

# Kitāb Sībawayhi and Modern Linguistics. A Synoptic View of a Complementary Relationship

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**Résumé :** *Cet article est une ébauche synoptique du modèle complémentaire renforçant Kitāb Sībawayhi tel qu'il a été abordé dans Marogy (2010). Le cadre complémentaire se reflète dans l'argument historique, qui présente al-Ḥīra - la ville arabe la plus importante du Croissant Fertile durant trois siècles précédant la montée de l'Islam - comme la clé qui détermina la période anticipant et entourant le Kitāb. Plus loin, le manque de divergences entre l'opinion des linguistes et celles similaires exprimées par des linguistes modernes est mis au premier plan et est employé pour identifier la structure théorique du Kitāb dans sa complexité et son idiosyncratie. L'identification du modèle linguistique basé sur une syntaxe et une pragmatique complémentaires, peut expliquer comment Sībawayhi s'arrange avec les différentes notions de base comme celle de nakira et ma'rifa.*

**Mots-clés :** *Kitāb Sībawayhi, al-Ḥīra, linguistique arabe, linguistique moderne, principes complémentaires, syntaxe, nakira, ma'rifa, indéfini, identifiabilité, 'ibtidā', muftada', position initiale, thème, topique.*

**Abstract:** *This article is a synoptic outline of the complementary model that underlines Kitāb Sībawayhi as discussed in Marogy (2010). The complementary framework is reflected in the historical argument which presents al-Ḥīra, the most important Arab city in the Fertile Crescent during the three centuries preceding the rise of Islam, as a key player in the period preceding and surrounding the writing of the Kitāb. Further, the lack of discrepancies between Sībawayhi's views and similar views expressed by modern linguists is brought to the fore and is employed to identify the complex and idiosyncratic theoretical structure of the Kitāb. The identification of the linguistic model based on the complementarity of syntax and pragmatics can explain how Sībawayhi deals with different basic notions such as nakira and ma'rifa.*

**Keywords :** *Kitāb Sībawayhi, al-Ḥīra, Arab linguistics, Modern Linguistics, Complementarity Principle, Pragmatics, Syntax, Nakira, Ma'rifa, Definiteness, Identifiability, 'ibtidā', muftada', Initial Position, Theme, Topic.*

*Kitāb Sībawayhi* forms one of those rare cultural turning points in the nascent 'Abbasid empire in the second/eighth century. The influence exercised by the

arguably first work on Arabic grammar mirrors the cultural vigor and efflorescence that characterized one of the greatest period in Islamic history.<sup>1</sup> It is therefore hardly surprising that a work of such magnitude should defy its few initial critics and establish itself to date as *Qur'ān al-Naḥw* 'the *Quran* of Grammar'.

Apart from its intrinsic importance as the earliest extant text of Arabic grammar, the *Kitāb*'s importance as an eyewitness of the formation of the Arabo-Islamic history has recently been brought to light.<sup>2</sup> *Sībawayhi* (d. 180/796) weaves into his linguistic analysis historical and cultural data that can help confirm and dispel doubt about crucial linguistic and historical issues and serve thus as an added value to today's discussion of the history of Arab linguistics. When *Sībawayhi* started his linguistic activities mid eighth century Iraq remained a colourful mosaic of peoples who were primarily tricultural and belonged to a miscellany of religious communities: Christians, Jews, Zoroastrian and others.

One of the most important issues closely linked to the early formation period of Arab linguistics is the question of initial foreign influences, such as Greek, Syriac, Persian or Indian (see for instance Troupeau 1976: 12-14). The central question concerning the grammatical activity prior to *Kitāb Sībawayhi* will still resonate while Arabists continue their efforts to unravel the mystery surrounding the origins of Arabic grammar and linguistics. However no credible answer can be given without taking into account the strong correlation between Arabic and the miscellany of social, linguistic and religious communities present in the acknowledged centre of pre-Islamic Arabic culture *al-Ḥīra* and the two emerging garrison cities of *Kūfa* and *Baṣra*.

