

*A Survey on Arabic Grammar in
The Light of Modern Linguistics
Dr. Ahmed Moumene
University Mentouri, Constantine*

Introduction

Nowadays, research in Arabic grammar has resulted in a debate between the purists and the innovators on the question of originality and modernity. The method followed by the Arab pioneers requires deep investigation before announcing any judgement in order to find out its main characteristics concerning validity, peculiarity and universality.

In Greek, the word *grammar* means the art of speaking and writing correctly.

In Arabic, the word *nahw* (grammar) means the way, route, track or direction that pupils usually lend in order to learn a language.

To appreciate the Arabic grammatical tradition, we should take into consideration the cultural atmosphere within which it has evolved. It should be stressed that Arabic grammar emerged and developed in an Islamic atmosphere around the seventh century AD, like all the Arab-Islamic sciences at that time. Its development may be rendered to three main factors. First and foremost, it was the religious impetus that activated people to lead pioneering investigations to codify the language of the Qur'an

and thus to avoid any kind of language deviation and decadence. Second, the Arabs had actually found themselves surrounded by many cultures such as the Greek, Roman, Persian, Hebrew and Coptic ones, and it was their duty

A Survey on Arabic Grammar in the Light of Modern Linguistics...Dr. Ahmed Moumene therefore to set up their own national Islamic culture which would draw its strength from their own sacred language which has been described by Ferguson (1959: 325) as follows:

It is the language of the Qur'an, and as such is believed to constitute the actual words of God and even to be outside the limits of space and time, i.e., to have existed before the time began with the creation of the world.

In the seventh century AD, the revelation of the Holy Qur'an stimulated Arabic linguistic studies. With the expansion of Islam, thousands of converts from many tribes and nations wanted to study the Qur'an and the Arabic language for the first time. This new cultural contact was likely to bring about profound changes upon the language of the religion of Islam. Once realizing this besieging peril that Arabic might undergo at the hands of the foreign converts to Islam, Muslim scholars hastened to codify all the phonetic and grammatical rules that govern the language of the Qur'an. This enthusiastic endeavour was intended to transmit as accurately as possible the norms of correct recitation of the Qur'an to native and foreign speakers and to preserve its sacred language from deviation and corruption. Thus, the study of grammar was seen as the unique guarantee for keeping alive the words of Allah (Exalted is He above all).

This whole state of affairs not only enhanced linguistic studies but also orientated them towards accurate scientific descriptions and pedagogical purposes as well. In one word, it was the revelation of the Holy Book which highly promoted linguistic investigations among the Arabs and the new converts into Islam and gave birth to the Arabic-Islamic civilization.

Arabic grammar was first and foremost devised for academic purposes; that is, to put people in the right way of learning Arabic. Hence, some grammatical treatises began to proliferate, but did not cover all the aspects of the language. Nevertheless, the end of the seventh century AD witnessed the appearance of two outstanding grammarians: Al-Khalil (d. 786 AD) and his most eminent pupil Sibawaih (d. 791 AD). The former is credited for his seminal ideas and for his role in the construction of an Arabic grammatical theory through his monumental linguistic work *Al-'ayn* which consists of forty-eight volumes. The latter is mainly credited for his deep

A Survey on Arabic Grammar in the Light of Modern Linguistics...Dr. Ahmed Moumene reflections and analyses and for his compilation of the minute details of Arabic grammar in a concise, voluminous work which bears the title of *Al-Kitab* (The Book) and which has become 'the Qur'an of Arabic grammar'. As a matter of fact, Arabic grammar reached its highest peak at the hands of Sibawaih. All grammatical treatises which were published later on were, in general, mere commentaries on the previous works.

In the tenth century AD, Ibn Djinni stated that grammar is intended to enable people to follow meticulously the speech habits of the pure Arabs so that foreigners would speak Arabic as eloquently as its native speakers (Ibn Djinni, 1952: Vol. I, p. 32). Nevertheless, he revolutionized the traditional methods of studying language with great ingenuity. He was mainly concerned with discourse rather than with sentences in isolation. Indeed, it is he who gave a new orientation to the study of language –an orientation which is highly akin to that which occurred in twentieth-century Linguistics.

In the same century, Al-Suyu:ti (1976: 30-31) posited that "Grammar is a scientific craft (sina:8ah 'ilmiyyah) founded by the first grammarians to derive from the speech of the Arabs all the criteria (maqa:yi:s) by means of which we discern the correct from the incorrect". We notice here the use of the word "sina:'ah 'ilmiyyah"; that is, a scientific industry. So, the word 'scientific' was used before de Saussure in his definition of linguistics as the scientific study of language ten centuries ago in his *Cours de Linguistique Générale* (1916). We also notice that the word "sina:'ah"; that is, industry, meaning: making and fabrication somewhat in the sense provided by Chomsky 'generation' in his Transformational Generative Grammar (1957; 1965). In addition, the steps followed in the examination of language were based on observation, analysis, description and rule formulation.

