



Remarks on the Origin of the Classical Arabic Future Mark *sawfa/sa-* from Related Semitic Roots. A Linguistic Innovation?

Comentários sobre a origem da partícula proclítica sawfa/sa da língua árabe clássica, a partir das partículas semíticas relacionadas às raízes semíticas. Uma inovação linguística?

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Abstract: This survey is an attempt to reconsider the origin of the Classical Arabic invariable proclitic particles *sawfa* and *sa-* marking the future tense with the imperfect form *yaf'alu*. Classical Arabic is the only Semitic language using two particles to indicate the future, with the exception of the Modern Arabic dialects and the Modern Neo-Aramaic varieties. Due to the historical linguistic contacts with other Semitic languages like Aramaic, Classical Arabic developed a new particle to express the future tense, as a linguistic innovation. The paper demonstrates that *sa-* is not a reduced form of *sawfa*, but a native Arabic abbreviated form to stress the future; by contrast, *sawfa* is a loan that entered Arabic and was juxtaposed with *sa-* as a borrowed particle.

Keywords: arabic; semitic; future tense; proclitic particle.

Resumo: Este artigo é uma tentativa de reexaminar a origem das partículas proclíticas invariável *sawfa* e *sa-* usadas na língua árabe clássica com a forma verbal do imperfeito *yaf'alu* para indicar o futuro. O árabe clássico é a única língua semítica que usa duas partículas para indicar o futuro, com exceção dos dialetos árabes modernos e das línguas neoaramaicas. Graças aos contatos linguísticos e históricos com outras línguas semíticas, como o aramaico, o árabe clássico desenvolveu uma nova partícula para expressar o futuro, como uma inovação linguística. Este artigo demonstra que *sa-* não é uma forma reduzida da *sawfa*, mas uma forma abreviada e originária da língua árabe clássica empregada para enfatizar o futuro. Por outro lado, *sawfa* é um empréstimo introduzido em árabe como uma partícula que foi juxtaposta a *sa-*.

Palavras-chave: árabe; semítico; futuro; partícula proclítica.

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1 Introduction¹

The Future tense in Classical Arabic is expressed by the invariable proclitic particles *sawfa* or *sa-*, with the imperfect indicative verb *yaf'alu* (lit. “he does”).

The use of *sawfa* or *sa-* is recognized as a supplemental form of *yaf'alu*, as without these particles it can express the future, like the parallel West Semitic prefixed verbal forms.

Arabic grammarians debated whether there is a difference in meaning between the two forms. M. Cohen observes that *sa-* expresses a near future and *sawfa* a common future².

As a rule, the form *sawfa/sa-* + *yaf'alu* indicates the future tense and more precisely, in the words of M.S. Howell, the two particles are “called *p.* of *amplification*; but *p.* of *futurity* is better [...]. The meaning of *amplification* is *widening*; for this *p.* transports the *v.* form from the narrow time, vid. the present, to the wide time, vid. the future” (Howell, 1880, p. 610, § 578).

The particle *sawfa* seems to indicate *one day* or *later once*, as H. Reckendorf³ points out.

¹ For the transcription of the varieties of epigraphic Aramaic, Phoenician-Punic and Biblical Hebrew we use the transliteration adopted by *SBL Handbook*, p. 26. For the transcription of Biblical Aramaic we follow Rosenthal (2006, p. 11 for the consonants, and 14-6 for the vowels). Syriac Aramaic is transcribed by the ancient and classical variety of 'Estrangēlā script following *SBL Handbook*, p. 26 for the consonants, whereas the vowels are not written, but they are marked in the transcription using the East Syriac vocalic system. The transcription of Syriac Aramaic vowels and fricative consonants follows that of Muraoka (2005, p. 4-7). The Romanization of Arabic is based on The Hans Wehr transliteration system (Wehr, 1976, p. VIII-XV).

² Cohen, 1924, p. 249: “*sa-* exprimerait, suivant certains, un future prochain, *sawfa* un future ordinaire”.

³ Reckendorf, 1921, p. 13, § 8: “das aber immer die stärkere Bedeutung “dereinst”, “später einmal”, “zu haben scheint”.

So the questions are why Classical Arabic needed these particles to mark a future tense or aspect, assuming that other cognate Semitic languages express it by the simple prefixed verbal form, and how *sawfa/sa-* was generated.

2 The Future in Semitic

As is well known, the Common Semitic verbal system consists of two forms inflected for person by means of a set of prefixes and suffixes; the semantic distinction between these forms revolves around the question of whether the verbal system in Semitic languages is tense-oriented or aspect-oriented. Unlike the Arab grammarians, who did not show interest in drawing a comparison between Arabic grammar and other Semitic sister languages, for Western scholars it is difficult to identify a partial correspondence between the tenses in Semitic and in Indo-European languages, as Cohen points out⁴.

The explanation of the original function of the tenses in Semitic presents complicated and disputed problems. According to the traditional approach, West-Semitic languages, and of course Arabic, exhibit two forms or conjugations, *yaqtulu* (lit. “he kills”) and *qatala* (lit. “he killed”), called tenses, but this nomenclature is inappropriate and it would be more appropriate to refer to aspects (Moscatti, 1980, p. 131). In fact, it seems that in the Semitic languages the tenses do not express the degree of the tenses (past, present, future), but the aspect of the action⁵.

Brockelmann is of the opinion that Proto-Semitic had only one verbal form, *yaqtul*, indifferent of time distinctions. Later a new form, the suffixed *qatal-*, emerged from the nominal clause indicating the present in East-Semitic and the perfect in West-Semitic⁶.