If we bear this in mind, we shall cease to be puzzled by the problems with which Arabists were faced in their attempts to construct the pre-*Sībawayhi* and *Sībawayhi* phases. In fact it will remain insoluble until this link with *al-Ḥīra*'s social and intellectual legacy is established. The decisive consideration is that the history of Arab linguistics in particular and early Islamo-Arabic culture in general requires the recognition of *al-Ḥīra*'s social, religious and cultural features in terms which define and explain the intellectual heritage in the early Islamic period.

Any examination of the *Kitāb* that aims at bringing a measure of clarity to the causes of writing the *Kitāb* and its subsequent success will inevitably recognise that unlike his predecessors and contemporaries, *Sībawayhi*'s main purpose of composing the *Kitāb* was to keep a detailed record of how the Arabs with the best command of the language spoke Arabic.

The *Kitāb* contains a wealth of authentic data of usage accompanied by subtle analysis based on the authority of trustworthy native speakers. The basic rule on which the *Kitāb* hinges is that a linguistic construction is accepted when the Arabs allow it in their speech and is rejected depending on the Arabs' linguistic authority.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the *Kitāb* distinguishes itself by the central position it gives to the Arabic language as the sole object of study and analysis, where the *Qur'ān* and poetry are used as mere means of attestation. His deviation from the primarily religious motive for studying Arabic might account for the initial neglect with which the *Kitāb* and its author were faced.

The *Kitāb*'s contribution to the development of Arabic as well as general linguistics as a whole has rigourously been distinguished and established (Carter (2004), Versteegh (1983), Talmon (2003), Levin (1998), Owens (1988), Bohas (1990), to mention but a few). Within the compass of this short article it is not possible of course to discuss at any length different conceptions of the nature and function of modern theoretical language which were applied or compared with the Arab linguistic theory and the *Kitāb* in particular. However, when placed against the general backdrop of carefully selected notions and insights of three western linguists, i.e., Leech (1983), Downing (1991) and Lambrecht (1994), the *Kitāb* appears as a true reflection of the relationship between speaker and listener, on the one hand, and language and context, on the other.<sup>4</sup> *Sibawayhi*'s implicit meta-language and conceptual framework underpinning his linguistic analysis are thus made accessible to a wider public. In this way, a new communication channel between traditional Arab linguistics and modern linguistics is opened up by adopting a stronger complementary orientation to *Kitāb Sibawayhi*.

As mentioned above, one case of such a fruitful interaction between traditional Arab linguistics and modern linguistics is Leech's Complementarity Principle (1983), with which a close affinity is found in the *Kitāb*. Leech's communicative approach to grammar tends to associate grammatical forms to their pragmatic uses, and to view communication as a problem-solving process (cf. Leech, 1983: x-xi). This approach proved to be the ideal framework to convey best *Sibawayhi*'s view of language. One of *Sibawayhi*'s main concerns was to solve two communicative problems, which happen to form the foci of Leech's approach to pragmatics as formulated below:

“A speaker, qua communicator, has to solve the problem: ‘Given that I want to bring about such-and-such a result in the hearer’s consciousness, what is the best way to accomplish this aim by using language?’ For the hearer there is another kind of problem to solve: ‘Given that the speaker said such-and-such, what did the speaker mean me to understand by that?’” (cf. Leech, 1983: x).

In order to give the *Kitāb* its due, it is paramount to answer the question whether *Sibawayhi*'s linguistic reasoning rested only on the generally assumed principle of syntactic motivation, or whether it was pragmatically motivated too. To establish the need for a complementary approach between syntax and pragmatics as the necessary poles of *Sibawayhi*'s holistic view of linguistic analysis, we shall need to show, albeit very briefly, how neglecting the interdependence of the two linguistic components fail to yield adequate accounts of various linguistic phenomena.

