MEDIAEVAL ARABIC GRAMMAR
AND ITS INFLUENCE
ON LINGUISTIC THEORY AND TERMINOLOGY
IN CONTEMPORARY ARAB SCIENCE

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1. The present state of scientific thought depends, to a considerable extent, upon results obtained in the past. However, the relation between the present stage of a given scientific discipline and the degree of development of the latter in the past (when speaking about the past we have mostly in mind the civilizational context of the mediaeval Arab science) is not quite immediate. For the achievements of a particular branch of science depend upon the continuity of national traditions in that field, upon the extent of its interrelations with the World science in the primitive period of its development, and upon other factors.

Scientific disciplines such as mathematics, astronomy, medicine and the like, that is those whose splendid results achieved within the frame of mediaeval Arab science are well known, drew freely upon the scientific thought of European antiquity (in some single cases even upon the best traditions of Hindu civilization, viz. mathematics) and, some centuries later, controlled the development of these branches of science in mediaeval Europe. But, in spite of this, all these fields of knowledge are, for the time being, entirely dependent on the achievements of the European science. With this type of sciences, viz. sciences characterized by a sufficiently long break of creative continuity, the national tradition does not operate in the sense either of a stimulative or in that of a retardative factor. Basically, these branches of science resume contact with the national tradition in an indirect way only, by means of the European (or rather Western, non-Arab) extensions of those remarkable accomplishments which have been attained or, at least, stimulated by the mediaeval Arab science.

On the other hand, however, those branches of science which have preserved their continuity until now and are able, in a certain sense, to adopt some elementary notions of the European science and confront them with the corresponding indigenous notions and related terms, yield a quite different picture. Linguistics, or more explicitly, those fields of the study of language which are represented in the Arab science, belongs to the latter category. In the following we shall try to approach some aspects of
the influence of the traditional grammatical theory and terminology within
the scope of mediaeval Arab science on the modern linguistic theory and
terminology, as reflected in the Egyptian linguistic publications issued
in the period of the last few years. (It seems that the very term 'linguis-
tic' is rather inappropriate in this context because of implying a consider-
ably higher degree of abstraction as to fully correspond to that which is
usual in the Arab science of language in our days. It would probably be
possible to substitute in most cases, the term 'linguistic' by that of 'gram-
matical' provided that the extent and assortment of grammatical features
would be conceived in the sense of the mediaeval Arab science.)

2. One of the highest degrees of abstraction was reached, by the medi-
aeval Arabic grammar, in setting the relation between governing ('āmil
and governed (ma'āmil fiṣīh) words. The former can operate as either ex-
plicitly expressed ('amīla fīshī laṣāna) or implied by the context ('amīla
fiṣīh taqādirān, bit-taqādirī). The governing word controls the grammatical
form of the governed one constituting, in this way, a relation which under-
lies the grammatical meaning (ma'ānīn). The whole of interdependencies,
conceived in this way, as well as their formal rendering, is termed i'rabī.1
The formal expression of these interdependencies is secured, with the
governed word, by the set of markers which are usually covered by the
term ḫarākūt al-ḥrabī.2 The negation of i'rab is designed by the term bīnīn',
in the terminology of indigenous philologists, that is, inflexibility in the
sense of i'rabī,3 which underlies the basic dichotomy between (1) al-
mu'rabūt (flexible words), and (2) al-mašniyyūt (inflexible words).

Flexible words yield, in turn, a trichotomic division into marṣūṭāt,
mansūbūtāt, and maṭḥūdūt (or maṭḥūrūtāt), in the case of nouns, and into
marṣūṭūt, mansūbūt, and maṭḥūrūt, in the case of verbs.

