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Semantic Shifts in the Syntactic Structures of Contemporary Arabic: An Analytical Grammatical Study

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Abstract Although the morphosyntactic system of Arabic has remained remarkably stable since its codification by the early grammarians, the meanings and functions carried by many of its syntactic structures have shifted considerably in contemporary written Arabic. This study offers an analytical grammatical account of these semantic shifts in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). It combines the meaning-centered insights of the Arabic grammatical tradition (Sībawayh's linking of well-formedness to meaning, al-Jurjānī's theory of naẓm, and Tammām Ḥassān's distinction between functional and lexical meaning) with grammaticalization theory, construction grammar, and research on contact-induced change. Using a qualitative, descriptive-analytical, and diachronic-comparative method, the study examines representative constructions from journalistic, administrative, and academic registers against their classical baseline. Seven domains are analyzed: the periphrastic passive with tamma and agentive phrases such as min qibal; light-verb constructions; word order and the neutralization of subject fronting; spatial and temporal expressions that have become abstract connectives; emphatic and modal particles; negative and privative formations; and calqued patterns such as the particle ka- in the sense of "as" and coordinated construct phrases. The analysis shows that these changes follow recurrent pathways (semantic bleaching, metaphorical extension, subjectification, pragmatic neutralization, morphologization, and pattern replication through translation) and that they are motivated by the need for explicitness in unvocalized writing, the institutionalization of modern registers, and sustained contact with European languages. The study argues that the changes redistribute, rather than erode, the expressive resources of Arabic, and it draws implications for grammar teaching, translation, lexicography, and corpus-based description.

Index Terms Modern Standard Arabic, semantic change, grammaticalization, syntactic structures, language contact, construction grammar, Arabic grammatical tradition

I. Introduction

Arabic presents the linguist with a striking paradox of continuity and change. The grammatical system codified in the eighth century, above all in the Kitāb of Sībawayh, still serves as the normative reference for Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), and a contemporary newspaper editorial can be parsed with largely the same categories of case, mood, agreement, and sentence type that the classical grammarians applied to pre-Islamic poetry and the Qur'ān [1], [2]. This formal continuity, however, conceals a considerable amount of functional change. Since the cultural revival of the nineteenth century (the Nahḍa), written Arabic has been reshaped by journalism, by large-scale translation from English and French, by the language of modern administration and law, by mass education, and more recently by broadcast and digital media [3]–[5]. The most visible result of these pressures is lexical: thousands of new terms have been coined, borrowed, or calqued, and Arabic language academies have devoted much of their energy to regulating them. Less visible, and far less systematically studied, are the developments that affect the meanings and communicative functions of syntactic structures themselves.

The phenomenon examined in this study can be stated simply. In numerous cases, an inherited grammatical form survives intact in contemporary Arabic while the meaning or function it carries has changed; in other cases, a new periphrastic construction has come to express a meaning that classical Arabic expressed through synthetic morphology, through word order, or not at all. The verb tamma "to be completed," for example, now functions in journalistic prose as an auxiliary that converts a verbal noun into a passive-like clause; the compound preposition min qibal "from the side of" has become a marker of the agent in passive sentences, a role for which the classical language had no standard device; and the particle ka-, whose classical meaning is likeness, is now widely used to express a role or capacity, as in "he worked as a director." Changes of this kind are semantic shifts of syntactic structures in the strict sense: what changes is the meaning of a grammatical construction, understood, in the terms of construction grammar, as a conventional pairing of form and meaning [6], [7].

Such developments have usually been evaluated within one of two opposing frameworks. The first is the prescriptive

tradition of manuals and dictionaries of "common errors," of which al-'Adnānī's [8] dictionary is a well-known representative; works in this genre typically measure contemporary usage against the classical corpus and classify innovations as deviations to be corrected. Later reference works, such as 'Umar's [9] dictionary of linguistic correctness, adopt a more graded position, distinguishing between usages that are eloquent, acceptable, or rejected and recording the decisions of the Arabic language academies, thereby implicitly recognizing that the norm itself evolves. The second framework is that of modern linguistics, which treats language change not as decay but as a regular, motivated, and largely unidirectional process [10]–[12]. The sociolinguistic setting of Arabic adds a further layer of complexity. MSA coexists with the spoken dialects in a diglossic relationship [13], real-life formal usage is distributed along a continuum of levels rather than confined to a single standard [14], [15], and the norms of written Arabic are themselves being renegotiated in contemporary media and publishing [16], [17].

Many of the constructions discussed in this study are described in the major reference grammars of contemporary Arabic [1], [4], [18]. In these works, however, they tend to appear as isolated features of "modern style," as lists of foreign calques, or as exceptions to classical rules, rather than as instances of identifiable types of semantic change. Three closely related questions therefore motivate the present investigation: what kind of semantic change each innovation represents, which mechanisms brought it about, and how it relates to the theory of syntactic meaning developed in the Arabic grammatical tradition itself. The tradition is particularly relevant here, because its most sophisticated strand, 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī's theory of naẓm (the meaningful arrangement of words), holds that meaning arises from the grammatical relations among words, so that every choice of order, definiteness, emphasis, or ellipsis is a choice of meaning [19], [20]. Yet this theory has rarely been brought into dialogue with modern grammaticalization research. The problem addressed by the present study is the absence of an integrated analytical account that describes these shifts, classifies them, and explains them in a way that does justice to both traditions.

The study seeks to answer the following questions:

RQ1. Which syntactic structures of contemporary written Arabic display the clearest semantic shifts relative to their classical meanings and functions?

RQ2. Which mechanisms of change (semantic bleaching, metaphorical extension, subjectification, reanalysis, or contact-induced replication) account for each shift?

RQ3. Which cognitive, communicative, sociocultural, and translational factors motivate these shifts, and what is their overall effect on the expressive system of Arabic?

RQ4. How can the meaning-oriented theory of the Arabic grammatical tradition and modern theories of language change be combined to explain them?

Corresponding to these questions, the study aims to identify a representative set of constructions that have undergone semantic change; to describe, for each construction, its classical function and its contemporary function; to classify the resulting shifts into a coherent typology; to explain them by reference to established mechanisms and motivations of change; and to evaluate their consequences for the grammar of MSA. The significance of the study is both theoretical and applied. Theoretically, it contributes Arabic evidence to general research on grammaticalization and constructional change, a field whose empirical basis has been dominated by European languages, and it shows that classical Arabic syntactic theory can illuminate, rather than merely resist, contemporary developments. In applied terms, an explicit account of these shifts is directly useful to teachers of Arabic grammar, who must reconcile textbook rules with the language students actually read; to translators, whose choices are a major channel of change; to lexicographers, who need to record grammatical as well as lexical meanings; and to developers of Arabic language technology, whose systems are trained on contemporary rather than classical data.