The reconstructed Proto-Semitic verbal system provides three finite and non-finite verb forms. Among the finite forms, the simplest is the imperative with base $C_1VC_2V_1C_3$; the other two are the short prefix

⁴ Cohen, 1924, p. 14: “un Européen qui apprend une langue sémitique s’aperçoit très vite de la difficulté qu’on éprouve à faire correspondre ce qu’on appelle les “temps” sémitiques avec les “temps” de nos grammaires”.

⁵ Haelewyck, 2016, p. 126: “...il semble que dans les langues sémitiques les “temps” n’exprimaient pas – du moins pas en premier lieu – les degrés relatifs du temps (passé, présent, future), mais l’aspect de l’action”.

⁶ *Grundriss*, II, p. 145-146.

conjugation, $C_1C_2V_1C_3$, unmarked for tense, aspect and mood, and the long prefix conjugation, $C_1aC_2V_2C_3$, marked for imperfectivity or non-anteriority (see Huehnergard, 2019, p. 62), whereas among the non-finite forms there is the verbal adjective denoting the result of the verbal action and having the base $*CaCVC$ (see Huehnergard, 2019, p. 63). This pattern takes on the enclitic subject pronouns creating a perfective verb for stative roots. Akkadian shows this original pattern, *paras, paris, parus* (3rd person), used with substantives, adjectives and verbs: *zika* (noun) “man”, *zika* (stative, permansive, 3rd person singular) “he is a man”, *zika-āku* “I am man” (with the 1st personal pronoun *anāku* “I”)⁷. Furthermore, the reconstructed Semitic original verbal system is based on three main patterns (Haelewyck, 2016, p. 130-131):

- (1) a. **yāqtul*, a short form expressing a punctual event (perfective);
- b. **yaqtulu*, expressing an incomplete situation (imperfective);
- c. **qatVl*, a suffixed form, with enclitic personal pronouns, indicating a state, stative or permansive.

In Semitic the ‘idea’ of the future is expressed by the prefixed form $y-C_1-C_2-V-C_3$; so, by the present or imperfect pattern. In Akkadian the present expresses the durative corresponding to both present and future: *išappar* “he is sending”, or “he will send”, depending on the situation (Ungnad, 1992, p. 63, § 55a). In other Semitic languages the prefixed-imperfect form also expresses the future.

Old Aramaic (Sefire Inscription⁸ III, 20; Gibson, 1975, p. 49)

(2)	<i>hn</i>	<i>hšb</i>	<i>zy</i>	<i>l-y</i>	<i>'hšb</i>	[<i>zy</i>]	[<i>l-h</i>]
	if	he returned	which (is)	to me	1SG-return-IPFV	which (is)	to him
‘If he has returned mine, I shall return [his]’							

⁷ This ‘stative’ conjugation has long been identified in Akkadian, Egyptian and Berber, e.g. Akkadian 1st pers. *pars-a:ku*, 2nd m. *pars-a:ta*, 2nd f. *pars-a:ti* = Egyptian 1st *šdm-kw*, 2nd *šdm-tj* = Berber 1st *māttit-āš*, 2nd *māttit-ət* and so forth (Gragg, 2019, p. 33-34).

⁸ It is a stele carved in the shape of a truncated pyramid and belonging to the mid 8 century B.C. The steles of Sefire constitute the fundamental *corpus* of Old Aramaic.

Phoenician (Krahmalkov, 2001, p. 184)

(3)	'dm...	'š	ymḥ	šm	'zwd	b-š'r	z...
	person	who	3M.SG- erase- IPFV	name	Aztwadda	from-gate	this
'A person who shall erase the name of Aztwadda from this gate'							

w-ys'	h-š'r	z...	w-yp'l	l-š'r	z
and-3M.SG-tear out- IPFV	the gate	this	and-3M.SG- make-IPFV	for-gate	this
and shall tear out this gate and shall make for it another gate'					

Punic (Krahmalkov, 2001, p. 184)

(4)	<i>Neste</i>	<i>ien.</i>	<i>Neste</i>	<i>dum</i>	<i>et.</i>	<i>Al.</i>	<i>Anec</i>	<i>este</i>	<i>mem!</i>
	1PL- drink- IPFV	wine	1PL- drink- IPFV	blood	together with	not	I	1SG- drink- IPFV	water
'We shall drink wine. We shall drink the blood of the wine. No! I shall drink water!'									

In Biblical Hebrew the prefix conjugation represents the future as a logical consequence of some expressed or unexpressed situation:

(Ps 15:5)

(5)	'ōšēh	'ēlleh	lō	yîmōt	lə-'ōlām
	he is doing- PTCP	these	not	3M.SG-shake- IPFV ⁹	for-ever
'He who does these things will never be shaken'					

In the Biblical Aramaic of Daniel the prefix conjugation expresses the simple future in at least 47 instances. According to Li, a simple future refers to the “predict actions or event after the moment of speech without any other explicit modal implications” (2009, p. 100):

(Dan 2:39)

(6)	dī	tišlaṭ	bə-qāl	'ar'ā'
	which	3F.SG-rule-IPFV	in-over	earth
'Which will rule over the whole earth'				

⁹ It is the *nip'al* (passive) form of the root *mwṭ*.

