

The Arabic Linguistic Tradition In a Comparative Perspective

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Abstract

In this article the author deals with a number of issues in the history of the Arabic linguistic tradition, as a preliminary to a comparative study of linguistic traditions. The issues selected are the following: diachrony/synchrony, prescriptive/descriptive, variation of speech, attitude towards other languages, the concept of 'linguistic rule'. He shows that the Arab grammarians' views on these issues are connected with their linguistic situation and the general social/religious context. Suggestions are made for a comparison between the Arabic linguistic tradition and other traditions which operated in partly similar contexts.

0. Introduction

In view of the increasing interest in the history of linguistics, it is surprising that the comparative study of non-Western linguistic traditions has received so little attention. Mostly, these traditions are studied in isolation, partly because of the linguistic difficulties involved, and partly also because the predominant interest in the technical aspects of grammatical theories leaves little room for other aspects of linguistic studies that are perhaps more relevant for a comparison with other traditions. At the most, collective projects such as Sebeok's volume on the history of linguistics (1975) in the **Current Trends in Linguistics** series, Auroux's **Histoire des idées linguistiques** (1989, 1992), or the forthcoming **Handbuch für die Geschichte der Sprach- und Kommunikationswissenschaft** (edited by auroux, Koerner, Nedderhage and Versteegh), provide an inventory of the most important traditions, including the Arabic tradition, but they do not go into a comparison of these traditions. Itkonen's universal history of linguistics (1991) also includes a chapter on the Arabic tradition, but he bases himself on secondary sources exclusively.

In most studies on the history of linguistic traditions the emphasis lies on the technical component of linguistic theories, i.e., the way in which traditions deal with various linguistic topics and problems. Very often such a comparison is made between the indigenous tradition and modern (Western) linguistics. Thus, we find publications on Panini as a variationist (Kiparsky), Sibawayhi as a transformationalist (Gruntfest 1984), and Apollonius Dyscolus as a generativist (Householder 1981). The underlying purpose of such publications is often apologetic: the authors wish to prove that these grammarians already had modern linguistic ideas, and that they may be regarded as modern linguists **avant la lettre**. In a similar vein, Ayoub & Bohas (1983) analyze the Arab grammarians' ideas about sentence structure in order to show that they are in line with transformational grammar and more adequate than the usual analysis in Western Orientalist grammar. At the other extreme, there is a tendency to study earlier traditions in order to find support for one's own theories. In Chomsky's **Cartesian Linguistics** (1966), for instance, which contains in itself an interesting analysis of earlier linguistic ideas, one sometimes has the feeling that its main aim is to legitimize modern theories by showing that already hundreds of years earlier linguists had the same ideas.

A different approach is followed by Owens (1988). He, too, compares the Arabic linguistic theories with those of modern generative/transformational grammar. His aim is not a legitimation of modern theories, nor does he feel the need to write an apology for the Arabic theories. But in comparing the methodological presuppositions of both theories he wishes to gain a better understanding of their constraints and impact. In some cases, there is, indeed,

a striking resemblance between both theories because of common problems, but in other cases they are radically different from each other.

In this article I wish to concentrate on a different aspect of Arabic linguistic theory. As a matter of fact, traditions may be compared on at least three different levels:

- the theory of grammar, e.g., the category of the adjective within linguistic theory, the discussion of phonological contrasts, the concept of relative sentence, the concepts of tense/aspect, the concept of underlying levels of speech, the nature of linguistic rules, the role of semantics;
- the theory of language, e.g., discussions about the origin of speech, the relationship between speech and thought, the stylistic dimensions of speech, the role of language in society, the acquisition of language;
- the theory of linguistics, e.g. questions which deal with the position of linguistics as a discipline within the classification of sciences, the task of the linguist and the place of linguistics in society, the role of linguistics in teaching; linguistics as a descriptive or prescriptive discipline; the orientation towards synchrony or diachrony; linguistics and variation; the attitude towards other linguistic models; and from a historical perspective, the question of foreign influence in a grammatical tradition.

