3 The Arabic Grammatical Tradition

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The Arabic grammatical tradition, over 1,000 years old, continues to serve as the basis of Arabic grammatical practice in the Arab world, and through translations such as Howell's of Ibn Ya'ish and Caspari/Wright's reliance on Arabic grammars, has had a fundamental influence on the Western study of Arabic grammar as well. Though old, the Arabic tradition is not anachronistic, as I will attempt to show. I divide this chapter into four parts. The first discusses the development of Arabic grammatical thinking, the second sketches grammatical theory and methodology, the third Arabic lexicography, and the final briefly looks at it in relation to Semitic studies. I would note that the dates of death of the Arabic grammarians are given in the Islamic/Christian calendars. Literal translations of Arabic linguistic terminology are provided in quotes.

Historical Overview
The study of Arabic grammar developed under two driving impulses, one religious, one practical. The religious motivation was the need to render a correct interpretation of the Qur'an both in its formal and semantic dimensions. The original mukashif, Qur'anic text, unwoveled and lacking diacritical marks, was subject to ambiguous interpretation in numerous places and for various reasons (lexical form, xufyatan vs. xifyatan 'secretly', morphosyntactic form, li-tastabiyatli-ya-stabiyya 'to become clear', etc.). These problematic cases were never completely "solved," but they were eventually resolved by standardizing them in various Qur'anic readings (al-qiraa'aat), which gave list-like descriptions of the different versions of each variant case. The most widely institutionalized, though not the only variants, are the seven readings described by Ibn Mujahid (324/935) in his Kitaab al-sab'a fiy l-qiraa'aat 'The seven variant readings'. These confirmed the readings of the late eighth-century Qur'anic readers Nafi', Ibn Kathir, 'Asim, Hamza, Kisa'i, 'Ala', and 'Amir, all of whom have a lineage (nasab) traceable to a companion of the prophet.

For purposes of linguistic theory, however, the qiraa'aat are of relatively minor
interest since they did little more than list variants. Much more important in the religious domain were works which gave grammatical and semantic analyses of problematic Qur'anic passages, the *maʿaaniy* ('meanings') literature. In this genre problems of all sorts were addressed and various solutions offered, including questions of pronunciation, morphological and grammatical structure, and semantics. One of the earliest and most important works in this class, *Maʿaaniy al-qur'aan* 'The meanings of the Qur'an', by Farra' (207/822) takes as its second topic, for example, the different pronunciations of the words *al-ḥamdu lillaahi* in the opening verse of the Qur'an. In all there are four different versions, the one cited, plus *al-ḥamda lillaahi, al-ḥamdi lillaahi,* and *al-ḥamdu lillaahi.* Most importantly, Farra' explains the linguistic cause for these variants, e.g. vocalic assimilation, cites parallel cases from other areas of the language (both the spoken language, particularly that of the bedouin, and poetry), and touches on questions of morphological analysis, in particular, word division. The *maʿaaniy* literature is a rich source for our understanding of linguistic thinking, with Farra' in particular playing a central role.

The second driving force in the development of an Arabic linguistic tradition was the pedagogical. One tradition has it, in fact, that Arabic grammar was born in response to this need. Grammar was founded when the linguist Abu Aswad al-Du'ali (68/668) heard his daughter say *maa ṣaḥṣa* 'what is more beautiful?' when she intended to say *maa ṣaḥṣana* 'how beautiful is ...'. Horrified at her bad grammar, he established a grammatical system based upon the three inflectional endings of Arabic, so that such mistakes would not be repeated. Whatever the truth of this story, it was clear that pedagogical material for the teaching of Arabic was needed, not least for the Arabs themselves, most of whom were illiterate and hence unready for the administrative tasks which their new conquests had thrust upon them, as well as for the many non-Arabs who formed the backbone of the early civil service. Though languages other than Arabic were used in the earliest periods of Arab rule, the use of Arabic increased steadily over time.