In Syriac Aramaic the imperfective form is rarely employed in independent clauses to indicate a future action or state. The prefix conjugation is frequently used in dependent clauses complementing another verb (Muraoka, 2005, p. 65):

(Matt. 1: 21)¹⁰

(7)	<i>geyr</i>	<i>naḥeyuhi</i>	<i>l-</i>	<i>'am-hu</i>	<i>men</i>	<i>ḥṭāhay-hon</i>
	for	3M.SG-save-IPFV	ACC	people-his	from	sins-their
'For he will save his people from their sins'						

By contrast Modern Arabic dialects, Modern Hebrew, Modern South Arabian and North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic have developed future tense markers via an auxiliary verb or grammaticalized auxiliary particle.

A future tense marker is formed by the verb *to go*, like in English *I am going*; in particular in Modern Hebrew the use of *to go* is “almost certainly a calque of English. In this case the form is grammaticalized, as it loses its basic meaning of motion, but it retains its form and inflection” (Rubin, 2005, p. 35.)¹¹:

¹⁰ The Greek *versio* of this passage also employs a future: αὐτὸς γὰρ σώσει τὸν λαὸν αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν αὐτῶν. Probably the use of the future form in Biblical Greek is due to a Semitic influence; some passages of the New Testament reflect a *servile* translation of a Hebrew imperfect verbal form expressing the idea of a future, but it is *timeless*, i.e. it expresses a non-complete action and may refer to the present, the past and also the future. So we find: Καὶ ὅταν δώσουσιν τὰ ζῶα δόξαν translated in the English Standard Version (ESV) as “And whenever the living creatures **give** glory” (Rev. 4: 9); also: πεσοῦνται οἱ εἴκοσι τέσσαρες πρεσβύτεροι ἐνώπιον τοῦ καθημένου ἐπὶ τοῦ θρόνου, καὶ προσκυνήσουσιν τῷ ζῶντι εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων, καὶ βαλοῦσιν τοὺς στεφάνους αὐτῶν ἐνώπιον τοῦ θρόνου, λέγοντες “the twenty-four elders **fall down** before him who is seated on the throne and **worship** him who lives forever and ever. They **cast** their crowns before the throne, saying...” (Rev. 4: 10). In these passages the Greek future verbal forms may refer to perfect or imperfect actions.

¹¹ It is worth bearing in mind that in English *going to* has two functions to mark the future tense: its lexical one and its grammaticalized one. The grammaticalized form of *go* has lost its lexical use as a verb of motion, as in *I am going to sit here all day*, that is different from *I am going to the store* (Rubin, 2005, p. 4).

Modern Hebrew (Rubin, 2005, p. 35)

(8)	<i>'ani</i>	<i>holex</i>	<i>la-xanut</i>
	I	am going-PTCP	to-store
	'I am going to the store'		

Some Modern Arabic dialects, for example Lebanese, Syrian, Egyptian, Iraqi, uses the grammaticalized active participle *rā'ih*, from the verb *rāḥ* “to go, to leave”; whereas other dialects employ the participle form *gādi* and the short form *gā* (from Classical Arabic *gādā* “to go away”) or *māšī* (from the verb *mašā* “to go”) as in Moroccan and Tunisian Arabic.

Egyptian Arabic (Rubin, 2005, p. 35)

(9)	<i>huwwa</i>	<i>ḥa-yiktib</i>	<i>il-gawāb</i>
	He	FUT-3M.SG-write-IPFV	the letter
	'He's going to write the letter'		

Moroccan Arabic (Rubin, 2005, p. 35)

(10)	<i>aš</i>	<i>gādi</i>	<i>nelbes ?</i>
	What	am going-PTCP	1SG- wear-IPFV
	'What am I going to wear?'		

Tunisian Arabic (Rubin, 2005, p. 36)

(11)	<i>māšī</i>	<i>imūt</i>	<i>bə-žžū'</i>
	going-PTCP	3M.SG-die-IPFV	with-hunger
	'He's gonna die of hunger'		

Another tense marker used is the verb referring to *to want*, like the English *will*; the particles *bā-* and *b(i)-* are attested, whose derive from the imperfect Classical Arabic *bagā* “to want”, introducing an imminent future. These particles are used, for instance, by Kuwaiti Arabic or Northern Yemeni Arabic¹².

Kuwaiti Arabic (Durand, 2018, p. 377)

¹² For detailed examples of the usage of these two tense markers, see Rubin, 2005, p. 34-38.

¹³ Durand's original translation in French is “il va y aller”. For the English translation of the Quran, we will follow the Salih International Translation.

(12)	<i>b-īrūḥ</i>
	FUT-3M.SG-go-IPFV
	‘He will go’ ¹³

Northern Yemeni Arabic (Rubin, 2005, p. 36)

(13)	<i>bā-yahabūlla-nā</i>
	FUT-3M.PL-give-IPFV-us
	‘They will give us’

3 The Future in Arabic

According to Arabic grammarians the verb expresses events and time. In the Arabic grammar tradition the concept of past and future seems to be solid, but the present is considered harder to define. As far as Ibn Ya‘īš is concerned, the present is an interval dividing the past from the future; the past precedes the time of the utterance, the future happens later than it and the present coincides with it (Šarḥ al-Mufaššal, 4, 207). This bipartite past-future system is also found in al-’Astarābādī (Šarḥ al-Kāfiya, 4, 12) and al-Zajjājī (’Īdāḥ, 1959, 86-87 ff)¹⁴.

According to Sībawayhi, there are three verbal forms: *fa‘ala* indicating the past, *if‘al* and *yaf‘alu* expressing the future, but also the present¹⁵. However, in his work, Sībawayhi later reports that in Arabic we find two times: the past, *fa‘ala*, and the future, *sa-yaf‘alu*¹⁶. The term *al-muḍāri‘* is first introduced in Chapter two of Sībawayhi’s *Kitāb: yaf‘al-V*; this pattern exhibits a final vowel like nouns, and in fact *al-muḍāri‘* means “the resembling”, i.e. the resemblance of *yaf‘alu* to the agent noun, and thus it assumes the final word declension (Marmorstein, 2016, p. 27-33).