Although some of the second and third level aspects of the comparative study of linguistic traditions are indeed covered in other projects, e.g. in the abovementioned **Histoire des idées linguistiques**, there remains a lot to be done. Because of the limitations of place I have selected a few topics from the third category for more detailed discussion in this paper. These are: diachrony/synchrony, descriptive/prescriptive, variation of speech, attitude towards other languages, the concept of 'linguistic rule'.

1. Diachrony/synchrony

For anyone even slightly acquainted with the history of the Arabic language after the pre-Islamic period, it must surely come as a surprise when they hear that Arab grammarians did not allow for any diachronical development in their language at all. It is a fact that after the Islamic conquests, the Arabic language underwent a series of drastic changes, which eventually led to the emergence of a group of widely divergent colloquials in the Arabic speaking world, in many respects deviating completely from the norms of the standard language. Nowadays, each region in the Arab world has its own colloquial, and the dialects of different regions are in many cases incomprehensible to people from other regions. Obviously, the Arab linguists were aware of this development,

which they regarded as a corruption of speech (*fasād al-luġa*). In Ibn Khaldun's account of the history of Arabic in the *Muqaddima* (546), the expansion of the Arabic language and its adoption by peoples from very different linguistic backgrounds are seen as the main causes of the threatening decay of the language. As a matter of fact, the corruption of the Arabic language as a result of the contact with non-Arabic speakers in the newly conquered territories is mentioned by him as one of the main factors in the emergence of the discipline of linguistics in Islamic culture. The stories about the 'invention of grammar' (*waq' an-naḥw*), for instance in Ibn al-Anbari (*Nuzha* 4-8) all center around the linguistic mistakes made by the newly converted Muslims. When these mistakes became too frequent, the experts of the Arabic language had to step in and codify the language, so that everybody would know the correct rules of the language.

Why, then, did the grammarians not take into account the development of the colloquial in their linguistic studies? In the entire grammatical literature from the 7th through the 16th century of the *Hiġra*, there is hardly any mention of a difference between the standard language and the colloquial, and no grammarian seems to have been interested in the colloquial. The answer is that from the very beginning, the linguistic situation in the Arabic speaking countries must have been one of diglossia, in terms of Ferguson's theory (1959). In such a situation there is a high variety of speech, the standard language, in the case of Arabic, the language of the *Qur'an* and the Bedouin, as well as a low variety, the colloquial. The latter is very often regarded as something shameful, and sometimes its existence is even denied outright. For the educated speakers, who have learnt the high or standard variety at school, even though they use the low variety as their mother tongue, deviations from the standard language are nothing more than linguistic mistakes, to be avoided at all costs, and certainly not to be included in any linguistic description. In modern times, this aversion from the study of the colloquial variety still exists and it is reinforced by ideological motivations. Since the standard language is perceived to be the major unifying force in the Arab world, the dialects have come to be associated with disintegration and regionalism, occasionally even with western imperialism or neo-imperialism. But even in the classical period colloquial speech was viewed negatively, if only because of the fact that the revealed Book of the Muslims, the *Qur'an*, was written in the standard language, the language of the Arabs, as the Book itself repeatedly states. Consequently, the use of colloquial idioms or forms ran counter to the religious beliefs of the Muslims and could on occasion even be regarded as a blasphemous neglect of God's revelation. Since this revelation was brought to the Arabs for all eternity, it was impossible to envisage any linguistic change

in the language in which the Book had been revealed.

In az-Zağğāğī's (d. 340/951) *īdāh fi'ilal an-naḥw* there is one chapter about the question of the priority of speech or declension (*īdāh* 67-69) that is enlightening in this respect. According to the author, speech is prior to the declensional endings, but he hastens to explain that this is only true from a theoretical point of view, and it does not mean that people ever spoke without declensional endings, and then introduced these into speech. The structure of the language is regarded by him as a permanent given, even though he must have been aware of the fact that the common people in the cities spoke Arabic without any declensional endings. As a matter of fact, he even says somewhere else, in the chapter about the use of learning grammar (*īdāh* 96.18-21), that some of the common people (*'amma*) do indeed omit the declensional endings, but this is only possible in daily conversations on simple topics, and these people would not be able to clarify their thoughts, without taking recourse to declension.