The first extant grammar of Arabic is *al-Kitaab* 'The book' by Sibawayhi (177/793), himself a Persian. It is a prodigious work of nearly 1,000 densely written pages. While this book is itself unsuitable as pedagogical material (Carter 1972), it does have a strongly normative character (Ditters 1992: 17) and is so detailed that in it virtually every major aspect of classical Arabic grammar is defined. All later grammars effectively rely on the *Kitaab* both for their content as well as their theoretical orientation (see next section).

The question of the origins of the Arabic grammatical tradition is one which has been an issue for Western Arabicists for over 100 years, and after a mid-century hiatus in the debate, it has again come to the fore in the last 25 years. It is far from being resolved. There are two main issues. First, to what extent did the Arabic grammatical tradition develop on its own or, alternatively, under the influence of other traditions? Second, when did Arabic grammatical theory come into being at all?

The prime issue in the first part of the question concerns the extent to which the
Arabic grammarians were dependent upon earlier Middle Eastern grammatical traditions in the development of their linguistic thinking. Particularly important is the role of the Greek tradition. Carter (1972) asserted that the influence of the Greek tradition was limited, arguing that the considerable Greek intellectual influence in Arabic culture came via translations of Greek works, and that these translations became available en masse after the end of the eighth century, by which time the Arabic grammatical tradition had already taken on a more or less fixed structure. Instead, the Arabic tradition developed largely under an internal impetus, in which, in particular, Islamic legal terminology and concepts provided a rich source of analogy for the linguistic (see also Fleisch 1994).

Against this, Versteegh (1977) sees the Greek tradition as having a key role, even in the formative stages of Arabic linguistic thinking. The influence, however, came not from the officially supported translations, but rather from a living Greek pedagogical tradition which the Arabs encountered in the conquered Greek territories. Furthermore, Versteegh suggests that the Arabic grammarians may have taken over certain methodological practices from the tradition of Greek empirical medicine. Moreover, Rundgren (1976: 140) has observed that Greek translations may have been available in Syriac or Persian in the conquered Persian territories before the later large-scale Greek translations into Arabic.

It is not a contradiction to say that both viewpoints have cogency. The Arabic grammatical tradition, as early as 200/800, had a depth and detail hardly to be accounted for in terms of borrowing. At the same time, certain similarities exist between aspects of Greek pedagogical grammar and Arabic practice which make independent development an implausible explanation. Progress is unfortunately hampered in answering the question of extent of outside influence by the relative dearth of original Greek sources.

The second question, period of origin, is one which had already been documented in considerable detail by the Arabic grammarians themselves. One example of this documentation, concerning Abu Aswad Al-Du’ali, was cited above. The most important constructs postulated by the Arabic grammarians for explaining the origins of the Arabic grammatical tradition were the existence of two linguistic schools, the Kufan and the Basran. According to this, the earliest Arabic grammarians were aligned in two opposing schools, one centered in Basra, the other in Kufa (near modern Najaf in Iraq). The chief protagonists were Xalil and Sibawayhi for the Basrans and Kisa’i and Farra’ for the Kufans, though virtually all of the early grammarians were categorized as belonging to one school or the other. According to one popular view, a major methodological difference separating the two was that the Basrans tended to favor the use of analogy in solving linguistic problems, while the Kufans put greater emphasis on the existence of exceptions to general rules.

The historical existence of the two schools, as described in the Arabic tradition, was challenged in the early part of this century by Weil (1913), who argued that the two schools were the creation of fourth/tenth-century grammarians such as Mubarrad and Sarraj. In the need to systematize Arabic grammar, they were con-
fronted by the fact that in the earlier period, particularly in the main works of Sibawayhi and Farra’, differences of terminology and concept were found. The general labels of Basran and Kufan were then applied to these ideas post hoc, and grammatical thinking became orientated around these two poles. Generally speaking, it was the Basran (Sibawayhian) version of grammar which became the standard one (see Ibn al-Anbari’s al-’Insāaf ‘Equitable treatment’).