The mechanism of i'rab, as defined in the above terms, includes only a
part of the possible inflectional manifestations of Arabic, notably the
grammatical category of case and that of verbal mood. The first of these
categories (viz. case) is, according to the traditional conception of i'rab,
superior to all other grammatical categories of the noun, such as number,
gender, and grammatical determination. The latter categories operate

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1 Referred to in de Sacy's 'syntaxe désinentielle' and J. Fück's 'Desinentia-
flexion' (cf. also § 4 of this paper).
2 Cf. the Egyptian edition of al-Hawārizmī's Mushafī Mufā'id, henceforth Mufā'idā,
based on van Vloeten's edition (Leiden 1895), Cairo 1930; pp. 29-30; cf. also
uṣūb al-i'rab, ib., 28 ff.; however, the latter does not strictly correspond to
ḫarakūt al-i'rabī because of its including, in certain contexts, such syntactic
notions as al-muḥānada', al-ḵabar, al-fā'il, etc. as well (viz. ib., 31 ff.).
3 For the term ḫarākūt al-bīnīn' cf., for instance, the Egyptian commentator on
Mufā'idā, Muḥammad Kamāl ad-Dīn al-Adhamī, Mufā'idā, 59, fa. 1.
merely as modifiers of the particular case ending realizations. The last of the above i'tāb categories (viz. verbal mood), is, in tum, superior to all grammatical categories proper to the verbal inflection, such as number, gender, person, etc.

I'tāb, then, does not include introflectional realizations of any of the aforementioned grammatical features, e.g. number distinction rendered by the so called broken plurals (kitāb vs. kutāb), the introflectionally expressed gender differences (ahsan vs. hasan), etc. All features of this type are described, as a rule, under the heading of 'istiqāq.

I'tāb, at the same time, constitutes the most conservative nucleus of the indigenous grammar in reflecting the synthetic linguistic type of Arabic. Although the language of the Qur'an, as demonstrated by the occurrence of constructions exhibiting free word-order (e.g. inna nāmi yahās li'ābdā min 'ibādī l-'ulamā'ī (Fāṭir, 28), as well as the language of the pre-Islamic poetry, fully preserve formal features of i'tāb, early generations of Iraqi grammarians as early as the beginning of VIIIth century A.D. find it useful to study the language of nomadic tribes. For their language, in preserving formal features of i'tāb, was much more conservative than that of sedentary Arabs, the latter exhibiting features speaking in favour of the progressive shift towards analytism.

Indigenous grammar, despite this evident situation, continues considering i'tāb as its basic concept from which the whole of its structure is derived, irrespective of the real linguistic evolution. This ignoring of the evolutional trends in Arabic creates as early as the early Middle Ages a very conservative scientific basis which has greatly contributed to maintaining and deepening divergences between the Classical idiom and the language of everyday usage, by virtue of which we can consider it as a powerful historical factor stimulating the emergence of the modern diglossia as well.

3. The very existence of i'tāb, as conceived by indigenous grammarians, brings into being several important problems.

The sum of formal features operating in the inflectional system of i'tāb is very frequently designated by one of the following terms: ḥarakāt al-i'tāb (viz. fn. 2), ʿalāmāt al-i'tāb, zhawābir al-i'tāb, awāhir al-kalām lil-i'tāb, etc., etc.

6 Fück (Arabic version), pp. 3, 4, etc.
7 Cf. Mārāḥib, 29.
8 For other variants viz. § 4 of our study as well.
The notion of ُharakāt al-iʿrāb becomes, in many cases, the first notion superior to the single inflectional manifestations of ʾiʿrāb in the indigenous hierarchy of grammatical notions and, accordingly, it freely substitutes the notion of case. The latter is, as a rule, defined by the sum of its single manifestations, i.e., by the total of desinential morphemes referred to in the Arabic terms ʿaʃʿ, ḥaʃʿ (ġarr), and naʃb. The relation between ُharakāt al-iʿrāb and the verbal mood yields a similar picture.