But such references to another, colloquial, type of Arabic are extremely rare in the grammatical tradition. On the whole, the Arabic language was treated as an inalterable set of rules. In this respect, the Arabic tradition is very much similar to the Indian tradition. From the times of Panini onwards, the Sanskrit language is described and analyzed by the grammarians. In the Western tradition of linguistics, on the other hand, linguistic change has always been one of the prominent topics. The starting point of modern Western linguistics was the study of the vernaculars that had become the national languages in the West-European countries, specifically in France, Italy and Spain. These vernaculars derived from Latin, and their study was inherently diachronical, so that Medieval and Renaissance grammarians could not avoid dealing with linguistic change. Besides, since in the Christian religion the revealed scripture is not regarded as the literal word of God, but as human speech that originated under divine inspiration, Christian grammarians could more easily envisage a change within the language than their Muslim colleagues.

2. Descriptive/prescriptive

In light of the foregoing paragraph one might expect the Arabic indigenous tradition to have been extremely prescriptive. As a matter of fact, this is not the case. It is true that there is a special genre of treatises, the so-called *laḥn al-'amma*, in which the mistakes of the common people are enumerated, but these treatises do not deal with the colloquial as such: their purpose is to warn against mistakes in the written language of those people

who tried to write in the standard language, but were incapable to do so correctly (cf. Molan 1978). Besides, these treatises are kept strictly apart from linguistics proper, and in ordinary grammatical writings no grammarian would ever mention any incorrect speech forms. When they mention unacceptable forms, this is not because these forms were ever actually used, but only to show their impossibility from a theoretical point of view.

The sources of linguistic correctness for the grammarians were three: the **Qur'an**, (pre-)Islamic poetry, and the **kalām al-'Arāb** "the language of the Bedouin". In the first centuries of Islam, it was still possible to elicit forms from the Bedouin, and grammarians did this as a rule, sometimes even going so far as to stay with a Bedouin tribe for years. The role of the grammarian was that of someone who registers what he hears, without inventing anything himself. But in the course of time, even the Bedouin tribes became affected by the sedentary way of speaking and after three or four centuries there were no tribes left who spoke 'Classical' Arabic, i.e., Arabic with all the correct case-endings.

Nevertheless, the grammarians continued to speak about the **kalām al-'Arab** throughout the entire tradition, stating about a certain form 'the Arabs say this' or 'this is not what the Arabs say', or even simply 'they say', or 'in their language', meaning by this the Arabs. One might assume that since the actual speech of the Bedouin was no longer regarded as pure Arabic, such references to a linguistic situation that no longer existed indicated a prescriptive attitude on the part of the grammarians, but this would be too easy an assumption. In one sense, the language of the Ġahiliyya no longer existed, and the standard language was a norm that only the elite learnt, and that was used predominantly in writing. But in another sense, in a situation of diglossia one cannot simply assert that the high variety is only an artificial, written norm, because for the educated speakers it is obvious that they themselves are speakers of this language, in spite of the fact that they do so only in very special situations. One could say that it is part of a fiction when the grammarians talk about 'the language of the Arabs'. At the same time, however, the grammarians also call this language of the Arabs 'our language' and they frequently say things like 'we say' or 'you say'. In other words, from their point of view the Arabic language is still there, even though nobody uses it in everyday speech. This attitude is highly reminiscent of the attitude of Greek and Byzantine grammarians with regard to the Classical Greek language, and it is an attitude we still find nowadays both in the Greek-speaking and in the Arabic-speaking world (cf. Versteegh 1987).