Weil’s ideas receive some support from Baalbaki’s (1981) observation that in the works of Sibawayhi and Farra’ themselves there is no mention of schools of grammar, while Owens (1990) argues that the earlier period of grammar, up to the end of the third/ninth century, was characterized by a relative conceptual and terminological heterogeneity in regards to linguistic thinking, that was subsequently replaced by the post hoc Basran/Kufan dichotomy. Talmon (1992: 818), on the other hand, would see a linguistic reality in the two schools even in the earlier period, though to date his ideas have yet to be presented in detail.

How old the Arabic grammatical tradition is, remains an unanswered question. It appears quite suddenly, fully developed, around 200/800, in the works of Sibawayhi and Farra’, and the lexicographic work of Xalil (Kitaab al ‘ayn ‘Book of the letter ‘ayn’). To what extent and in what way these scholars were dependent on their predecessors is difficult to answer directly for the same reason that the potential Greek predecessors of Arabic linguistic thinking are problematic: lack of original texts prevents an easy overview of pre-second/eighth-century grammatical commentary. Versteegh (1993), showing that there are relatively few hints about the origin of Arabic grammatical theory in early (i.e. pre-800) exegetical texts, tends only to deepen the mystery. The study of indirect sources such as the extant grammars themselves and the bio-bibliographical literature, will hopefully shed more light on this question.

If the earliest period of Arabic grammar is still rather shrouded in darkness, the same is fortunately not true of the post-Sibawayhi period, in particular the period beginning with Mubarrad (285/898) and running up to the present day. While there remains a great deal to be studied in the medieval Arabic linguistic tradition, its important developmental stages are readily discernible. In the rest of this section I will very briefly outline what these were, and in the next will summarize the theoretical and methodological basis on which they were built.

Aside from the Qur’anic exegetical tradition (Farra’, Naḥḥas, etc.), in which linguistic disputes are set out, but only in so far as they illuminate particular textual problems, the two bases of the linguistic tradition are grammar in the broad sense (naḥw ‘way’, including phonetics, phonology, morphology and syntax) and lexicography. Prototypical works are Sibawayhi’s Kitaab for the former and Xālīl’s Kitaab al ‘ayn for the latter. These two works represent the first compendia in these two genres, and one finds like-spirited works appearing at regular intervals from that time onwards.

The lexicographic tradition was by its nature the less variegated. The form of dictionaries remained much the same (see pp. 55–56), the main variation from the large reference dictionaries being the production of short lexica describing spe-
cialized subjects, such as vocabulary related to horses, Hadith (stories about the Prophet), the Qur'an, dialectal variants (luya'a) and others.

The grammatical, on the other hand, underwent a slow but steady differentiation. Sibawayhi's grammar was basically about core grammar, even if it touched on related fields like pragmatics and markedness theory (see p. 000). It has, however, the nature of a reference grammar, and to fulfill more practical pedagogical needs two developments occurred. On the one hand, short summaries of a limited subject matter, like the category of gender in nouns (cf. Farra's al-Muṣakkar wa l-mu'tanab 'Masculine and feminine gender') were written, or, simply, lists of examples contrasting certain morphological forms (the verb form fa'ala vs. qa'ala for example) were drawn up. On the other, the reference grammars themselves were made more transparent in their organization, and short summaries of the reference grammars were written (e.g. Ibn al-Sarraj's al-Muwjaz fiy al-nahw 'Summary of grammar', c. 100 pages, based on his al-'Uṣūl fiy al-nahw 'The foundations of grammar' c. 1,200).

As the organization of grammar was systematized, a greater interest developed in organizational principles. The notions of basic and secondary or marked and unmarked, 'aṣl/far 'root/branch' playing a decisive role here. These were especially prominent in the fourth/tenth century. Ibn Jinni's al-Xaṣṣa'iš 'Characteristica' being the tour de force in this genre.