In this connection, it should be said, we do not take into account too specialised conceptional and terminological niceties peculiar to particular authors or grammatical schools. Thus, for instance, ʿal-Ḥawārizmī considers ʿaʃʿ, naʃb and ḥaʃʿ to be freely replaceable by (viz. qad tusammā aydēn . . .) ʾdamm, faṭḥ and kasr, in opposition to Bastian philologists who distinguish between both sets of the above terms: the first of them denoting case endings controlled by ʿawāmil in the framework of ʾiʿrāb (in the case of nouns which will serve as illustrative material for the subsequent statements), the other set representing the so-called ُharakāt al-bināʾ like those in naḥnu, aynā, etc.⁹

The extent of ُharakāt al-iʿrāb varies considerably with individual authors:

3.1. In a minimum sense, this term includes vowel morphemes of the nominal (viz. case) and verbal (viz. mood) inflection, i.e., those corresponding, in the most generally accepted terminological usage, to ʾdamm, faṭḥ and kasr (in the domain of verbal inflection the latter being substituted by ʾgaʃm). That part of ʾiʿrāb which is rendered by means of morphemes constituted by consonantal elements is not taken into account. It should be noted that Arab grammarians, influenced by orthographical features, tend to identify morphemes constituted by long vowels: -ū, -aʿ, -iʿ (viz. ʾāw, ʾalif and ʾiʿ) with consonants (viz. ʾḥurūf) as well.

3.2. Maximally, it includes the whole variety of grammatical means pertaining to the rendering of case and verbal mood, that is, with the inclusion of the consonant-constituted morphemes as well. In this case, as is evident, it is possible to treat ُharakāt al-iʿrāb as a notion superior to the whole inflectional domain defined by the indigenous terms ʿaʃʿ, naʃb, ḥaʃʿ (ġarr), in the case of nouns, and ʿaʃʿ, naʃb and ʾgaʃm, in the case of verbs.

Similar discrepancies in defining ʾiʿrāb by means of the indigenous notions of ُharakāt al-iʿrāb are allowed by a rather large frame of interpretability of the very terms ʾharaka (corresponding, in most cases, to 'vowel') and ʿaʃʿ (equalling, most frequently, the concept of 'consonant').

As emphasized by J. Cantineau,¹⁰ the term ʾharaka, in the interpretation

⁹ Cf. ʿal-Ḥawārizmī, 29.
of Arab grammarians, does not represent a phonetic correlate to consonant (harf) being rather identified with a certain state of the latter (viz. state of 'motion'), thus contrasting with its state of 'quiescence' (viz. sukun). On the other hand, the term 'harf' which can be, in most cases, rendered by the term 'consonant', denotes in the main the graphic symbol of the Arabic alphabet and only secondarily its phonetic realization.

When viewed from this angle, an extremely important criterion in defining huruf is their occurrence at the line level within a written corpus. It is mostly in virtue of this specific localization that huruf can most unambiguously be distinguished from hamaka, that is, additional graphic symbols situated at different line levels. Since all harf-type symbols are situated at the same line level, including graphic symbols of vowel quantity, (1) the notion of harf potentially includes (1.1) the sum of graphic symbols used in expressing consonants as well as their phonetic realization, and at the same time, (1.2) the total of graphic symbols pertaining to the notation of vowel quantity jointly with their phonetic values; while (2) hamaka should be identified with (2.1) additional graphic symbols of short vowels with their phonetic realization and, in some sources, (2.2) still other additional graphic symbols with their respective phonetic values among which is sometimes located rather unfortunately even zero-vowel (sukun, ḍawām), so that hamaka potentially includes even its own negation as well.\footnote{11}

The opposition between vowel and consonant did not get, in the indigenous grammar, any precise definition until now, the terminological distinction between both notions being, in turn, very insufficient. Some sources tend to derive the terms for vowel and consonant from the traditional terminology (viz. hamaka, harf), perceptibly influenced by orthographic features, while other sources try to emphasize the phonetic value of these items in a more immediate way.

To the first type the following pairs belong:

\textit{huruf} mutahārrika vs. \textit{huruf} sākina;\footnote{12}

\footnote{11} Cf., for instance, Muḥammad Kamāl ad-Dīn al-Adhamī’s comments, \textit{Maqāḥib}, 29, 1.

\footnote{12} L. Saïsse, J. Châbata, \textit{Dictionnaire français-arabe} (henceforth DFA), London-New York-Toronto, 2nd ed., new impr. 1955; viz. the entry 'consonne (les consonnes et les voyelles)’. Here, in the state of definiteness and in reverse order relative to our quotation.

