Journal of Foreign Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics
ISSN 2303-5528 (Print) · e-ISSN 2303-6397 (Online)
j-fltal.org/j

Volume 13 · Issue 2 · 2026
Pages 996–1004

Morphological Intelligence: How Do Arabic Patterns Convey Meaning Before Sentences Are Formed?

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Received: 22 April 2026 | **Accepted:** 31 July 2026 | **Published:** 1 November 2026

Abstract

This study examines morphological semantics in Arabic, namely the meanings conveyed by morphological patterns and forms before a word enters into a syntactic construction. It proposes the term "morphological intelligence" as a metaphorical description of the fact that the system of morphological patterns is imbued with a semantic design that precedes actual usage. Drawing on Sharḥ al-Mufaṣṣal by Ibn Yaʿīsh (d. 643 AH) and the material he transmits from Sībawayh, the study examines several morphological patterns: istafʿala, iftaʿala, afʿala, fāʿil/fāʿala, intensive forms, tafaʿʿala and tafāʿala, faʿula, ifʿalla, and infaʿala. It demonstrates how morphological forms distinguish between pairs of lexemes that are close in meaning, such as kasaba and iktasaba, taḥallama and taj āhala, and kāhil and kāhala. The study concludes that Arab grammarians and morphologists associated each pattern with a meaning specific to it, and that a morphological form provides the speaker with a prior semantic expectation, rather than an absolute determination. The actual meaning is established through the interaction of the morphological pattern with the root and the context.

Keywords: Morphological semantics; morphological patterns; Ibn Yaʿīsh; Sībawayh; Sharḥ al-Mufaṣṣal; meanings of morphological forms; morphological intelligence.

Introduction

Anyone tracing the development of Arabic linguistic studies will find that much of their attention has focused on investigating meaning within syntactic constructions: the relationship between the subject and the verb, word order, and linking particles. This is a legitimate field of inquiry. However, Arabic preserves an earlier layer that does not require a sentence to express itself: the layer of the morphological pattern itself. Anyone who hears a word formed according to the pattern iftaʿala may expect, even before knowing who performed the action and for whom, that the action may have been performed for the agent's own benefit. Likewise, anyone who hears a word on the pattern ifʿalla may expect an intensified colour or defect. This type of prior knowledge, embedded in the structure of the word before it enters a sentence, is what this study metaphorically calls "morphological intelligence." This does not mean that morphology is an entity capable of thinking; rather, it means that the system of morphological patterns carries a semantic design that precedes actual usage, resembling an internal dictionary embedded in every morphological form.

This observation has led us to formulate the following research problem: Do Arabic morphological patterns possess meanings that precede syntactic construction? How did classical morphologists express these meanings? And what are the limits of such meanings when they interact with the root and the context?

To answer these questions, we hypothesise that a morphological pattern provides the speaker with a predominant semantic expectation, and that Arab morphologists recognised this fact, associating each pattern with one or more meanings specific to it and distinguishing between patterns that are superficially similar. However, this expectation remains a possibility whose precise interpretation is determined by context; it should not be regarded as an absolute linguistic necessity.

1. Morphological Semantics and the Term “Morphological Intelligence”

Researchers maintain that the structure of a word plays an important role in determining its meaning, and that meanings emerge through the word’s structure and its various forms.[1] Morphological semantics has been defined as “the meaning expressed by the form of the word,”[2] or as the meanings derived from the morphological form. Some researchers have referred to these as “the phonetic functions of the word.”[3] Accordingly, morphological semantics refers to the meaning carried by a morphological form as a template, before that template is filled with a particular root and placed within a context.

This awareness is not a modern development. Ibn Jinnī devoted a chapter in Al-Khaṣāʾiṣ to what he called “making words correspond to the likenesses of meanings.” In this chapter, he explained, by way of illustration, that the Arabs used the pattern istafʿala primarily to express seeking or requesting, and used the repetition of the second radical in a pattern to indicate the repetition of an action, as in kassara (to break into pieces) and qaṭṭaʿa (to cut into pieces).[4] He also attributed to Sībawayh the observation that verbal nouns formed according to the pattern faʿalān express agitation and movement.[5] Among modern scholars, Fāḍil al-Sāmarrāʾī’s book Maʿānī al-Abniya fī al-ʿArabiyya represents a systematic attempt to establish connections between morphological forms and their meanings.[6]

This study proposes the term “morphological intelligence” to describe this phenomenon, while emphasising that it is a metaphor rather than an established concept in morphological scholarship. Defining it precisely requires distinguishing between two levels of meaning: a latent, potential meaning provided by the morphological form, and an actualised meaning determined when that form interacts with a particular root and a particular context.