In the context of controversy surrounding the inimitability of the Qur'an (Bohis, Guillaume, Kouloughli 1990: 116), there developed a greater interest in the contextual, both textual and situational, and pragmatic aspects of language structure. Jurjani (471/1078) in his Dalaa'il al-‘i‘jaz 'The proofs of inimitability' paid particular attention to the information structure of language, and later al-Ashtarabadhī (686/1286) and Sakkaki (626/1228), among others, gave prominence to speech act theory. Still later (c. 1400) scholars working within the 'ilm al-waqf' (Weiss 1966) addressed the structure of semantic relations. In addition, works of bio-bibliographical summary, the tabaqat, were produced at various periods, and there were linguistic analyses of Arabic poetry, particularly those important for linguistic analysis.

It is important to note that Arabic linguistic thinking developed in an accretionary rather than substitution-like fashion. If Jurjani developed a theory of sentential information structure, he saw it as complementing, not replacing, the grammatical analysis of the sentence that he inherited from his predecessors. While his Dalaa'il lays the foundation for a sub-discipline known as rhetoric (balaqya), his Muqtaṣid 'The mediating' is a wholly orthodox compendium of Arabic grammar.

The Form of Arabic Grammatical Theory
As I have emphasized in the previous section, Arabic grammar developed continually over a period of time. Nonetheless, discrete stages are discernible where the grammatical tradition took on a fixed form (see Owens 1991: 233), and one can use these as reference points in summarizing the theory and methodology behind
the grammatical thinking.

As far as the core grammar goes – phonology, morphology and syntax – a key grammarian is the Baghdadian Ibn al-Sarraj (316/928). His al-Usuw fiy al-nahw effectively established the form of grammatical treatises which is in use in the Arabic world up to today. While I therefore make reference especially to Sarraj here, it should be noted that, by and large, his methodology and theoretical orientation follows that of his predecessor Sibawayhi.

Arabic grammars (including Sibawayhi’s) treat syntax before morphology, giving equal weight to the two, phonology as part of morphology (i.e. morphophonology), and phonetics as part of phonology. There are three axiomatic elements in Arabic syntactic analysis. Items substitute for each other, forming classes. The places of substitution are identified as grammatical functions. The functions are linked to each other by means of dependency relations which determine case form. If this pithy summary makes Arabic syntactic practice sound like “prescient” structuralism it is because modern grammatical theory does indeed rest on the same foundation as that supporting Arabic theory (Carter 1973, Owens 1988). The following example, using the simplified, didactic style of the grammarians, serves as an illustration.

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{daraba} & \text{zayd-un} & \text{'amr-an} \\
&\text{hit} & \text{Zayd (nom.)} & \text{‘Amr (acc.)} \\
&\text{Verb} & \text{Agent} & \text{Object}
\end{align*}
\]

‘Zayd hit ‘Amr’.

This sentence consists of three functions, a verb (\textit{daraba} = \textit{fi’l} lit. ‘doing’), an agent (\textit{zaydun} = \textit{fa’i}l ‘doer’) and an object (‘\textit{amran} = \textit{maq}ulu bihi ‘done to it’). The verb governs both agent and object, the former in the nominative, the latter in the accusative. At each position other items could occur. In subject position, for example, one could have \textit{muwsaa ‘Musa’}, for example:

\[
\text{daraba muwsaa ‘amr-an}
\]

