

Sa- and Sawfa as Modal Forms New Evidence from Informant Testing

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Abstract: *Most of the Western writers, especially when they come to compare the English modal verbs with their equivalents in Arabic, claim that there are no modal verbs in Arabic (see, for example, Swan and Smith's (1987) Learner English: A Teacher's Guide to Interference and other Problems). There are probably two reasons why they make this assumption. The first one is that modality in Arabic has not yet attracted much attention from either Arabic or Western linguists. The second is the scarcity of information about these modal forms in Arabic grammar books. Arabic does have different realizations at the level of form for 'modal' meanings, e.g. as verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and particles. But these verbal and non-verbal forms do not form a distinct, formally recognizable set of modal forms, as is the case with the English modals. The result is that discussions of them are scattered throughout different chapters of the traditional Arabic grammar books. (This is possibly a third reason that has led some writers claim that there are no modal verbs in Arabic). But, whether they are verbs, adjectives, or particles, these forms express a wide range of 'modal' meanings (see Abunowara, 1996). This paper shows that the two particles sa- and sawfa, beside their meaning as future markers, can cover a range of volitional and prediction meanings if they are used in different contexts.*

1. Introduction

A number of scholars, perhaps the majority of those working on forms used to refer to future time have argued that in a whole variety of languages various verbs and forms have been used as future tense- verbs of wishing, possibility, having, etc. In the same spirit Lyons (1968:310) notes that French future tense may indicate probability and Russian imperfective may signal futurity, intention or determination.

In English there are a number of ways of expressing future time. *Shall* and *will*, for example, are used to express future time as well as modality meanings. Thus, *He will go swimming in dangerous waters*, has the meaning of insisting upon action. *Will* here is concerned with volition.

In Arabic some verb tenses and forms are used to refer to future time. One of the verb tenses is the present simple form. It is a form, as Khrama and Hajjaj (1989: 164) point out, around which a very long controversy has raged in the history of Arabic linguistics. It has been claimed by many that this form refers only to pure future. However, this form is used frequently in Modern Standard Arabic,

especially in the mass media, to describe events are almost certain to happen. Beside this form, Arabic uses the particles *sa-* and *sawfa*. These two particles are treated in many grammar and reference books as the markers of the future tense. For this reason they are called ‘huruf al-estigbal’: the particles of the future. The traditional view of *sa-* and *sawfa* as markers of the future tense states that *sa-* refers to the near future and *sawfa* refers to the remote future.

In the grammar of Arabic nothing has been written so far about the possibility of using *sa-* and *sawfa* to express judgements or attitudes towards a possible future event. Not a single author has even referred to these two forms as having other meaning than their meaning as future markers. But the fact is that, if we use *sa-* and *sawfa* in different contexts, we may become aware of a range of volitional meanings such as ‘willingness’, ‘intention’, ‘insistence’ etc. and judgements ‘validity meaning’ of various kinds such as ‘prediction’. The term validity meaning, used here, is mainly concerned with the speaker’s statement of his/her level of confidence in the ‘propositional’ content of the clause (Fawcett). In the coming sections I shall briefly discuss with examples the two major modal meanings expressed by *sa-* and *sawfa* and their sub-senses. Then, in the last sections I shall run an informant test to support my argument that these two particles can not only be used to refer to future time but that they can also be used to express modal meanings. Note that, in presenting my examples, I shall follow the pattern below:

Arabic transcription
English near equivalent.

2. Prediction

There are a number of different ways of expressing ‘prediction’, but I shall not go into details in this section. I shall discuss only those obvious options undertaken by the ‘prediction’ meaning, as in Figure 1:

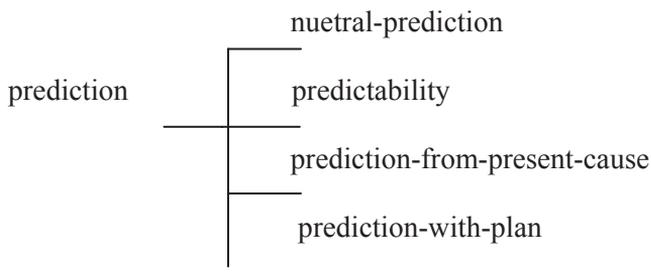


Figure 1: The ‘prediction’ meaning

2.1. Neutral-prediction

The 'neutral-prediction' meaning, which does not involve the subject's volition, usually refers to future events or occurrences as seen from the standpoint of present time and it should not be confused with the approximately similar option of 'predictability', as in (1):

- (1) sawfa yasilu al-tardu gadan.
The parcel will arrive tomorrow.

It roughly means 'It is predictable that ...'

2.2. Predictability

The 'predictability' meaning expresses the speaker's confidence in the validity of the proposition, but this confidence is not based on a process of logical inference. Instead it is based on repeated experience or common sense that coincides with the speech time, as example (2) shows.

- (2) sayakunu dalika sa'i al-bareedi.
That will be the mailman (on hearing the doorbell ring).

It is clear that the two types of meaning: 'neutral' and 'predictability' are so closely intermingled that it is difficult to separate them. One reason for the confusion lies in the very nature of futurity. What differentiates the 'predictability' meaning is that it always has a present time reference, and coincides with the speech time and timelessness, as in English *oil will float on water*. In other words, the speaker makes a 'forecast about the present' concerning an event not directly observable.

2.3. Prediction-from-present-cause

The meaning here is different from the 'neutral' meaning discussed above. In this type of meaning, the speaker also makes a prediction about the future. However, his prediction here is based on features, causes of initiations of present time or the moment of speaking that will determine future events. This is clear in an example such as (3) when we see dark clouds:

- (3) sawfa tumturu hada al-masa.
It is going to rain this evening.