2. The Istifʿāl Pattern: From Seeking to Transformation (The Semantics of Istafʿala)

Ibn Yaʿīsh explains that the pattern istafʿala may express transformation, as in istaḥjara al-ṭīn (the clay turned to stone), and in the verse:

“Indeed, the weak birds in our land become like eagles.”[7]

The meaning here involves a transition from one state to another: the clay becomes stone, and the weak bird becomes like an eagle in strength. Transformation, however, is not the only meaning conveyed by this pattern. In his discussion of istafʿaltu, Sībawayh mentions the meaning of finding something to possess a particular quality, as in istajadtuhu, meaning “I found it good,” and istakramtuhu, meaning “I found it noble.”[8] Ibn Jinnī also observes that this pattern is used primarily to express seeking or requesting, as in istasqā (to ask for water), istaṭʿama (to ask for food), and istawhaba (to ask for a gift).[9]

The same pattern, therefore, carries at least three meanings: seeking or requesting, transformation, and finding something to possess a particular quality. What these meanings have in common is that, in each case, the agent is oriented towards something or towards a state that they seek or come to attain. Perhaps this orientation towards a goal explains why context alone can determine which of the three meanings is intended. When the verb is associated with something denoting food or drink, as in istasqā, the meaning of seeking or requesting is favoured. When it is associated with a substance or an entity, as in istaḥjara and istan sara, the

meaning of transformation is favoured. This provides an early example of a point to which we shall return in the discussion: the morphological pattern offers the speaker a limited set of possibilities, while context determines which interpretation is most likely.

3. The Iftiʿāl Pattern: When the Agent Performs the Action for Their Own Benefit

Ibn Yaʿīsh explains that the predominant meaning of iftaʿala is that of taking or adopting something for oneself. He states: “It is said ishtawā al-qawmu al-laḥma when people prepare meat by roasting it for themselves. As for shaw aytu, it is like saying that I cooked the meat until it was done.”[10] The distinction is subtle: shaw aytu describes a practical action, namely cooking meat over a fire until it is done, whereas ishtawaytu additionally indicates that the roasting was performed for the agent’s own benefit. Thus, the agent in shawā may be a cook preparing food for someone else, whereas the agent in ishtawā is someone cooking for themselves. This additional meaning does not arise from the syntactic construction but from the morphological pattern.

Ibn Yaʿīsh also transmits from Sībawayh a more subtle distinction between the pair kasaba and iktasaba: “As for kasabtu, it means that I acquired or obtained something; as for iktasabtu, it denotes undertaking an action and making an effort to obtain something.”[11] Lisān al-ʿArab confirms this distinction, also attributing to Sībawayh the view that kasaba means “to acquire,” whereas iktasaba means “to act, exert oneself, and make an effort.”[12] This distinction is also connected with the Qur’anic verse: “It shall have the reward of what [good] it has earned, and it shall bear the consequence of what [evil] it has acquired.”[13] Lisān al-ʿArab explains the use of iktasabat in relation to wrongdoing by noting that the commission of an evil deed involves greater force than the performance of a good deed. Consequently, the expression for the evil deed is lengthened, while that for the good deed is shortened.[14] The morphological pattern thus carries an implication of effort and striving, although the interpretation of the verse remains dependent on the explanations provided by exegetes and linguists.

