

SOME DISCREPANCIES IN THE REASONING  
OF THE ARAB GRAMMARIANS

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IN the course of its history, the Arabic language, perhaps more than any other, has been the language most highly revered and honoured by those speaking it. It was more than simply a means of expression. Among the Arabs in the days of the Jāhiliyya (when we first come into contact with Arabic as a literary medium) words seem to have had something of a magical power. The man who could use words to the advantage of his tribe (and not least of his own pocket) was highly regarded. He was thought to be in touch with the jinn, who inspired him, and hence the designation of a poet as شاعر, or the 'knower' (of some magical or supernatural knowledge). With the advent of Islam, the Arabic language became even more revered: not only was it a superb language of man, capable of being used with great artistry, both literary and technical, but it now became regarded as the language of God, His very words, remembered, collected, and eventually committed to writing in the form of the Koran.<sup>1</sup> It was as a result of Islam, and the need for accurate study and exegesis of the Koran, that linguistic studies assumed a major role in Arabic scholarship. A large number of very competent grammars were written, dealing at varying lengths with the various aspects of Arabic grammar. Not infrequently, however, the grammarians found themselves at variance with each other, presenting two different, and to their way of thinking apparently sound points of view about the same aspect of the language. It is the intention of this article to present and illustrate some of these discrepancies: they will be taken exclusively from the use of only one case, the نصب (which will henceforward be referred to as the accusative, the word نصب serving to denote also the subjunctive mood of the verb), since it is in connection with this case, owing to its wide range of uses, that these discrepancies are thrown into clearest relief. An attempt will also be made to discover the depth of the Arabs' thought into their system of grammatical analysis: did they really think

<sup>1</sup> The fact that the Koran was regarded as the language of God was later to prove both useful and embarrassing to the grammarians.

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deeply, or did they go only for the ظواهر , the external features?

We must first try to establish where and when the science of grammatical analysis originated, and in particular as an Arabic science, since this was to have a bearing on the subsequent method of the Arabs. Nowadays, when even a young schoolboy can quite easily categorise a given piece of language into its component parts, it is difficult for us to realise that at one time great scholars spent years breaking grammar down into these various component parts. 'In studying the history of grammar in the western world . . . one must start with the work of ancient Greece . . . quite early in their history the attention of those Greeks who were later philosophers was turned to considering the facts of their own language'.<sup>2</sup> For a long time, grammar was treated in fragments only as part of another discipline. Authors drew from it only those arguments valuable to their own speciality. Only later were philological questions treated in their own right. But what, it might be asked, is the connection between the grammatical science of the ancients and Arabic grammatical analysis? That the early grammarians of Arabic were affected by some external influence is reasonably certain. Without in any way denigrating their powers of originality, it seems too much to imagine that they invented their own system of grammatical analysis. We see also the extreme efficiency with which Sībawayh (d. 796/7), one of the earliest and undoubtedly the foremost of Arabic grammarians, begins his book, the 'Kitāb', immediately dividing language into its three component parts – verb, noun and particle. It is therefore tolerably certain that he, like his predecessors, was acquainted with some method of grammatical analysis before embarking on the task of analysing Arabic, and this influence was probably of Greek origin. We know that, before the days when any attempt was made to analyse Arabic, Greek philosophical methods were known in Persia, and as some philosophers had even gone there, there was undoubtedly a close cultural contact between Greece and Persia. It is therefore quite probable that the early grammarians – of whom Sībawayh was himself a Persian and others had resided in Persia – were affected by the Greek influence and based their method of analysis on that of the Greeks. This same Greek influence may also have reached Persia via Syria, since Syriac was an additional language used by Persian scribes, and there was contact between Greece and Syria. A further source of

<sup>2</sup>Robins, R.H.. 'Ancient and Mediaeval Grammatical Theory in Europe'. London, 1951. p. 2.

influence may well have been of Indian origin. The copious writings in Sanskrit had led to philosophical studies, and the Indian influence was to be felt in Persia – traces of it can be seen in the 'Kalīla wa Dimna' and other literary works.