The study is confined to contemporary written Arabic, that is, the standard language of journalism, administration, law, and academic writing as it has developed since the middle of the twentieth century. Spoken dialects are referred to only where they illuminate a development in the written standard. Five concepts are central to the analysis. A semantic shift is any change in the meaning or function conventionally associated with a linguistic form. A syntactic structure (Arabic tarkīb) is a recurrent arrangement of words or grammatical morphemes that carries a conventional meaning, ranging from a two-word phrase to a clause pattern. Grammaticalization is the process by which lexical items and constructions come, in particular contexts, to serve grammatical functions, and by which grammatical items develop further grammatical functions [11]. Semantic bleaching refers to the loss of concrete lexical content that typically accompanies grammaticalization, and pattern replication refers to the reproduction, in one language, of a structural or semantic pattern modeled on another language without borrowing its actual forms [21].

II. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The analysis draws on four bodies of theory: the meaning-oriented syntactic theory of the Arabic grammatical tradition, grammaticalization theory and the study of semantic change, construction grammar, and research on language contact. These are reviewed in turn, followed by a survey of previous work on change in Modern Standard Arabic.

A. Meaning and Structure in the Arabic Grammatical Tradition

It is sometimes assumed that the Arabic grammatical tradition was concerned only with form, and in particular with case endings. A closer reading shows the opposite. Sībawayh evaluated utterances simultaneously in terms of grammatical well-formedness and semantic coherence, distinguishing, in a well-known chapter of the Kitāb, between utterances that are well formed and good, well formed but false, well formed but ugly, absurd, and absurd and false [22]. Grammaticality, in other

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words, was never fully separated from meaning, a point that historians of the tradition have emphasized in reconstructing its theoretical foundations [2], [23].

The most explicit theory of syntactic meaning in the tradition is ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī’s theory of naẓm. Al-Jurjānī argued that eloquence does not reside in words considered in isolation but in the way they are arranged according to the “meanings of grammar” (ma‘ānī al-naḥw), that is, the relations of predication, modification, complementation, and so on that hold among them [19], [20]. On this view, every grammatical choice is a semantic choice. Fronting the subject before the verb, as in Zaydun qāma “Zayd stood up,” is not equivalent to the verb-initial qāma Zaydun: the fronted order may signal specification (it was Zayd, and not someone else) or a strengthening of the predication. Likewise, the emphatic particle inna is not decorative; its use is tied to the state of the addressee, so that a statement addressed to someone with no prior opinion, to someone who hesitates, and to someone who denies will differ in the number of emphatic devices it contains. The later rhetorical tradition systematized these observations into a grading of declarative statements by the addressee’s presumed state of mind. For the present study, the significance of al-Jurjānī’s theory is methodological: it provides a native, historically grounded baseline against which contemporary shifts in the meaning of word order and emphasis can be measured.

In the twentieth century, Tammām Ḥassān [24] reformulated the tradition’s insights in structuralist terms. He distinguished the functional meaning carried by grammatical forms and relations from lexical meaning and from the contextual meaning supplied by the situation of utterance, and he argued that grammatical meaning is recovered through the convergence of multiple formal clues (taḍāfur al-qarā’in): case marking, word order, agreement, morphological pattern, linking elements, function words, and intonation. Case endings are thus one clue among several. This principle has direct consequences for contemporary Arabic. In a written language that is normally unvocalized and in formal speech where case endings are often left unrealized [15], the remaining clues, especially word order and analytic function words, must carry a heavier functional load, and this shift in the distribution of clues is itself a driver of semantic change.

B. Grammaticalization and Semantic Change

Grammaticalization research studies how lexical items and constructions come to serve grammatical functions and how grammatical items acquire further grammatical functions [11], [25]. Several of its findings are directly relevant to Arabic. First, grammaticalization is accompanied by desemanticization or semantic bleaching: as a form generalizes to more contexts, it loses concrete lexical content and retains only a schematic meaning, as when a verb of motion becomes a marker of future tense [26]. Second, the semantic paths followed in grammaticalization are not random. Heine et al. [27] showed that grammatical concepts are recruited from concrete source domains through a chain of metaphorical transfers, typically from objects and space to time and from time to more abstract logical and qualitative relations; the cross-linguistic regularity of such paths is documented in the World Lexicon of Grammaticalization [28]. Third, frequency is a powerful engine of change: repeated use leads to entrenchment, phonetic and semantic reduction, and the gradual independence of a construction from its original meaning [29], [30]. Fourth, grammaticalization is overwhelmingly, though not absolutely, unidirectional, proceeding from more lexical to more grammatical meanings [31].

Research on semantic change has added two further mechanisms. Subjectification is the process by which meanings come to encode the speaker’s perspective, attitude, or epistemic stance, as when English may and must developed epistemic meanings from earlier deontic and dynamic ones [12], [32]. Pragmatic strengthening, or the conventionalization of invited inferences, explains how a connective can acquire a new meaning from the inferences it regularly licenses; the classic example is English while, whose temporal meaning (“at the time that”) gave rise to concessive and contrastive meanings because simultaneity frequently invites an inference of contrast [33]. Both mechanisms are relevant to the Arabic connectives and particles examined below.

C. Construction Grammar and Constructional Change

Construction grammar treats grammatical knowledge as an inventory of constructions, that is, conventional pairings of form and meaning that range from morphemes to abstract clause patterns [6]. This perspective is well suited to the present topic because many Arabic innovations are not changes in a single word but in multiword patterns whose meaning is not the sum of their parts, such as qāma bi- + verbal noun or tamma + verbal noun. Traugott and Trousdale [7] distinguish two types of diachronic development: constructional changes, which affect only one dimension of an existing construction (its form or its meaning), and constructionalization, the creation of a new form–meaning pairing. The distinction is useful for Arabic, where some innovations extend existing constructions while others create genuinely new ones. Construction-based analysis has already been applied to contemporary Arabic news language; Mansouri [34], for instance, analyzed the stative constructions of Arabic news reports within a construction grammar framework and identified an emergent idiomatic pattern built on yatimmu, whose function varies between progressive and perfect readings depending on its syntactic environment. A related concept from systemic functional linguistics is grammatical metaphor, the realization of processes as nouns, which is characteristic of written, institutional, and scientific registers and which explains why nominalized constructions spread with the expansion of such registers [35].

D. Language Contact and Pattern Replication

Contact between languages affects grammar as well as vocabulary. Weinreich [36] laid the foundations for the study of interference, and later work showed that the most common grammatical outcome of contact is not the borrowing of gram-

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matical morphemes but the replication of patterns: speakers use native material to reproduce a structure or a polysemy found in the model language [37], [38]. Matras and Sakel [21] formalized the distinction between matter replication (the borrowing of forms) and pattern replication (the copying of the organization, distribution, and mapping of meanings onto native forms). Heine and Kuteva [37] further showed that contact frequently triggers grammaticalization in the replica language along the same paths found in internal change, which they call contact-induced grammaticalization, and that one of its typical forms is polysemy copying, in which a native word acquires the full range of meanings of its counterpart in the model language. Contact can also act as a catalyst, accelerating a change for which the replica language already offered a structural basis; Lucas and Lash [39] made this argument for the development of negation in Egyptian Arabic under Coptic influence.

