

Historical Development of Arabic Grammar and Contributions of Its Cultivators

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Abstract

Grammar remains an indispensable aspect of a language which facilitates the proficiency of the user or speaker of such language. Linguistic sciences in Arabic which embrace its grammar were not known to the Arabs prior to the revelation of the Qur'ān. Development of various aspects of Arabic grammar started in response to the need to establish a correct reading and interpretation of the Qur'ān, due to the spread of a phenomenon called Lahn (errors in speech). In addition to serving as a manual for religious instructions, the Qur'ān served as an excellent source of ideas and a fertile ground for the development of various branches of knowledge. This paper examined the evolution and the historical growth of this vital aspect of Arabic studies. It employed historical method which attempts to reconstruct the significant events of the past through analysis, synthesis and verification, in tracing the birth of Arabic grammar to the era of Prophet Muhammad in Madīnah. Its development during the eras of the rightly guided Caliphs, especially the events that led to the emergence of the schools of Kufah and Basra and the eventual amalgamation of the two schools in Baghdad with notes on the scholars representing the various schools also received adequately addressed. The paper discovered that Arabic grammar has witnessed tremendous growth from the time it originated up to the present time. It provided information about the early cultivators of Arabic grammar as well as their significant literary productions. While it may be argued that the focus of this paper has received wider scholarly attention, the significance of this work manifests in our effort to address the lacunae we observed in the previous writings in our possession.

Keywords: Abbasid, Arabic grammar, Caliphs, Linguistics, Qur'ān, Umayyad,

Introduction

Series of linguistic occurrences in Islam have facilitated the evolution and growth of Arabic grammar. This paper attempts an examination of these events as they led to the historical growth of this vital aspect of Arabic studies. It traces the evolution of Arabic grammar to the first century after the *Hijrah* (migration) of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) from Makkah to Madīnah in 622. The paper traces its periodical development, starting from the era of Prophet Muhammad (SAW), era of the *Khulafā'* to the emergence of various schools at Basra and Kufah as well as the final amalgamation of these schools in Baghdad. Specific illustrations were cited to show the indelible literary contributions of the early scholars who facilitated its development as well as their roles in the emergence of the various schools identified. The account is concise yet it provides necessary background concerning the historical development of this significant aspect of Arabic studies

Origin

Linguistic sciences were alien to the Arabs prior to the advent of Islam. Attempts to straighten the tongues of the Arabs came with the advent of Islam and the revelation of the Qur'ān. The emergence of Islam in Arab community aroused the grammarians to establish some principles and grammatical rules for this language. Although the Arabic language existed before the Qur'ān, no specific attention was paid to it. When the Qur'ān was descended to the Prophet, it was recognized as the common and eloquent language among all Arabs (Gholitabar and Kamali, 2012:28).

Arabic grammar (*Nahw*) came into existence in its perfect form, during the first century after the *Hijrah* (migration from Makkah to Madinah) of the Noble Prophet Muhammad (SAW). It is noteworthy that the originator of Arabic grammar was 'Alī b. 'Abī Tālib who introduced only three aspects, viz: '*Al-'ism* (noun), '*Al-harf*' (particle) and '*Al-fi'l*' (verb) to 'Abū 'Al-'Aswad 'Al-Du'alī (Shakir, 2016:42). 'Abū 'Al-'Aswad 'Al-Du'alī was then instructed to develop these three aspects which he did successfully. There is no written record, as far as we know, showing the source of 'Alī's knowledge of grammar and this led us to attributing this knowledge of his to special divine gift.

The Prophet's Era

The birth of Arabic grammar could be traced back to the Prophet's era. The converts then included the non-Arabs, who had their first contact with Arabic language on their embracing Islam. As a consequence of the mixture of the non-Arabs (the converts), with the Arabs, there arose the problem of solecism in the spoken Arabic. According to Ibrahim (1975:38), there was a situation during the life time of Prophet Muhammad, when a man constructed a grammatically wrong statement and the Prophet said to the others with him (Ali included), "*Guide your brother (to construct grammatically) for he has made a mistake*". That incident later served as one of the stimulants for the establishment of grammatical rules for Arabic language which was not only the major medium of expression but also a *lingua franca* of Islam. There were no serious grammatical issues that could have warranted giving attention to its evolution during the Makkah phase of the prophetic mission.

