A Semantic Study of ‘Verbs to be’ in Modern Standard English & ‘Defective Verbs’ in Modern Standard Arabic

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Abstract

This study focuses on analyzing and contrasting the meanings of "verbs to be" in Modern Standard English (MSE) and Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) to reveal the features of similarity and difference between them. It is meant to point out the difficulty of "existence" in the two languages context.

It is concluded that both MSE and MSA have fourteen aspects of similarity as well as eleven aspects of difference. In relation to the similarities, the two languages have the existence meaning in continuous active forms, orders, destiny, and wish of another person when 'be' is an auxiliary verb in English. In addition, Arabic is similar to English in some features such as existence implied in using 'kāna'; existence denoting physical and mental conditions; age, size, price, colour; the existence implied in the predicate +adv., prep. particles in nominal sentences; existence in possession; the meaning of "become"; "get"; "go, come"; and the meaning of "ṣāra".

As for the differences, in this respect, Arabic has no auxiliary or ordinary ‘defective verbs’, tenses structure like English, passive forms of 'kana wa akhawatuha', intention, possibility, supposition, and mutual arrangement. On the other hand, English has no divisions of general existence, special existence, continuous existence, and the one implied in the predicate in nominal sentences. The number of 'verbs to be' are eight only compared to thirteen in Arabic; no extra verbs follow the main 'defective verbs', the existence is very clear by the 'verbs to be' compared with the implied existence of Arabic predicate in nominal sentences, and finally English 'verbs to be' are not formed by adding a prefix like the Arabic 'verbs to be' mā+zala = māẓala, mā+ dāma = mādāma, and etc.

The present research includes an introduction, definitions of basic terms and three sections. Introduction is about the theoretical perspective regarding the theory of contrastive analysis (CA) on which the research is based. Section one presents the meanings of 'verbs to be' in English and ‘defective verbs = kana wa akhawatuha’ in Arabic. In Section Two we have contrastive analysis of both MSE and MSA concerning their similarities and differences, Section Three is conclusions and recommendations.

Introduction

Generally speaking, English language has been rapidly developing; everyday one meets a new word or usage. Therefore, people should keep in touch with such developments to be well-informed about language. One of these developments is what is called "Contrastive Analysis" which means to compare two or more than two languages in order to reveal the aspects of similarity and difference.

This study is one of its applications. It is about the meaning of "verbs to be" in MSE and MSA. In English, these verbs have eight forms, i.e., is, are, am, was, were, be, being, and been. These verbs are of two categories: an auxiliary verb and an ordinary verb.

In Arabic, "verbs to be" are called 'kāna wa akhawatuha' or ‘defective verbs’. They are thirteen verbs: kāna, asbaha, zalla, amsā, bāna, sara, leisā, adha, mādāma, mābāriha, māfati'a, māẓala, and mānīfakka.

In this paper, the researcher tries to solve or decrease the degree of difficulty of ambiguity faced by EFL learners in understanding ‘verbs to be’ and ‘defective verbs’
The Arabic consonant and vowel sounds in the present study

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<th>Sounds</th>
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This phonological system was adopted from “Encyclopedia of Islam” Vol. 1. E.J. Brill, Leiden, (1967).
Section One

A "Verbs to be" in MSE:

According to Eckersley and Eckersley (1960: 192) the verb to be is a verb of incomplete predication, i.e., it requires something else (called the complement) to complete its meaning such as: (Your dinner is ready), (His father was a famous man). In this part, 'verbs to be' in MSE, there are two kinds of 'verbs to be' that we should take into account, i.e., 'be' as an auxiliary verb and 'be' as an ordinary verb.

1. 'Be' as an auxiliary verb:

1.1 Form:

Principal parts: be, was, been
Gerund / present participle: being
Present tense: is, are, am
Past tense: was, were
(Thomson and Martinet, 1986: 116)

1.2 Use:

1.2.1 'Be' is used to form tenses: (Ibid).
   a. in continuous active forms:
      - He is working hard.
      - He will be studying hard.
   b. in all passive forms:
      - He was killed.