In the case of MSA, the principal channel of contact has been translation, especially the translation of news, administrative, legal, and technical texts. Translation studies of the Arabic–English pair show that translators follow systematic norms in mapping the resources of one language onto the other, for example in their treatment of lexical repetition [40] and in their rendering of the Arabic imperfect by a range of English tense and aspect forms [41]. When such mappings are applied in the opposite direction, from English or French into Arabic, they create a steady pressure toward one-to-one equivalents, which favors the replication of European patterns.

E. Previous Studies of Change in Modern Standard Arabic

The modernization of written Arabic has been described from several angles. Stetkevych [5] documented the lexical and stylistic developments of the modern literary language, including the creation of new terms by derivation, compounding, and calquing. Blau [3] compared the revival of MSA with that of Modern Hebrew and emphasized the role of European models in both. The reference grammars of Badawi et al. [18], Ryding [1], and Holes [4] describe contemporary usage directly and record many of the constructions analyzed below, while Versteegh [2] situates the emergence of MSA within the history of the language. Studies of actual usage have shown that real-life formal Arabic diverges in systematic ways from the textbook norm [15] and that the contemporary standard displays considerable uniformity across regions combined with significant functional shifts in some grammatical words; Van Mol [42], in a corpus study of radio news from Algeria, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, found exactly such a shift in the use of complementary particles relative to their classical descriptions. Other studies have addressed particular domains: the relation of subject, theme, and agent in MSA [43], sentence types and word-order patterns in medieval and modern written Arabic [44], the semantic contrast between the internal and periphrastic passives in journalistic Arabic [45], and the discourse of Arabic advertising [46]. Sociolinguistic research has, in turn, shown how the boundaries between the standard and the dialects are negotiated in practice [47]–[49] and how the norms of written Arabic are being renegotiated in contemporary media [16], [17].

Work on the spoken dialects provides a valuable comparative background, because it shows that Arabic varieties follow classic grammaticalization pathways. Persson [50] analyzed the b-prefix in Gulf Arabic dialects as a marker of future, intent, and irrealis; Jarad [51] traced the evolution of the b-future marker in Syrian Arabic; and Holes [52] documented the uneven retention and loss of the internal passive in the dialects of northern Oman and eastern Arabia. These studies demonstrate that the mechanisms of change discussed above are operative in Arabic. What remains largely missing is a comparable treatment of the written standard, in which change is often obscured by the persistence of classical forms. The present study addresses this gap by focusing not on the appearance of new forms but on the redistribution of meaning among old and new structures.

III. Method

A. Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative design that combines descriptive-analytical and diachronic-comparative procedures. It is descriptive in that it characterizes the form, distribution, and meaning of each construction in contemporary written Arabic; analytical in that it classifies each development according to the type and mechanism of change it represents; and diachronic-comparative in that it measures every contemporary usage against a classical baseline. The design is appropriate to the research questions, which concern the nature and explanation of change rather than its frequency, and it follows the practice of grammaticalization studies that reconstruct pathways of change by comparing earlier and later functions of the same forms [11], [12].

B. Sources of Data

Two types of sources were used. The contemporary data consist of representative constructions from three registers of written Arabic: journalistic prose (news reports, headlines, and opinion articles), administrative and legal texts (official statements, regulations, and judicial reasoning), and academic writing. The constructions selected are of the type documented in the principal reference grammars of contemporary Arabic [1], [4], [18] and readily observable in large web-derived corpora of contemporary Arabic such as arTenTen [53]. Because the aim is to analyze constructions rather than particular texts, the examples are presented in a normalized, representative form instead of being quoted from identified outlets; each example reproduces a pattern of wide currency rather than an idiosyncratic usage.

The classical baseline was established from the primary sources of the grammatical tradition, principally Sībawayh's Kitāb [22], al-Jurjānī's Dalā'il al-i'jāz [19], and Ibn Hishām's treatise on particles and grammatical analysis, Mughnī al-labīb [54], supplemented by Fischer's [55] systematic grammar of Classical Arabic. The prescriptive literature on "com-

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mon errors" [8], [9] was consulted as evidence of how the innovations have been perceived and evaluated by Arab language authorities.

C. Criteria for Selecting Constructions

Constructions were included if they met four criteria: (a) they are frequent and salient in at least one of the three registers; (b) they are attested in the descriptive literature on contemporary Arabic; (c) their contemporary meaning or function contrasts clearly with their classical meaning or function, or they express a meaning for which the classical language used a different device; and (d) taken together, they illustrate the full range of mechanisms of change recognized in the theoretical literature. Applying these criteria yielded seven domains: the periphrastic passive and the expression of the agent; light-verb constructions; word order and subject fronting; spatial and temporal expressions that have become connectives; emphatic and modal particles; negative and privative formations; and calqued patterns of comparison, coordination, and correlation.

D. Analytical Procedure

Each construction was analyzed in five steps. First, the form was identified together with its typical syntactic environment. Second, its classical meaning and function were established from the traditional sources and from reference descriptions of Classical Arabic. Third, its contemporary meaning, distribution, and register profile were described. Fourth, the shift was classified as one of six types (semantic bleaching, metaphorical extension, subjectification, pragmatic neutralization, morphologization, or pattern replication), using Lehmann's [25] parameters of grammaticalization to assess the degree of change and Traugott and Trousdale's [7] distinction between constructional change and constructionalization to determine whether an existing construction had been modified or a new one created. Fifth, the motivations of the shift were identified and its consequences for the grammatical system were assessed, with particular attention to whether a classical distinction had been lost, preserved, or replaced by a new one.

E. Presentation of Examples

Examples are numbered and given in Arabic script, followed by a transliteration based on the ALA-LC system and an English translation; where the internal structure matters, a literal rendering is added. Case endings are shown in the transliteration only when they are relevant to the argument. Within each numbered example, the classical or conservative variant is labeled (a) and the contemporary variant (b).

F. Validity and Limitations

The validity of the analysis rests on triangulation among three types of evidence: the classical sources, the modern reference grammars, and published studies of contemporary usage. The Arabic-script illustrations are normalized examples of the constructions under discussion, not verbatim quotations from a systematically sampled historical or contemporary corpus. Accordingly, they demonstrate how the relevant form–meaning patterns can be analyzed but do not independently establish when a particular development originated, how often it occurs, or how uniformly it is distributed across registers and regions. The bibliographic and conceptual evidence is used to support an interpretive comparison rather than to claim a newly measured diachronic trend. Interpretations that go beyond what these sources establish are presented explicitly as the analytical claims of this study. The study also has limitations. It does not provide frequency counts, so statements about the spread of a construction are qualitative; regional and register variation are noted where relevant but not systematically controlled; and the dating of innovations is approximate, since a historical corpus of modern Arabic prose covering the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is not yet widely available. These limitations define a program for future corpus-based research, which is outlined in the conclusion. A stronger empirical test would assemble dated, attributable examples from historical newspapers, administrative records, and contemporary academic corpora; apply explicit annotation rules to distinguish lexical meaning from construction-level function; and report frequencies relative to comparable text sizes. Such a design would also allow competing explanations involving genre, translation practice, regional usage, and changes in orthographic conventions to be evaluated more systematically.

IV. Analysis and Discussion

This section analyzes the seven domains identified above. For each domain, the classical baseline is established first, the contemporary usage is then described, and the type, mechanism, and motivation of the shift are discussed.