Ibn Yaʿīsh points out other meanings of iftaʿala, including its use to express the middle or passive-like response to an action, a function it shares with infaʿala, as in ghamamtu-hu fa-ightamma (I distressed him, and he became distressed). It may also express reciprocal action involving two or more parties, as in ijtāwarū, meaning tajāwarū (they lived next to one another).[15] This pattern may also occur without any apparent addition to the meaning of its basic form, as in iftaqara, which functions like faqura, meaning “he became poor”; its corresponding adjective is faqīr (poor). It would therefore be incorrect to claim that the active participle muftaqir (being in need) is excluded from usage, since this is a matter of actual usage that cannot be determined by the morphological pattern alone. The single pattern iftaʿala is thus not a mask with one meaning, but rather a repository of several meanings, even though its most prominent meaning is that of taking or adopting something for oneself.

4. The Ifʿāl Pattern: Entering into Something and Finding a Quality

One of the clearest meanings of the pattern afʿala is entering into something, whether in terms of time or place. This meaning is mentioned in instructional references on morphology and illustrated by the verb abḥara, meaning “to enter the sea.”[16] A classical source also provides evidence for this meaning. Abū Ṭālib relates, on the authority of Ibn Qutaybah, a report concerning ʿUmar, may God be pleased with him, according to which the polytheists used to say, when departing from Muzdalifah: “O Thabīr, rise with the sun!”[17] Ibn Qutaybah explained that they meant: “Enter into sunrise, O mountain!” Similar expressions include ashmala al-qawmu, when people enter into the north wind; ajnabū, when they enter into the south wind; arāḥū, when they enter into the wind; and arbaʿū, when they enter into the spring season.[18]

These are five verbs associated with five different circumstances—sunshine, the north wind, the south wind, wind in general, and the spring season—which share a single semantic structure: entering into

something. Had they been formed according to the basic pattern faʿala, they would not have conveyed this meaning. The expression sharaq at al-shams (the sun rose) describes the sun's rising, whereas ashraqa, in Ibn Qutaybah's interpretation, conveys the meaning of entering into sunrise. The hamzah here is therefore not merely a phonetic embellishment; rather, it carries the idea of entering and passing into something, even before we know who has entered or where they have gone.

The hamzah in afʿala has another function, which Ibn Yaʿīsh calls "finding something to possess a particular quality." His example is aḥmad tu-hu, meaning "I found him praiseworthy."[19] In this usage, the agent does not bring about the quality in the object but discovers that it already possesses it. Whoever says aḥmadtu al-rajula does not claim to have made the man praiseworthy; rather, they report that they found him to be so upon examination. The same pattern can therefore accommodate two distinct meanings: causing an action or state, and discovering a quality. This example is sufficient to demonstrate that a morphological form does not, by itself, determine which of its meanings is intended, and that the speaker's familiarity with the particular verb helps establish the most appropriate interpretation.

5. The Semantic Significance of Fāʿil and Fāʿala: State and Becoming

Abu Talib provides an interesting example illustrating the effect of a single vowel change on meaning. It is found in the Prophet's (peace and blessings be upon him) hadith addressed to a man who wished to participate in jihad alongside him: "Is there anyone of mature age among your family?" (hal fī ahlika min kāhil?), also narrated as "Who has reached maturity?" (man kāhala?).[20] The hadith has two variant readings: kāhil, following the pattern fāʿil, meaning "a mature man" or "a middle-aged person," and kāhala, following the pattern fāʿala, meaning "to reach maturity" or "to grow old and become middle-aged." The difference between the two readings lies in the vowel marking of the letter hāʾ: a kasrah changes into a fatḥah, thereby transforming the morphological pattern from an active participle into a verbal form. This change may be interpreted as a transition from describing an existing state to describing the process of becoming characterized by that state. Such an interpretation is consistent with Abu Talib's observation concerning the difference in meaning between the two forms. Nevertheless, it should be noted that Abu Talib does not explicitly refer to the concepts of state and becoming.

A methodological qualification is necessary here: the distinction between the two forms cannot be identified in unvowelled writing, since their written forms are exactly alike. It becomes apparent only through pronunciation or vowel marking. Thus, this example demonstrates that a morphological pattern can convey subtle semantic distinctions; at the same time, however, it shows that identifying the intended pattern depends on how the word is pronounced or transmitted in a particular narration, that is, on information external to the morphological form itself.