1.2.2 be+inf construction to show:
   a. Orders meaning must or ought:
      - He is to stay here till we return.
   b. Intention:
      - They are to be married in May.
   c. Possibility
      - The book was not to be sold. (= could not be).
   d. Supposition or unreal condition:
      - If it were to rain (= if it rained) tomorrow.
   e. Destiny (chiefly past tense):
      - He was never to see his wife and family again.
   f. Mutual arrangement:
      - We are to be married in May.
   g. Wish of another person:
      - At what time am I (= do you want me) to be there?
   h. Purpose:
      - The telegram was to say that she had been delayed. (Hornby, 1974: 68; Swan, 1980: 97; Al-Wahab, 1990: 115).

1.2.3 be about to + inf., to show the immediate futures, (Thomson and Martinet, 1986: 118):
   - They are about to start. (= they are on the point of starting)

1.2.4 Passive infinitive of find, see, and congratulate in structure with 'be': (Swan, 1988: 97).
   - The watch is nowhere to be found.

2. 'Be' as an ordinary verb:

2.1 Form: as in (1.1)

2.2 Use:

2.2.1 Existence: be + adj/n./prep. (Hornby, 1974: 68; Praninskas, 1975: 7; Azar, 1998: 17)
a- denoting a person or a thing or to give information about them:
- Tom is a doctor. (be + n.)
- The horse is in the garden. (be + prep.)
- The house is large. (be + adj.)
b- with a preposition or adverbial particle, indicating place:
- The cat is on the table. (prep. particle)
- The ball is upstairs. (adv. particle)
c- Physical or mental condition:
- I am cold. (physical)
- She is unhappy. (mental)
d- indicating size, weight, age, colour, and prices:
- The building is large.
- How old are you? I am 30.
e- referring to possession, actual or intended when 'be' is used with a noun or a preposition:
- The money's not yours, it's John's. (noun).
- The watch is for you. (preposition)
f- be, when a linking verb, means 'become':
- He wants to be a doctor.
g- It can also mean 'go, come' (when paying a visit):
- I've been to see my aunt.
h- It means 'get': (Low, 1986: 55).
- You can be there in five minutes.

B: "Verbs to be" in MSA:
In Arabic, the sense of 'verbs to be' can be found in what is called 'kana wa akhawatuha' as well as it is shown in nominal sentences, especially when it is genitive (= prepositional phrase) or adverb (Ibn-Akeel, 1980: 201). There are nearly thirteen particles of 'kana wa akhawatuha' such as: kāna, za'lla, bāta, adhā, ʿaṣbaḥa, ṣāra, leisa, māzāla, mābāriha, mafatī'a, manfakka, and mādāma. Arabic grammarians call them (af'alunnakisa = incomplete verbs) since their meanings remain imperfect in the sentences until we mention their predicate and such verbs can refer to existence (Al-Makhzoumi, 1964: 176, 180 and Al-Sammarra'i, 2003:190). In addition, they abrogate the rule of subject and predicate, i.e., they change the final /u/ (the nominal case) of their predicate into accusative (i.e. pronouncing the final consonant /a/) (Cowan, 1980: 349, 968). Following Al-Makhzumi, the researcher will divide 'kāna wa akhawatūhu' concerning existence into three groups excluding 'ṣāra' and 'leisa' because they have no sense of existence as Al-Makhzumi (1964:180) thinks.

1. General Existence
1.1 kāna
a- It means “existence of a thing in the past”:(Hassan, 1974: 549)
- Ashrākat ashshamsu fakāna annūr.
The sun rose and was the light.*
- The sun rose and there was the light. (The researcher's translation).
b- It can mean ‘to stay without stopping, i.e., continuity without a certain time’: (ibid)
- Wa kāna allahu ghafūran rahīma.
Allah was forgiving and merciful*.
c- It can also mean 'to become': (Al-Sammarra?i, 203:197).

The water froze and was ice*.
When water froze it would become ice. (The researcher's translation)

It is worth mentioning that there are some other verbs that follow 'k?na' like 'istakkarra' (=to reside) 'hasala' (=to happen), 'wajada' (=to find), and 'hadatha' (=to happen), (Al-Makhzumi, 1964: 180).