It happens that \textit{muwsaa} has one invariable form, and the characteristic -\textit{u} nominative suffix does not appear on it. By virtue of its substituting at the agent position, however, \textit{muwsaa} is equally an agent, and it is equally governed by the verb, its form being implicitly (\textit{muqaddar ‘implied’}) nominative. It is by the use of substitution techniques that a whole range of morphologically irregular forms, pronouns, demonstratives, compound and diptotic nouns, etc. are accommodated within a simple grammatical framework. An Arabic syntax is by and large an explication of what can occur and cooccur at each of the thirty or so syntactic positions which are customarily distinguished. Among the most important are topic (\textit{mubtada ‘beginning’) and comment (\textit{xabar ‘news’) in a nominal sentence, verb
(fi‘l), agent (fa‘a’il) and the various types of objects in the verbal sentence (direct object, maf‘uwl bihi, absolute object maf‘uwl muṭlaq ‘what is done unrestricted’, locative (termed either maf‘uwl fiyhi ‘done in it’ or sarf ‘container’), as well as the various nominal elements, adjective (variously, na‘t ‘description’, sīfa ‘quality’ or wasf ‘description’) substitute (badal ‘replacement’) and conjunct (‘arfi ‘bending’), to name but a few. Within each of these categories various subclasses were distinguished.

The largest functional unit in Arabic is the sentence (kalaam ‘speaking, talk, statement’ or jumla ‘sum’), though a function of special type since its existence is not established by a single substitution class. Nor are the functions which are in a sentence, jumla, said to be functions of the sentence. One never finds in Arabic grammars phrases such as ‘agent of the sentence’ (fa‘a’il al-jumla or fa‘a’il al-kalaam). Instead, the concept integrating the sub-parts of the sentence, verb, agent, object etc. is dependency. One item, a verb, for example, as in ḍāraḥa ṣayd-un ‘amr-an, governs (ya‘milu) another in a particular form, nominative in the case of agent, accusative in the case of object. In general the Arabic notion of dependency and that defined in certain modern versions (e.g. Tesnière 1959) rest on common principles.

Arabic morphology, or sarf ‘turning away’, has as its basis a formal and a distributional component. The distributional consisted in the division of Arabic words into three major classes: noun (ism ‘name’), verb (fi‘l) and particle (harf ‘edge’). Each of these in turn contained numerous subclasses. Under noun, for example, was understood common and proper nouns, adjectives, pronouns, demonstratives and relative pronouns. The rationale for the subclassification was partly formal – nouns have case endings but particles do not, for instance – but ultimately, distributional properties were decisive, each class being defined by its mutual communicational possibilities (see Owens 1989). The ability of an item to be substituted at a syntactic position defined the basic unit of morphology, the word (kalima): whatever can be commuted is a word, for instance the subject muwsaa in ḍaraḥa muwsaa ‘amr-an. The m or muw of muwsaa, however, cannot alone be substituted with other items, are not therefore words, and hence are not units susceptible to analysis at the level of sarf.

While the word is the morphological element which is distributed in larger constructions, the basic unit of morphological analysis is the root (‘aṣl ‘root’), a consonantal skeleton. This skeleton was represented conventionally by the template f‘l (the root for ‘doing’), which stands for the three consonantal positions, initial, medial and final, that most roots have. Roots of more than three consonants were represented by adding an l for each basic consonant; tarjama ‘translate’, would have the structure f‘lIl. The combination of root + vowel pattern, forming a stem, is designated wazn ‘weight’ or bina‘ building’. It is the stems, of course, which make up the word classes. Short vowels generally had no special status in Arabic morphological theory, though their discrete morphological status was hinted at (Owens 1988: 110 on the thirteenth-century grammarian Astarabadhi). The stem kataba = the wazn “fa‘ala” is simply an instance of a 3rd person perfect verb.
Of course, stems in Arabic can consist of more than basic root consonants + vowel patterns. They may contain, singly or in various combinations, prefixes (ma-ktah ‘office’), infixes (‘in-t-aqala ‘move’) and suffixes (ham-r-aa ‘red (f.)’). It was well recognized that these elements often represented, relative to the consonantal root, extra-lexical semantic elements, and they were given a distinct status and representation in morphological theory. A basic distinction was drawn between the root (‘āṣl) and non-root (zaaʿida ‘increasing’) consonants, the latter by and large comprising the affixes. Whereas the root consonants are represented in the standard template as f/l, the added consonants were represented by themselves, so that the morphological structure of the three examples given above in this paragraph would be ma-fʿal, ‘i-fʿala and faʿl-aa. Usually a consonantal root appears in a number of morphological guises, and identifying all of them was the domain of taṣriʿf ‘alteration, drainage’, effectively the identification of all basic and derived forms applicable to a given root.