Apart from the form *if‘al* denoting the imperative, Classical Arabic admits, as in Semitic, two patterns:

- (14) a. *fa‘ala* → past “he did”
 b. *yaf‘alu* → future/present “he will do/does”

¹⁴ He maintains that the present is the first part of the future and the future is the first part of times.

¹⁵ *Kitāb*, 1, 1.

¹⁶ *Kitāb*, 10.

The latter form is, to be exact, ambiguous: in fact while *fa'ala* is generally described as a complete or past form, it is difficult to identify or to define the real nature of *yaf'alu*. The ongoing dispute over the semantic opposition of the two primitive basic patterns continues to intrigue modern scholars (Larcher, 2012, p. 133-136).

It should be noted that the Classical Arabic verbal system can be further augmented by 'modifiers' so that the two simple finite verbal forms *fa'ala* and *yaf'alu* take the modifiers *qad*, *la-* and *sawfa/sa-* having an affirmative function and expressing "a degree of certainty or commitment with regard to the validity of the contents expressed by the verb" (Marmorstein, 2016, p. 65).

A large number of medieval Arab grammarians believes that *sawfa* and *sa-* show a semantic equality, namely *sawfa* expresses a remote future and *sa-* a near future.)¹⁷

The only one, among the Arab grammarians, who rejected this semantic distinction between *sawfa* and *sa-*, is Ibn Mālik; he argued in his *Šarḥ al-Tashīl* that

Tout cela est alors incontestable quant à la convergence de *sa-yaf'alu* et de *sawfa yaf'alu* "il fera" dans le fait d'indiquer de manière globale le future sans difference dans la proximité ou l'éloignement si ce n'est que *sa-yaf'alu* "il fera" est plus léger et que son utilisation est alors plus grande. (Sartori, 2017, p. 250)

As is well known, the modifier *sawfa/sa-* is compatible only with the form *yaf'alu* occurring in independent clauses (13), substantival clauses linked by *'anna* (15) and raising constructions (16), as Marmorstein quotes¹⁸:

¹⁷ Sartori, 2017, p. 245: "s'il est vrai que certains, explicitement ou implicitement par leurs exemples, posent une égalité sémantique entre *sa-* et *sawfa*, ils le font toutefois sans rejeter de manière explicite la possibilité que *sawfa* signifie effectivement "plus" que *sa-* dans le sens lointain > proche". See this article for detailed instances of the medieval Arab grammarians' points of view about *sawfa* and *sa-* in Classical Arabic.

¹⁸ Marmorstein, 2016, 9.17; 7.5; 8.73.

(Ta 'rīx, 1, 186)

(15)	<i>fa-yasharūna</i>	<i>min-hu</i>	<i>wa-yaqūlūna</i>	<i>ta 'malu</i>	<i>safnatan</i>	<i>fī-l-barri</i>	<i>fa-kayfa</i>
	and-3M. PL-make fun-IPFV	of-him	and-3M.PL- say-IPFV	2M.SG- work	an ark	in-the- land	and-how
'They made fun of him and said: 'You are building an ark on land, how could							

<i>tağrī</i>	<i>fa-yaqūlu</i>	<i>sawfa ta 'lamūna</i>
3F.SG-run-IPFV	and-3M.SG-say-IPFV	FUT-3M.PL-know-IPFV
it float?!' So he said: 'You will know'.		

In this passage from al-Ṭabarī there is a clear opposition between a concurrent event and a posterior one.

(Kalīla wa-Dimna, 95)

(16)	<i>wa- 'anna</i>	<i>l- 'asada</i>	<i>sa- yaḥḍaru</i>	<i>l-ṭawra</i>	<i>wa- yatahayya 'u</i>	<i>la-hu</i>
	and-what	the-lion	FUT-3M. SG-be wary-IPFV	the-ox	and-3M.SG-get prepared-IPFV	for-him
'and what the lion will be wary of the ox, and will get prepared for him'						

(Sīra, 1, 254)

(17)	<i>fa- 'in-nī</i>	<i>'arā-hu</i>	<i>sa- yağhadu</i>	<i>'an yuṣība-hu</i>	<i>mā 'aṣāba-nī</i>
	and-that- I	1SG-see- IPFV-it	FUT-3M.SG- strive-IPFV	that 3M.SG- happen-IPFV. SBJV- to him	what 3M.SG- happen-PRF- to me
'I see it (as if) he will strive so that what happened to me will happen to him'					

According to these examples, *sawfa/sa- + yaf'alu* expresses a posterior event especially with a stative verb. Marmorstein (2016, p. 86) states that "the modifier *sawfa/sa-* may be said to serve as a heavier means by which the meaning of posteriority is expressed".

