

**A Linguistic Comparison of Appropinquation Verbs in English and Arabic: Structure, Meaning, and Usage**  
**Assistant professor :Faiza Qanbar Ali**

Al -Mustansiriyah University : College of Political Sciences  
International Relations Department  
[faizaqanbar1970@gmail.com](mailto:faizaqanbar1970@gmail.com)  
07730367773

**Abstract**

This study presents a contrastive analysis of appropinquation verbs in Arabic and English. Appropinquation verbs, a well-defined grammatical category in Arabic grammar (أفعال المقاربة), express concepts of temporal imminence, inception, and hopeful expectation. The research investigates the significant typological differences between the two languages: Arabic employs a closed set of synthetic verbs with specific syntactic constraints, requiring a subject in the nominative and a predicate in the accusative case (typically a present tense verb). Since English has no direct grammatical counterpart, it instead uses a variety of multi-word expressions to convey similar meanings, such as the modal phrase 'be about to,' the phrasal verb 'set about,' and catenative verbs like 'begin. The results show that Arabic and English convey proximity in distinct ways: Arabic uses morphological forms, while English uses phrasal structures.

The research aims to expand the body of knowledge in the field of comparative linguistics and semantics, through theoretical analysis and comparison between two linguistic systems. The results of this theoretical research may lay the groundwork for subsequent applied research, such as developing materials for teaching Arabic or English to learners, improving machine translation tools. This study adopts a descriptive-contrastive approach to examine syntactic and semantic differences between Arabic and English appropinquation constructions.”

• **Keywords** : appropinquation verbs , Contrastive analysis, Arabic and English, Comparative linguistics, Grammatical category

## 1- Introduction

**A comparative descriptive linguistics**, of verbal systems across languages provide valuable information both universal and language-specific aspects of human cognition and grammatical structure. Although English and Arabic share the use of verbs to describe motion, there are substantial differences in their linguistic structures and cultural contexts. (Talmy,2000)

This study investigates a fascinating class of verbs referred to as appropinquation **verbs**—a grammatical class that expresses concept of proximity, hope, and inception (Wright 2007pp106). These verbs provide an intriguing for contrast between two linguistically distinct systems: English as a Germanic language with relatively analytical characteristics and Arabic as a semitic language with rich morphological complexity.

The term "appropinquation" describes verbs that denote the **proximity of an event** or the **inception of an action** (Wright 1967,106). While Arabic grammar traditionally identifies and categorizes these verbs as a distinct class, English lacks an exact equivalent category, instead employing various **periphrastic constructions** and **phrasal verbs** to express similar semantic concepts.

### 1.1 Research Problem

The main issue is a basic difference in language structure: Arabic has a specific set of verbs (*af'āl al-muqāraba*) for expressing imminence, inception, and expectation, on the other hand. English doesn't have a direct equivalent, instead relying on various phrases like modal phrases or verb combinations. This asymmetry complicates systematic comparison, translation, and pedagogical explanation between the two languages.

### 2.1 Research Questions

1. How do the structural patterns of appropinquation verbs differ in English and Arabic?
2. What are the semantic differences and similarities in the usage of appropinquation verbs in both languages?

### 3. 1 Scope and Limitations

• **Scope:** The analysis is confined to a theoretical contrastive study of **Modern Standard Arabic** and **contemporary Standard English**.

• **Limitations:**

It is a qualitative, theory-based analysis using illustrative examples rather than a quantitative corpus study.

It focuses on core morphosyntax and semantics, not an exhaustive account of pragmatics or all idiomatic variants.

## 2. Arabic appropinquation verbs

In Arabic grammar, appropinquation verbs are grouped into three distinct subcategories based on their meaning and functions. Al-Raji (1998: 136) & Al-Samarrai, 2007: 293)

• **Verb of Verbs of proximity** like "kaad(a), 'awshak(a), karab(a)" mean "to be on the verge of" or "to be about to". They take a subordinate clause with an imperfective verb. The verb can be subjunctive (with 'an "أن") or indicative (without 'an). Using 'an is optional, less common with kaad and karab.) as shown in sentences (1) (Wright 1967,106)

(1a) kaad(a) ('a)l-waqt(u) yanqadee (Verb - Subject – Verb)

the time is almost up

b) 'awshak(a) ('a)l-matar(u) 'an yahtil(a) Verb - Subject - Infinitival Phrase)

the rain is about to fall.

a nominal sentence (comprises a subject (*ism Kāda* — a noun or implied pronoun) and a predicate (*khobar Kāda*). The predicate is specifically distinguished by beginning with a verb in the imperfect tense.) (Al-Hashimi, n.d., p. 151).

tc) karaba al marīdu yushfā.