With the Islamic conquest of Mesopotamia, two linguistic schools emerged in two main centres and came to be known as the Basra and the Ku:fa schools. They promptly entered into rivalry with each other over many grammatical issues. This rivalry was reminiscent of that which was held between the Alexandrian and Pergaman schools under the Greek leadership in the third century BC. Like the Alexandrian grammarians, Basra grammarians were predominantly analogists who

A Survey on Arabic Grammar in the Light of Modern Linguistics...Dr. Ahmed Moumene were mainly concerned with linguistic regularities and philosophical explanations; and like the Pergaman grammarians, the Kufa grammarians were adherents of the anomalist position who described the language objectively with all its irregularities. The Basra School has received throughout the different ages a great acceptance and validity on the part of scholars in the Arabic world. Its terminology and grammatical explanations held sway over those presented by the Kufa School because of their accuracy and economy. Eventually, it should be reiterated that the main goal of grammar is to get learners from different races to speak and write Arabic correctly.

Arabic grammar has been customarily regarded as a traditional grammar whose main foundations have been subjectively antagonized with the appearance of modern linguistics. What has been said about conventional grammar in general has been said about Arabic grammar in particular. The main criticism levelled against Arabic grammar resides in its influence by the Aristotelian logic. In this perspective, however, historians provide no evidence for the contact of the Arab precursors with this formal Greek logic.

Divergent ideas have been advanced in connection with the origin of Arabic grammar. Some researchers, such as Fleish (1961) see that it is a purely Arabic discipline which grows amongst Arabs; others such as Aoun (1952) and Omar (1972) claim that it is influenced by the Indian, Greek or Syrian grammatical traditions. Although the beginning of Arabic grammar remains a controversial issue because of the lack of reliable resources, the consensus among Arab scholars is that this grammar stems from the Arabic thought and no foreign influence can be proved upon it. It was outside Europe that the Arabs independently developed their own grammatical and linguistic studies within the general field known as '*ulum al-'arab*' (the sciences of the Arabs).

Contrary to what the Arab grammarians think about the origin of Arabic grammar, John Lyons (1968: 19) goes so far as to trace back the origin and development of Arabic grammar in the following manner:

The grammar of Dionysius Thrax was translated into Armenian in the fifth century A.D., and somewhat later into Syrian. Subsequently the Arab grammarians drew upon the Syrians, and they also came more directly into contact with the Greco-Roman tradition in Spain.

It is worth pointing out here that Arabic grammar is, in fact, completely different from both Greek and Western grammars in many respects. In addition, the linguistic inquiry preoccupied early Arab grammarians and accordingly became an established independent tradition considered as a branch of "the sciences of the Arabs" before any probable contact with the Greco-Roman linguistic heritage.

Nowadays, some linguists claim that all traditional approaches to the study of language are useless, inadequate, and unsatisfactory; and therefore people have to get rid of them. Nonetheless, as far as Arabic grammar is concerned, we think that it is still wise to evaluate this grammar objectively and to build on it instead of demolishing it and starting from scratch, especially if one knows that Arab grammarians have profoundly investigated all the aspects of the Arabic language: its lexicon, morphology, syntax, phonology, and semantics in a descriptive way. They also studied the language use and usage, the functional and pragmatic uses of language together with derivation and word formation mechanisms, the gradual development of language and its linguistic variation throughout different periods. Indeed, it was a linguistic study which is very akin to that of modern linguistics in many respects.

In the last few decades, a revolution has shaken up the main assumptions of the traditional approaches to grammar including that of Arabic. As a result, Arab grammarians have been divided into proponents and opponents: those who want to carry on with the classical approach and those who want to abandon it and adopt modern linguistics. This is in fact the crucial problem that divides Arab grammarians today and consequently hampers the natural development of the Arabic linguistic thought.

Fair and square, one cannot assert that Arabic traditional grammar was wholly subjective or unscientific, but rather it was adequately set on the right track. Yet, any grammarian who claims that Arabic grammar is as complete as modern scientific grammars and that it needs no revision may be regarded as a stubborn charlatan. Likewise, it seems quite useless, if not harmful, to translate any linguistic theory and to try to apply it directly to Arabic or any other modern language, mainly those which emanate from a different origin, like Semitic languages. Added to this, one has to take into consideration the turmoil in the general linguistic theory and the existence of a great deal of discrepancies.