6. Intensive Forms and Gemination

The intensive forms, namely faʿūl, faʿʿāl, mifʿāl, faʿil, and faʿīl, belong to the domain of adjectives derived from verbs. Ibn Yaʿīsh quotes Sibawayh as saying: "They treated the active participle in the same way when they intended to express intensity in an action."[21] He then clarifies the distinction through the following example: "Zayd is a ḍarrāb (one who beats his slaves frequently) and a qattāl (one who kills his enemies repeatedly) ... when such actions occur frequently on his part," as opposed to "Zayd is a ḍārib (one who beats his slaves)," which does not necessarily convey the meaning of repetition.[22]

Thus, ḍārib describes an action that has occurred or is occurring, regardless of how many times it has been performed. By contrast, ḍarrāb conveys, even before we hear expressions such as "constantly" or "frequently," that the action has been repeated to such an extent that it has become almost habitual in the person performing it. Gemination here is not merely phonetic redundancy. Ibn Jinnī observed that the Arabs made the repetition of the middle radical in a morphological pattern an indication of the repetition of the

action itself.[23] He illustrated this principle with kassara (to break into pieces) and qaṭṭaʿa (to cut into pieces), both following the pattern faʿʿala. The present study extends the same principle by analogy to the pattern faʿʿāl. This extension is an interpretative development proposed by the researcher rather than an explicit statement by Ibn Jinnī. Accordingly, the geminated rāʾ in ḍarrāb represents the repetition of an action throughout the individual's life. When someone is described as kadhdhāb (a habitual liar), the intention is not to say that the person has lied once, but rather that lying has become an established habit. Similarly, a najjār (carpenter) is not simply someone who has carved a piece of wood once, but someone who has adopted carpentry as a profession.

7. The Patterns Tafaʿʿul and Tafāʿul: Between Pretence and Sincere Aspiration

The pattern tafaʿʿul sometimes functions as the passive or resultative counterpart of faʿʿala, as in kasartuhu fa-takassara (I broke it, and it broke into pieces). At other times, it conveys the meaning of affectation or deliberate effort, as in tashajjaʿa (to act courageously), taṣabbara (to make oneself patient), taḥallama (to strive to become forbearing), and tamarrāʾa (to behave as a morally upright person).[24] Sibawayh explains this meaning by stating that when a man wishes to bring himself into a particular state so that he may be associated with it and become one of those characterized by it, he uses the pattern tafaʿʿul. He provides the examples tashajjaʿa, tabaṣṣara, taḥallama, tajallada, and tamarrāʾa.[25] He then adds an observation worthy of particular consideration: taḥallama is not equivalent to tajāhala, because the person who taḥallama genuinely seeks to become forbearing.[26]

Understanding this observation requires correcting a common misconception: taḥallama and tajāhala are not morphological twins following the same pattern. The former follows tafaʿʿul, whereas the latter follows tafāʿul. This is precisely what makes Sibawayh's observation significant: although the two forms share the initial tāʾ, they differ in their morphological structures, and consequently in the intention conveyed by the speaker. Someone who tajāhala presents himself as possessing something he does not actually possess, pretending to be ignorant while knowing the truth. By contrast, someone who taḥallama makes a sincere effort to attain forbearance. In the first case, a mask is worn before others; in the second, a struggle takes place to transform the mask into a genuine disposition. This contrast deserves particular attention from readers of the ethical and educational texts of our intellectual heritage: deliberately cultivated forbearance that eventually becomes a genuine character trait is fundamentally different from pretended ignorance adopted for a temporary purpose.

As for the pattern tafāʿul, Ibn Yaʿīsh states: "The pattern tafāʿala is used for actions involving two or more participants, such as taḍārabā and taḍārabū (they fought one another)."[27] This is its most common meaning: reciprocal participation between two or more parties, as in taḍāraba (to fight one another), taḥāwara (to engage in dialogue), and tarāsala (to exchange correspondence). However, the absolute claim that this pattern, by virtue of its morphological structure, cannot be attributed to a single subject requires qualification. The verb tajāhala itself, which Sibawayh mentioned in the preceding comparison, follows this pattern and is attributed to a single subject. Thus, reciprocity is the predominant meaning of tafāʿul, but it is not its only meaning. Among its other meanings is the deliberate display of a quality or state that does not exist internally. We have also seen that the pattern iftiʿāl can be used to express reciprocity (ijtawarū, meaning tajāwarū, "they lived next to one another"). This suggests that Arabic provides more than one morphological pattern for expressing exchange and mutual participation.