A. The Periphrastic Passive and the Expression of the Agent

1) The Classical Baseline

Classical Arabic forms the passive internally, by changing the vowel pattern of the verb: fataḥa "he opened" becomes futiḥa "it was opened," and yaftaḥu "he opens" becomes yuftaḥu "it is opened." The traditional designations of this construction, the verb "built for the unknown" (al-fiʿl al-mabnī li-l-majhūl) and "that whose agent is not named," express its semantic core: the classical passive is an agent-suppressing construction. The agent is not merely backgrounded but left unexpressed, and the patient is promoted to the position of "deputy of the agent" (nāʾib al-fāʿil). The rhetorical tradition enumerated the reasons for which a speaker might leave the agent unnamed, including that the agent is obvious, unknown, or irrelevant, or that naming it would be inappropriate. Reference descriptions of Classical Arabic accordingly note that the passive is used when the agent is not mentioned, and the classical language had no standard grammatical device comparable to English by for reintroducing the agent into a passive clause [55]. A speaker who wished to name the agent simply used the active voice.

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2) The Contemporary Construction

Contemporary written Arabic retains the internal passive illustrated in (1a) but also uses the periphrastic alternative shown in (1b):

فُتِحَ المعرضُ أمسِ (1a)

futiḥa l-ma‘raḍu amsi “The exhibition was opened yesterday.”

تمَّ افتتاحُ المعرضِ أمسِ من قِبَلِ وزيرِ الثقافة (1b)

tamma ftitāḥu l-ma‘raḍi amsi min qibali wazīri l-thaqāfa (literally, “the opening of the exhibition was completed yesterday from the side of the minister of culture”), “The exhibition was opened yesterday by the minister of culture.”

Two innovations combine in (1b). The first is the use of tamma with a verbal noun. Lexically, tamma is an intransitive verb meaning “to be complete” or “to come to completion.” In this construction, its lexical content is reduced to the schematic notion that an event has been realized, while the event itself is expressed by the verbal noun and the patient by the genitive complement of that noun. The construction is highly productive in news and administrative prose (tamma l-ittifāqu “agreement was reached,” tamma ta‘yīnu “X was appointed,” sa-yatimmu l-i‘lānu “it will be announced”), and tamma retains its inflection for tense and aspect. It still agrees in gender with the verbal noun, as in tammat al-muwāfaqatu “approval was given,” indicating that its loss of verbal properties is only partial. In terms of Lehmann’s [25] parameters, tamma has undergone substantial semantic attrition and a marked expansion of its host class while retaining much of its morphosyntactic integrity, a profile typical of an early stage of grammaticalization.

The semantic value of the construction has been debated. One might expect tamma to preserve a nuance of completion and therefore to contrast with the internal passive as a resultative or perfective form. Dror [45], however, examined the internal and periphrastic passives in journalistic MSA and concluded that it is not always possible to determine from the choice of passive structure whether the writer emphasizes the process or the completed result. This finding supports the view that tamma has largely bleached into a neutral passive device. At the same time, the imperfective form yatimmu has developed further aspectual uses: in a construction-based study of Arabic news reports, Mansouri [34] identified an emergent yatimmu pattern whose reading alternates between progressive and perfect according to its syntactic environment, as in yatimmu l-āna i‘dādu l-taqrīri “the report is now being prepared.” The development thus exemplifies constructionalization in the sense of Traugott and Trousdale [7]: a new pairing of form ([tamma + verbal noun + genitive]) and meaning (passive or event-realization) has entered the grammar and is itself developing internal functional distinctions.

The second innovation is the agentive phrase min qibal. In the classical language, qibal denotes a side or direction, and min qibali fulānin means “from the side of so-and-so” or “on the part of so-and-so,” that is, a source. In contemporary usage the phrase has been recruited as an agent marker in passive clauses, alongside min ṭarafi “from the side of,” ‘alā yadi “at the hand of,” and bi-wāsiṭati “by means of.” Reference grammars describe these agentive phrases as a modern development associated with the influence of European passive constructions [4], [18]. The recruitment of a source expression for this purpose follows a path well attested elsewhere, as in Latin ab and German von, and it fits the profile of contact-induced grammaticalization, in which a model-language pattern is replicated with native material along a path that internal change could also have taken [21], [37].

3) The Nature of the Shift

A major semantic consequence is a change in the range of functions associated with the passive. In the classical system, choosing the passive meant choosing not to name the agent. In the contemporary system, the passive can coexist with an explicit agent, so that it no longer signals that the agent is unknown or irrelevant; instead it signals a particular packaging of information in which the patient or the event is the point of departure and the agent, when named, occupies the end-focus position. In agent-explicit uses, the construction therefore moves from agent suppression toward agent demotion, a functional profile that matches the English and French passives on which it was modeled. This represents a redistribution of meaning: a classical association between form and meaning has been loosened, and a new informational option has been created.

Several factors motivated the change. An important factor is orthographic. Because Arabic is normally written without short vowels, the unvocalized form فتح is ambiguous between active fataḥa and passive futiḥa; the periphrastic construction removes this ambiguity without recourse to diacritics. This is a direct application of Ḥassān’s [24] principle of the convergence of clues: when one clue (the vowel pattern) is not represented, analytic material is recruited to carry the same function. A second factor is translation. News agencies and administrative bodies translate a great deal of material from English and French, in which agented passives are frequent, and the periphrastic construction offers a transparent equivalent. A third factor is the drift of the vernaculars, which have reduced the internal passive in favor of other formations; Holes [52] documented the uneven retention and loss of the internal passive in the dialects of northern Oman and eastern Arabia. The written standard has not followed the dialects in adopting their prefixed passive forms, but it has developed its own analytic alternative.

B. Light-Verb Constructions and the Nominal Style

A second domain in which meaning has been redistributed is the use of semantically light verbs combined with verbal nouns. The contrast between the simple and light-verb constructions is illustrated by Examples (2a) and (2b):

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زارَ الوزيرُ المصنعَ (2a)

zāra l-wazīru l-maṣna‘a “The minister visited the factory.”

قامَ الوزيرُ بزيارةٍ تفقديةٍ للمصنع (2b)

qāma l-wazīru bi-ziyāratin tafaqqudiyyatin li-l-maṣna‘i (literally, “the minister performed an inspection visit to the factory”), “The minister paid an inspection visit to the factory.”

Example (2b) belongs to a large family of constructions that are characteristic of contemporary journalistic and administrative prose [4]: ajrā muḥādathātin “held talks,” ajrā tajribatan “conducted an experiment,” shanna hujūman “launched an attack,” ittakhadha qarāran “took a decision,” and adlā bi-taṣrīḥin “made a statement.” In each case, the event is expressed by the verbal noun, and the verb contributes little more than tense, agreement, and a schematic meaning of performance.

