

The Concept of Time: A Multiple Reference Reading

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Abstract

This study presents a multiple reference reading of the concept of time in its transformation across an evolutionary path, accompanied by a clear transformation in human thinking and in the ways of understanding what surrounds them. The debate has intensified over the existence of time or its non-existence, and over its nature and formation as a necessary human need. The concept of time is reconsidered each time as a problematic issue whose presence is multiple and whose philosophical, linguistic, critical, and creative references are also multiple. Given the importance of time as an active element in human life and in discourse, its concept has transformed and varied, moving from simplicity to complexity with the increasing complexity of the issues of reality and life.

Keywords: *Concept, Time, Reading, References, Philosophy, Language.*

Received: 21/06/2025 ; Accepted : 21/01/2026 ; Published : 25/02/2026

Introduction

Time has always raised a conceptual problem, and the studies related to it have multiplied, as have the reference readings about it, which has led to a clear divergence in its concept.

Time has occupied a large space in human life in its connection with existence and the world, to the extent that it has become a central question in the thought of ancient and modern philosophers, and a prominent element in ancient and modern critical and creative studies.

The concept of time has been formed through an evolutionary path, understanding its meaning and structure based on its connection with the world of ideals, with the truth dictated by reason, and with what human experience requires, all of which affirms its existence, its elusiveness, and the difficulty of defining it.

Time has acquired an aesthetic dimension and a central position in ancient and modern philosophical theories, both Arab and Western, as well as in other fields. It has also become, in contemporary studies, that active element in creative formation without which the structure becomes imbalanced.

From here, this study has focused on deriving a concept of time as previous scholars attempted to define its essence, according to a reference reading of its concept, by presenting some of the conceptions proposed in philosophical and linguistic studies as a basis for critical and creative studies, which formed the background of the formation and development of the concept of time.

References of the Concept of Time:

The Philosophical Reference:

Ancient philosophy is considered the first reference adopted by most researchers and critics in their studies and in building their theories, to the extent that it constituted the primary foundation for a group of philosophers themselves.

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Here, I refer to ancient Western philosophy, particularly the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, as it represents the foundation upon which most researchers built their orientations, despite the fact that this philosophy was linked to nature and physical reality, and that it dealt with time as an external framework.

Time is dependent on movement and its change, and on the measure of its calculation, as well as its number, and this is what Aristotle affirms in his statement: "Time is the measure of the number of movement or its estimation in terms of before and after... Time is not movement, but that by which we can measure movement numerically." ⁽¹⁾

Human beings do not perceive the passage of time without movement, and it is impossible to know time except through movement, whether fast or slow, as "it cannot be separated or detached from movement" ⁽²⁾.

The measurement of time is defined in relation to movement as well as to rest, and "the existence of a thing in it is that it is measured; time measures the moving insofar as it is moving, and measures the resting insofar as it is resting, for their movement and rest are unified by virtue of their being as such" ⁽³⁾.

It is as if time, in narrative discourse according to Aristotle, relates only to the external framework of events and nothing more. Aristotle's view of time here does not explain the character's awareness of moments, nor the recollection of memories that passed over years but are condensed into a single moment across many pages. By nature, the human being lives in the past (memory) and the present, and looks toward the future with expectations. For this reason, time is not only linked to the external world and existence, as Aristotle asserts, but is also connected to the inner self, human consciousness, and memory. This is an existential philosophy affirmed by Saint "Augustine" (Augustine), in *Confessions*, when he was asked: "What is time? If no one asks me, I know; if someone asks me, I do not know" ⁽⁴⁾.

This statement confirms the ambiguous nature of time and its changing, elusive character, as well as the difficulty of explaining it, especially when it is related to self-awareness as psychological time. The conclusion reached by "Augustine" played an effective role in the writing of the modern novel, as time is measured by what occurs in the consciousness of characters, based on their feelings and their connection to memory.

This vision represents a shift in the idea of time: after it was linked to what surrounds the human being, it became internal. Here we must recall the view of "Isaac Newton," who considered time absolute, governed by no external logic, since it "flows uniformly by itself and by its own nature without relation to anything external" ⁽⁵⁾, although "Albert Einstein" opposed Newton's view and affirmed the relativity of time and its connection to space, a theory that brought about a major transformation in many propositions.

The shift introduced by psychological philosophy gave time a different concept within the sphere of humanity, as time was no longer external and natural, but rather what the human being experiences within consciousness, where moments overlap and intertwine.