In most cases the added consonants are readily distinguishable from the root. In the relatively few cases where they are not, various criteria (semantic, morphotactic, derivational, see Owens 1988: 115) were developed for deciding what belonged to the root, what not.

A more fundamental problem to the representation of root/non-root structure was presented by the various phonological changes which root consonants could undergo. Miṣṣaʿa ‘weight’, for instance, is based on the root wzn, though no w is discernible in it. The greater part of Arabic morphology concerned itself with explaining the various phonological changes which roots could undergo.

The changes were phrased in terms of general phonological processes, deletion (haṣf ‘deleting’), assimilation (idḥaʿam ‘insertion’), substitution of one sound for another (ḥadāl metathesis) (taḥwiṣ ‘transformation’), and rules which affected the ‘weak’ consonants w and y (qalb ‘heart, center’). The rules applied to ideal underlying morphological forms which served as the input. Miṣṣaʿa ‘scales’, for instance, is based on the underlying form mi-fʿal (cf. mi-qaḍar ‘measure’) = miṣṣaʿa. A general phonological rule changes the sequence iw to iy (cf. e.g. duʿiyya ‘be invited’ < duʿiwa). The rules apply in succession, and a given underlying form may undergo four or five different rules before the final surface form is reached, as is the case, for instance, with qul-tu ‘I said’, from underlying *qawal-tu.

The rules defining the changes are not strictly phonological, but rather morphophonological. That is, potentially every rule with phonological effect has its domain restricted by morphological domain: a rule may apply to nouns, but not to verbs, or vice versa; a rule that holds for a basic consonantal root may not apply to a non-basic (zaaʿid) one; rules applying stem initially (at ‘f’) may not apply stem finally (at ‘l’).

Arabic morphophonological theory is entirely orientated toward explaining formal deviation from an underlying stem. It is thus not surprising that phonetics is not introduced as an independent component of grammar parallel to syntax and morphology, but rather in conjunction with one aspect of morphophonology, namely assimilation. Most assimilation rules, like the voicing of t in iṣṣaraaba ‘be
confused' (*idtaraba*), or the emphatization of *i* in the same example, are specifiable only with a precise phonetic description of the sounds involved, for assimilation can be due to various phonetic factors: in the example just cited two independent assimilation processes are attested, one in terms of voicing, the other in terms of manner (emphasis).

While phonetics is, within the Arabic model, conceptually a part of morphology, the classificatory categories used are largely articulatory and were subcategorized as to place (some fifteen points in all distinguished, starting from the glottis, the classification being hampered by the fact that no theoretical distinction was drawn between an active and passive articulator); manner (including stops *sadiq* 'strong', fricatives *riw* 'loose, flabby' etc., eight in all) and voicing (or tenseness, various interpretations have been given the terms *mağuwr/mahmuw* 'made loud/whispered'). A sound like *t* was thus given a multiple characterization: voiceless (*mahmuw*), stop (*sadiq*), pronounced at the tongue tip and incisor tip, and implicitly, non-emphatic (not *muṭbaq* 'covered'). Assimilation could affect a sound along one or more of these classificatory parameters.