Era of the Caliphs (632-661):

There was no notable development in Arabic grammar during the Caliphate of 'Abū Bakr. However, the caliphate of 'Umar b. Khattāb witnessed a remarkable improvement. Then, a bedouin Arab convert came to the Madīnah (anglicized as Medina) and requested a man to read portion of the Glorious Qur'ān for him. The man picked up the Qur'ān and read the first three verses of *Sūrah 'al-Tawbah* (Q.9:3), where he made a mistake in his recitation thus: "*Inna Ilāha barī 'un mina 'l-mushrikīn wa rasūlihi*" meanings: "*Allah is free from the idolaters and His messenger*". The man, on hearing this asked the reciter to stop and passed a comment "*Allah is free from His messenger also, once He that sent him is free from him, I am equally free from him*". The incident got to the notice of Caliph 'Umar who called the man and said, "O Brother is it true that you claimed freedom from Muhammad? The man replied: "O Commander of the Faithfuls, I reached the Madīnah and embraced Islam. I then requested a man to recite some portions of the Glorious Qur'ān for me and he recited what led me to the conclusion. 'Umar denied the correctness of the recitation and convinced the man that it should have been: "*Inna Ilāha barī' un mina' I-mushrikīna wa rasulu-hu*" meaning: *Allah*

and His apostle (peace be on him) are free from the idolaters." The man then remarked: "By Allah, I am also free from those whom Allah and His apostle are free from"(Ibrahim, 1975:7).

Such were the grave grammatical errors among the Arabs in the early days of Islam. The language remained in that manner throughout the era of the rightly guided Caliphs. No written grammatical rules were then available but corrections were made orally whenever necessary.

Umayyad Period (661-750)

Arabic grammar came to be reckoned with as it became documented during the Umayyad Dynasty. According to Al-Fakhuri(2002:327) ,whose submission was corroborated by Lichtenstadter (1974:9), a traditional story relates that 'Abū Mughirah, Ziyād b. Sumayyah, popularly known as Ziyād b. 'Abihi, from Tā'if who was a half brother of Mu'āwiyah and his governor in Basrah, was sitting one day with a group of Arabs, when some newly converted Muslims of non-Arab stock were passing by, speaking faulty Arabic. Ziyād passed comments on their errors and urged 'Abū 'Al-'Aswad 'Al-Du'alī, who is considered by tradition to have been the first grammarian (to put Arabic grammar into writing) and the inventor of the system of Arabic grammar, to write a book on the correct usage of Arabic language.

Before the event narrated above, Nicholson (1969:342) observes that 'Abū 'Al-'Aswad 'Al-Du'alī had been conscious of the common mistakes in spoken Arabic, but he used to make corrections orally, without the determination to put into writing, his knowledge of grammar, and the rudiments of which he acquired from Ali b. Abi Talib. For example, Ibrahim (1975:9) narrates that there was an incident when his ('Abū 'Al-'Aswad 'Al-Du'alī's) daughter said: *Mā 'ahsanu's-samā'* (what is the best part of the sky?), and the father responded: "*Nujumuhā*" (Its Stars) . The girl replied: "I am not talking on the best part of it, but I am trying to express astonishment on its beauty". 'Abū 'Al-'Aswad 'Al-Du'alī then corrected her saying that *Mā 'ahsana's-samā'* (what a beautiful sky), was more appropriate. Sequel to his experience with his daughter, the first aspect on which he wrote was *Ta'ajjub* (expression of amazement).

'Abū 'Al-'Aswad 'Al-Du'alī was firstly disinclined to carry out the order of Ziyād, earlier mentioned. However, when at some later time, he heard God's word mispronounced and distorted by faulty reading of the Holy text, he felt compelled to compose a book, to instruct the 'Ajam, the non-Arab Muslims, in the language. He then remarked, "I never thought that things would have gone to this". He then returned to Ziyād and said, "*I will do what you ordered*" (Nicholson, 1969:342). Thus, the science of *Nahw* (Arabic grammar), in a written form came into birth. It became necessary, according to Lichtenstadter (1974:92) for the correct reading of the Glorious Qur'ān and for understanding its true meaning, for people were then bound by their religious conviction to take decisive measures for ensuring the correct pronunciation and interpretation of that miracle of divine eloquence, the Arabic Qur'ān . It was purely to this motive that the invention of grammar is traditionally ascribed.

Abbasid Period (749-1258) and the Emergence of Various Schools

At the early stage, Lichtenstadter (1974:92) notes that scholars began their investigations into the intricacies of the Arabic language. Two groups developed and often engaged in controversies against each other, these were Basrah (where it actually originated)

and Kūfah. The science of Arabic grammar took its use in the cities of Basrah and Kūfah, which were founded not long after the death of Muhammad (peace be on him) and remained the chief centres of Arabian life and thought outside the peninsula until they were eclipsed by the great Abbasid. In both towns, Nicholson(1969:343) submits that the population consisted of Bedouin Arabs, belonging many different dialects, while there were also thousands of artisans and clients who spoke Persians as their mother tongue, so that the classical idiom was peculiarly subjected to corrupting influences.