8. The Patterns Faʿula, Ifʿalla, and Infaʿala: Innate Disposition, Colour, and Receptive Change

Regarding the pattern faʿula, with a ḍamma on its middle radical, Ibn Yaʿīsh states: "As for faʿula with a ḍamma, its structure is designated for innate dispositions and characteristics that a person possesses, whether good or bad, and similar qualities."[28] He then provides an extensive list of examples, including ḥasuna (to

be good), sharufa (to be noble), ẓarufa (to be refined or elegant), sahula suhūlatan (to be easy), ṣaʿuba ṣuʿūbatan (to be difficult), ʿaẓuma (to be great), and ḍaʿufa (to be weak).[29] These verbs describe an inherent characteristic that is closer to a state of being than to a transient event. Thus, when someone says ẓarufa fulān (so-and-so is refined or elegant), they are not recounting an incident in which the person displayed refinement on a particular occasion; rather, they are making a judgement about that person's inherent nature. In accordance with the established principles of Arabic morphology, the present study distinguishes between faʿula, which denotes an established characteristic, faʿala, which denotes an action or event, and faʿila, which predominantly expresses temporary conditions and states. However, this particular distinction is not supported by a specific textual example from Sharḥ al-Mufaṣṣal.

The pattern ifʿalla, as in iḥmarra (to become red) and iṣfarra (to become yellow),[30] is associated with colours and physical defects. It is generally intransitive, meaning that it cannot normally be understood as taking a direct object. Someone who iḥmarra has become red; they have not caused something else to become red. By contrast, the pattern infaʿala is associated with the meanings of responsiveness and the reception of an action, as in ṣaraftuhu fa-inṣarafa (I turned him away, and he turned away), qadtu-hu fa-inqāda (I led him, and he submitted to guidance), and shaqqaqtuhu fa-inshaqqa (I split it, and it split apart).[31] It therefore describes a participant who receives the effect of an action rather than one who initiates it, which explains why it is generally intransitive. In this study, both patterns have been described according to the general principles commonly presented in introductory Arabic morphology textbooks, without relying on a specific classical textual source. Consequently, examining them in greater depth through primary classical morphological sources remains an avenue for further research.

9. A Critical Discussion of the Limits of "Morphological Intelligence"

The examination of the preceding morphological patterns leads to a positive conclusion: there is a remarkable degree of consistency between form and meaning within the system of Arabic morphological structures. However, this consistency does not mean that a morphological pattern "says everything" before it enters a sentence. This point is highlighted by the following observations:

1. Probability rather than determinism: Most morphological patterns carry more than one meaning. The pattern istafʿala, for example, may express seeking, transformation, or finding a particular quality in someone or something. The pattern afʿala may denote causing an action, entering into a state, or finding a particular quality. Similarly, iftaʿala may express adoption, responsiveness, or reciprocity. What determines which meaning prevails is the interaction between the morphological pattern, a particular root, and a particular context. The semantic expectation generated by a pattern is therefore probable rather than definitive.

2. The influence of vowel marking on identifying the pattern: The example kāhil/kāhala demonstrates that the semantic distinction depends on vowel marking and that an unvowelled text conceals this distinction. Differentiating between morphologically similar forms cannot therefore be achieved through the form alone, but also requires consideration of pronunciation and transmission.

3. The dangers of overgeneralization: The study has demonstrated that some commonly held generalizations do not withstand closer examination. These include the claim that tafāʿul necessarily involves two participants, or that taḥallama and tajāhala follow the same morphological pattern. This highlights the need for caution when discussing the "meaning of a morphological pattern" in absolute terms.

4. The metaphor of "intelligence": Using this metaphor requires caution. The ability to recognize such distinctions is not an exclusive property of language itself; it is also the outcome of the interaction between morphological forms and the speaker's linguistic memory. Furthermore, the widespread assumption that Arabic speakers acquire an intuitive sense of morphology from early childhood is a hypothesis that requires support from language acquisition studies, which were not conducted in the present research.