The patient starts to heal (restore)

• **verbs of hope( afḡāl ar rajā)** These verbs mean that the action included in the verbal predicate sentence. This subgroup includes "asaa, Haraa, and 'ikhlawlaq(a). All these verbs convey expectation about the predicate happening, and each can take a subordinate clause with 'an (أن) as (2a-c) show , although 'an" is optional with asaa (Al-Raji 1998,138)

2a) "asaa rabbu-kum 'an yarhama-kum

May your Lord (God) pardon you

b) ḥarâ as samâ'u an tumtira

**The sky was about to rain**

ḥarâ is seldom used in contemporary Modern Standard Arabic.

c) ikhlawlaqa al jâwwu an yaḡtadila

It is hoped that peace spread on the earth.

• **Verb of inception** shows that the subject started doing the action in the predicate of six verbs /bada'a, akhadha, haraḡa, jaḡala/, tafiqā, ansha'a they mean to start or to set about( as shown in sentences (3)

3a) kaada at tâlibu yaktubu

The student started to write

b) jaḡala al ustādhu yashraḡu ad darsa

The teacher started to explain the lesson

c) /ansha'a al muḥāsibu yaḡuddu an nuqūda

The accountant started to count the money  
d) tafiqa al waraqu yasqutu min ash shajari.

The leaf starts to fall from the tree

These verbs are normally followed by verbs in the present tense to show the idea that someone started doing an action. They are typically in the past tense, whereas the subsequent verb is required to be in the present tense. (Sawaie, 2014, p. 8)

### 3. English appropinquation verbs

English does not have a specific grammatical category that directly corresponds to Arabic appropinquation verbs, but it uses various linguistic means to convey

- **English modal constructions** like *be going to*, *be about to*, and *be on the verge of* functionally resemble Arabic verbs of temporal proximity, despite lacking a direct structural equivalent. (Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus, n.d.)

- **Verbal inceptives** are formed from verb roots, and indicate the beginning of an action as *set out to* and *launch into*, paralleling to Arabic inception verbs, though they typically require infinitive or gerund complements rather than specialized syntax. (Anonymous. (n.d.). Verbal inceptives in Elvish)

- **English Phrasal Verbs:** Phrasal verbs like **get around to** and **set about** express concepts of approaching or initiating actions, paralleling Arabic appropinquation verbs, though they use verb-particle constructions.

Arabic uses specific verb forms and constructions to convey temporal closeness where as English employs a range of constructions, including phrasal verbs, modal constructions, and adverbs, as illustrated in the table below :

Table(1) Comparison of Arabic Appropinquation Verbs and Their English Equivalent

Arabic Verb	Literal Meaning	English Equivalent	Semantic Type
(kāda)	to be about to	be about to, be on the verge of	Temporal closeness
(awshaka)	to be imminent	be likely to, be apt to	Temporal closeness
(‘asā)	to hope that	hope to, may	Hopeful

Arabic Verb	Literal Meaning	English Equivalent	Semantic Type
			expectation
(akhadha)	to take up	begin to, start to	Inception
(shara'a)	to commence	set about, proceed to	Inception
(ja'ala)	to make/set about	start to, get to	Inception

#### 4. Comparison Analysis of Appropinquation Verbs in English and Arabic

##### 4.1 Structural comparison

In Arabic syntactic analysis, **verbs of inception/beginning**, are typically constructed as verbal sentences, featuring a verb in the imperfect tense. This verb may be preceded by the subjunctive particle 'anna', thereby rendering it subjunctive. Notwithstanding the apparent verb-initial structure, the sentence is, in fact, nominal, with the subject (mubtada') being either implicit or explicitly stated as a noun.. (Wright ,1981)( Sentence 4)

an-nisā'u akhadhna yu'tiqna 'abīdahunna wa yatazawwajnahunna

**The women began to liberate their slaves and wed them.**

Yusuf (n.d.) noted that Appropinquation verbs introduce complexity in Arabic syntax due to their flexible word orders and agreement patterns (p. 7). For instance sentence with kaada , the subject may precede or follow the main verb :

**Subject -first pattern :** Kadaa al-Mu'allim yashrah al-dars)

The teacher was about to explain the lesson.

**Verb -first pattern :** Kadaa yashrah al-Mu'allim al-dars

Was about to explain the teacher the lesson.

##### 4.2 English syntactic strategies

English uses various syntactic mechanisms to express similar semantic content, including:

- **Catenative Constructions** denote syntactic patterns in which a verb (e.g., *begin, start*) functions as a link that can be recursively followed by another verb. This creates a verbal chain, such as "*begin to think.*" The verb that follows the catenative may appear in several non-finite forms, including

the **to-infinitive**, the **bare infinitive**, or the **gerund/present participle**. (Leech et al. (2009)

He started writing/ to write the story.

• **Complex Auxiliary Phrases:** are verb phrases that consist of a main verb combined with one or more auxiliary verbs, forming a structure that conveys nuanced meanings. such as "is going to have started working." These multi-word verb phrases allow for precise aspectual distinctions similar to those conveyed by Arabic appropinquation verbs but through different structural means.