In addition to the usage of this modifier, an asseverative *la-* may be prefixed to *sawfa* (18) or a verb void of government may separate *sawfa* from its verb (17):

(Quran, 93: 5)

(18)	<i>wa-la-sawfa</i>	<i>yu 'ī-ka</i>	<i>rabbu-ka</i>	<i>fa-tarḏā</i>
	and-EMPH-FUT	3M.SG-give-IPFV-you	Lord-your	and-2M.SG-satisfy-IPFV
	'And your Lord is going to give you, and you will be satisfied' ¹⁹			

(Wright II, 19B)

(19)	<i>wa-mā 'adrī</i>	<i>wa-sawfa 'iḥālu</i>	<i>'adrī</i>	<i>'a-qawmun</i>	<i>'ālu Ḥiṣnin</i>	<i>'am nisā 'u</i>
	and-not I know	and-FUT-1M.SG-think-IPFV	1M.SG-know-IPFV	if-people	tribe (of) Ḥiṣnin	or women
	'and I do not know, but I shall (I think) know, whether the family of Ḥiṣn are a band of men or women'					

The particle *sawfa/sa- + yaf'alu* could also express what is the final result of an event or what is the final conclusion after considering the relevant facts, as for instance:

(Wright II, 19A)

(20)	<i>sa-nubayyinu-hu</i>	<i>fī mawḏi 'i-hi</i>
	FUT-1PL-explain-IPFV-it	in place-its
	'we will explain it in its (proper) place'	

(Quran, 12: 98)

(21)	<i>sawfa 'astagfiru</i>	<i>la-kum</i>	<i>rabb-ī</i>
	FUT-1SG-ask forgiveness-IPFV	for-2M.PL-you	Lord-my
	'I will ask forgiveness for you from my Lord' ²⁰		

¹⁹ For the English translation of the Quran, we will follow the Salih International Translation.

²⁰ Brockelmann translates this passage "ich werde meinen Herren für euch um Verzeihung bitten" (Grundriss, II, p. 156).

(Wright II, 19A)

(22)	<i>wa-man yaf'alu</i>	<i>dālika</i>	<i>'udwānān</i>	<i>wa- zulmān</i>	<i>fa-sawfa nuṣlī-hi</i>	<i>nārān</i>
	and-who does	this	maliciously	and- wrongfully	so-FUT- IPL-burn- IPFV-him	with fire
'and whoever does this maliciously and wrongfully, we will burn him with hell-fire'						

So, in the examples (20), (21) and (22), *sawfa/sa-* has the meaning of “in the end” marking the futurity of the act, distinct from the simple form *yaf'alu*, and indicating that “in the end I will do this”, “finally, after a period of time, I will do this”.

Classical Arabic also expresses the future by means of a compound verb consisting of the auxiliary verb *kāna* “he was”, in the imperfective-prefixed form *yakūnu* “he will be/he is”, and the modified form *qad fa'ala* (i.e. the suffixed verbal form denoting a perfect tense preceded by the particle *qad* “now, already, really”) or the active participle *fā'ilan*.

It should be noted that *yakūnu* is not attested with the simple forms *fa'ala* and *yaf'alu*, as Marmorstein points out (2016, p. 69)²¹.

(Wright II, 22A)

(23)	<i>wa-'akūnu</i>	<i>qad 'istazhartu</i>	<i>li-nafs-ī</i>	<i>fi 'irāḥati</i>	<i>badan-ī</i>
	and-1SG-be- IPFV	now 1SG- seek aid-PRF	for-soul-my	in rest	(of) body-my
'I shall have provided help for myself (so as) to spare my own body'					

²¹ Differently, the verb *kāna*, in subjunctive or conditional form, could be found with *fa'ala* and *yaf'alu* as a *exposant modal* as Larcher states reporting the following examples (2012, p. 147): *'an yakūna qad iqtaraba 'aḡalu-hum* (that 3M.SG-be-IPFV-SBJV already 3M.SG-approach-PRF end-their) “qu’il se peut que leur terme se soit rapproché?”; *ḥattā takūnū 'antum taḡda'ūna* (so that 2M.PL-be-IPFV-SBJV you 2M.PL-mutilate-IPFV) “[jasqu’à ce] que ce soit vous qui les mutiliez”.

(Quran, 7: 185)

(24)	<i>wa- 'an</i>	<i>'asā 'an</i>	<i>yakūna</i>	<i>qad iqtaraba</i>	<i>'aḡalu-hum</i>
	and-that	perhaps that	3M.SG-be-IPFV.SBJV	verily 3M.SG-come near-PRF	term-their
'and that perhaps their appointed time has come near?'					

(Howell: 181, §450)

(25)	<i>'anta</i>	<i>takūnu</i>	<i>māḡidun</i>	<i>nabīlu</i>	<i>'idā tahubbu</i>	<i>šam 'alun</i>	<i>balīlu</i>
	2M.SG-you	2M.SG-be-IPFV	M.SG.PTCP-glorious-ACC	excellent	if 3F.SG-blow-IPFV	north-wind	moist
'Thou shalt be illustrious, excellent, whenever a moist north-wind shall blow'							

(Quran, 17: 25)

(26)	<i>'in takūnū</i>		<i>šālihīna</i>
	if 2M.PL-be-IPFV		M.PL.PTCP-pious-ACC
'if you should be righteous'			

Classical Arabic also employs the particle *lan*, a suppletive form of the negative *lā* that is used exclusively in the future tense. This form occurs with the subjunctive. In addition, *lan* “denotes corroboration of the negation of the future conveyed by *lā*” (Howell, 1880, p. 537, § 549).

The expression *lan yaf'ala* is not the negative twin of the verb **yaf'ala* meaning “he will do”, but according to Larcher²² (2012, p. 153) it is a modal negation meaning “I deny that he does” “” which is conform to the etymology of *lan*, i.e. a contraction for *lā 'an* “it will not be that” (Wright, I, 287C.).

²² Larcher, 2012, p. 153: “on est tenté d’y voir une negation modale de sens ‘je nie qu’il fasse’ ”.