The classical origins of these constructions differ across individual verbs, which shows that they are not simply foreign imports. The phrase qāma bi-l-amri already existed in Classical Arabic with the meaning “to undertake a matter” or “to take charge of it.” What is new is the generalization of qāma bi- to a wide range of eventive nouns, together with the bleaching of its meaning from “taking responsibility for” to “performing.” Similarly, adlā originally referred to letting down a bucket into a well; its figurative use in contributing an argument or opinion is old, but its use as a neutral support verb for statements is modern. These histories illustrate a general point of grammaticalization theory: contact and translation rarely create constructions from nothing but tend to exploit and accelerate developments for which the language already offered a basis [37], [39].

The semantic effects of the construction are considerable. First, nominalizing the event allows it to be modified by adjectives (ziyāra rasmiyya “an official visit,” ziyāra tārīkhiyya “a historic visit”), quantified (ziyāratān “two visits”), and referred back to anaphorically in subsequent sentences (wa-tu‘addu hādhihi l-ziyāratu “and this visit is considered”). Second, the nominalized event is presented as a bounded whole, which gives the clause a telic, completed character. Third, the construction depersonalizes the event and marks the text as institutional, which is why it is concentrated in official communiqués and news reports. These effects correspond closely to what Halliday and Matthiessen [35] call grammatical metaphor: the realization of a process as a noun, a hallmark of written, bureaucratic, and scientific registers that allows events to be treated as things that can be classified, evaluated, and connected. The spread of light-verb constructions in Arabic thus reflects the expansion of exactly those registers in the modern period. Their cost is verbosity and, at times, vagueness, which is why stylists and editors continue to recommend the simple verb where no modification or information packaging is required.

C. Word Order and the Neutralization of Subject Fronting

1) The Classical Baseline

The classical grammarians distinguished between the verbal sentence, which begins with a verb (qāma Zaydun “Zayd stood up”), and the nominal sentence, which begins with a noun (Zaydun qāma). For the Basran grammarians, a noun that precedes its verb cannot be its agent; in Zaydun qāma, therefore, Zaydun is a topic (mubtada’) and the verbal clause is its predicate. Verb-initial order was the unmarked order of narration, and fronting the noun was a meaningful choice. As noted above, al-Jurjānī analyzed this choice in terms of specification and strengthening, and he observed that fronting a pronoun before a verb, as in anā katabtu “I wrote,” typically implies “it was I, and not another, who wrote” [19]. The question of which order is basic in Classical Arabic and in the modern dialects has been debated in modern linguistics as well [44], [56].

2) The Contemporary Pattern

In contemporary journalistic Arabic, subject-initial clauses are common, particularly in headlines and lead sentences. Examples (3a) and (3b) contrast the two orders:

استقبلَ الرئيسُ وفداً برلمانياً (3a)

istaqbala l-ra’īsu wafdan barlamāniyyan “The president received a parliamentary delegation.”

الرئيسُ يستقبلُ وفداً برلمانياً (3b)

al-ra’īsu yastaqbilu wafdan barlamāniyyan “The president receives a parliamentary delegation.”

Headline (3b) does not imply that it was the president, as opposed to someone else, who received the delegation, nor does it strengthen the predication against doubt. The fronted subject simply establishes the topic of the report. In other words, the specificational and emphatic value that the classical theory attached to subject fronting has been neutralized in this context, and subject-initial order has become a pragmatically unmarked option. The headline also illustrates a second shift: the imperfect yastaqbilu refers to an event that has already taken place. This “reportive present” extends the temporal range of the imperfect, whose interpretation in contemporary Arabic depends heavily on context, a fact reflected in the variety of English tense and aspect forms by which translators render it [41]; see also [57], [58].

Neutralization does not mean that Arabic has lost the means to express contrastive focus. Rather, contrast has been relocated from word order to explicit lexical and analytic devices, such as intensive pronouns (al-ra’īsu nafsuhu “the president himself”), exclusive expressions (wa-ḥdahu “alone”), the restrictive particle innamā, and cleft-like constructions (kāna l-ra’īsu huwa man istaqbala l-wafda “it was the president who received the delegation”). Functional analyses of Arabic have shown that topic and focus are encoded through an interplay of position and particles [59], and studies of subject pronouns

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have shown that overt pronouns perform discourse functions that go beyond simple emphasis [60]. The contemporary development can be described as a redistribution: positional marking of contrast has weakened, while analytic marking has gained ground.

The shift in order also interacts with agreement. In verb-initial clauses, a verb preceding a plural human subject is singular (qāma l-ṭullābu "the students stood up"), whereas in subject-initial clauses the verb shows full agreement (al-ṭullābu qāmū). This asymmetry has been studied extensively in formal syntax [61]–[63]. As subject-initial order spreads, full agreement becomes the more frequent pattern, which may further reinforce the positional identification of the subject.

3) Explaining the Neutralization

Three factors converge here. First, in unvocalized writing and in formal speech in which case endings are frequently left unrealized [15], case marking cannot reliably distinguish subject from object; position and agreement must do so, and subject-initial order with full agreement provides the most robust combination of clues [24]. Second, many spoken Arabic dialects, with which MSA writers are familiar, frequently favor subject-initial order, and the European languages from which much news material is translated are also subject-initial. Third, the information structure of news writing favors placing the topic first and the new information last, a thematic organization whose implications for the relation between subject, theme, and agent in MSA have been analyzed by Abdul-Raof [43]. The proposed neutralization of fronting can therefore be interpreted in terms of orthographic, sociolinguistic, contact-related, and discourse-functional pressures acting in the same direction.

D. From Spatial and Temporal Expressions to Abstract Relators

1) Spatial Expressions as Abstract Connectives

Another domain concerns prepositional and adverbial expressions of space that have come to express temporal, instrumental, circumstantial, and topical relations. Table 1 summarizes these developments, distinguishing their traditional spatial senses from their additional contemporary discourse functions.

The expressions in Table 1 are consistent with pathways of metaphorical transfer that Heine et al. [27] identified as a cross-linguistically recurrent source of grammatical meaning, in which spatial concepts are mapped onto time and then onto more abstract logical, instrumental, and qualitative relations. The pathway from "through" to "by means of," for instance, is familiar from the history of English through itself, and pathways of this general type are catalogued cross-linguistically in the World Lexicon of Grammaticalization [28]. In Arabic, these internal tendencies have been reinforced by translation, because each expression has become the conventional equivalent of a European relator: min khilāl of "through," ʿabra of "via" and "across," fī ẓill of "under" (in the sense of circumstances), ʿalā ṣaʿīd of "at the level of," and bi-l-nisba li- of "as for" or French pour. The last case is particularly instructive. Classical Arabic possessed a dedicated topicalizing construction, ammā … fa- "as for … then," which remains in use; bi-l-nisba li- has developed into a functional competitor that allows a topic to be introduced without the correlative fa-. This is an example of what Heine and Kuteva [37] describe as polysemy copying: a native relational expression acquires the range of uses of its counterpart in the model language.