Since the Arab grammarians in theory used themselves as informants, but in practice worked within the framework of a closed corpus of utterances, we cannot say that they prescribed a norm for the Arabic language. Their rules are

the faithful reflection of the way the Arabic language is spoken, at least from their point of view. But it would also be wrong to say that the grammarians simply described the language. From the earliest times onwards, when Sibawayhi at the end of the second century of the Hīġra wrote his **Kitāb**, the aim of the grammarians went beyond a pure description. The grammarian is not and cannot be content with just representing the rules of Arabic, but he has to explain these rules. The major innovation Sibawayhi brought into grammar was a complete system of meta-rules concerning the principles of governance: every case-ending, i.e. every change in the ending of nouns or imperfect verbs (called collectively **i'arāb** "declension"), had to be accounted for. The theory presupposes that every case-ending is the result of the action of a governor, and it is the task of the grammarian to determine which word in the sentence acts as a governor in each individual case.

In order to understand this attitude towards the task of the grammarians, we have to realize that Arab grammarians functioned within the framework of the Islamic sciences. Language is as much part of God's creation as every other aspect of human behaviour and culture. Since the creation is perfect, every single event in nature, including language, is perfect, and has its own purpose. The Islamic scholar has to demonstrate this purpose, has to point out the perfection of God's creation in every detail. In the science of medicine, for instance, the scholar cannot limit himself to a description of the human body, but he has to show that every part of the human body is there for a specific purpose, and could not have been different from what it is now. Likewise, the grammarian must give an explanation for each and every case-ending in a sentence.

The emphasis on the explanation of speech forces the Arab grammarians to posit an underlying level for actual speech utterances. On the surface level, the governance relations between words are not always clear, for instance because of a transposition of the word order or as a result of deletions. The speaker 'hides' (**admara**) his real intention by leaving out words, but the hearer still understands him because of 'indications' (**dalā'il**) in the actual sentence. The sentence is, therefore, completely understandable, but the governance relations are not. Take, for instance, the sentence **zaydan ḍarabtu** "Zayd I hit". In this sentence the word **zaydan** is in the accusative, and there is no governor preceding it. The grammarian therefore assumes that on an underlying level the sentence is **ḍarabtu zaydan**, in which it is clear that the governor of the word **zaydan** is the verb **ḍarabtu**. Now, take another example, **zaydan ḍarabtuhu** "Zayd I hit him". Here, the grammarian cannot posit an underlying transposition, since the sentence ***ḍarabtuhu zaydan** is not only ungrammatical, but also impossible because the verb in this sentence would

have to govern both the object and its anaphorical pronoun. The grammarian, therefore, posits an underlying sentence **ḍarabtu zaydan ḍarabtuhu**, in which the first verb governs the stranded object, but is deleted in the surface sentence.

In later grammar this procedure is called **taqdīr**, and it is the most important explanatory device the grammarians have at their disposal (cf. Versteegh, forthcoming). It is important to realize the difference between this procedure and the distinction between deep and surface structure in modern generative grammar. In Arabic linguistic theory, the actual sentence is not generated by an underlying abstract base structure, as in generativist linguistics, but the grammarian reconstructs a complete underlying sentence on the basis of the actual sentence (cf. Owens 1988: 220-26). Apart from the difference in theoretical presuppositions, there is a difference in purpose, too. The Arab grammarian's aim is not, to make any predictions about the way language is acquired, nor to posit any underlying universal properties of languages, but to provide a satisfactory explanation of the syntactic effects in actual utterances.

3. Variation in speech

Obviously, within the framework sketched above, there was no room for any variation in the sense of different rules. On the other hand, since every native speaker is a competent speaker, who makes his own utterances on the basis of his native command of the language, there is a large margin for stylistic or discourse variation. This may occur in the form of **ḍarura** "poetic license" or in the form of idiosyncratic liberties taken with the linguistic rules (**ittisā'**). The speakers, for instance, may replace one form with another: sometimes they use a plural instead of a singular, or a perfect instead of an imperfect, or a **pars pro toto**. Such idiosyncrasies do not affect the syntactic relations within the sentence, and may therefore be interpreted by the grammarian with a reference to the intention of the speaker. In some cases the idiosyncratic application of the rules obscures the surface governance relations, so that the grammarian is forced to refer to the underlying level, for instance when the speaker changes the word order, or when he does not apply a morphonological transformation that is used by most speakers. In the latter case the speaker is said to have gone back to the **asl**, i.e., the base structure.