While Leech's Complementarity Principle proved indispensable to establish the complementarity of syntax and pragmatics as a linguistic fact that forms part and parcel of *Sibawayhi*'s approach to the Arabic language, the confusion pointed out by Downing (1991) of what she calls initial elements or Theme and her notion of Topic not only sheds light on the parallel that is drawn with analogical concepts in the *Kitāb*, but also suggests a reorientation in our approach to the confusion of the 'ibtidā' and muftada' so far neglected by other traditional and modern frameworks.<sup>5</sup>

Let us now examine the way *Sībawayhi* approaches the issue of *nakira* and *ma'rifa*. It should be pointed out that there is a long tradition that views definiteness as a central syntactic category. However, Lambrecht (1994: 84), for instance, invites us to see the difference in which the grammar of those languages that codes the category of definiteness as reflections of different language-specific cut-off points on the continuum of identifiability.<sup>6</sup> He clarifies further:

“the relevant property of an identifiable referent is not that it is presupposed to exist, but that the speaker assumes that it has a certain representation in the mind of the addressee which can be evoked in a given discourse” (Lambrecht, 1994: 78).

The passage above shows that speaking is a goal-oriented activity, so what the speaker is thinking of when starting a sentence is how to convey relevant information of some situation or state of affairs to the listener in the most adequate way. Although Arabists are commonly noncommittal as to whether definiteness is a grammatical or pragmatic category, it is necessary to abandon the syntactic dichotomy of definite-indefinite partially, and introduce the pragmatic principle of Identifiability.

In his treatment of definiteness (*Kitāb* I, 219-226 /187-193)<sup>7</sup>, *Sībawayhi* argues that a distinction of the five definite classes, i.e., proper nouns, the *muḍāf* annexed to the definite when the speaker does not intend the meaning of *tanwīn*, the definite article *'alīf-lām*, vague nouns and pronouns (*kitāb* I, 219/187), is based on a kind of hierarchy of 'definiteness'. However, words are either definite or indefinite; they cannot possibly be more or less definite. Conversely, words can be more or less identifiable and the crucial element here is the listener's ability to identify a particular referent as known. In other words, a referent is *nakira* not when it is grammatically coded as such but rather when the listener fails to recognise it as known or familiar. The hierarchical order in *Sībawayhi* relates more precisely the syntactic behaviour and degree of adjectival qualificability of each definite class to its corresponding definite nature. Moreover, the rule of definiteness and the pragmatic principle of Identifiability have a major role in determining word order in Arabic nominal sentences as well as the eligibility of nouns and verbs to occupy the initial position in nominal sentences.

To conclude, the *Kitāb* is not only a familiar part of the study of Arabic grammatical science, but an indispensable part of it. Its original and lasting contribution continues to shape and challenge the way we approach Arabic in particular and language in general. It remains a valid point of departure when attempts are undertaken to study traditional Arab linguistics in the light of modern linguistics. However, today's debate about the origin of Arabic Linguistics and grammatical science, its development and interaction with modern linguistics is not new but its scope and resonance are.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The reign of Caliph *Hārūn ar-Rašīd* (170-193/786-809) and his successors is known to be an age of great intellectual achievements. Mainly through Christians, Muslims had gained access to Greek knowledge of the natural sciences, mathematics, astronomy, geography and medicine.

<sup>2</sup> cf. *Kitāb Sibawayhi*, Syntax and Pragmatics (Marogy, 2010: 1-25)

<sup>3</sup> Phrases such as 'we heard from an Arab whose Arabic can be trusted' are scattered throughout the *Kitāb*.

<sup>4</sup> Concepts, definitions and linguistic principles are borrowed to help making more explicit what is only implicitly, but clearly present in *Sibawayhi*'s linguistic thinking.

<sup>5</sup> The communicative model and the complementarity principle underlying Definiteness and Identifiability are applied to the notion of '*ibtidā*' 'Theme/Topic'. The confusion pointed out by Downing of what she calls initial element or Theme and her notion of Topic not only sheds light on the parallel that is drawn with analogical concepts in the *Kitāb*, but also suggests a reorientation

in our approach to the confusion of the '*ibtidā'* and *mubtada'* so far neglected by other traditional and modern frameworks. See Downing (1991) and Marogy (2010: 95ff) for more details.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the use of the 'a' and zero article in English or the use of «le, la, les, des» and zero article in French. In many languages definiteness is usually expressed via the contrast between a definite and an indefinite article or other determiners such as possessive or demonstrative.

<sup>7</sup> References are the *Būlāq* and Derenbourg editions respectively.