

INTRODUCTION TO SARF (Arabic Morphology)

CONTENT

INTRODUCTION	1
BASIC TERMINOLOGIES	1
WHY STUDY VERBS?	3
❖ Examples of How Meaning Changes in Sarf:	3
BASIC TENSES IN ARABIC	5

INTRODUCTION

Sarf (صرف) is the science of word-forms and patterns in the Arabic language. While Nahw (grammar) deals with **how words function in a sentence**, Sarf focuses on how words are formed, derived, and transformed from their root letters. It teaches us how a single root can produce a family of related words with different shades of meaning.

For example, from the root كَتَبَ (k-t-b), we derive:

- ❖ كَتَبَ – he wrote
- ❖ يَكْتُبُ – he writes
- ❖ كِتَاب – a book
- ❖ مَكْتُوب – written

Thus, Sarf is often called the “*Mathematics of Arabic*”, because it gives precise rules on how words expand from roots into various forms.

BASIC TERMINOLOGIES

Example	Explanation	Word	Terminology
ضَرَبَ، شَرِبَ، أَكَلَ	Verb - Action/Doing Word	فِعْل	أقسام الكلام
محمد، أحمد	Noun - Place, Name or Object etc.	إِسْم	
في، و، ل	Particle - Link between a noun/verb	حَرْف	
he wrote = كَتَبَ	Past tense - Action already done	ماضي	من حيث الزمن
he writes = يَكْتُبُ	Present/Future tense - Action happening now or in the future	مضارع	
write! = اكْتُبْ	Imperative - Commanding someone to do something	أمر	
don't write = لا تَكْتُبْ	Prohibition - Prohibiting someone from doing something	نهي	

he wrote = كَتَبَ	Affirmation - Positive Action	إثبات	من حيث الإثبات
he did not write = مَا كَتَبَ	Negation - Negative Action	نفي	
indeed he wrote = لَقَدْ كَتَبَ	Emphasis - Stressing the verb/action	تأكيد	
كَتَبَ زَيْدُ الدَّرْسِ Zayd wrote the lesson	Active Voice - Doer is known	فعل معروف	من حيث البناء
كُتِبَ الدَّرْسُ The lesson was written	Passive Voice - Doer is Unknown	فعل مجهول	
he is a writer هو كاتب	Masculine	مذكر	من حيث الجنس
she is a writer هي كاتبة	Feminine	مؤنث	
(he writes / is writing) يكتب	2st Person	حاضر	من حيث الشخص
(he writes) هو يكتب	3rd Person	غائب	
(I write) أنا أكتب	1st Person	متكلم	
(book) كتاب	Singular	واحد	من حيث العدد
(two books) كتابان	Dual	ثنائية	
(books) كتب	Plural	جمع	
(writing) كتابة	Verbal Noun	المصدر	من حيث الوظيفة
(writer) كاتب	Active Participle	اسم فاعل	
(written) مكتوب	Passive Participle	اسم مفعول	
I saw a book رأيت كتابًا	Accusative case	مفتوح/منصوب	من حيث الإعراب
from a book من كتاب	Genitive case	مكسور/مجرور	
The book is مفيد useful	Nominative case	مضوم/مرفوع	

ف in فَعَلَ (ك ← كتب)	1st letter of the verb	كلمة الفاء	من حيث موقف الحرف
ع in فَعَلَ (ت ← كتب)	2nd letter of the verb	كلمة العين	
ل in فَعَلَ (ب ← كتب)	3rd letter of the verb	كلمة لام	
Paradigm/Conjugation		الصيغة	
Full morphology / complete conjugation table		صرف كبير	
Partial morphology / small conjugation		صرف صغير	

WHY STUDY VERBS?

In Arabic, sentences can be broadly divided into nominal (جملة اسمية) and verbal (جملة فعلية). A nominal sentence begins with a noun and can often express basic ideas without the need for a verb. For example:

We are in the bank.	نحن في البنك
My mother is in the school with my brother.	أمي في المدرسة مع أخي

These kinds of statements are sufficient for simple description or identification. However, once we move beyond such elementary expressions—when we want to describe actions, events, time, continuity, or commands—*We enter the domain of verbs.*

This is why the study of Sarf (morphology) is so crucial. Sarf is not only about recognizing different verb forms, but also about understanding how meaning changes through patterns, roots, tenses, and voices.

❖ Examples of How Meaning Changes in Sarf:

1. Through Patterns (الأوزان):

- Different patterns derived from the same root create new shades of meaning.

He wrote	كَتَبَ
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He corresponded (wrote to someone)	كَاتَبَ
He asked someone to write	اسْتَكَتَبَ
Same root (ك-ت-ب), but the pattern changes the meaning.	

2. Through Roots (الجدور):

- The three root letters carry the core meaning, while patterns expand it.

He knew	عَلِمَ
Scholar (knower)	عَالِم
Known, information	مَعْلُوم
Teaching, instruction	تَعْلِيم
The root (ع-ل-م) revolves around knowledge, but sarf generates nouns, verbs, and abstract concepts from it.	

3. Through Tenses (الأزمنة):

- The same verb root changes meaning based on tense.

He helped (past)	نَصَرَ
He helps / will help (present/future)	يَنْصُرُ
A shift in time changes the scope of the action.	

4. Through Voices (المبني للمعلوم والمبني للمجهول):

- The same action can be expressed actively or passively.

Zayd wrote the letter.	كَتَبَ زَيْدُ الرِّسَالَةِ
The letter was written.	كُتِبَتِ الرِّسَالَةُ
The voice shifts focus from the doer to the action itself.	

BASIC TENSES IN ARABIC

In Arabic, verbs revolve around only two fundamental tenses:

Past Tense (الماضي)	Expresses an action that has already been completed.
Present/Future Tense (المضارع)	Expresses an action that is either ongoing now or will take place in the future.

Unlike English, which has a wide variety of tenses (past perfect, present continuous, future progressive, etc.), *Arabic condenses all actions into these two essential time frames*. Other meanings such as command, prohibition, habitual actions, or continuous states are conveyed through context, particles, and derived forms, *not through separate tenses*.

From a grammatical perspective, it makes sense to begin with the past tense. This is because the past tense verb in Arabic is the most straightforward because:

- It has a fixed, predictable pattern.
- Its endings are stable and clear.
- It is easier to conjugate across different pronouns (ضمائر) before moving on to the more fluid present tense system.

Note: Arabic does not have separate tenses for “future” or “continuous” as in English. These meanings are understood through context or additional particles (e.g., سوف, س).