Thus the ancient science of grammar was to be adopted by the Arabs, although it had to be adapted to suit their own particular needs. 'Arabs are most reluctant to admit foreign influence in their literature, especially anything connected with their language. This is not merely due to the particular role of the language as the vehicle for the Quranic revelation, but to the misguided idea that to admit the influence of foreign ideas detracts from their own achievements. This is not so. However much the early Arab philologists may have owed to Greek and Indian notions, nothing can belittle the use they made of such notions ...'<sup>3</sup>

'Greek philological ideas were coloured by philosophy, and the disputes of the Analogists and the Anomalists were transferred to linguistics. This was to have far-reaching influence in Latin, where it figured prominently in Varro's 'De Lingua Latina', and perhaps also in Arabic? Is it too far-fetched to compare the Basrans, who set such store by 'Qiyas', with the Analogists; and the Kufans, with their study of Arabic dialectical forms, with the Anomalists? Is not the notion of the Anomalists behind the much publicised visits of certain lexicographers to Arabian desert tribes, as a corrective and a supplement to the theorisings of pedantic teachers?'<sup>4</sup>

So we see the Arabs examining their grammar. It appears that, having started by discovering a number of rules about grammar from foreign sources, they tried to fill in these rules to agree with what happened in their language. As Arabic was the vehicle for God's revelation, the Arabs had to find a reason for its syntax, and especially for the seeming imperfections. In finding this reason, the grammarians used one of two criteria: taking some question of their grammar, they argued that it was either like something else – in which case it followed the same pattern because it was similar; or else it was different – in which case they argued that it was different in order to be distinguished from something else. The arguments of the grammar schools of Kufa and Basra provide ample illustration of these points. One might say that by using this method the grammarians would appear to be 'playing safe', but some of

<sup>3</sup> Haywood, J.A.. 'Arabic Lexicography'. Leiden, 1960. p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Haywood. op. cit., p. 7.

the resultant arguments show that it has grave deficiencies. Sībawayh, whom the Arabs regard as being the great master, had a habit of illustrating by analogy, and could finish up by having a false analogy or a non sequitur. Later grammarians adopted this fault to a greater or lesser degree, and sometimes tended to argue round the point. This too can clearly be seen in the arguments of the Kufans and Basrans who, when dealing with certain points, tended to stress negative excuses rather than positive reasons, trying to explain certain things away. Part of the reason for this may be found in the fact that they were faced with certain difficulties when they encountered anomalies, some of which they possibly recognised as being in fact anomalies.

In what way do the above introductory generalizations apply? Let us examine some of the accusative usages, throwing light on the discrepancies. The most obvious use of the accusative is as the direct object of the verb (المفعول به). When the object precedes the verb it may be in the رَفْع (nominative) or the accusative, with apparently sound reasons for either. One explanation for the use of the accusative is that the object is preceded by an understood verb, identical with the expressed verb - (ضربتُ) زيدًا ضربته.<sup>5</sup> The Kufans say that the accusative is used because in the sentence زيدًا ضربته the \* refers back to the زيدًا and makes it accusative as a بَدَل (the equivalent of the English 'apposition').<sup>6</sup> If this is the case, how then is the accusative governed when there is no ضميرُ العائد (the pronoun which refers back), as if the sentence were زيدًا ضربتُ? Al-Zajjājī allows either the accusative or the nominative, even when there is a ضميرُ العائد, so either the argument about the بدل, or the opinions of al-Zajjājī must be at fault.<sup>7</sup> From the Arabs' point of view, since other principal grammarians say that the nominative may be used,<sup>8</sup> and thanks to the shrewd reasoning of the Basrans about the positions of words in a construction with بدل,<sup>9</sup> the Kufan view would appear to be at fault. However, even after the re-

<sup>5</sup> Ibn al-Anbārī. 'Al-Inṣāf fi Masā'il al-Khilāf'. Ed., 'Abd al-Hamīd. 1945. p.60f..

<sup>6</sup> Ibid..

<sup>7</sup> Al-Zajjājī. 'Al-Jumal'. Mohammed ben Chereb. Paris, 1957. p.51f..

<sup>8</sup> Sībawayh. 'Kitāb'. Bulak edition, 1316 A.H.. p.46.

Ibn Mālik. 'Alfiyya'. Trans., Goguyer. Beirut, 1888, + De Sacy, S.. 'Alfiyya'. Commentary, Paris, 1833. 11.255f..

Ibn Hishām. 'Qaṭr al-Nadā'. - 'La Pluie de Rosée'. Trans., Goguyer. Leiden, 1887. p.200f..