2. Special Existence:

2.1 ?ash?a

a- It mainly indicates 'the existence in the morning': (ibid)

The staying up person became tired*.

The staying up person became tired in the morning. (The researcher’s translation)

b- It also means 'sara' (= to become): (Hassan, 1974: 554)

The pupil became doctor*.
The student became a doctor. (The researcher's translation)

2.2 ?ama

a- It denotes 'the existence in the evening': (Al-Jarim and Amin, 1966: 63)

?ama al?arisu.
The guard entered the evening*.
The guard has was awake at night. (The researcher's translation)

b- It also means 'sara' (= to become): (Hassan, 1974: 555 and Al-Turfi, 1986: 145)

?ama annaharu baridan.
The day evening cold*.
The evening became cold. (The researcher’s translation)

2.3 ?a?ha

a- It refers to 'the existence in the time of forenoon': (Hassan, 1974: 555 and Al-Jarim and Amin, 1966: 63)

?atha ann?imu.
The sleeper entered the forenoon*.
He was sleeping until forenoon. (The researcher's translation)

2.4 za?la

a- It refers to 'the existence in the day' (Al-Makhzumi, 1964: 180)

za?la aljawwu mu'tadilan.
The weather stayed moderate*.
The weather was moderate. (The researcher's translation)

b- It means 'sara': (Al-Sammarra?i, 2003: 215)

If the man lost his beloved he became unhappy*. If the man lost his beloved he became unhappy. (The researcher's translation)

c- It indicates ‘continuity’: (Hassan, 1974:554)
The hot weather stays*. The warmth continued. (The researcher's translation)

2.5 bāta
a- It denotes 'the existence at night': (Al-Makhzumi, 1964:180)

Bāta alkā'idu sāhiran .
The leader slept staying up*.
The leader stayed up at night. (The researcher's translation)

(Al-Makhzumi, 1964: 180) says that the Arab grammarians neglected to mention another verb 'ghada' which indicates the same existence as the verbs in special existence.

3. Continuous Existence: This sense is represented by the following:

3.1 māzāla

Māzāla aljawwou bāridan.
The weather still cold*.
The weather is still cold. (The researcher's translation)

3.2 manfakka

Manfakka ala'milu nashītan.
The worker still active*.
The worker is still active. (The researcher's translation)

3.3 mabāriha

Mabāriha aljundiyyu shuja'an .
The soldier still courageous*.
The soldier is still courageous. (The researcher's translation)

3.4 māfati'a

Māfati'a arrabi'u jamīlan.
The spring still beautiful*.
The spring is still beautiful. (The researcher's translation)

3.5 madāma

Yufidu ala?klu madāma almar'u mā?ia'n .
Food useful as long as the person hungry*.
As long as the person is hungry, food is useful. (The researcher's translation)

Some other particles in this respect should be added such as 'istammarra', 'mawujida', 'mastakkarra', and 'mahasala', since they denote the continuous existence (Al-Makhzumi, 1964: 180).

4. The Existence Implied in the Predicate of the Nominal Sentences:

It is one form of genitive (=either prepositional particle or adverbial particle) to have the meaning of 'ka?in' (Ibn Akeel,1980: 210 and Al-Turfi, 1986: 144).

4.1 Genitive (prepositional particle):

Aliyyun fiddār.
Section Two

2. Contrastive Analysis of 'Verbs to be' in MSE & 'Defective verbs' in MSA:

2.1 Similarities:

(a) Be as an auxiliary verb:

1- Be, when used in continuous active forms, is similar to the Arabic 'defective verbs' in continuous existence such as māzāla, manfakka, mābariḥa, māfati'a, istamarra, mādama, māwujida, and mahasala:
  - He is working hard. (English)
  - māzāla aljawwu baridan. (Arabic = The weather is still cold)

2- When English 'be' is used to give orders in 'be + inf.', the Arabic has a similar sense by the imperative case of 'kāna', ẓalla', 'āśbaḥa', 'amsa', and 'bāta':
  - He is to stay here till we return. (English)
  - Kun ḥākim an fi m u'alajati al? umūrī. (Arabic = You should be wise when dealing with matters), (The researcher's translation)

3- 'Destiny' by 'be+inf.' is found in both English and Arabic 'kāna' only:
  - He was never to see his wife and family again. (English)
  - kāna muḥaddaran lahu an la yara zawjatahu marratān ukhra. (Arabic = He was never to see his wife again), (The researcher's translation)

4- 'Wish' of another person by 'be+inf'. can also be shown by both English and Arabic 'kāna':
  - At what time am I to be there. (English)
  - Arju an takūna ma'anā. (Arabic = I hope you are to be with us.)