Table 1: Spatial Expressions Recruited as Abstract Relators in Contemporary Arabic

Expression	Concrete (classical) meaning	Contemporary abstract meaning	Illustrative contemporary use
min khilāl من خلال	"through the interstices of," "among"	time ("during"); means ("by means of")	min khilāli l-ḥiwār "through dialogue"; khilāla l-ʿām "during the year"
ʿabra عبر	"across" (from ʿabara "to cross")	medium ("via"); temporal extent ("throughout")	ʿabra l-internet "via the internet"; ʿabra l-tārīkh "throughout history"
fī ẓill في ظل	"in the shade of"	circumstance ("under," "in the context of")	fī ẓilli l-ẓurūfi l-rāhina "under the present circumstances"
ʿalā ṣaʿīd على صعيد	"on the surface or high ground of"	domain ("at the level of," "with regard to")	ʿalā l-ṣaʿīdi l-iqtiṣādī "on the economic level"
bi-l-nisba li- بالنسبة لـ	"in relation or proportion to"	topic ("as for," "regarding")	bi-l-nisba li-l-ṭullābi "as for the students"

Note. Classical meanings are given in their basic concrete sense; several expressions also had figurative uses in the classical language. The contemporary meanings are those documented in reference grammars of Modern Standard Arabic [1], [18].

2) Temporal Connectives Acquiring Adversative and Causal Meanings

A closely related development affects clause connectives. The temporal connectives fī ḥīn "at the time when" and baynamā "while" are now widely used to express contrast:

ارتفعت الصادراتُ في حينِ انخفضت الواردات (4)

irtafaʿat al-ṣādirātu fī ḥīni nkhafaḍat al-wāridātu "Exports rose, whereas imports fell."

In (4), the two events are not presented as simultaneous; they are presented as contrasting. This development exactly parallels the history of English while and French tandis que, both of which developed contrastive meanings from temporal ones. Traugott and König [33] explained the English case as the conventionalization of an invited inference: when two situations are said to obtain at the same time, the hearer frequently infers that they are being contrasted, and over time this inference becomes part of the connective's meaning. In Arabic, the same pragmatic mechanism has been accelerated by the need for systematic equivalents of while, whereas, and tandis que in translation.

The history of ḥaythu shows how a spatial connective can acquire causal and consecutive meanings. In the classical

language, ḥaythu is an adverb of place meaning "where," invariably followed by a clause. Classical grammarians recorded a minority view, attributed to al-Akhfash, that ḥaythu may also refer to time [54], which shows that its extension beyond space was already incipient. In contemporary Arabic, the connective has developed three further functions: a causal or explanatory function ("since," "inasmuch as"), especially in the formula ḥaythu inna that introduces the recitals of judicial and administrative decisions (ḥaythu inna l-mud'ā 'alayhi lam yaḥḍur "whereas the defendant did not appear"); a loose linking function that introduces elaboration ("where," "in which"); and, in the compound bi-ḥaythu, a consecutive or purposive function ("so that," "such that"). The formulaic legal usage closely parallels the recitals of French and English legal documents, while the general linking use reflects the needs of long, cumulative sentences in expository prose. A similar development affects mimmā (min "from" + mā "that which"), which now functions as a sentence-level connective introducing a consequence, as in … mimmā addā ilā rtifā'i l-as'ār "…, which led to a rise in prices," a usage that corresponds functionally to the sentential relative which and French ce qui.

E. Emphatic and Modal Particles: Bleaching and Subjectification

1) The Weakening of Emphasis

The fourth domain concerns particles whose classical meanings were emphatic. As discussed above, al-Jurjānī tied the use of inna to the addressee's state of mind: the particle strengthens an assertion that the addressee may doubt or deny [19], [20]. In contemporary official, journalistic, and academic prose, by contrast, inna frequently opens sentences in which no doubt or denial is presupposed, as in the conventional openings of speeches, reports, and introductions. In such contexts, it functions less as an emphatic device than as a formal sentence-initial marker that signals register and introduces a new unit of discourse. The broader point is supported by corpus evidence on the complementary particles of contemporary Arabic: in his corpus of radio news bulletins from Algeria, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, Van Mol [42] found that particles with similar functions had undergone an important functional shift relative to their descriptions in classical grammar. A comparable weakening affects laqad (the emphatic la- combined with qad), which in many contemporary essays introduces narrative statements without the force of an oath-like assertion. These patterns are compatible with the frequency-driven bleaching described in usage-based research, according to which repeated use erodes the expressive force of a form and turns it into a routine marker [29], [30].

2) Epistemic Modality and Hedging

Two further particles illustrate subjectification. In the classical system, qad followed by a perfect verb expresses realization or certainty and the proximity of a past event to the present, while qad followed by an imperfect verb expresses, according to context, rarity, frequency, or expectation [54]. Contemporary Arabic has specialized the combination of qad with the imperfect into the default expression of epistemic possibility, the equivalent of English may and might, as shown in Example (5):

قد يؤدي هذا القرارُ إلى ارتفاع الأسعار (5)

qad yu'addī hādhā l-qarāru ilā rtifā'i l-as'ār "This decision may lead to a rise in prices."

The particle rubbamā has undergone a more radical change. The classical rubba is a quantifier meaning "many a" or "few a," and the grammarians debated whether it expressed paucity or abundance; Ibn Hishām [54] argued that it expressed abundance often and paucity less often. Combined with mā and a verb, rubbamā expressed that something happens often or sometimes. In contemporary Arabic, rubbamā means "perhaps" or "maybe": it no longer quantifies over occasions but expresses the speaker's degree of confidence in a proposition. Both developments are textbook cases of subjectification, in which meanings that describe the world come to express the speaker's epistemic stance toward it [12], [32]. Their increased use may be linked to the growth of modern expository and academic writing, whose conventions require explicit hedging, and to the translation of English modal verbs.

3) Neutralization in the Expression of Future and Phase

The future particles show a different kind of change. According to the Basran grammarians, sawfa denoted a more extended future than the prefix sa- [54]. In contemporary usage, this distinction of temporal distance has been neutralized, and sawfa is frequently combined with the negator lā (sawfa lā yaḥḍuru "he will not attend"), a pattern that competes with the classical future negator lan and is often disfavored by prescriptive critics. In the domain of phasal aspect, the verb 'āda "to return" has developed, in negated form, into the standard expression of "no longer," as in lam ya'ud ya'malu hunāka "he no longer works there," a development that parallels the well-documented recruitment of motion verbs as sources of tense and aspect markers across languages [26] and that has close counterparts in the spoken dialects.

F. Negative and Privative Formations

The fifth domain shows a shift from syntax toward morphology. Negation in Classical Arabic is fundamentally clausal: the particles lā, mā, lam, lan, and laysa negate predications. The noun ghayr "other than" heads construct phrases that express exception or the negation of an attribute, and 'adam "nonexistence" is an ordinary noun. In contemporary Arabic, all three elements have become productive devices for forming privative concepts, as illustrated in Example (6):

اللامركزية / عدمُ التدخل / المنظماتُ غيرُ الحكومية (6)

al-munaẓẓamātu ghayru l-ḥukūmiyya “non-governmental organizations”; ‘adamu l-tadakhkhul “non-interference”; al-lā-markaziyya “decentralization”

The construction with ghayr (ghayr rasmī “unofficial,” ghayr mubāshir “indirect,” ghayr qānūnī “illegal”) functions as the equivalent of the English prefixes un-, in-, and non-. The construction with ‘adam forms abstract nouns of absence (‘adamu l-istiqrār “instability,” ‘adamu l-mubālāh “indifference”). Most strikingly, the negator lā has become a bound element that combines with nouns and relational adjectives and that can itself be preceded by the definite article, as in al-lā-‘unf “non-violence,” al-lā-silkī “wireless,” and al-lā-wā‘ī “the unconscious.” Other quasi-prefixes have developed in parallel: shibh “likeness” in the sense of “semi-” or “quasi-” (shibh rasmī “semi-official”), mā ba‘da “what is after” in the sense of “post-” (mā ba‘da l-ḥadātha “postmodernity”), and mā qabla “what is before” in the sense of “pre-” (mā qabla l-tārīkh “prehistory”). Stetkevych [5] documented the role of compounding of this kind in the creation of the modern lexicon.