Cf. also the study of ʿAbd al-Qādir, member of the Cairo Academy of Arabic Language, \textit{Tandażiyat al-uṣūl al-luqawiyya} (‘Biliteracy of Roots of the Language’), in \textit{Maqāllat Maqma} al-luğa al-ʿarabiyya (henceforward MML‘A), 11. 113-133 (al-Qahira 1959), p. 113. Here, the author employs the term ‘harf mutahārrık in a slightly different way, viz. yatarkhab kull minhā (i.e. min al-mawādd al-luqawiyya) min maqta’ wāḥid muqlaq ay min ḥurufin aswalumun mutahārrık
hurst ñawit藜ya vs. hurũf sâkin, etc.

To the second:

ašuṭ al-maṭṭâ (with a further distinction between al-qâṣīra and at-tawiya) vs. ašuṭ maqta'îyya (hurstũf);

ṣawt layyîn (ṣawt layîn qâṣīr or ḥarakâ ʾâdiya vs. ṣawt layîn ʾawāl or ṣawt al-maḍîl) vs. ṣawt sâkin, etc.

The last pair presents the first hopeful attempts to codify these basic terms at the highest codificative level in the U.A.R. (1962).

Other variants:

ḥarakâ — graphic symbols of short vowels (as against hurũf); (it should be noted that the criterion of localization of a given graphic symbol relative to the line level or, in other words, the criterion of equivalence of graphic symbols, which was repeatedly emphasized in works of Arab scholars of various periods, continues to be relevant until our days. Thus, for instance, Professor Wafi, while commenting on the proposal to introduce new ḥarî-type graphemes for denoting short vowels of the Arabic sound system, speaks about hurũf;)

ḥarakâ mandaḍa — long vowel;

ḥarakâ qaṣīra (tawiya) — short (long) vowel;

ʾalâmaṭ al-ḥarakâ — graphic symbol of short vowel (in contradistinction to its phonetic representation — ḥarakâ), etc.

wa ṣâniḥiyya sâkin. The term ḥarî muḥtabarik, as evident from the above quotation, is to be identified with a CV segment (in opposition to the DFA-conceived 'voyelle'). Discrepancies of this kind are numerous.

G.S.Šarbatov, Russko-arabskij učebnyj slovar’, Moscow, 1964. Cf. entries 'glasnyj (glassnye zvuky)' and soglasnyj li'

Cf. 'Ali 'Abdallâh Wāfī, Fiqh al-lağū, 4th ed., Cairo 1956, pp. 204, 253, 257, etc. (henceforth FL). Besides these items, Wāfī employs terms which have been subsequently codified by the Cairo Academy, such as al-ʾaṣwâṭ al-layyīna (or ʾaṣwâṭ al-līn) as against al-ʾaṣwâṭ as-sâkin (cf. ib., 16).


Cf. FL, 253.


Cf. FL, 259.

MML’A, 10 (1958), 53.

MML’A, 11 (1959), 113.

4. The traditional grammar, as is evident from the preceding pages, did not succeed in creating some of the useful generalizations of certain grammatical categories commonly met with in European-type grammars. The grammatical category of case, for instance, which is one of the basic *i’rāb* categories, is in most cases substituted by the sum of its single representations (viz. *raِf‘*, *naṣb*, *bālِd* (*garr*). However, this degree of abstraction proves to be, in certain contexts, rather insufficient, especially when confronting the system of scientific notions, as elaborated by the indigenous Arabic grammar, with that of the European or, more generally, Western type grammars. Such cases of confrontation emerge quite necessarily in every attempt to translate works of linguistic interest by non-Arab authors into Arabic, as well as in every attempt to adopt modern linguistic notions by specialists who had received their linguistic training out of the reach of the influence of the Arab science but who make, nevertheless, use of Arabic as a medium of scientific communication.