5- With regard to the English construction 'be about to +inf.' denoting immediate future, Arabic has the same reference by three ways. The first is by the predicate (prep. or adv. Particles) in nominal sentences. The second is by the general existence. Finally, by the special existence:
  - They are about to start. (English)
  - kāna ala washaki al-fawzi. (Arabic = He was about to win.)
  - asbaha ala washaki annihaya. (Arabic = He was about to finish.)

6- Both English & Arabic have the same meaning of the verb 'to find' when using 'be' to mean existence:
  - She is nowhere to be found (English)
  - Innahu gheiru mawjūdin filbeit. (Arabic = He is not found in the house.)

b- Be as an ordinary verb:

1- When English 'verbs to be' mean 'existence', the Arabic existence is implied in the verbs used in sentences:
  - Tom is a doctor. (English)
  - Ashrakati ashshamsu fakāna annuru. (Arabic = When the sun rose the light would spread.)
2- Existence denoting physical or mental conditions appears in both English & Arabic 'kāna wa akhawātuha' (i.e. kāna, ašbaḥa, ẓalla, amsā, bāta, adhā, māzalā, manfakka, mābariḥa, māfatiḥa, and mādāma):

- I am cold.
- She is unhappy.
- Ašbaḥa attalibu mujiddan. (Arabic = The student became hard-working.)

3- The sense of existence can be shown in English and Arabic when dealing with 'age', 'size', 'price', and 'colour', i.e., either by the 'defective verbs' or by the nominal sentences (subject & predicate):

- Ali is ten years old.
- The wall is white.
- The house is large.
- How much is the banana? It is 5.
- Māzāla umruhu šaghiran. (Arabic = He is still little.)

4- Another similarity is shared by the two languages by the construction of 'be + adverbial/prepositional particle', i.e., it is implied in the predicate of the nominal sentences to mean 'kāʾin' (= existence) of Arabic.

- The cat is in the garden. (be + prep. Particle). (English)
- The man is upstairs. (be + adv. Particle). (English)
- Aliyyun fiddārī. (Arabic = Ali is in the house.)
- Aҋḻaʔiru fawḵa ashahjaraṯi. (Arabic = The bird is on the tree.)

5- When referring to 'possession' in English, the same reference is found in Arabic 'kāna wa akhawātuha':

- The picture is for you. (English)
- Yakūnu almalu laka ʾabīlta ashsharta. (Arabic = If you accept the condition the money will be for you.)

6- Both English 'verbs to be' and Arabic 'kāna wa akhawātuha' can mean 'get'. The meaning of Arabic existence is shown by both 'kāna' & 'ašbaḥa':

- You can get there in five minutes. (English)
- Yumkinukaʔan takūnna hunaaka khīlāla saʿatin wahidatin. (Arabic = You can get there in one hour.)

7- The meaning of 'verbs to be' found in (go & come) is common in English and Arabic 'kāna', ašbaḥa, amsā, and bāta':

- I've been to Baghdad. (English ⇒ to pay a visit)
- Kuntu fi babila ʾamṣi. (Arabic = I went to Babylon yesterday.)
- ?amṣeitu inda ṣadikī albarīhata. (Arabic = I visited my friend yesterday evening.)

8- Arabic 'verbs to be' (kāna, ašbaḥa, amsā, adhā, and ẓalla), when meaning 'sara' They are similar to the English 'be' when meaning 'to become':

- He wants to be a doctor. (English)
- Adha aljawwwu barīdan. (Arabic = The weather became cold.)