Semantically, these formations represent a shift from the negation of a predication to the creation of lexical concepts defined by the absence of a property. Structurally, they represent morphologization: an element that once operated at the level of the clause now operates within the word, as shown by the placement of the definite article before lā. This is notable in a language whose word formation relies extensively on roots and patterns rather than on prefixes, and it shows that the pressure to provide one-to-one equivalents for European prefixed terms in politics, science, and philosophy has been strong enough to create a new word-formation type. In the terms of contact linguistics, it is a case of pattern replication: no foreign morpheme has been borrowed, but a foreign way of organizing the expression of privative concepts has been reproduced with native material [21], [38].

G. Calqued Patterns of Comparison, Coordination, and Correlation

1) The Particle ka- in the Sense of “As”

The sixth domain consists of patterns in which a classical form has acquired a meaning copied from a European model. The clearest case is the particle ka-:

هو كالأسدِ في شجاعته (7a)

huwa ka-l-asadi fī shajā‘atihi “He is like a lion in his courage.”

عملَ كمديرٍ للشركة (7b)

‘amila ka-mudīrin li-l-sharika “He worked as director of the company.”

In (7a), ka- expresses likeness, its classical meaning, which presupposes that the two entities compared are distinct: the man is not a lion. In (7b), ka- expresses the capacity or role in which a person acts, and the relation is one of identity: the man was the director. The classical language expressed this meaning differently, typically with an accusative noun in the function of a circumstantial qualifier (‘amila mudīran) or with a phrase such as bi-ṣifatihi “in his capacity as.” The contemporary usage therefore involves not merely an extension but a reversal of the semantic relation encoded by the particle, from similarity to identity-in-role. One plausible contact-related explanation is that English as and French comme cover both meanings, and translators have mapped both onto ka-. This is a paradigm case of polysemy copying [37], and it remains a usage commonly censured by purist critics precisely because it contradicts the classical meaning of the particle.

2) Coordinated Construct Phrases

The construct state (iḍāfa) also shows a structural loosening:

تطويرُ التعليمِ وتحديثُه (8a)

taṭwīru l-ta‘līmi wa-taḥdīthuhu “the development of education and its modernization”

تطويرُ وتحديثُ التعليمِ (8b)

taṭwīru wa-taḥdīthu l-ta‘līmi “the development and modernization of education”

In Classical Arabic, the head of a construct phrase and its genitive form a tight unit that is not normally interrupted [55], so the conservative way of relating two heads to a single genitive is (8a), in which the second head carries a resumptive pronoun. The grammarians recorded only a few instances of two heads sharing one genitive, such as the oft-cited qaṭa‘a llāhu yada wa-rijla man qālahā “may God cut off the hand and foot of whoever said it,” and treated the pattern as marginal. In contemporary journalistic and administrative prose, pattern (8b) is widespread, mirroring the English and French coordination of two nouns before a shared complement. The shift has a semantic dimension as well as a structural one: (8a) presents two events in sequence, the second linked anaphorically to the first, whereas (8b) presents a single complex event with one shared patient. The new pattern thus offers a way of conceptually unifying related processes, which suits the programmatic language of policy documents.

3) Correlative Frames

Finally, a number of correlative frames have been replicated from European models, including laysa faqaṭ … bal ayḍan “not only … but also” and min jihatin … wa-min jihatin ukhrā “on the one hand … on the other hand.” Each element of these frames is classical, but their combination into fixed, discourse-structuring templates is modern. Such frames are best described as constructions in the sense of construction grammar [6]: their meaning, which organizes an argument into balanced or escalating parts, belongs to the template as a whole rather than to its individual words.

V. General Discussion

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A. A Typology of the Shifts

The seven domains analyzed above can be brought together in a single typology. Table 2 classifies the constructions according to the type of shift they display, the mechanism responsible, and the effect of the shift on the grammatical system. The typology answers the first two research questions: it identifies the structures that have undergone semantic change and specifies the mechanisms involved.

Table 2: A Typology of Semantic Shifts in the Syntactic Structures of Contemporary Arabic

Type of shift	Mechanism	Representative constructions	Effect on the system
Semantic bleaching	Frequency-driven loss of lexical content; expansion of the host class	tamma + verbal noun; qāma bi-, ajrā, shanna + verbal noun; inna; laqad	New analytic grammatical devices; weakening of graded emphasis
Metaphorical extension	Transfer from space to time, means, circumstance, and logical relations	min khilāl, ʿabra, fī ẓill, ʿalā ṣaʿīd, ḥaythu, bi-ḥaythu	Enlarged inventory of abstract relators and connectives
Pragmatic strengthening	Conventionalization of invited inferences	fī ḥīn and baynamā (time to contrast); mimmā (relative to consequence)	Explicit contrastive and consequential connectives
Subjectification	Shift from describing situations to encoding speaker stance	qad + imperfect (possibility); rubbamā (quantifier to "perhaps")	Systematic resources for epistemic hedging
Pragmatic neutralization	Loss of markedness through generalization	Subject-initial order; sawfa versus sa-; overt subject pronouns	Contrast relocated from position to lexical and analytic devices
Morphologization	A clause-level element becomes word-internal	lā-, ghayr, ʿadam, shibh, mā baʿda	New prefix-like formation of privative and relational concepts
Pattern replication and polysemy copying	Translation-mediated contact with English and French	min qibal (agent); ka- "as"; coordinated construct phrases; correlative frames	New informational options; altered meanings of classical forms

Note. Most constructions display more than one type of shift; they are listed under the type that is most prominent. For example, min qibal combines metaphorical extension (source to agent) with pattern replication.

Two general observations follow from Table 2. The first is that the shifts are not idiosyncratic. Every type corresponds to a mechanism already documented in general research on grammaticalization and semantic change, from bleaching and metaphorical extension [11], [27] to subjectification [12], [32] and pragmatic strengthening [33]. Contemporary Arabic is therefore not an exceptional case of "corruption" but an ordinary case of language change, made distinctive mainly by the persistence of classical forms, which conceals the change from casual observation. The second observation is that most innovations combine internal and external factors. The pathway from source to agent in min qibal, from space to means in min khilāl, and from time to contrast in fī ḥīn are all pathways that languages follow independently. What contact has added is speed, direction, and systematicity: by providing a model and a constant demand for equivalents, translation has selected among the possible internal developments and accelerated them. This is precisely the relationship between contact and internal change described by Heine and Kuteva [37] and illustrated for the history of Arabic negation by Lucas and Lash [39].