These studies, along with later ones, benefited literary studies, as understanding time in the novel, for example, is linked to what the character experiences in their consciousness. This is what "Henri Bergson" (Bergson) calls duration or *durée*: "Our duration is not a moment replacing another moment; otherwise there would be only the present, with no extension of the past into the present, no development, and no self-defined duration. Duration is continuous progress that grows without interruption and without limit, preserving its continuity" ⁽⁶⁾.

Here, we can move from the scientific definition of time toward considering it as psychological time that flows continuously, since the human being lives the past, which is retrieved in the present through memory.

Bergson's view had a profound impact on novelistic creativity, where creative attention shifted toward psychological time and toward tracking and observing decisive emotional moments within the human self. Thus, time moved away from its external nature to become an internal measure, in which times overlap and

intertwine until time becomes infinite and beyond any measurement. Moreover, “writers knew internal dialogue and stream of consciousness before psychology, but the discovery of psychological theories provided writers with organized mechanisms that developed their ideas and their intellectual and artistic vision of time” (7).

Bergson’s psychological theory also influenced later philosophers, such as contemporary and existential philosophers, who presented a philosophy of life and existence that transcends the external world, initiating the adoption of new ideas focused on human experience and human existence. Being was placed within time, and there is no existence without temporality, such that being is a form of existence, and “the essence of the human being lies in its existence” (8), as stated by “Martin Heidegger” (M. Heidegger), who considered Dasein and affirmed that “time is the foundation of human existence, and temporality is the meaning of the being of the human entity” (9).

The openness of new philosophical thinking toward a new concept of time created fertile ground for proponents of hermeneutic philosophy, especially when time is associated with narrative, which is considered an image reflecting human life in its states and transformations. Accordingly, “time becomes meaningful when it turns into a story, and becomes human to the extent that it is expressed in narrative form” (10).

“Paul Ricoeur” linked time to existence and narrative and devoted several works to this field, making time understandable through narrative. By reorganizing events in a story in an ordered manner, we can understand them as they occur in reality. Thus, “Paul Ricoeur’s” theory became a foundation for the critical and applied analysis of literary and narrative texts, and the idea expanded until time became a method for understanding the text, more closely connected to literature.

Especially when time and narrative are linked to space as experienced by characters, as expressed by “Mikhail Bakhtin” (Mikhail Bakhtine) through the term “chronotope,” meaning space-time. This is a method the critic derived from Einstein’s theory of relativity in terms of measuring time in relation to space, making the chronotope “the fundamental interrelation of spatiotemporal relationships as artistically expressed in literature...” (11).

The term chronotope is associated with the theory of literary genres, and it is their fundamental component through which they can be understood. Accordingly, “the chronotope is the internal component of every literary genre and even synonymous with it. Moreover, the novel as a literary genre cannot be defined or distinguished except by determining its spatiotemporality” (12).

Due to the importance of this theory, the chronotope later became a procedural tool applied to narrative texts, representing a new critical reading of space-time, which earlier philosophers had discussed after linking time to space.

“Bakhtin” reached satisfactory results after applying the chronotope to the novels of “Dostoevsky” and “Rabelais,” where “each novel has its own chronotope that frames its events and characters. Through his many works, the writer presents various spatiotemporalities and reciprocal relationships among them. The writer stands at the intersection of the boundaries of the time of the represented world and the time of the actual represented world. No matter how realistic and truthful the first time may be, it cannot coincide with the second. In every creative act, the writer immerses himself in his own time, which he lives as a human being, shaped by the culture of his era” (13).

This study falls within poetics and reflects what “Bakhtin” contributed to literary criticism, as he made time a living, dynamic element in narrative discourse.

Arabic Philosophy:

The issue of time was one of the complex problems in Arab-Islamic philosophy. Arab philosophers adopted some Greek theories (Plato and Aristotle) and attempted to adapt them to their religious and doctrinal

orientations, adding their own philosophical perspectives and supporting their analyses with evidence from verses and hadiths.

Among the earliest philosophers who addressed the subject of time in their research and theories was “Ibn Sina,” who began with Aristotle’s physics and concluded with his Islamic philosophical reflections on existence and creation. The main points he addressed regarding the concept of time are:

- 1 – Time and movement
- 2 – Time and the soul
- 3 – Time and existence
- 4 – Time is infinite

“Ibn Sina” adopted Aristotle’s conclusions regarding time but offered a more precise conception and deeper analysis. This philosophical dialogue created points of convergence and divergence between the two philosophers despite their differing religious frameworks. Aristotle linked time to the measure of circular motion, a view supported by “Ibn Sina.” His definition aligns with Aristotle’s assertion that time is related to movement, but not movement itself; rather, time is the measure of circular motion, which is the central point both raised regarding time.