<sup>9</sup> They say that a noun in apposition بدل may not precede the noun to which it is in apposition (المبدل منه). Ibn al-Anbārī. op. cit. p.60f.

moval of this point of view, we are still left with the interesting situation of having two explanations as to why either the accusative or the nominative may be used, both of them soundly reasoned from the Arabs' point of view, and both of them permitted by the grammarians. Their view as to why the nominative is permitted is that the word *زيداً*, in *زيداً ضربته*, is a مبتدأ (subject) and what follows is its خبر (predicate). But here the grammarians seem to have presented themselves with a paradox. Taken at face value, their argument about its being a مبتدأ is quite sound. But they have overlooked their own explanations as to why the preceding direct object may be in the accusative. If the Kufans were right, and the object were a بدل of the pronoun which refers back, then it should be accusative all the time. And if we accept the Basrans' theory that the word is made accusative by a preceding understood verb, then again it should logically be accusative all the time.

This problem of the direct object which precedes the verb is made even more complicated by sentences of the type *زيداً ذهبَ به*. The grammarians are content to accept a sentence like this,<sup>10</sup> but it would seem wrong to use the accusative. If – and this is purely for the sake of argument – we were to allow that the preceding noun should be in apposition to the *به*, then the جر (genitive) would be called for, as the *به* is governed by the preposition *ب*. Likewise, if we were to imagine an understood verb before the *زيداً*, then *زيد* must still be genitive, since the understood verb must be identical with the expressed verb. Finally, this type of sentence cannot even be construed as a خبر – مبتدأ type of sentence, since this would necessitate the noun being in the nominative. It would appear that the accusative is used, with the Arabs regarding this type of sentence as identical with that with a directly transitive verb, failing to take into consideration that they have here a verb which is made transitive only through the medium of a preposition. It is possible, however, that they allow the accusative to be used by looking at the sentence from the point of view of meaning, rather than going by the actual letter of the word.

An extension of the direct object is *نداء*, the equivalent of the vocative, used for the noun addressed. In their arguments about the cases involved in *نداء*, it would seem that the grammarians were trying to explain something away. It immediately strikes the student of grammar as

<sup>10</sup> Sībawayh. op. cit. . p. 46.

Al-Zamakhsharī. 'Al-Mufaṣṣal'. Alexandria, 1291 A.H. . p. 27.

Ibn Mālik. op. cit. . 11.255f. .

illogical that one type of noun addressed should be in the accusative, while another should be in the nominative. There is the impression, in reading the arguments and reasons for the cases involved, that the Arabs were aware of what was a blatant paradox in their language, and attempted to discover or invent sound reasons for the facts. What factors do emerge, however? First and foremost, there is a majority agreement, but one not accepted by the Kufans, that the vocative appellative *يا* is essentially verbal in action, such as 'I mean' or 'I call', and that therefore the *منادى* is a direct object.<sup>11</sup> This seems to be perfectly sound reasoning and a satisfactory explanation; but why, then, should the definite singular term be an unannated nominative? In their arguments one cannot help feeling that the grammarians realised it should be in the accusative, and tried valiantly to give sound reasons as to why it was not. In starting their arguments the Kufans had the advantage that they did not accept that the *منادى* was a direct object,<sup>12</sup> but even so their reasoning is weak and negative. Their strongest point against its being a direct object is that one may not have *حال* accompanying it – at first sight an apparently sound reason, but successfully rejected by the Basrans, whose reasoning is as a whole slightly more sound than that of the Kufans, but even it tends to be negative. Both schools say that the nominative is used because neither the accusative nor the genitive may be used. The Basrans, however, do admit that this nominative is in place of an accusative. They not only say that it is in place of a direct object, but can give proof of this in the form of the particle *ل*, followed by the genitive – *يا لزيد*. If it were not that *يا* takes the place of a verb, they say it would not be possible for a particle demanding the genitive to be attached to it. They give further proof of this in the use of the accusative epithet with the nominative noun – *يا زيد الطريق*.<sup>13</sup>

A further bone of contention among the grammarians was the subject of *إستثناء* (exception), which was to present various problems which in turn led to discrepancies in the grammarians' reasoning. In the negative exceptive sentence, they tell us that the thing excepted goes into the case of the generality, or, put another way, the word after *لا* does not change from