5. Limitations of the research material: The study relies on a single work, namely Sharḥ al-Mufaṣṣal, quotations drawn from it, and a brief study published online. It should therefore be regarded as an introduction to the subject rather than an exhaustive investigation.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Arab morphologists, from Sibawayh to Ibn Yaʿīsh, did not limit themselves to defining morphological patterns in formal terms, such as the number of letters and the arrangement of vowels. Rather, they associated each pattern with a particular meaning and carefully distinguished between forms that appear similar on the surface. This perspective makes it possible to approach Arabic morphology from a different angle: not as a dry table of morphological patterns, but as a map of an ancient linguistic intuition that recognized that meaning does not wait for the sentence to emerge; rather, it begins, to some extent, with the very first additional letter attached to the root. Morphological meaning constitutes a strong expectation rather than an absolute certainty, since the actual meaning is determined through the interaction of the morphological pattern with the root and the context.

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[10] Ibn Yaʿīsh, Sharḥ al-Mufaṣṣal, vol. 4, p. 441.

[11] Ibid., vol. 4, p. 441.

[12] Ibn Manẓūr, Lisān al-ʿArab, entry “Kasaba,” digital edition in the Hawramani Arabic Lexicons, https://arabiclexicon.hawramani.com (accessed 25 April 2026).

[13] Sūrat al-Baqarah, verse 286. See also Ibn Yaʿīsh’s reference to this verse in Sharḥ al-Mufaṣṣal, vol. 4, p. 441.

[14] Ibn Manẓūr, Lisān al-ʿArab, entry “Kasaba.”

[15] Ibn Yaʿīsh, Sharḥ al-Mufaṣṣal, vol. 4, p. 441.

[16] “Maʿānī Ḥurūf al-Ziyādah fī al-Afʿāl” [The Meanings of Augmentative Letters in Verbs], Mawdoo3 website, n.d., https://mawdoo3.com (accessed 25 April 2026).

[17] Abū Ṭālib, “Al-Dalālah al-Ṣarfiyyah” [Morphological Semantics] (citing al-Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Book of Hajj, chapter “When to Depart from Jamʿ,” 2/604; and Ibn Qutaybah, Gharīb al-Ḥadīth, 1/124).

[18] Ibid. (citing Ibn Qutaybah, Gharīb al-Ḥadīth, 1/124).

[19] Ibn Yaʿīsh, Sharḥ al

[20] Abu Talib, “Al-Dalālah al-Ṣarfiyyah” (citing Gharīb al-Ḥadīth by Abū ʿUbayd, 1/129–130; and al-Haythamī, Majmaʿ al-Zawāʾid wa-Manbaʿ al-Fawāʾid, 5/610 [Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1412 AH]).

[21] Ibn Yaʿīsh, Sharḥ al-Mufaṣṣal, Vol. 4, p. 88 (the grammatical function of intensive forms of the active participle) (quoted from Sibawayh, Al-Kitāb).

[22] Ibid., Vol. 4, p. 88.

[23] Ibn Jinnī, Al-Khaṣāʾiṣ, Vol. 2, p. 152 et seq.

[24] Ibn Yaʿīsh, Sharḥ al-Mufaṣṣal, Vol. 4, p. 437.

[25] Sibawayh, Al-Kitāb, Vol. 8.

[26] Ibid., same passage.

[27] Ibn Yaʿīsh, Sharḥ al-Mufaṣṣal, Vol. 4, p. 438.

[28] Ibid., Vol. 4, p. 436.

[29] Ibid., Vol. 4, p. 436.

[30] See the presentation of morphological patterns and their examples in: “Sharḥ ʿan al-Mujarrad wa-al-Mazīd min al-Afʿāl,” Mawdoo3 Website, n.d., https://mawdoo3.com (accessed May 25, 2026).

[31] “Maʿānī Ḥurūf al-Ziyādah fī al-Afʿāl” [The Meanings of Augmentative Letters in Verbs], Mawdoo3 Website (see also “Maʿānī Ḥurūf al-Ziyādah,” Mawdoo3 Website, n.d., https://mawdoo3.com, accessed May 25, 2026).