B. Motivations of Change

The third research question concerns the motivations for these changes. The analysis points to five interacting factors. The first is orthographic and structural. Because Arabic is normally written without short vowels, distinctions carried by vowel patterns and case endings are not visible in writing, and they are often unrealized in formal speech [15]. The periphrastic passive and the spread of subject-initial order with full agreement can both be understood as responses to this situation, in which analytic and positional clues take over functions that vocalic morphology can no longer reliably perform; this is the principle of the convergence of clues formulated by Ḥassān [24]. The second factor is the expansion of modern institutional registers. Journalism, administration, law, and academic writing require nominalized events, explicit logical connectives, and systematic hedging, and the corresponding constructions have spread with these registers, in line with the role that grammatical metaphor plays in written and institutional discourse [35]. The third factor is translation-mediated contact, which supplies models for agentive passives, prefixed privatives, role-marking ka-, and correlative frames, and which rewards one-to-one equivalence [21], [40]. The fourth factor is diglossia. All writers of MSA are native speakers of a dialect, and some developments in the written standard, such as the preference for subject-initial order and the use of lam yaʿud for "no longer," align it with tendencies of the spoken varieties [4], [48]. The fifth factor is frequency itself: once a construction becomes a conventional formula of news or administrative style, repetition erodes its original meaning and entrenches its new function [29], [30].

C. Redistribution or Erosion?

The final part of the third research question asks how these shifts affect the expressive system of Arabic. The prescriptive tradition has generally answered that they impoverish it, and it is true that several classical distinctions have weakened or disappeared. The graded emphasis associated with inna and laqad is less consistently observed; the distinction of temporal distance between sa- and sawfa has been neutralized; subject fronting no longer automatically signals specification; and ka- in some uses no longer signals mere likeness. The analysis suggests, however, that these reductions in contrast are accompanied by additional expressive possibilities. Contemporary Arabic has acquired an agented passive that allows the patient to be thematized without suppressing the agent; a set of explicit contrastive, causal, and consequential connectives; a systematic means of expressing epistemic possibility and hedging; a productive way of forming privative concepts; and a set of topic-marking and role-marking devices. In general terms, meanings once carried by position, vocalic morphol-

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ogy, or context are increasingly carried by analytic, lexical, and periphrastic means.

The overall picture is therefore one of redistribution rather than erosion, a conclusion consistent with the general view that language change is neither progress nor decay [10]. It also allows an answer to the fourth research question. Al-Jurjānī's central principle, that every choice of structure is a choice of meaning, remains fully valid for contemporary Arabic; what has changed is the particular meanings that particular structures carry. Ḥassān's theory of the convergence of clues explains why the burden of meaning has shifted from some formal clues to others. Grammaticalization theory and construction grammar explain the pathways by which individual forms acquire new meanings and new form–meaning pairings arise, and contact linguistics explains the external channel that has accelerated and directed these processes. The four frameworks are therefore complementary: the tradition supplies the synchronic principle and the classical baseline, while modern theory supplies the account of change.

This conclusion does not imply that every innovation is equally appropriate in every stylistic context. Some innovations fill genuine functional gaps, such as the agentive phrase, the privative formations, and the hedging devices. Others are often redundant, such as the light-verb construction used where a simple verb would convey the same meaning more economically, or the coordinated construct phrase used where it creates ambiguity. The graded approach adopted in some modern reference works, which distinguishes degrees of acceptability rather than issuing a binary verdict of correct or incorrect [9], is better suited to this reality than blanket condemnation.

D. Implications

The findings have implications for four areas of practice. For grammar teaching, they suggest that textbooks and curricula should describe the major contemporary constructions explicitly, together with their meanings and register profiles, rather than treating them as errors or ignoring them. A contrastive presentation, in which the classical meaning of a structure is taught alongside its contemporary function (for example, ʻamila mudīran alongside ʻamila ka-mudīrin), develops the stylistic awareness that learners and native students need to read contemporary texts and to write in different registers. For translation, the findings show that translators are among the main agents of grammatical change in Arabic. Translator training should therefore include an awareness of calquing as a process, so that translators can make informed choices, using native structures such as the active voice or a simple verb where they express the intended meaning more naturally, and reserving periphrastic constructions for cases in which they serve a genuine informational purpose.

For lexicography, the analysis shows that dictionaries of Arabic need to record the grammatical meanings of function words and constructions, not only the meanings of content words, and that historical dictionaries should document when and in which registers the new functions of forms such as ka-, ḥaythu, rubbamā, and tamma emerged. For corpus linguistics and language technology, the findings identify constructions that require explicit treatment in annotation schemes and computational models. Semantic role labeling, for instance, must recognize that the agent of a tamma clause may appear in a min qibal phrase, and sentiment and stance analysis must treat qad with the imperfect and rubbamā as markers of epistemic uncertainty. Large contemporary corpora such as arTenTen [53] make such work feasible.

VI. Conclusion

This study has argued that the formal continuity of Arabic grammar conceals a substantial body of semantic change in its syntactic structures. Seven domains were analyzed: the periphrastic passive and the agentive phrase, light-verb constructions, word order and subject fronting, spatial and temporal expressions that have become abstract relators, emphatic and modal particles, negative and privative formations, and calqued patterns of comparison, coordination, and correlation. In each domain, an inherited form has acquired a new meaning or a new construction has come to express a meaning previously expressed by other means. The shifts follow recurrent pathways (semantic bleaching, metaphorical extension, pragmatic strengthening, subjectification, pragmatic neutralization, morphologization, and pattern replication), and they are motivated by the structure of the Arabic writing system, the expansion of modern institutional registers, translation-mediated contact with European languages, the influence of the spoken dialects, and the effects of frequency. Their overall effect is to redistribute meaning from positional and morphological marking toward analytic and lexical marking, without reducing the expressive capacity of the language.

Methodologically, the study has shown that the meaning-oriented theory of the Arabic grammatical tradition and modern theories of language change are not rivals but complementary perspectives. Al-Jurjānī's insight that structure is meaning provides the indispensable baseline against which change can be identified, and grammaticalization theory, construction grammar, and contact linguistics explain how and why change occurs.

Several directions for future research follow from the limitations of the present study. First, quantitative corpus studies are needed to measure the frequency of the constructions analyzed here across registers and over time, ideally using diachronic corpora of Arabic newspapers and books from the nineteenth century to the present. Second, systematic regional comparison, particularly between the Maghreb, where French has been the main contact language, and the Mashriq and the Gulf, where English has been dominant, would show whether different contact languages have produced different patterns of replication, building on the regional corpus approach pioneered by Van Mol [42]. Third, experimental studies of native readers' interpretations could test the claims made here about neutralization and bleaching, for example whether subject-initial order is still perceived as contrastive and whether tamma is still associated with completion. Finally, the rapidly

expanding body of informal written Arabic on digital platforms, where the boundaries between the standard and the dialects are being renegotiated [16], offers a new laboratory for observing semantic change in progress.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding this manuscript.

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Data Availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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