A key difference between Arabic appropinquation verbs and their English equivalents lies in their complementation patterns. While Arabic appropinquation verbs take a present tense verb in the accusative case as their predicate, English equivalents typically take infinitival complements (e.g., "start to do") or gerundial complements (e.g., "start doing"), with subtle aspectual differences between these constructions.

**Table2: Syntactic Properties of Appropinquation Expressions in Arabic and English**

Syntactic Property	Arabic Pattern	English Pattern	Linguistic Implications
<b>Subject Position</b>	Flexible (pre- or post-verbal)	Generally pre-verbal	Arabic shows unusual word order flexibility
<b>Agreement Patterns</b>	Asymmetrical/defective	Full agreement	Arabic exhibits special agreement properties
<b>Complement Type</b>	Present tense verb (accusative)	Infinitive or gerund	Different structural requirements
<b>Argument Structure</b>	Complex predicate	Catenative/raising	Varied syntactic analysis
<b>Negation Placement</b>	Pre-verbal negation particles	Auxiliary negation	Different scope possibilities

## Conclusion

1. Arabic appropinquation verbs form a distinct class with specific syntactic requirements, whereas English expressions are more varied and distributed across different grammatical elements.

2. English uses a range of constructions, from fully grammaticalized (be about to) to lexical verbs (begin) to idiomatic phrasal verbs (get started on), to express similar concepts.

## References

1. Al-Hashimi, (n.d.) **A. The Basic Rules of the Arabic Language**. Dar Al-Kutub Al-Ilmiyah, Beirut, Lebanon.
2. Al-Rajih, (1998) **A. Applied Syntax**. 2nd Edition. Dar Al-Ma'rafah Al-Jami'ah.
3. Al-Samarrai, F. S. (2007). **Meanings of Syntax. Vol.1**. (1st ed.). Beirut: Lebanon: Dar Ihea" a Al-Turath Al Arabi.
4. Aziz, Y.Y. (1989). **A Contrastive Grammar of English and Arabic**. Mosul: University of Mosul Press.
5. Bassiouney, R., & Katz, E. G. (2012). **Arabic language and linguistics**. Georgetown University press. Washington, DC.
6. Bucklly, R. (2004). **Modern Literary Arabic A Reference Grammar**. Beirut: Libraire du Liban.
7. Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus (n.d.).
8. El-Hamadi, Y., El-shinawi, M. M., & Ata, M. S. (1995). **The Basic Rules of Syntax and Morphology**. General Authority for Government Printing Affairs.
9. Leech, G.; Hundt, M.; Mair, C.; & Smith, N. (2009). **Change in Contemporary English: A Grammatical Study**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
10. Sawaie, M. (2014). **Fundamentals of Arabic grammar**. Routledge.
11. Talmy, T. (2000). **Toward a Cognitive Semantics: Volume 1: Conceptual Structure, Grammar, and Event Structure**. MIT Press.
12. Wright, W. (1981). **A Grammar of the Arabic Language**, translated from the German of Caspari, and edited with numerous additions; revised by W. Robertson Smith and M. J. De Goeje. Beirut: Librairie du Liban.

مقارنة لغوية لأفعال التقريب في الإنجليزية والعربية  
البنية والمعنى والاستخدام

ا.م. فايزة قنبر علي

جامعة المستنصرية: كلية العلوم السياسية / قسم العلاقات الدولية

[faizaqanbar1970@gmail.com](mailto:faizaqanbar1970@gmail.com)

07730367773

مستخلص البحث:

يُقدم هذا البحث دراسة مقارنة لأفعال المقاربة في اللغتين العربية والإنجليزية. تعبر أفعال المقاربة في النحو العربي، عن مفاهيم الاقتراب الزمني والبدء والتوقع الأمل. يُركز البحث على الفروق الجوهرية بين اللغتين: فالعربية تستخدم مجموعة مغلقة من الأفعال التركيبية ذات القيود النحوية المحددة، التي تتطلب فاعلاً في حالة الرفع وخبراً في حالة النصب (عادةً ما يكون الفعل المضارع). بينما تستخدم الإنجليزية تعبيرات متعددة الكلمات مثل 'be about to' و 'set about' و 'begin' تظهر النتائج أن العربية والإنجليزية تعبران عن القرب بطرق متميزة: العربية تستخدم الأشكال الصرفية، بينما الإنجليزية تستخدم هياكل الجمل. يهدف هذا البحث إلى توسيع المعرفة في مجال اللغويات المقارنة وعلم الدلالة، من خلال التحليل النظري والمقارنة بين نظامين لغويين، دون الهدف الفوري من تطبيق هذه النتائج لحل مشكلة عملية في العالم الواقعي. قد تضع نتائج هذا البحث النظري الأساس لبحث تطبيقي لاحق، مثل تطوير مواد لتعليم العربية أو الإنجليزية للمتعلمين، وتحسين أدوات الترجمة الآلية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أفعال المقاربة، التحليل المقارن، العربية، الإنكليزية التحليل اللغوي، الفئة النحوية