There is one category of linguistic facts which fall within our concept of variation in speech, the pre-Islamic dialects. According to all grammarians the various Bedouin tribes in the Arabian peninsula used different forms in the pre-Islamic era. Since by definition the Bedouin tribes had a perfect command of

their speech, such variation has to be accepted. One finds, for instance, statements to the effect that the tribe of Tamim pronounced 'an as 'an (cf. Rabin 1951:10), or that the inhabitants of the Higaz used agreement between the verb and the following agent (the so-called 'akalūni l-barāgītu syndrome, cf. Rabin 1951:77, 168, 209). The acceptance by the grammarians of such forms did not imply that everybody could speak like this. This is formulated by them in the following way: if there are testimonies that a pre-Islamic tribe used a certain form, then we have to accept this, but we may not use it ourselves or extend its range of use by grammatical analogy. Such forms are to be regarded as šadd "irregular" and cannot serve as the basis of qiyās "analogy". One also finds this variation referred to as far', i.e., secondary ways of speaking, which when attested are acceptable, but cannot serve as norms.

In a few cases the variation between the tribes is used as an explanation of certain linguistic facts. An interesting example is that of the verb ḥasiba "to reckon", which according to the rules should have the imperfect yaḥsabu, but actually has the imperfect yaḥsibu. The grammarians explain this as an example of tadāhul al-luġāt "interpenetration of dialects: (also tarākkub al-luġāt, cf. Mehiri 1973:110ff.): in the pre-Islamic period there were two tribes, which used different verbs. One tribe had the verb ḥasaba, imperfect yaḥsibu, the other had the verb ḥasiba, imperfect yaḥsabu. Both verbs are, of course, correct, since they are used by native speakers, but the perfect of the one tribe and the imperfect of the other are simply not used. In this example the variation of the pre-Islamic dialects serves as a synchronic explanation, and there is no trace of a diachronic account of the development of the forms.

In the Greek tradition the coexistence of various literary dialects led to a somewhat similar approach to linguistic variation. There was a norm for the standard language - Attic Greek - but those forms that had been in use in the dialects were regarded as acceptable in their own context, and could even be adduced as explanations for the standard forms (cf. Siebenborn 1976: 146-51). The difference is, of course, that the Greek grammarians developed a theory of linguistic pathology that allowed for diachronic developments, whereas the Arab grammarians regarded all dialectal forms as synchronic components of the given structure of Arabic.

4. Attitude towards other languages

The first grammarian to give a complete account of the Arabic language, Sibawayhi, was himself of Persian descent. We do not know whether Persian was his first language, but there can hardly be any doubt that he knew the language. Still, in the Kitāb we do not find any trace at all of a comparison

between the two languages. Another example is that of the grammarian al-Farisi (d. 377/987), who was the teacher of the famous Ibn Ġinni (d. 392/1002). As his name indicates, he too, was a Persian, and in his case we know for certain that he knew Persian, since Ibn Ġinni reports a conversation with his teacher in which he asked him about his preferences with regard to languages (**Ḥaṣa'is I, 243**). His answer was that the Arabic language is vastly superior over Persian, and indeed over all other languages.

One could summarize the attitude of the grammarians towards other languages in the following way. Either the other languages have the same structure as Arabic, in which case it is useless to study them, or their structure differs from that of Arabic, in which case by definition the structure of Arabic is superior. In either case it is, therefore, useless to study any other language but Arabic. As a result we find only very seldom any reference to other languages in the writings of the Arab grammarians, and there is certainly no attempt at all to reach a cross-linguistic comparison. By way of contrast, we may mention here that the Hebrew grammarians, who often used Arabic as their medium of communication and publication, were very much interested in comparing the two languages. They even established the first comparative Semitic parallels, often including Aramaic in their comparisons as well (cf. van Bekkum 1983).