The core grammar thus contained detailed treatment of syntax, morphology (and morphophonology) and phonetics. As already mentioned, the data, and for the most part, theoretical descriptive apparatus pertaining to this grammar are to be found in Sibawayhi, and were organized in a coherent way by Ibn al-Sarraj. Around Ibn al-Sarraj’s time a further interest gained prominence, one touched on, but not developed as an independent linguistic endeavor, in the pre-tenth-century grammar. This was an interest in the relation between items fulfilling the ideal grammatical/morphological structure (*‘as*al) of the language and those deviating from this ideal (*far* ‘branch, twig’). The ideal pertained both to structures and to items realizing these structures. The ideal was in some sense the most basic, simplest, or, the metaphor I prefer, unmarked to be found. For instance, in morphology the ideal root was one containing three consonants (not four or five, which are statistically marked), none of which are "weak," i.e. *y* or *w*, since these consonants tended to undergo various sorts of phonological changes. In syntax the most unmarked parts of the sentence were topic and comment of a nominal sentence and verb and agent of the verbal sentence, whereas direct objects and locative objects are marked (*far*). The "proof" that topic/comment and verb/agent are unmarked is that they, in opposition to objects, are obligatory. Virtually any grammatical category could be given a markedness status relative to another one, and in some cases markedness hierarchies were postulated, one item being closer to the basic (*‘as*al) category than one (*far*), but less close than another. For instance, Bohas and Guillaume (1984: 68) point out that Sibawayhi draws up a three-way hierarchy defining the sounds *‘ar-w* (going from least to most marked), whereby the "heaviest" (*‘uniqil* 'heavier', most marked) may undergo certain changes which the others do not. Thus, the initial *w* of *waqa‘a* "he fell" is deleted in the imperfect, *yaqa‘u*, whereas the *y* will usually be kept, *yayminu* 'go right'. The explanation for this is that *y* is lighter (*‘axafa‘) 'lighter' or less marked than *w*.

Implicitly, the entire organization of Ibn al-Sarraj’s grammar is built around the
notion of markedness, always beginning with unmarked categories then moving to marked. In summarizing the various grammatical functions, for instance, he begins with a summary of the functions which the nominative case could assume (topic, comment, agent), since the nominative was assumed to be the basic case. He moves next to accusative functions (absolute, direct, locative object, etc.), and ends with the genitive (possessive, object of preposition), the least basic. Markedness considerations further informed the treatment within these categories. Among the nominative functions, for example, the nominal sentence is treated before the verbal, based on the assumption that nouns are unmarked relative to verbs.

Interest in pragmatic matters led to a further layer of grammatical analysis. Jurjani (471/1078) sought to explain the meaning difference between (a) and (b)

(a)  ؤنابا ژاید-ع ‘(What happened is that) Zayd left’
(b)  ژاید-ع ؤنابا ‘(It is) Zayd (who) left’

on the basis of new and old information. (a) would be appropriate if one were concentrating on the action itself, whereas (b) would be appropriate if the actor Zayd were the most important aspect of the discourse. The new information was placed first, the presupposed afterwards. It is important to note here that Jurjani essentially formalized a multi-systemic analysis of sentence structure: at the grammatical level (a) is a verbal sentence and (b) nominal, two fundamentally distinct sentence types. At the informational level both sentences share a common dichotomization into new/given information.

Pragmatics continued to interest linguists. A basic distinction was drawn between performative (inšaq ‘creative’) and enunciative (xahari ‘reportive’) utterances (Larcher 1991), and detailed analyses were made of individual structures. The seventh/thirteenth-century grammarian al-Astarabadi, for example, analyzed laakinna ‘but’ in terms of the predicate ‘astadraktu ‘I have corrected’, an abstract semantic element whose 1st person subject reflects al-Astarabadi’s assumption that each utterance presupposes a speaker (Larcher 1992).

Lexicons
Arab scholars were equally active in the field of lexicography. Ibn Manzur’s (711/1311) Līsān al-ʿarab ‘The Arabic tongue’, for instance, runs to fifteen volumes, each volume about 400 pages long, approximately 80,000 entries in all. While the dictionaries were comprehensive to a fault, it is notable that they never attained the structured order found in the study of grammar (see Langhade 1994, Haywood 1959: 82, Wild 1965: 56). I will briefly illustrate this here with a summary of the entry for kfr (Vol. 5: 144–151) from the Līsān.