2.4. Prediction-with-plan

The 'prediction-with-plan' meaning is similar to the 'neutral' meaning, except that the reference to future events is always felt to be planned or arranged. A typical example such (4) makes it clear that the speaker's choice of this meaning implies that the event in question is due to some conscious organization, which again is different from the implication in the 'prediction-from-present-causes' meaning.

- (4) sawfa yajtami'u al-ruasau gadan.

The presidents will meet tomorrow.

3. Volition

The second major meaning *sa-* and *sawfa* are concerned with is volition. Therefore, the volitional range of these two forms extends from the 'weak volition' of 'willingness' to the 'strong volition' of 'insistence'. Between these two sub-senses of volition, there is the more usual volitional sense of 'intention'. These three different meanings, as shown in Figure 2, are often combined with the future implication of 'prediction'. Young (1992:88) mentions that volition can be weak or strong. It is a question of the conditions under which the performer forms the intention of performing. With weak volition he consents, or gives way to pressure, and with strong volition he insists, the intention being there without any urging.

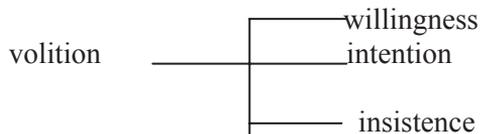


Figure 2: The 'volition' meaning

3.1. Willingness

sa/sawfa, in this sense, are quite common particularly with verbs that refer to activities. They can be paraphrased by *willing* or *want*, as in the following example:

- (5) man sayunazifu al-sayarata? sawfa af'alu dalika.
Who is going to clean the car? I will do that.

3.2. Insistence

In this use *sa-* and *sawfa* have the meaning of insisting upon action. An example is:

- (6) sayadalu yaf 'alu nafsa al-sayi.
He will keep doing the same thing.

Notice that the future *sa-* and *sawfa* of 'prediction' sometimes has a special use. It is used to issue a command or instruction. This quasi-imperative use of these forms seems closer in meaning to the use of the verb *yajibu* (must), as in:

- (7) sawfa taf 'alu ma aguluhu laka
You will do what I tell you.

Of course, there is a difference between this special use of *sa-* and *sawfa* (quasi-imperative) and *sa/sawfa* of insistence. The former, in this sense, expresses the will of the originator of the message, rather than of the subject.

3.3. Intention

It has been mentioned earlier that between the sub-senses of volition ('willingness' and 'insistence') there is an intermediate volitional sense of 'intention'. When the speaker expresses an intention, the intention is, naturally, coincident with speech time, but the intended action is in the future (Downing and Locke, 1992), as i

(8) *saasumu talatata aiyamin.*

I will fast three days.

Sa- and *sawfa* in this sense also convey promises or threats which are decisions; either to do something definitely, or to do it under certain circumstances. In other words, the *sa-* and *sawfa* of intention can have the illocutionary force of either a promise or a threat, according to whether the intended action is beneficial to the addressee or otherwise. Examples are:

(9) *intaziru hata ahsula 'alla al-nugudi wa saastari laka darajatan.*

Wait till I get the money and I will buy you abike.

(10) *in lam tadhab falasawfa auhatimu raqabataka.*

If you don't go I'll break your neck!

Finally, the distinction between the three meanings of *sa-* and *sawfa*, illustrated above, is not always clear. In other words, the classification of utterances according to function is necessarily arbitrary to some extent, since language is not neatly divided into compartments. There is considerable overlap, and it is precisely this borderline area which presents the most problems and the greatest fascination. The notions of intention, insistence and willingness are often inextricably bound up. In addition, linguists sometimes try to determine the meaning of a particular utterance in relation to the context it occurs in, or in relation to what the speaker intends to do in uttering it.

4. Informant Test and Results

From the above argument, one may claim from the above argument that the two forms of the future, *sa-* and *sawfa*, can be said to be used to express different prediction meanings and an attitude of 'volition' towards a possible future event, which ranges from the 'weak' volition of 'willingness' to the 'strong' volition of 'insistence'. To see if this is the case I decided to run an informant test, which I shall describe below.

Informants were eighty (80) postgraduate students and staff members from the Departments of Arabic and English at the university of Garyounis with a good knowledge of Arabic and English. They were instructed to read the underlined sentences carefully, and to choose either **A** or **B**. **A** represented one

(14)	A. 88.2	B.11.8
(15)	A. 84.9	B. 15.1
(16)	A. 87.9	B. 12.1
(17)	A. 93.9	B. 6.1
(18)	A. 97.0	B. 3.0
(19)	A. 93.9	B. 6.1

5. Conclusion

These results suggest that *sa-* and *sawfa* are not only used for pure future, as has been stated in most of the Arabic grammar and reference books, but that they can also be used, in certain contexts, to express different prediction meanings and volitional uses which range from the 'weak volition' of willingness to the 'strong volition' of insistence.

As in English, the distinction between these meanings is not always clear. In other words, the notions of 'intention', 'insistence', and 'willingness' are often bound up with other meanings, and the full meaning of any particular utterance can be determined only in relation to a full knowledge of the context it occurs in, including what the speaker intends to do in uttering it.

Even though it will take further work to establish more precisely the full range of meanings of these items, we may reasonably conclude, from this pilot study that Arabic does not use *sa-* and *sawfa*, as Meziari (1978: 67) and many other grammarians claim, solely to express 'futura', but that they can also be used to express an attitude or judgement towards a possible future event.

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