The example of the Hebrew grammarians was also followed by those people who used the Arabic model to describe their own language, as for instance in the case of Coptic, Syriac, and Turkic. There is only one Arab grammarian who involved himself in the description of other languages, the Andalusian grammarian Abu Hayyan al-Ġarnāṭī (d. 745/1344), who wrote grammars for Turkic, Mongolian and Ethiopian (cf. al-Ḥadīṭī 1966). But this exceptional grammarian only confirms the rule that in general, Arab grammarians were not interested in the study of other languages.

The reason behind this exclusive interest in only one language is easy to find out. In a sense, it is connected with the almost total neglect of colloquial varieties of Arabic. In both cases scholars were led by the religious importance of the language in which the **Qur'an** was revealed. Language, poetry and rhetoric had already been important aspects of pre-Islamic society, and this did not change with the coming of Islam. Throughout the first centuries of Islam Arabs had to come to terms with the high level of material culture and scientific practice of the inhabitants of the conquered territories. As a reaction they emphasized the two things the non-Arabs did not have: their language and their religion.

We do not know whether this attitude of superiority existed right from the beginning in Arabic culture. In the earliest commentaries on the **Qur'an** the commentators frequently explain Qur'anic words by pointing out their foreign

origin, for instance, from Nabataen, Aramaic, Hebrew, Greek or Ethiopian (e.g. Muğāhid, **Tafsir** I, 77.1; I, 307.1; I, 362.7; II, 783.3 etc.; cf. Versteegh 1993:89-90). But at the end of the second century of the Hīğra, this issue had become highly controversial, and even nowadays there is some opposition to the existence of foreign loans in the **Qur'an**.

It is essential to realize that because of their concentration on one single language, the Arab grammarians did not feel the need to assume a universal underlying structure for all human languages. Perhaps a better way to express this is to say that it was self-evident to them that other languages had to conform to the structure of Arabic. Even for Abu Hayyan who went to the trouble of analyzing the Turkic language of Mamluk Egypt, it was obvious that the structure of Turkic grammar was identical to that of Arabic grammar, or rather that all the categories of Arabic applied to Turkic as well. Since he was a conscientious observer of the facts of the Turkic language, this did not prevent him from giving an accurate account of Turkic, and he did acknowledge that in some cases Turkic surface structure was different from that of Arabic, in other words that the transformations from underlying to surface structure differed in the two languages. But the system of grammar that the Arab grammarians had devised was equally applicable to both languages.

There has been one period in Islam when the grammarians came under attack because of this attitude towards their own language. During the third/fourth centuries of the Hīğra many treatises of logic and philosophy were translated from Greek into Syriac and from Syriac into Arabic. A group of scholars, some of them Syrian Christians, began to claim that the study of the meanings belonged to their discipline, and that the grammarians would have to limit themselves to the study of the (arbitrary) expression of these meanings in any individual language. Famous debates between the philosophers and the grammarians were held, in which the grammarians in their turn accused the philosophers of being incompetent both in the Greek language (which was a dead language after all, and could no longer be studied) and the Arabic language (cf. Mahdi 1970). They asked the philosophers questions about the structure of Arabic and about the meaning of Arabic grammatical categories, and when the philosophers lamely retorted that they were only concerned with the universal meanings, they declared them to be charlatans who did not have the right to make any statement about Arabic. One could say that these philosophers were very close to the linguistic programme of the Port Royal grammarians, who likewise defended the underlying universality of all languages, and used a reconstructed underlying level to prove this universality (cf. Chomsky 1966).

As a matter of fact, Western linguists have always operated in a context in

which variety of languages, and variety within a language were accepted as normal components of human linguistic behaviour. At first, the variety they studied was obtained between the various languages of Western Europe, but they soon turned to the variety of the languages of the world and in the 18th/19th centuries they became interested in the intra-language variation of dialects, as well.