“Ibn Sina” also followed Aristotle in linking time to the perception of the soul, as “time cannot be conceived except with movement, and when no movement is perceived, no time is perceived” (14).

What “Ibn Sina” added was subjecting this view to a religious framework: time does not exist without change, and God is not subject to time, as He is constant and unchanging. He states: “Time is not created in a temporal sense, but in a creative sense that is not preceded by its creator in time... Time is originated, meaning it is preceded only by its Creator” (15). Since time is linked to movement, it is subject to change, yet creation has no end, as evidenced by circular motion in infinite space.

“Al-Kindi” supported this view as a metaphysical question related to the formation of the world whether it is eternal or created and affirmed, like other philosophers, that existence was created with the creation of the world. Likewise, “Ibn Arabi” considered time a reality linked to the continuous renewal of the world at every moment, where the present moment is the original point, and continuity is tied to the eternity of the world. Time is governed by the present, as “time is your state in the present moment, with no relation to the past or the future” (16).

According to “Ibn Arabi,” time is linked to movement and renewal; thus, “there is no rest in the world at all, but rather it is constantly in motion, always transitioning from one state to another, in this world and the hereafter, outwardly and inwardly, although there is both hidden and observable movement” (17).

This renewal and continuity produce a complete cycle of time through the alternation of night and day, measured by the movement of celestial spheres. “Ibn Arabi” considers the day as the unit of time, and “time is an imagined duration divided by the movement of the spheres” (18).

For “Ibn Arabi,” time is linked to the present moment, the celestial spheres, and physical nature. His view differs from his predecessors in that he added the notion of renewal as a measure of time rather than movement, which constitutes a contribution to Arab philosophy.

These philosophers, along with others, had a clear influence on modern Western philosophy by enriching thought, transmitting Greek knowledge, and clarifying it for both the Islamic and Western worlds. Their works and contributions were translated and became a source of inspiration.

Most philosophers agreed, in their discussion of time, on linking it to movement and change, relative to the soul that perceives this movement. This is also reflected in the work of “Abu Hamid al-Ghazali,” in his book *Ma‘arij al-Quds fi Madarij Ma‘rifat al-Nafs* and *al-Ma‘arif al-‘Aqliyya wa Lubab al-Hikma al-Ilahiyya*, although he conditions movement on precedence and succession, and “as for eternity (dahr), it is the intelligible meaning derived from the relation of permanence to the soul throughout all time”⁽¹⁹⁾.

“Al-Ghazali” discusses time in the context of the soul and creation. Although he was familiar with previous philosophies, he did not follow them but developed an independent perspective grounded in the Qur’an and the Sunnah. Thus, he did not devote a separate chapter to time; rather, his ideas appear scattered, linking time to the states of the soul and spirit and to the perception of its passage in relation to existence. He considered time a created, illusory entity known only after the creation of the world, and that God, the Creator, is not bound by time: “precedence and succession apply only to created beings subject to opposition, while the Creator is the one who advances and delays, not one who is advanced or delayed...”⁽²⁰⁾, and “to Him belongs creation and command... He is the First and the Last, and thus it is known that He is not temporal...”⁽²¹⁾.

“Al-Ghazali” also held that time is divided into past, present, and future, and he emphasized the present moment as a Sufi conception linked to the soul’s relationship with its Creator, and the importance of seizing the present and not wasting time on what is of no benefit. His theory is grounded in a religious framework that does not aim to define the essence of time as much as it seeks to awaken the heedless human being to make use of time “to attain eternal happiness and avoid everlasting misery”⁽²²⁾.

It is best to conclude that Al-Ghazali refused to engage in defining a concept of time and rejected the idea of the eternity of existence as asserted by earlier philosophers. He refuted them in his book “*Tahafut al-Falasifa*” (The Incoherence of the Philosophers) and presented other issues with proof, including eternity and origination, causality, and matters related to divine sciences.

Accordingly, the question of the concept of time among philosophers shifted from a concept linked to reason, human experience, and existence, to a concept answering the question of creation the creation of humans and the formation of the world ending with the idea that time exists with the existence of the universe.

The Linguistic Reference:

Ancient linguists paid attention to time, but they did not devote independent chapters to it in their studies. Rather, their attempts were limited to indications of verb tense and the temporal meaning of the sentence or context.

The concept of time in language evolved to be considered an expressive system and a linguistic phenomenon manifested through the division of grammatical time into past, present, and imperative, in terms of the verb’s indication of time with contextual markers.

According to “Sibawayh,” time is indicated by the form of the verb as the time of the occurrence of the event: “The verb consists of forms derived from the expressions of nominal events, and they are built for what has passed, what will be and has not yet occurred, and what is ongoing without interruption”⁽²³⁾.