(Quran, 9: 80)

(27)	<i>fa-lan</i>	<i>yağfira</i>	<i>Allāhu la-hum</i>
	and-NEG.FUT	3M.SG-forgive-IPFV. SBJV	Allah to-them
	'never will Allah forgive them'		

(Quran, 12: 80)

(28)	<i>fa-lan</i>	<i>'abraha</i>	<i>l-'arḍa</i>
	and-NEG.FUT	1SG-leave-IPFV.SBJV	the-land
	'So I will never leave [this] land'		

It has been noticed that it is not possible to employ two expressions of future, as shown in (29) and (30):

(29)	<i>*sawfa</i>	<i>lan</i>	<i>yaf'ala</i>
	FUT	NEG.FUT	3M.SG-do-IPFV.SBJV
	'he will not do'		

(30)	<i>*lan</i>	<i>sa-yaf'alu/a</i>	
	NEG.FUT	FUT-3M.SG-do-IPFV/SBJV	
	'he will not do'		

Differently *lā* can combine with *sawfa*, but not with the particle *sa-*; this is an alternative analytic realization of future:

(Fassi-Fehri, 1993, p. 82)

(31)	<i>sawfa</i>	<i>lā yaḥḍuru</i>
	FUT	NEG-3M.SG-come-IPFV
	'He will not come'	

(Benmamoun, 2000, p. 101)

(32)	<i>*al-ṭullābu</i>	<i>lā</i>	<i>sa-yaḍhabūna</i>
	the-students	NEG	FUT-3M.PL-go-IPFV
	'The students will not go'		

Since *lā* can only combine with *sawfa*, this seems to indicate that the particle *sa-* is not the abbreviated form of *sawfa*.

As regards the negation of the past future, Classical Arabic uses

lā before the imperfective verbal form or *mā* before the perfective verbal form (Veccia Vaglieri, 1996, I, p. 124, § 257.). Consider for instance, examples (33) and (34):

(33)	<i>lā yakūnu</i>	<i>qad fa'ala</i>
	NEG-3M.SG-be-IPFV	verily 3M.SG-do-PRF
	'he will not have done'	

(34)	<i>yakūnu qad</i>	<i>mā fa'ala</i>
	3M.SG-be-IPFV-verily	NEG-3M.SG-do-PRF
	'he will not have done'	

It is worth bearing in mind that the only way to negate future copular sentences is by using the copular verb *kāna* “he was”:

(Benmamoun, 2000, p. 98)

(35)	<i>lan</i>	<i>yakūna</i>	<i>sahlān</i>
	NEG	3M.SG-be-IPFV/SBJV	easy
	'It won't be easy'		

To recap, the behaviour of the future forms we need to capture is summarised as follows:

(36)		Affirmative form	Negative form
	Imperfective	<i>yaf'alu</i>	<i>lan yaf'ala</i>
	<i>sawfa/sa- yaf'alu</i> <i>sawfa lā yaf'alu</i>		
	Perfective	<i>yakūnu qad fa'ala</i>	<i>lā yakūnu qad fa'ala</i> <i>yakūnu qad mā fa'ala</i>

Aside from Classical Arabic, the linguistic situation is different in the Arabic dialects where the aspectual/temporal opposition, *fa'ala/yaf'alu*, is marked by means of prefixed particles of non-verbal origin. In particular, the form *yaf'alu* assumes a precise aspectual/temporal meaning. The sedentary dialect of Damascus is a case in point:

- (37) a. *b-yəktob* “he writes”
b. *'am-yəktob* “he is writing”

- c. *rāḥ-yaktob* “he will write”
 d. *yaktob* “[that] he write”

In this dialect the future is expressed by the particle *rāḥ-*, a short form of the active participle *rā'ih* from the verb *rāḥ* “to go”. This kind of marking the future by means of a ‘constructed form’ is typical of all Arabic dialects, as stated above, as well as of other non-Semitic languages²³.

It is interesting that the negation particle of the future *lan* is disappeared in the modern Arabic dialects, so only the particle *mā* is used.

4 The Origin of *sawfa/sa-*

W. Wright (I, 361D) points out that *sawfa* is an adverb meaning “in the end”, as in Hebrew *sōf*, and *sa-* is its abbreviation, but he does not explain their etymology. A. Barthélemy (1921, p. 44-45) claims that *sa-* is fundamentally different from the adverb *sawfa* and originates from a verb of ‘intention’²⁴; So, according to him, this verb is *sa'ā, yas'ū*, related to *sa'ā, yas'ā* “to run” and *sa'ā, yas'ā* “to make an effort, to intend”²⁵.

In the medieval lexica there are signs of reduced forms resembling the variant patterns found in the modern dialectal prefixes. These common variants are *saf, saw, say, sā* (See Lane, 1863, p. 1469). According to Medieval Arabic lexica the original meaning of the root *s-w-f, sāfa, yasūfu* or *yasāfu* is “to smell”; Lane reports that *sāfa al-šay'* means “he smelled the thing”, referring to the place of smelling of the guides (in the desert for example) so that they can know whether it be far or near. This means that “the guide smells the dust of the place wherein he is; and if he smell the odour of urine and dung of camels, he knows that he [or some other] has traversed it” (Lane, 1863, p. 1470).