Since the Arab grammarians were solely interested in what they regarded as the most beautiful, most logical, most subtle language in the world, their discipline functioned in a different way. For them, the discipline of grammar was an Islamic science, whose purpose was to help people to reach a more profound understanding of the text of the Holy Book, rather than an exercise in linguistic curiosity. I may add that many theologians regarded the (linguistic and rhetorical) inimitability of the **Qur'an** as the most fundamental proof of the veracity of Muhammad's mission. For some of the orthodox Muslims this even implied that the **Qur'an** could never be translated into any other language, since the true linguistic sense and beauty of the work would disappear immediately when God's speech was transformed into something completely different.

5. The nature of rules

Since the grammarian's task was to explain every single phenomenon in Arabic, there had to be a framework in which phenomena could be explained. In the early stages of Arabic grammar, such an explanation was found in the identification of the responsible governor for each case-ending, and in the reconstruction of an underlying level when no governor could be identified on the surface level. They expressed their statements about the existing governing relationships in terms of the behaviour of the linguistic units. In line with the hierarchical organization of Arab society itself, the linguistic units, too, were structured along a scale of weakness and strength, or lightness and heaviness. Each element occupied a certain position within the 'society of words', determined by its relative strength, and on the basis of this position its functions and rights were assigned to it.

In this respect Arabic grammar seems to be unique among all linguistic traditions I have become acquainted with, and it is fascinating to see which consequences such a point of view had on the development of the discipline. Take, for instance, the declensional endings. The right to declension belongs primarily to the nouns, but one category of verbs, that of the imperfect verbs, shares at least two of its endings (which in other traditions would be called modal endings) with the nouns. According to the Arab grammarians this can

only be because of their resemblance to the nouns, otherwise it would be inexplicable that they exhibited declensional endings. So they set out to prove that the imperfect verb was indeed similar to the nouns in certain syntactic aspects, e.g., by pointing out the parallelism between the two sentences **zaydun la-yaktubu** "Zayd is indeed writing" and **zaydun la-katibun** in which the nominal participle functions in the same way as the imperfect verb. This fundamental resemblance between the noun and the imperfect verb was already established by Sibawayhi as an explanation for the declension of the imperfect verb, which he called **al-fi'l al-muḍāri'** "the resembling verb".

Now it is obvious that in the beginning such resemblances were advanced by the grammarians as **ad hoc** arguments for phenomena they had observed in their language. But at a later stage, linguists were no longer content with such **ad hoc** inventions. They wished to know the real reason behind the distribution of linguistic 'rights' and 'status'. The above mentioned grammarian az-Zağğāḡi in his **Kitāb al-iḍāḡ fi 'ilal an-naḡw** talks explicitly about the nature of these "linguistic causes" ('ilal, *Idāḡ* 64-66; cf. Guillaume n.d.). According to him there are in language **'ilal ta 'līmiyya** "didactic or acquisitional causes", which provide the answer to such simple questions as 'what is the correct form for the topic'. Then come the **'ilal qiyāsiyya** "analogous causes", which provide the answer to such questions as 'why is the nominative case the correct form for the topic?'. These answers are given by setting up analogies (**qiyās**) between the various categories and components and pointing out the functional resemblance between various constructions, which results in their having similar case-endings. Finally there are **'ilal naḡariyya wa-gadaliyya** "theoretical and dialectic causes", which provide the answer to even more fundamental questions, such as 'but why then is the vowel u selected for the expression of this common feature that is shared by other constructions?' The answers to these questions are found in extra-linguistic arguments, which take into account general theories of logic and philosophy.