“Al-Zamakhshari” and others followed him in this division and in linking verb tense to form. Sibawayh also considers time as defined in “hours, days, months, and years, and similar temporal units and periods that exist within time”⁽²⁴⁾.

Time is also undefined in certain expressions such as “al-dahr,” which denotes all time, a usage common among ancient Arabs.

This perspective led modern linguists to criticize this concept, arguing that traditional grammarians adopted the philosophical division (past, present, future) and gave a concept of “zaman” rather than “zaman/tense.”

They distinguished between the two terms: zaman and zaman/tense, focusing on their translation from English into Arabic: “zaman: time – tense: zaman,” because “time belongs to the domain of measurement, whereas tense belongs to the domain of linguistic expression” (25).

The difference between the two terms, according to modern linguists, lies in the fact that grammatical tense refers to the event and is “a function within the context performed by the verb, the adjective, or what is transferred to the verb from other parts of speech such as verbal nouns and derivatives” (26), whereas “time is a mathematical quantity measured by specific units such as seconds, minutes, hours, night, and day; it does not determine the meaning of forms in context and is not linked to the event as grammatical tense is” (27).

Thus, it can be said that ancient grammarians based their studies on morphological forms and verb patterns, dividing time into three tenses, whereas modern linguists associated this division with context. This means they moved beyond the structural level at which the ancients stopped—the morphological structure (the sentence)—toward examining the meaning of verbs as understood from context through indicators. This is the same approach later presented by “Ferdinand de Saussure” (F. Desausure), when he introduced the concepts of synchrony and diachrony and distinguished between langue and parole, defining time within a linguistic framework as speech in his lectures on general linguistics. He also distinguished between the signifier and the signified, a result that can be considered a true starting point for modern linguistic studies.

From here, linguistic studies shifted from the sentence as the smallest unit to discourse as the larger unit, leading to extra-linguistic studies (the speaker). This is the theory discussed by “Émile Benveniste” in his book *Problems in General Linguistics*, where he states: “With the sentence, we leave the domain of language as a system of signs and enter another world that of language as a tool for communication, where expression is discourse” (28).

The communicative process (enunciation) requires the presence of a speaker and a listener, as well as enunciation (Enonciation) and the utterance (Enoncé), and discourse as “every utterance that presupposes a speaker and a listener, where the former intends to influence the latter in some way” (29). It also presupposes the context of enunciation. Here, time can be discussed and divided into past, present, and future; however, for Benveniste, the present is the time of discourse, through which we understand the past and the future. At the moment of enunciation in the present, this time becomes the starting point, “as it determines all other temporal relations, since neither past nor future is known except from it” (30).

Linguistic studies constituted a starting point for modern structural and critical studies, enabling researchers to later study time in discourse and text. Benveniste’s focus on verb tense and Saussure’s distinction (signifier/signified) marked the beginning of deeper analysis of internal structure and the distinction between the time of the story and the time of discourse, especially with the studies of the Russian formalists.

Conclusion:

Research into the concept of time is both fascinating and difficult, due to its elusive nature, the precision and variation of its levels, and the multiplicity of its references, readings, and theories whether philosophical, natural, psychological, or linguistic. These references have come together to form an integrated, overlapping, and fluctuating vision.

Despite this, the study of time remains linked to ancient and modern intellectual aesthetics, through which knowledge is formed as its trajectories unfold.

The Most Important Findings of This Study Are:

- The difficulty of defining a comprehensive and precise concept of time.
- The fields of studying time are diverse and varied.

- The earliest studies on the concept of time were Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy, which opened the way for subsequent theories.
- These philosophies provided a concept of time as an external framework linked to human beings, existence, movement, and its changes and measurement, a concept adopted later by most philosophers and researchers.
- The concept of time became linked to consciousness and human experience, marking the beginning of studying the inner self in relation to memory (psychological time).
- Time acquired a narrative dimension that contributed to understanding human life in reality.
- Some Arab philosophers based their concept of time on Aristotle's conclusions.
- The concept of time in Arab philosophy was adapted to a religious framework, considering the world as created and the Creator as constant and unchanging.
- Arab philosophy deepened the understanding of time and introduced certain Western theories.
- Classical and modern Arabic linguistic references contributed to understanding time as an independent element linked to context.
- Modern linguistic studies shifted attention from the sentence to discourse, maintaining the concept of time as context-bound and divided into three tenses.
- Linguistic studies contributed to shaping awareness of discourse and time as part of it, facilitating later reception and analysis in literary and critical studies.

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