<sup>11</sup> *Sībawayh. op. cit. p. 303.*

*Ibn Hishām. op. cit. p. 218f..*

*Al-Zamakhsharī. op. cit. p. 21.*

*Ibn al-Anbārī. op. cit. p. 200f..*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibn al-Anbārī. op. cit. p. 200f..*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid..*

the case it had before the *إِلَّا* was appended - *ما قام القوم إلا زيداً* - *ما قامت القوم إلا زيداً*.<sup>14</sup> However, if the generality is not mentioned, the word excepted goes into the case in which the generality would have been - *ما أتاني إلا زيداً* - *ما أتاني إلا زيداً*. The Arab grammarians' explanation for this is that the noun excepted is a *بدل* of the generality and so goes into the same case. This explanation would appear quite sound, but there is one flaw: when the excepted thing precedes the thing from which it is excepted it cannot be a *بدل*, because, as we have already seen when dealing with the direct object preceding the verb, the grammarians did not allow a *بدل* to precede its *مبدل منه*.

Positive exceptive sentences, however, present more problems. The rule agreed by the grammarians is that the noun excepted goes into the accusative<sup>15</sup> - *مررت بالقوم إلا أباك*, *أتاني القوم إلا أباك*, and *مررت بالقوم إلا أباك*: it is not part of what precedes it, and so cannot be a *بدل*. They say that the regent (*عامل*) acting on the accusative is what precedes it, but the Kufans and Basrans disagree as to what this regent might be.<sup>16</sup> One Kufan view is that *إِلَّا* is a compound of *إِنَّ* + *لَا*, and so governs in the way in which *إِنَّ* does.<sup>17</sup> If this is so, why does *إِلَّا* govern the accusative when the sentence is positive, and yet allow also the nominative or genitive when the sentence is negative? If *إِلَّا* is derived from *إِنَّ* + *لَا*, then it would logically have to govern the same case all the time.

A further Kufan view is that one must understand by *إِلَّا* the verb *استثنى*, governing a direct object. But as mentioned in connection with the *إِنَّ* + *لَا* interpretation, and as the Basrans pointed out, if the verb *استثنى* were understood, then the accusative would again have to be used in all instances.

<sup>14</sup> *Sībawayh. op. cit. p. 359f.*

*Al-Zamakhsharī. op. cit. p. 36f.*

*Ibn Hishām. op. cit. p. 271f.*

*Ibn Mālik. op. cit. 11.316f.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

*Al-Zajjājī. op. cit. p. 230f.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibn al-Anbārī. op. cit. p. 167f.*

<sup>17</sup> It is interesting to note that the Basrans try to refute this theory by saying that this cannot be the case, since the shortened form of *إِنَّ*, *إِنْ*, which is thought to be used in *إِلَّا*, cannot wield any influence, when it was they who stated, when dealing with *إِنْ* and its sister words, that the shortened form could still govern the accusative. (*Ibn al-Anbārī. op. cit. p. 123f.*...)

The Basrans claim that the word excepted is made accusative by the transitivity of the main verb, which governs an accusative by the force of *يَا*. But in condemning the Kufans, the Basrans automatically condemn themselves: if the main verb, by the mediation of *يَا*, governs the noun excepted in the accusative, then it too would have to govern the accusative in all instances.

Outside the grammar schools, the grammarians offer two explanations for *إستثناء*. The first is that one must understand *ولكن*: but if this were so, then surely one must understand *ولكن* in all instances, and so the accusative would be necessitated all the time. The second is that the accusative is used because the thing excepted is not part of what went before, and cannot therefore be a *بدل* – a rather doubtful view: and once again, there is the question, why the accusative and not the nominative or the genitive? The grammarians then tell us that if the thing excepted discontinues the idea of the sentence, then it is made accusative as it is different from the generality. This also appears to be a false way of looking at the sentence: again we get the same question, just because the word is different, why should it be accusative, and not nominative or genitive?

Having seen the flaws in the foregoing explanations, do the grammarians give us a sound alternative? Several factors give the impression that the usage after the exceptive particle *يَا* is yet another example of an anomaly. However, another explanation, free of discrepancies, can be given, if we examine more closely some of the points made by the grammarians. One clue can be found when they say that, even in a negative sentence, instead of using the nominative or genitive, where applicable, the noun excepted may always be in the accusative.<sup>18</sup> A second clue is to be found in the other words of exception, some of which are verbs. It seems probable that the noun excepted after *يَا* is a further use of the direct object after an understood verb which is contained in *يَا*: in this respect the view of the Kufans is quite acceptable, imagining this verb to be *إستثنى*, or one of similar meaning, despite the arguments of the Basrans to condemn this theory.