The lack of a number of clearly defined notions and terms related to them in the mediaeval grammar as well as the lack of well-established terminological units in the present day Arabic grammar lead to numerous incorrespondences in the generality range of the respective terms as compared with their European equivalents. The generality range of the Arabic terms is either slightly higher or, which is the most typical case, slightly lower than that of terms corresponding to them in Western taxonomies of grammatical concepts. The situation is further complicated by the fact that the great majority of terms used varies not only with different authors but even with the same author.

Discrepancies of this kind can be illustrated by the grammatical category of case. Examples are drawn from the Arabic translation of Fück’s *Arabfiya* and are faced with those corresponding to them in the German original. Page numbers with German quotations are to be identified with the pagination of the German original, those given with Arabic terms refer to an-Naḍīr’s Arabic version.22

Kasus (plur. (60)) – ‘aলāmāt al-i’rāb (106);

Kasusendugen (2) – ‘aলāmāt al-aوَٰحُل’ (2);

Kasusendugen (60) – *i’rāb* (106) (however, the term *i’rāb*, on the other hand, frequently corresponds to Fück’s term *Desinential/ation*, the latter being alternatively rendered by still other Arabic equivalents such as *taṣāra* / *m∗ābī* (9, 13, etc.), *taṣāra* / *bāl-i’rāb* (2, 3, etc.), *taṣrīf* / *m∗ābī* (11), etc. which, apart from the grammatical category of case, also include at the same taxonomic level that of verbal mood);

Kasusforman (60) – Ḥalāl al-i’rāb (105) (in opposition to Fück’s ‘Modus-formen’ (60) which is rendered by the Arabic *taṣrīf* al-a‘f al (105) in an-

22 For the full bibliographical data viz. fn. 4 and 5.
Nağgar’s translation;
Kasusformen (viz. die Aufgabe der äusseren – (61) – (tark) al-i’rāb fī
awābir al-kālimāt (107);
Kasussyntax (5) – ḥṣbāl al-kālima (9); etc., etc., etc.²³
The relatively great number of alternative terms related to case seems
to bear witness to the fact that this range of generality is not familiar to
the grammatical theory in the contemporary Arab science, nor do the sep-
arate case values exhibit unambiguous terminological coverings in recent
works of Arab scholars, especially in connection with case systems of
synthetic languages other than Arabic, i.e., languages whose case systems
differ from the Arabic trichotomy. In similar cases, traditional syntactic
terms for particular parts of a sentence are, as a rule, called to the res-
cue, such as:
(in describing the case system of Latin)
nominaive – ḥālat al-fā’īl;
accusative – ḥālat al-ma’āl bibi;
genitive – ḥālat al-μuḍāf ilayhi,²⁴ etc.
The use of terms of the above type leads to a dangerous terminological
over-load as in the case of al-fā’īl, for instance. Cf.:
(1) (with reference to Arabic:) subject of a verbal sentence;
(2) (with reference to other languages:) subject in general, agential
noun;
(3) nominative (viz. above);
(4) in morphology: active participle.
5. Further complications emerge whenever, apart from a given gram-
matical category (in the following considerations the grammatical category
of case will be used as an illustrative example), another category should
be expressed at the same time. It is worthwhile noting, in this connection
that singular, in the case of grammatical number, and masculine, in
the case of gender, are very frequently treated as implicitly included in the
term covering the basic category. The very term 'basic category' is, as a
matter of evidence, a highly relative notion because it is a matter of con-
text to decide the question of the respective relevance of grammatical
categories under consideration.
In such cases, basically, one of the following methods is usually fol-
lowed:
(1) all the grammatical categories under consideration, irrespective of

²³ Ṣabbāg speaks mostly about mawāṣiṣ or mawāṣiṣ bīls-i’rāb, cf. p. 24, etc.
²⁴ MMLA, 15 (1961), pp. 55-6 (viz. Ramses Girgis, al-Tamāyim wa-tamūnīn, pp. 51-
9). The last example (genitive), should in the quoted source, represent the plural,
viz. al-muḍāf ilayhim, p. 56. (All the examples quoted occur here with reference
to the Latin case system).
any aspect of their possible hierarchization, are explicitly expressed by means of autonomous terminological units, case being, as a rule, rendered by