It is noteworthy, as documented by Hitti (1980:241) that these two capitals of Iraq, were originally military camps built on the order of Caliph ‘Umar Kufah, the former capital of ‘Alī arose not far from the ruins of ancient Babylon and in a sense fell heir to its neighbors Al-Hirah, the Lakhmid capital. Through favoured location, commerce and irrigation, the sister towns soon grew into wealthy and populous cities.

The population was seen as being so rapidly developed also at Basrah, from which Khurasan, was governed under the Umayyad. Here, on the border land of Persia, the scientific study of Arabic language and grammar was begun and carried on mainly for foreign converts and partly by them. The first impulse came from the desire to supply the linguistic needs of Neo-Moslems, who wanted to study the Qur’ān, hold government positions and converse with conquerors. In addition, the ever widening gap between the classical language of the Qur’ān and the everyday vernacular corrupted by Syriac, Persian and other tongues and dialects was partly responsible for evoking such linguistic interest (Hitti, 1980:241).

The School of Basrah:

The Basrah School, which surpassed that of Kūfah in fame, was firstly established under the leadership of ‘Abū ‘Al-‘Aswad ‘Al-Du‘alī earlier mentioned. He intensified his research after the order of Ziyād. ‘Abū ‘al-‘Aswad ‘al-Du‘alī was introduced to the three aspects mentioned earlier (*‘ism*-noun, *fi‘l*-verb, *harf*-particle) by ‘Ali b. ‘Abī Tālib. Though, ‘Ali as gifted by the Al-Mighty Allah knew all the aspects of grammar but he instructed ‘Abū ‘Al-‘Aswad ‘Al-Du‘alī to develop upon these three aspects which formed the bases for Arabic Grammar, and he was successful in doing this.

Some of the renowned scholars belonged to that school. Of them was ‘Ahmad ‘Abdur Rahmān Khalīl b. ‘Ahmad ‘Al-Farāhīdī, the teacher of Sibawayh, who is credited with the invention of the metric system of Arabic poetry. He wrote *Kitāb ‘Al-‘Ayn*, the first lexicography in Arabic Lichtenstadter (1974:92). Al-Fakhuri (2002:329) also notes that he wrote *Mā jā’ fī ‘l-lughah wa ‘l-‘adab* and *muliman bi‘l-musīqī*. He also arranged the Arabic alphabet according to their manners and places of articulation.

Az-Zayat (1987:367) submits that the school of Basrah could boast of counting among its members the Persian *Mawla*, ‘Abū Bashshār ‘Umar b. ‘Uthmān popularly known as Sibawayh, whose great work on grammar become famous as *‘Al-Kitāb*, (The book) par excellence. It is considered the most valuable of the books written on the roots of the Arabic grammar. According to Lichtenstadter (1974:92), *‘Ilm ‘al-sarf* (Arabic morphology), was also discovered during the period under discussion, by Mu‘ādh b. Salm ‘Al-Hirā, but it was considered as an aspect of *Nahw* then. There were also scholars like ‘Abū ‘Ubaydah, ‘Al-Asma‘ī and ‘Ibn Durayd, who wrote *‘Al-Jamharah fī l-lughah*, *Kitābul ‘ishtiqaq* and *Maqsūrah*.

The School of Kūfah

A competitor of the School of Basrah grew up in the newly founded military settlement of Kūfah on the Euphrates. At first, an amicable exchange of ideas was carried in among the two groups, but soon, rivalry and differences of opinion and approach arose between two schools. Just as they differ in character and political tendency, the two towns also differ in their treatment of the sciences, the opposition of the Basra and Kūfah schools is spoken of in all fields, they oppose each other in historical questions and in the science of traditions, differences between them are mentioned even concerning their dialects, but the most intense opposition between them concerns linguistic, and especially grammatical questions (Yaacob, 2012:2) The men of Basrah uphold stricter standards with regard to grammatical and philological purity and were regarded more reliable Lichtenstadter (1974:92).