²³ In particular, in Modern Greek the future tense is marked by the invariable particle $\theta\alpha$, a radically reduced form of the Classical Greek verb $\theta\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\epsilon\iota\nu$ “to want, wish”. So, $\theta\alpha \gamma\rho\acute{\alpha}\varphi\omega$ “I will write” < $\theta\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\omega \gamma\rho\acute{\alpha}\varphi\epsilon\iota\nu$ “I want to write” (See Psicharis 1884, Meillet 1912, among others). Another good example is the Romance future tense that originated from the phonetic reduction and agglutination of the following auxiliary verb “to have”, in the present tense, to the infinitive. Consider: Italian *verrà*, French *viendra*, Portuguese *virei*, Spanish *vendrá* “he will come” < **veni'ra* < Latin *venire* + *habet* (Cf. Maiden, 2011, p. 264-265).

²⁴ Barthélemy, 1921, p. 45: “me paraît se rattacher à un verbe d'intention”.

²⁵ An original related root exists in Afro-Asiatic languages. This is **saw-/su'* - “to go, run”, Akkadic *ša'u*, Semitic **šV'Vw* (*HSED*, 2207).

Although Lane's efforts to explain the meaning "to smell" of the root *s-w-f* are substantial, it seems that the root assumed this meaning later and originally took on a more general usage.

Lastly, D. J. Stewart argues that *sawfa* and its related prefix *sa-*,

derive from an auxiliary – the perfect verb *sāfa* or *sawfa*, meaning "to smell" and as an auxiliary "to go, set out" – and that the invariable particle *sawfa*, the prefix *sa-*, and variants *saw-*, *saf-*, *sā-*, and *say* result from the process of clitic reduction. (Stewart, 1998, p. 125-126)

It should be noted that evidence for Arabic became more copious towards the end of the 1st millennium B.C.E. according to the inscriptions in the Himaic, Nabataean and Safaitic scripts; these types of alphabet provide considerable information for the earliest stage of Arabic, but in the history of this language Old Arabic affords more data about Arabic features²⁶.

According to these epigraphic sources there is not clear evidence of a specific particle marking the future tense/aspect, which means that only the *yaf'alu* pattern is used.

There is no denying the fact that in the pre-Islamic era *sawfa* and *sa-* appeared for the first time; although most of the poetry of that era has not been preserved, what remains is well regarded as the finest of Arabic poetry to date²⁷. Consider, for instance, (38) and (39):

(Tarafah, 105)

(38)	<i>sa-tubdī</i>	<i>la-ka</i>	<i>al-'ayyāmu</i>	<i>mā</i>	<i>kunta</i> <i>ġāhilān</i>
	FUT-3F.SG- reveal-IPFV	to-2M.SG-you	the-days	what	2M.SG-you were unaware
‘The days will reveal to you what you didn’t know before’ ²⁸					

²⁶ The term 'Old Arabic' refers to the *corpus* of inscriptions written before the Islamic Conquest (See Macdonald 2008) For a detailed comment and bibliography of Old Arabic, see al-Jallad, 2018, p. 322-328.

²⁷ It should be noted that the very best of these early poems were collected in the 8th century as the *Mu'allaqāt*.

²⁸ Translated by Michael Sells (1986, p. 33)

(Ibn Kulṭūm, 8)

(39)	<i>wa-'inna</i>	<i>sawfa tudriku-nā</i>	<i>'al-manāyā</i>
	and-surely	FUT-3F.SG-overtake- IPFV-us	the-fates
	'Surely our allotted hour of fate will overtake us' ²⁹		

Later, the marks of the future occurred in the Holy Quran.

Thus, there are no traces of *sawfa* and *sa-* in Arabic at least until the 6th century C.E., and probably they originated during the Islamic period as a loanword from other Semitic languages. Especially in Hebrew we find the root *swp* “to have an end”, but it is considered an Aramaism³⁰.

Moreover, the varieties of Aramaic attest the root *swp*, *swp*³¹ as a substantive, mainly meaning “end”, in a spatial and chronological linguistic environment, as for instance:

Biblical Aramaic (Dan. 4:8)

(40)	<i>wa-hāzōt-ēh</i>	<i>l-sōp</i>	<i>kāl-arē'ā</i>
	and-appearance-its	to-end	(of) whole-the earth
	'its appearance was to the end of the whole earth'		

Christian Palestinian Aramaic (*DJPA*: 371a)

(41)	<i>ymwt</i>	<i>b-swp</i>	<i>byš</i>
	3M.SG-die-IPFV	with-end	bad
	'may he die with a bad end'		

Syriac (Luke 1:33)

(42)	<i>wa-l-malkūt-ēh</i>	<i>sūp</i>	<i>lā nehwe</i>
	and-for-kingdom-his	end	not-3M.SG-be-IPFV
	'and of his kingdom there shall be no end' ³²		

²⁹ Translated by William Clouston (1881, p. 67).

³⁰ Donner, 2013, p. 877, “aufhören, schwinden”, “ein Ende nehmen”. In Middle Hebrew *sph* “vernichten”, “to destroy”. It is a word belonging to later Hebrew.

³¹ Here the spirantization of /p/ >/f/ in the Hebrew and Aramaic root *swp* is not indicated in the transcriptions.

³² The English translation of the Syriac verses of the New Testament is that of the King James Version (KJV).

Syriac (Acts 1:8)

(43)	<i>wa-‘aḏammā</i>	<i>l-sawp-ēh</i>	<i>dar‘ā</i>
	and-uttermost	to-limit-his	the earth
	‘and unto the uttermost part of the earth’		

In the example (43) the KJV translation of *sawp* as “part” is referring to the meaning of “limit, end” of the earth.