Again we find a diversity of opinion amongst the grammarians as to why the accusative should be used in the *مفعول معه*, the accusative of con-

<sup>18</sup> *Sībawayh. op. cit. p. 359f.*

*Al-Zajjājī. op. cit. p. 230f.*

*Al-Zamakhsharī. op. cit. p. 36f.*

*Ibn Hishām. op. cit. p. 271f.*



comitance, examples of which are *سرت والنيل* and *ما صنعت و اباك*. Two main points are emphasized:<sup>19</sup> the *واو* does not alter the sense at all, and the accusative is used only in those instances where concordance – making the noun after *و* agree in case with the noun before it – would offer something contrary either to the ordinary rules of grammar, or to the sense. One view which is extremely weak is that of the Kufans in their assertion that the accusative is used as a difference<sup>20</sup> – this is once again negative reasoning, easily refuted by the Basrans. But even their view is questionable.<sup>21</sup> They regard the *مفعول معه* as made accusative by the verb in the sentence, and state that the *واو* makes any intransitive verb transitive – a view which seems false. Admittedly the root form verb *خرج* is made transitive by the prefixing of an alif (form 4) or the doubling of the middle radical (form 2), but these are both changes to the actual verb itself. Moreover, while certain verbs, such as *حاج إلى*, *أغار على* and *جاء ب*, are made transitive by the mediation of a preposition, *و* is not a preposition (*ظرف*), but a conjunction (*عطف*) which, unlike prepositions, is incapable of wielding any influence. The most acceptable explanation is that the *مفعول معه* is made accusative by the influence of the main verb (we must remember that, from an Arab point of view, even an intransitive verb may exercise influence over a noun and make it accusative in an indirect way) which reaches the noun through the medium of the *واو*.

Having seen some of the discrepancies in the reasoning of the Arab grammarians, it will be appreciated that the Arabic language contains anomalies (there are also other illustrations outside the scope of this article). One might tentatively put forward a possible explanation for some of these anomalies, and thus partly vindicate the grammarians of some of their deficiencies. One of their main sources when they wished to illustrate some point, especially of vocalization, was the Koran. However, the question of the vocalization of the Koran is a problem in itself. The text was vocalized at the time of al-Hajjaj, in the late seventh century: indeed, it is not inconceivable that some of the early grammarians may have themselves assisted in the vocalization. As far as the anomalies and seeming imperfections are concerned, it is well known that there are a considerable number of variant readings in the different MSS,<sup>22</sup> and

<sup>19</sup> *Sībawayh*, op. cit. p. 150.

*Ibn Mālik*, op. cit. p. 11.311f..

<sup>20</sup> *Ibn al-Anbārī*, op. cit. p. 155f..

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>22</sup> Jeffrey, A... 'Materials for the History of the Text of the Qur'ān'. Leiden, 1937.

therefore, while the final vocalized form might have supported one view on a certain topic, certain of the MSS might have supported another. It is possible that certain of the MSS might have given a reading which would not seem anomalous, but of course the grammarians relied on the final vocalized form which came to be generally accepted. Such anomalous usages may have crept into Arabic as a result of human error, or of historical change during the ages, presumably during that period before the language was written, and, gaining currency in the course of time, may have been followed in the vocalization. Of course the Arabs could not admit to such an explanation, because if they were to suggest that these anomalies and illogicalities were the result of human error, and were genuine mistakes in their language, this would be tantamount to saying that the Koran, which was the language of God, contained mistakes.

Did the Arabs think deeply about their system of grammatical analysis, or did they, in fact, go only for the *ظواهر* ? They were faced with no easy task in performing this analysis. Though this article has touched on only some of the discrepancies, relating to one particular case, others could be cited. As a result of these, the impression is given that, in tackling this task of analysis, the depth of their thought, while it was considerable, was not very conclusive in a number of cases. It must, however, be stated in the Arabs' defence, that they had several awkward problems with which to contend. If we say that the Arabs were not completely convincing in their analysis, we must add that they were certainly no worse than contemporary Western grammarians. It would be easy to condemn them in the light of modern grammatical knowledge, but in their age, even though they were poorly equipped to carry it out, their method of analysis was of at least an equal standard with that of other nations. It must be admitted that, despite their shortcomings, they did some excellent work in the field of grammar.