It should be noted that the people of Kūfah had *Nahw* derived from the Basrites The major cause of their differences was in approach to the construction of Arabic sentences. The Basrites took from the most eloquent of the Arabs that dominated the population of Basrah then. As for the Kufites, for their inter-mixture with the non-Arabs, the Nabateans in particular, their spoken Arabic was not pure, consequently, the Basrites challenged their eloquence and this led to the disagreement between the two schools (Az-Zayat 1987:367). Goldziher (1994:34) observes that the Basra school represents analogy, which likes to treat everything by the same standard, while the Kufah School represents the prerogative of individuality in grammar, and allows the regulation and arrangement of grammar. This is not only according to the forms that remain on the highroad of regularity, but also those forms which are used according to the individual will of poets

. The school of Kūfah was equally represented by erudite scholars. There was Mufaddal 'Al-Dābisi, the compiler of the most outstanding collections of Arabic poetry called Mufaddaliyyāt. Also, 'Abul Hassan 'Ali b. Hamza popularly known as 'Al-Kisā'ī the authority on prophetic legends (Lichtenstadter (1974:92) Az-Zayat (1987:367) submits that 'Al-Kisā'ī wrote about twenty books the most important of which are *Kitāb ma'āni 'al-Qur'ān*, *Kitāb 'al-Nahw*, *Kitāb 'al-Nawādir*, *Kitāb 'al-Hijā'* and *Risālat lahn 'al-'āmmah*. Lastly, there was Zakariyya Yahyā b. Ziyād al-Farrā, who, according to Al-Fakhuri (2002:327) the student of 'Al-Kisā'ī who also wrote *'al-Hudūd*.

Amalgamation of the Two Schools: The Emergence of Baghdad School

In the third century of the Hijrah, both schools lost their importance with the shift of political power from Damascus to Baghdad. These early centres had to cede their pre-eminence to the new capital which developed into a new focus for scholarship and the views of the ancient schools disappeared (Lichtenstadter (1974:92) Such was the birth of Baghdad system with mixture of the Basritie and Kufite scholars who met and agreed there.

Az-Zayat (1987:367) submits that at Baghdad then, the Abbasids favoured the Kufites for the proximity of Kufah to Baghdad and for political purposes. This led to the frame gained by the Kufite system in Baghdad in its early days: Hasan and Sulaym(1978:59) observe that preference was later given to the Basrites though with no reason noted for this, hence the dominance of their grammatical rules till today

The school of Baghdad was represented by Ibn Qutaybah, the author of *'Uyūn 'al'akhbār*, *Kitāb sh-shi'r wa'sh shu'arā'* as well as *'al-ma'ārif*. Scholars of Iranian origin

gradually become pre-eminent as evidenced by the fame gained by 'al-Zamkhsharī ,the authors of an exegesis of the Qur'ān and of the grammatical work *Kitāb 'al-mufasssal*.

Through the concerted efforts of the scholar of these three leading schools, Arabic grammar ,syntax as well as morphology were put on a firm basis. The following scholars also contributed immensely to the development of Arabic grammar as we have it today : 'Abu 'Umar 'Uthman b. 'Umar popular known as Ibn ul Hajib .He authoured ' *Al-kāfiyah wa sh-shāfiyah fī 'n –Nahw, kitāb 'l maqsidi 'l-jalīl and Muntahā s-su'āl wa 'l-'amal fī 'ilmi 'l-usūl wa 'l-jadal*(Al-Fakhuri,2002:327). Also Abdullahi b. Hāshim who wrote *Qatrun nadā wa ball 's-sadā, Mughni 'l-labīb 'an kutub 'l 'a'ārib and Shadhuru dh-dhahab fī ma'rifati kalāmi 'l-'arab*. Worthy of mentioning is also Shaykh Jalāluddīn 'as-Suyūtī who wrote about three hundred books on religion (Islam) and Arabic language. '*Al-'ashbā' wa 'n-nazā'ir* is his famous book on Arabic grammar(Az-Zayat, 1987:367))

Conclusion

We have been able to examine the origin of Arabic grammar as well as the events which led to its development in its early days. An account of the emergence of various schools of Arabic grammar was equally brought with a view to exposing why there are certain variations on the same topics in Arabic grammar. Scholars representing the various schools, their literary productions as well as the final amalgamation of these schools were not left untouched.

Arabic grammar has witnessed tremendous development from the time it originated up to the present time. The interest shown by scholars in this field had invaluable contributed to this development. Apart from its development during the eras cited in this paper, a lot of academic works have been carried out in this regard in the recent times, to consolidate the efforts of the early scholars who left a lot of materials behind. Also, to put in those ideas and new discoveries that are necessary for the development and modernization of Arabic language which is spoken not only by the Arabs but studied and spoken world-wide.

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