The main organizing principle within the lemmas was semantic and pragmatic, a given stem form being repeated as often as distinct meanings were associated with it. The lemma for kfr begins with the verbal noun kufr with the (1) meaning
‘disbelief’ (naqiyy al-‘iyma‘n); in the next short paragraph kufr is given with the (2) sense of ‘disavowal of grace’, and in the long third paragraph kufr in the (3) sense of ‘denial (jihwud) of grace’. There is no explicit intimation that the meanings are related. Sometimes other derivationally related forms are listed with the different senses of kufr, sometimes not. With the first sense four related verb forms are given (yakfuru, kafarna, kafaruw twice), three in examples, one to illustrate verbal nouns. No definition of a verb kafara is offered. Three verbal noun forms in the function of absolute object are listed with the first meaning, kufran, kufuwrwan and kufraanan. There is no discussion of their respective meanings. With the second sense of kufr no other related forms are listed. With the third a large number are, including again the verbal nouns kufuwrwan, kufraanan, as well as other forms, kadifr (with its three plurals, kufaarun, kufaratu and kifaru), mukaffar ‘denied grace and its goodness’, and others (twelve in all). Again, there is usually no explicit definition of the meanings of these related forms. One would assume presumably that they are to be accommodated under meaning three. There is further discussion of various connotations of kufr, though under which of the first three senses they are subsumed is not made clear. Kufr in the sense of ‘innocence’ is discussed on p. 145. It is noteworthy that at the end of p. 145 the basic (‘asf) meaning of kfr is said to relate to ‘covering’. The basic meaning, however, is introduced only after lengthy discussion of the pragmatically more prominent religious connotations of the root. On p. 147 a new sub-entry, kafir ‘covering’ is introduced and on p. 148 kufr returns again, though with the meaning ‘pitch for sealing ships’. The lemma for kfr ends with further morphological forms based on kfr.

Throughout the lemmas are found references from the Qur’an, Hadith, and poetry, and various grammatical points, mainly morphological are mentioned, such as whether a noun is dipotic or not. The interpretations of previous lexicographers are cited quite often.

In strong contrast to formally based grammar, meaning has a more central role than form. There is no single form kufr; rather there is kufr1 with meaning 1, kufr2 with meaning 2, kufr3, etc. The derivationally related forms, the tasriif of kfr, are consequently listed only when they happen to have some special semantic relation to the sense of kfr under discussion. The basic passive participle form makfiwr, for example is mentioned only once and that in the sub-lemma kafir meaning ‘dust’ (turaab): ramaad makfiwr means ‘dust-covered ashes’.

In terms of the structure of its lemmas, the Lisan is more or less typical of earlier works (e.g. Ibn Sida’s (458/1066) Mu‘hkam ‘The precisely planned’ and later lexicons like al-Zabiydi’s (1205/1791) Taaj al-‘arwus ‘The crown of the bride’ had relatively little organizational improvement. It was only in the nineteenth century that dictionaries took on the form common today.

The Arabic Grammatical Tradition and Comparative Semitics
As far as the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the Arabic tradition
go, there is little of special interest to comparative Semitics, aside from what they have to say about the overall cultural history of the regions where Semitic languages are spoken. Such basic notions of linguistic analysis as substitution and dependency are, presumably, of universal application. The Arabic tradition has had a fundamental influence on other Middle Eastern grammatical traditions, like the Hebraic and Coptic, and it would be of interest to know to what extent the similar structure of the languages facilitated their adoption of the Arabic grammatical model. Such an investigation, however, is probably of more interest to general linguistic theory than to Semitic studies.

There is, however, an invaluable, if inadvertent, contribution in the Arabic grammatical tradition to general Semitics. This lies in the great compendia of facts recorded by the grammarians and lexicographers, dialectal forms, socially marked forms and outright mistakes (lahn) for example. This material was used extensively by Rabin (1951), though it is far from being exhausted, and its judicious evaluation will be of fundamental interest to Arabic studies in particular and Semitics in general.

References

Arabic Sources


Secondary Sources


Damascus: Institut Français de Damas.

Further Reading

Arabic

Secondary