It also has an adverbial/prepositional usage meaning “at the end of”, “finally, in the end”, as the following examples suggest:

Qumran Aramaic (Cook, 2015, p. 164)

(44)	<i>l-swp</i>	<i>ḥmš</i>	<i>šny’</i>	<i>’ln</i>
	to-end	five	the years	these
	‘at the end of these years’			

Jewish Babylonian Aramaic (*DJBA*, p. 796)

(45)	<i>w-l-b-swp</i>	<i>ytyb</i>	<i>b-’ymt’</i>	<i>w-ptḥ</i>	<i>b-šm ‘t’</i>
	and-to-in-end	3M.SG-seat-IPFV	in-fear	and-3M.SG-open-PRF	in-the legal tradition
	‘finally, he sat in awe and began (the discourse of) the legal tradition’				

In Biblical Hebrew the root is also used meaning “end” in spatial and chronological sense:

(Eccl. 7:2)

(46)	<i>ba-’āšer</i>	<i>hū’</i>	<i>sôp</i>	<i>kāl</i>	<i>hā-’ādām</i>
	in-that	he	end	(of) all	the-mankind
	‘for this is the end of all mankind’ ³³				

(2Chron. 20:16)

(47)	<i>û-məšā’em</i>	<i>ō’tām</i>	<i>bə-sôp</i>	<i>han-naḥal</i>
	and-2M.PL-find-PRF	ACC-them	in-end	the-valley
	‘You will find them at the end of the valley’ ³⁴			

³³ English Standard Version (ESV). Other occurrences in the Bible with the same meaning are in Eccl. 3:11; 12:13.

³⁴ English Standard Version (ESV).

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear from the examples above that the varieties of Aramaic and Biblical Hebrew³⁵ employ the root *swp* to mark a definite spatial and chronological environment where the ‘function’ of ‘end’ is to underline an action that will end in a future context. This means that probably the Aramaic root entered Arabic firstly with the meaning of “end”, as the examples (20), (21) and (22) prove; later, the Arabicized form *sawfa* was employed as a particle to highlight the future tense/aspect.

It should be noted that Classical Arabic is the only Semitic language to possess two particles to indicate the future. So, presumably, *sa-* is not a clitic or reduced form of *sawfa*, as the examples (31) and (32) show³⁶, but it may be an abbreviated pattern of a participle, possibly *sā’ir* “he is going”, from the verb *sār* “to go, to move” or it may be the abbreviation of the Arabic word *sā’ah* “hour” in the sense of “now”; in fact, the particle *sa-* is likened to Maltese *sa*³⁷, as for instance: *sa niġi miegħek* “I shall come with you”³⁸.

According to Aquilina, in the Maltese phrase *sas-sa*, meaning “till now”, the second *sa-* represents the particle at issue, but in his opinion, “I am inclined to look upon *sa* as a shortening of Italian *sino a*, ‘until, as far as’; Maltese has also *ser*, a shortening of *sejjer* < *sā’ir*, as for instance: *ser nitkellem* ‘I am going to speak’” (Aquilina, 2000, II, p. 1244-1245).

So, we can state that *sa-* is an Arabic original native dialectical particle, probably derived from the verb *sār* “to go, to move”, or from the word *sā’ah* that has the meaning of “now” (like the noun “time”). In contrast, *sawfa* is to be considered a linguistic innovation due to the historical linguistic contacts with other Semitic languages like Aramaic

³⁵ In Modern Hebrew *sōf* means “end”, and the expression *ba-sōf* “at the end”.

³⁶ Here the question is why *sa-* cannot combine with the original negative particle *lā* seeing is retained to be an abbreviated form of *sawfa*. It could be the proof that *sa-* is the original future marker and only *lan* is used to negate it; by contrast *sawfa* is considered a foreign new particle without a specific particle to negate it, but only the common Semitic *lā*, joined with *sawfa*, is used.

³⁷ Sicilian Arabic used the particle **bi-*, probably to mark the future as in the Tunisian South-East vernacular, on the border with Libya and on the isle of Djerba (La Rosa, 2019, p. 196-197).

³⁸ Probably it derives from the noun *sā’ah* “hour”, in the Romance sense of “now”, like Italian “ora vado” or Spanish “ahora voy”. See Durand, 2018, p. 378.

(Syriac?): hence in Classical Arabic there is no linguistic ‘reason’ to use two original patterns, a *plene* and its clitic form, to mark the future. Hence, it is more likely that *sa-* is a native Arabic abbreviated form to stress the future, probably for two reasons: first, if *sa-* is a reduced form of *sawfa*, there is no linguistic explanation as to why the diphthong *-aw-* has been abbreviated³⁹; second, if *sawfa* is a foreign word, as the linguistic and philological evidence implies, why did Classical Arabic need to employ a reduced form of it?

It is most plausible that, like the Arabic dialects, Classical Arabic used an ‘internal’ indigenous form. By contrast, *sawfa* is a loan (from Hebrew or Aramaic?) that entered Arabic and was juxtaposed with *sa-* as a borrowed particle.

Abbreviations

1	1 st person
2	2 nd person
3	3 rd person
ACC	accusative
EMPH	emphatic
F	feminine
FUT	future
IPFV	imperfective
M	masculine
NEG	negator
PL	plural
PRF	perfective
PTCP	participle
SBJV	subjunctive
SG	singular

³⁹ It is worth bearing in mind that in the Arabic dialects *aw* is pronounced as a monophthong /ū/ or /ō/, so it is a pure vowel and only in Classical Arabic it is rendered as a diphthong. If the Arabic dialects were firstly spoken before the advent of the Classical Arabic *fushḥā*, the abbreviation of *sawfa* presumably had to be *saw-*.

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