A deep view on Arabic grammar indicates that it incorporates a descriptive approach in providing a full account of the linguistic phenomena as is the case of structuralist theories which focus on the description of language and the utter reliance on informants on the one hand and a mentalist approach which does not suffice itself with mere descriptions but strives at explaining the aspects of language on rational and functional grounds/ on the other hand. These two aspects were quite manifest in the Kufa and Basra schools. The former was concerned with description and the latter with analysis and interpretation. The cognitive aspects of Arabic grammar are quite apparent to date in what is called 'cognitive linguistics' which appeared in the middle of the 1970s in reaction to the formalism of generative grammar and its modular treatment of language and which put more emphasis on the ideational and interpersonal functions of language in the works of Langacker (1991), Geerarets (1993), Taylor (1995), Radden and Dirven (2003) and Delbecque (2006).

It is quite urgent at this moment to engage into a serious academic process so as to amass and reformulate the whole Arabic linguistic thought with its philosophical, cultural and ideological dimensions. Only then can we thoroughly compare and contrast it with modern linguistic theories. Once this has been done, we would be able to bring about a valid Arabic linguistic theory which intrinsically links the past and the present of this nation and which works out with the principles of empiricism to achieve the ultimate goal of linguistic studies as proclaimed by Hjelmslev (1961: 127) "Humanitas et Universitas". Now, we strongly believe that it is high time for Arab researchers to come out with an integrated original linguistic theory combining both identity and modernity, mainly because the works of ancient grammarians and modern linguists tend to be reconcilable and complementary to one another.

It seems that the time is ripe now to bridge the gap between the two traditions. In spite of the fact that many precious linguistic resources have not yet been found, what is left suggests a very rich and original thought capable of competing with modern linguistics. It is incumbent upon Arab linguists then to reconsider the whole works of their pre-runners in this field in order to dissipate any prejudices and preconceptions and to elucidate a great deal of misconceptions which may trouble researchers in this domain.

In fact, although their attempts at establishing a solid grammatical theory have been vitiated by some principles, Arab grammarians did build up an unshakable theoretical foundation which a great number of its main assumptions have recently been rehabilitated by some well-known linguists. Furthermore, these linguists do not feel at all contemptuous vis-à-vis the

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revival of conventional grammars, but they rather insist that these models should, in no way, be despised or left to the tender mercies of an utter zealotry. John Lyons recalls that these grammars are no longer considered as a thorn in one's flesh while mentioning that:

Many of the insights into the structure of language obtained by the classical grammarians were valuable and revealing but demand reformulation in more general and more empirical terms.

(Lyons, 1968: 18)

In addition, Chomsky (1966: 73) goes on very further to emphasize the intrinsic relation between the old and the new grammar testifying that:

The discontinuity of development in linguistic theory has been quite harmful to it, and that a careful examination of classical linguistic theory, with its accompanying theory of mental processes, may prove to be an enterprise of considerable value.

Despite many criticisms levelled against them, conventional grammars are still taught throughout the world. Certainly, some researchers still think that teaching them is not only a nasty and a dull task but also a waste of time and even a sanguinary pursuit. Nevertheless, other researchers believe that thanks to these traditional grammars, people can acquire the mechanics that are customarily required for speaking correctly as well as writing correct and effective compositions and achieving stylistic elegance.

It is noteworthy that modern linguistics has not yet been able to adopt a full and rational approach to the pedagogical teaching of the different existing languages throughout the world. The various constellations of linguistic terms and complex rules have been indeed a hindrance rather than an aid to both teachers and learners alike. However, conventional grammar has shown once and again that it is a reliable source to many linguists whether they are structuralists, generativists or functionalists. In his preface to *An Introduction to Linguistics*, Liles (1975) goes as far as to state that:

Along with the transformational model, we make frequent references to traditional grammar, which to the current generation of linguists is not

It is really deplorable to see some Western thinkers denying the least acknowledgments to the Arab scholars in this field. For instance, Holger Pederson (cited in Al-Waar, 1988: 644) extravagantly attacks Arabic grammar and mistakenly declares that: "We have nothing to thank Mohammedism for this respect." In fact, Arab grammarians have played an important role in determining the direction of linguistic investigation. Their achievements are plausible and quite significant. A careful examination of their works will indubitably help us understand the essence of their linguistic inquiry which not only prompts to discover the underlying principles that govern language but to provide an in-depth analysis of the observed constituents at the surface structure and the hidden ones at the deep structure.

In conclusion, we can say that it is impossible in this article to do justice to the complexity of the relations that hold among various Arabic grammar schools and twentieth-century schools of linguistics. However, Arabic grammar is quite rich and diversified. Many aspects of it can be directly linked to structuralism, descriptivism, distributionalism, generativism and functionalism. It is high time we reconsidered all the linguistic heritage of the ancient scholars and we astutely set afloat accordingly in order to build up a sound linguistic theory based on empirical principles.

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