(1.1) terms derived from the traditional 'rāb-featured case terminology, e.g. al-ğam’ al-marṣū ṣ — nominative plural,\(^{25}\) etc.;

(1.2) traditional syntactic terms related to particular members of a sentence (using these terms in this context is, nevertheless, rather traditional), e.g. ğam’ al-muddīf ilāyhi — genitive plural,\(^{26}\) etc.;

(2) one expresses, in an explicit way, only the basic category (relative to a given context; in our context it is the grammatical category of case) all other satellite categories being expressed, or rather symbolized, by the corresponding grammatical form of the term covering that basic category, the latter and only the latter being rendered by an autonomous terminological unit, e.g.

al-ğāʿilūn — nominative plural\(^{27}\) (possibly even gender: masculine); the plural ending -ūn is in this case terminologically pertinent (viz. ‘plural’) in virtue of which we get an opposition between:

al-ğā’īl — nominative singular\(^{28}\) vs. al-ğāʿilūn — nominative plural.

6. Along with the extinction of the synthetic category of case emerges the problem of the fixation of word-order. As early as in the work of Sibawayhi we find frequent allusions to word-order. There is, however, no generalized notion of the latter, the sum of its single manifestations rather being used instead once again. Such a sum is, in the terminology of mediaeval grammar, represented by the bi-componental term at-ta qiḏim ʾawār-taʾbīr. It seems that word-order was, during the whole period of the Middle Ages, and possibly still later, covered by this term which, in view of its features of summation, suggests at the same time a certain abstraction from a concrete word-order scheme.

The translator of Fûck’s Arabīya similarly, as with the category of case, meets serious difficulties once again. Since no better term was at hand, the following units have been used:

\(^{25}\) Cf. ibid., 57 (here relative to Amharic).

\(^{26}\) Cf. ib., 55 (with reference to Greek).

\(^{27}\) Cf. ib., 56 (with reference to Latin).

\(^{28}\) In a similar way can be expressed categories of number and gender, together with the grammatical category of person (in verbal inflection) in a context where the latter may be considered as ‘basic’, e.g. al-ğāʾib ʿawār-ğāʾibun (viz. lil-ğāʾib ʿawār-ğāʾībun) — the 3rd pers. masc. of singular and plural (Ṣabbāq, op. cit., 21); al-ğāʾībra ʿawār-ğāʾībrāt — the 3rd pers. fem. of singular and plural (ib., 21); damīr al-muhāṯībūn — the pronominal suffix of the 2nd pers. masc. plural (ib., 43).

Nevertheless, we find alternative solutions as well, viz. damīr ğam’ al-mustakallimūn (ib., 20), etc. As is evident from the last example, both procedures may be combined.
tartib (105, 106, etc.);
tartib al-kalimat (106);
at-tartib al-wad' lil-kalimat (107);
mawdqi' al-kalimat (106);
mawdqi' al-kalimat (4, 105);
mawdqi' al-kalam (al-ikhityariyya) (viz. mawdqi' kalam al-qur'an al-ikhityariyya (3), etc.

Nearly all these terms are neologisms of calque origin. The last of them (mawdqi' al-kalam al-ikhityariyya – free word-order) proved to be unintelligible for Egyptian undergraduates at a linguistic specialization (Czech language), with ten questioned from fifteen.

7. In view of the fact that the indigenous grammar developed independently of the living usage, it lead into a more or less closed system which is not able, for the time being, either to record evolutoinal linguistic features or to underlie them by new, powerful generalizations in a fully satisfactory way. Furthermore, i'rab, in its orthodox interpretation, grows out from a level of abstraction incompatible with that underlying the hierarchy of grammatical notions in mediaeval Europe.

Consequently, every attempt to link up with Western grammatical thought encounters serious difficulties. For the future, one is authorized to believe that there will arise a situation similar to that in natural sciences, modern technology, medicine, etc. (viz. adopting whole scientific systems from outside without any, or with negligible regard to the national achievements). Or, which seems to be even a more promising solution, that a far-reaching re-systemization of the linguistic science on the basis of the national tradition will put an end to the recent stagnancy.