3.2 Differences

Unlike similarities, differences will be listed or discussed without referring to whether 'be' is an auxiliary or an ordinary verb, i.e., in general:
1- There is no auxiliary or ordinary verb in Arabic, but in English.
2- Unlike English, Arabic 'kāna wa akhawātuha' (=defective verbs) do not form tenses.
3- No passive forms in Arabic 'defective verbs' while English does have.
4- It is only in English that 'be + inf.' construction can refer to intention, possibility, supposition (unreal condition), mutual arrangement, and purpose, but no existence for them in Arabic 'defective verbs'.
5- No divisions of general existence, special existence, continuous existence, and the existence implied in the predicate of the nominal sentences in English, but only in Arabic.

6- There are eight 'verbs to be' in English, whereas Arabic has thirteen 'defective verbs'.

7- Arabic has some verbs following the verbs 'kana' in function, like 'istakkarra', 'hasala', 'wajada', and 'hadatha', but English has no verbs following the 'verbs to be'.

8- All the eight forms of 'verbs to be' in English have the same function when coming in one context, but Arabic ones have different meanings in the same context, for example:
   - He is to be a doctor.
   - I am to be a doctor.
   - They are to be doctors.

   While in Arabic, we have 'zalla' the existence in the day, 'asbaha' = in the morning, 'amsa' = in the evening, 'adha' = in the time of afternoon, and 'bata' = at night.

9- Arabic 'verbs to be' (käna, mäzala, mäbariha, mäfati'a, manfakka, and mädämä) have the meaning of continuity without referring to certain time, but English 'verbs to be' should take (-ing) form or should be in the progressive to show continuity. For example:
   - He is being threatened. /He is writing a letter now. (English)
   - Mazala alwaktu mubakkiran lil'amali. (= It is too early to work.)

10- The existence of Arabic predicate in nominal sentences is implicit, but it is explicit in English:
    - He is a student. (English) ⇒ explicit
    - Aliyyun fiddari . (Arabic) ⇒ implied.

11- We have some 'defective verbs' in Arabic which are formed by adding a prefix (ma), for example, in 'continuous existence' verbs: mä-zala, mä-bariha, ma-dama, ma-fati'a, and ma-infakka, while such a prefix is not used in English 'verbs to be'.

Section Three

3.1 Conclusions

It has been concluded that both MSE & MSA are similar in fourteen aspects and different in eleven ones in terms of 'verbs to be'.

In relation to similarities (when 'be' is an auxiliary verb) MSE & MSA share the following features: continuous existence, existence in (orders, destiny, wish, immediate future), the verb 'to find' implying existence; (when 'be' is an ordinary verb) the two languages are similar in: existence between 'verbs to be' and 'kana', existence denoting physical and mental condition, existence showing 'age', 'size', 'price', and 'colour', existence shown by (be + adv./prep. particle) in English and that is implied in the predicate of the nominal sentences in Arabic, existence in possession, existence by 'be' meaning 'to get', 'go & come', and 'to become'.

As for differences, the two languages are different in: the number of 'verbs to be' compared to 'defective verbs', the existence of auxiliary or ordinary verbs in Arabic, the tenses, the passive forms, some constructions which are not found in MSA and found in MSE and vice versa, the using of (-ing) form, the using of prefixes, and whether there are some verbs follow 'verbs to be' or 'defective verbs' in the two languages.
3.2 Recommendations

Although, so far, some aspects of similarity and difference between MSE & MSA have been revealed through this study, it still seems that there is some ambiguity concerning the area of 'verbs to be'. Therefore, the researcher hopes to recommend the following points which are of great value in the field of methodology, translation, syllabus design, teacher training, etc.:
1- English teachers can successfully present the information to the students by making use of similarities between the native language and the second language.
2- Those who are in charge of teaching English, must guide students to understand 'verbs to be' through contexts, and differentiate between 'be' as an auxiliary verb and an ordinary verb.
3- 'Verbs to be' should be studied individually according to languages (MSE & MSA), to avoid the interference.
4- It is the job of English teachers to distinguish between 'be' as a 'linking verb' and a 'verb to be', by giving more practice on such a point.
5- Teachers of English should pay more attention to English than Arabic concerning 'verbs to be' in their teaching since the Arabic lacks such verbs.

Bibliography

**English**


**Arabic:**
The Holy Qur’an.