Obviously, in this way the questioning could go on for ever, and this is why the grammarian Ibn Ġinni states that the search for an **'illat al-'illa** "cause of the cause" is both infinite and futile, since it only leads to confusion and away from the primary aim of grammatical writings, which is the immediate explanation of the surface level (**Ḥaṣā'iṣ** 1, 173-74). For some scholars even this immediate explanation went too far. The Andalusian grammarian Ibn Maḡā' (d. 513/1119) in his **Kitāb ar-radḡ 'alā n-nuḡāt** rejected any grammatical reasoning that went beyond the observation of linguistic phenomena. As native speakers, the Arabs know that the agent of the sentence is to be provided with the case-ending -u, but they have no need to know why this has been instituted by God. According to Ibn Maḡā' it would be blasphemous to assume that the

human mind would be able to fathom the reasons behind God's institution of grammatical rules. This is why he rejects the use of grammatical analogies (*qiyās*) and argues that one simply has to accept the received rules without trying to explain them by rational reasoning.

For the majority of the grammarians such an attitude was unacceptable, be it only because it would destroy the *raison d'être* of the discipline of linguistics. As we have seen above, they regarded the entire system of language as a structured whole, within which everything is connected with everything. This also meant that linguistic reasoning did not limit itself to any one component of grammar, but used cross-level arguments wherever this was necessary. In principle, relationships on the phonological level at the same time reflected relationships at the syntactic level, and the same arguments that were brought forward to explain morphological phenomena could also be used to explain phenomena elsewhere in the system. Since all elements were connected within the system, a change in one part had consequences in another part: if, for instance, something was deleted at one level, compensation could take place at another.

In this way, grammarians found explanations for every linguistic rule, and for every apparent exception. As a matter of fact, one could almost say that this system did not accept any exceptions. We have seen above that a certain amount of flexibility was assigned to the speakers, but their idiosyncrasies were not used as the basis for linguistic reasoning. Such phenomena, which we would regard as discourse phenomena, were called by the grammarians *šādd*, sometimes translated as "irregular". But they are not irregularities in our sense of the word, since they did not belong to the category of phenomena that had to be explained and fell outside the domain of linguistic argumentation. Structural deviations from the general rules, on the other hand, were always regarded as part of the system, and the grammarian's task was to find an explanation for them within the system.

6. Conclusion

In the preceding paragraphs I have tried to sketch some of the more conspicuous features of linguistic theory in the Arabic grammatical tradition. In a veritable comparative approach my next aim should be to explain the differences between this theoretical framework and that of other traditions. Obviously, I will not be able to do so within the limited space of this presentation. But it seems to me that it is important to ask ourselves in what terms such a comparison could be made. One crucial factor appears to be the connection between the discipline of grammar and the culture in which it

emerges. The development of linguistic thought constitutes part of the general history of ideas, and the theoretical presuppositions we have discussed above are intimately connected with the general constraints that determine the cultural framework. The Islamic emphasis on God's omnipotence, the hierarchical structure of classical Islamic society, the attitude towards the revealed texts, and the feelings of superiority towards other cultures, religions and languages, have all been instrumental in the formation of a linguistic model. These factors are partly shared with other traditions. We could, for instance, study how the presence of a revealed religion influenced theories on language in early Christianity, and we could contrast this with the earliest ideas about language in Chinese culture, in which there was no religion with a revealed Book. With regard to the attitude towards other languages, we could compare Arabic linguistics with Greek linguistics, since in both traditions other languages were regarded as inferior. This again could be contrasted with most European traditions, since these had to deal with a variety of languages that had no apparent claim to a monopolistic position and must therefore be regarded as principally equivalent. If I am not mistaken, this awareness of the existence of more languages eventually led to the study of the underlying universal principles of speech that throughout the development of European linguistics has been characteristic of the discipline.

In this way, the comparative study of linguistic traditions may help us to gain a better and deeper understanding of the conceptions that lie behind the linguistic framework, and to go beyond a simple taxonomy of different beliefs about the phenomenon of language. The above mentioned characteristics of the Arabic grammatical tradition are no doubt nothing more than a preamble to such a comparison, which hopefully, will stimulate specialists from other traditions to apply the results to their own research.

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