes the Arabic construction ‘/maa zaala + imperfect’ refers to the continuity of a past action. In this case, it is transferred into English by ‘still + past simple’. This usually occurs, for instance, when the novelist uses the stream of consciousness to make a character remember what happened in the past:

(58) a. wa-lam ya-zal-Ø Sawt-u
and-not impf.3msg-be still shout-Nom
š-šabaab-i l-fidaa?iyy-i
the-youth-Gen the-commando-Gen
ya-xriq-u ?uDun-a-h (Simman 5)
impf.3msg-split-indic ear-Acc-3msg
b. He still heard the ear-splitting shout of the young commando. (Autumn 11)

The imperfect form can refer to the future when it follows the particle /?in/ ‘if’ and other particles which introduce conditional or hypothetical clauses (Kharma
1983: 56). Conditional particles are like /?in/ 'if', /man/ 'whoever’, /mahmaa/ ‘whatever’, /kullamaa/ ‘whenever’, /?aynamaa/ ‘wherever’ and /kayfamaa/ ‘however’. The imperfect in the condition clause is translated by the present simple form, whereas that in the result clause should be translated by the future simple:

(59) a. ?in ta-h?tarim-Ø in-naas-a
   if impf.2msg-respect-juss the-people-Acc
   ya-h?tarim-uu-k
   impf-respect-3mpl-2msg
b. If you respect people, they will respect you.

Finally, the imperfect form can imply a future action when it is used after the emphatic prefix /laamu t-tawkiid/ , literally ’the /la-/ of emphasis’. This is transferred into English by ‘will certainly + base verb’:

(60) a. la-?u-krim-a-nna
    emph-impf.1sg-be generous to-subj-emph
    jiiraan-ii wa-?aSdiqaa?-ii
    neighbors-1sg and-friends-1sg
b. I will certainly be generous to my neighbors and friends.

4. Conclusion

This study illustrates that understanding the contextual references of each Arabic imperfect construction is essential to translating it into English. Following are the constructions in which Arabic imperfect verbs can be placed, their English translation equivalents and the contextual reference of each translation:

First, the Arabic bare imperfect form can have the following English translations in order of frequency:

1- present simple for regular and habitual actions, all-time truths and scientific facts
2- present progressive for continuous present actions
3- past simple for past actions
4- -ing participle for actions continuous at the time of others
5- past progressive for continuous past actions
6- future simple for future actions and hypothetical result clauses
7- present conditional for hypothetical actions
8- present perfect for past actions related to the present
9- be going to + base verb for near future actions
10- past perfect for completed past actions
11- present progressive conditional for continuous future in the past

Second, the Arabic construction ‘/sa-, sawfa/ + imperfect’ can have the following English translations in order of their frequency:

1- future simple for prediction or determination of future actions
2- present conditional for hypothetical actions
3- be going to + base verb for future actions with present intention
4- future progressive for continuous future actions
5- present progressive for future arrangements or planned events
6- present simple for time-table or programmed events
Third, the Arabic construction 'subjunctive particle + imperfect' can have the following English translations:

1. infinitive in the case of '/?an/ or /li-/ + imperfect'
2. negative future simple in the case of '/lan/ + imperfect'
3. present conditional in the case of /li-, kay, likay, hatta/ followed by the imperfect
4. present simple in the case of '/hatta/ + imperfect'.
5. past simple for past actions
6. past conditional for hypothetical result clauses with past reference.

Fourth, the Arabic construction '/lam/ + imperfect' can be rendered into English by the following translations in order of frequency:

1. negative past simple for the negation of past actions
2. negative present perfect for the negation of the occurrence of past actions to the present moment
3. negative present simple for the negation of present actions
4. negative past perfect for the negation of the completion of past actions
5. negative present conditional for the negation of past actions
6. negative past perfect progressive for the negation of the duration of completed past actions
7. negative present progressive for the negation of the duration of present actions

Fifth, the Arabic construction '/kaana/ + imperfect' can have the following English translations in order of frequency:

1. past progressive for continuous past actions
2. past simple for non-continuous past actions
3. used to + base verb for reiterative past actions
4. past perfect for completed past actions
5. present perfect for past actions that are related to the present
6. present conditional for hypothetical actions
7. past perfect progressive for the duration of completed past actions

Sixth, the construction '/qad/ + imperfect' can be transferred into English by the following constructions:

1. may/might/would + base verb for present or future possibility
2. may/might + have + past participle for past possibility
3. it is possible that / maybe + present simple/present perfect for present possibility
4. it is possible that / maybe + past simple for past possibility

Seventh, the Arabic construction '/li-/ + imperfect' can be rendered into English by one of the following forms:

1. let + base verb for commands and requests
2. hope + will + base verb for hopes and wishes
3. present conditional for hypothetical actions
4. (May) + base verb for prayers and curses

Eighth, the construction '/maa zaala/ + imperfect' can be translated into English by the following structures:

1. still + present simple/present progressive to show the present duration of a past action
2. still + past simple to show the continuity of past actions
Ninth, the construction ‘conditional particle + imperfect’ is transferred into English by the present simple. The imperfect verb in the result clause is transferred by the future simple.

Finally, the construction ‘/la-/ + imperfect’ is rendered into English by ‘will certainly + base verb’. This expresses emphatic future actions.

**Appendix 1**

### A. Consonants of Standard Arabic

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<thead>
<tr>
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### B. Vowels of Standard Arabic

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<tr>
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**Appendix 2**

### List of Symbols & Abbreviations

- sg: singular
- du: dual
- pl: plural
- pf: perfective
- impf: imperfective
- comp: complementizer
- emph: emphatic
- 1: First Person
- 2: Second Person
- 3: Third Person
- //: phonemic transcription
- -: morpheme boundary
- Nom: Nominative
- Acc: Accusative
- Gen: Genitive
- indic: indicative
- subj: subjunctive
- juss: jussive
- pass: passive
- fut: future
- interrog: interrogative
- m: masculine
- f: feminine
- Ø: zero morpheme

- **Simman** Al-Simman wa l-Kharif (Mahfouz 1962)
- **Autumn** Autumn Quail (Allen 1985)
- **Afrak** Afrak Al-Qubah (Mahfouz 1981)
- **Wedding** Wedding Song (Kenny 1984)
REFERENCES


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