

Arabic Grammar
as Illustrated in *Elementary Modern Standard Arabic*
A descriptive and critical study

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1 Introduction

This paper intends to review Arabic Grammar as presented in *Elementary Modern Standard Arabic* by Peter Abboud and others. In the paper, I try to answer this question: can a grammarian study a grammar of a foreign language using the descriptive framework and terminology of his own language? It is necessary to note here that I do not claim that a grammarian cannot write on a grammar of a foreign language, because even in Arabic itself, the first and the best grammar book was written by a Persian.

2. Outline of the book E.M.S.A

In E.M.S.A. there are several points worth discussing such as philology, morphology, phonology, syntax, etymology, translation, etc. But I intend to write on only the two following points: (1) the presentation of Arabic grammar and its relation to the Arab grammarians' method of introducing the Arabic grammar; and (2) the grammatical terms used in this book, and to what extent the authors succeeded or failed in relating them to Arabic grammar

It would be useful, I think, to mention here that the book is written by a team of five scholars; three of them are Arabs, and two are not. The three native speakers composed and/or selected and adapted from the literature the basic texts and wrote a greater part of the drills. The two non-native speakers were responsible for writing the grammatical notes, which describe such items and structure as occurred in the basic texts.¹

The book is in two parts (993 pages). Part I contains 30 lessons, whereas part II contains 15 lessons. Part II is a completion of part I, but they differ in that part I concentrates on syntax, whereas part II concentrates on morphology. Since my concern is grammar, I will concentrate only on part I.

Grammar in the concept of the Arab grammarians is the science which studies the sentence. They consider it to be separated from

¹ Peter F. Abboud: *Elementary Modern Standard Arabic*, (University of Michigan; U.S.A. 1975) Part I, p. iii.

philology, phonetics and morphology. The latter studies the single word before it is used in a sentence.²

3. The authors' Presentation of Arabic Grammar

The book has a specific design in presenting the linguistic material. The lesson usually starts with a basic text, followed by vocabulary, and it ends by presenting the grammatical rules and the drills. In the basic text, the authors give a translation of it from lesson one up to lesson 45. At lesson 45 they stop doing the translation, because they believe that at this stage, the student does not need it.

In general, the material of the basic text is good and interesting. It deals with the Arabs, and Arabic society and civilization. But the basic text is presented unvoweled which makes it difficult for the learner to read it and consequently to understand it. The authors say that they didn't vowel the basic text in order to prepare the foreign student for the unvoweled Arabic material in the Arab world.³ In my opinion, this is a strange viewpoint because there is a big difference between the Arabic reader and the beginning foreign student. The Arabic student who reads the unvoweled Arabic newspapers, magazines and books would not be able to read any of them if he were not prepared to do that before, when he started studying Arabic in primary, middle, and high schools. The Arabic books which are used in these schools to teach Arabic, poetry, literature, and grammar are all precisely voweled.

As for the foreign student who begins studying Arabic in this book, he is not prepared for what the Arabic reader is prepared to do. Therefore, he would not be able to read without vowelizing. This is why it would have been better for the authors to vowel the basic text in this book, or at least to vowel the first ten lessons in the book, and every new word which occurs in the following lessons until the end of the book.

As a matter of fact, Arabic writing depends, to a great extent, on vowelizing. It is basically invented to enable the reader to read correctly and to understand the Quran precisely. To illustrate this point, it would be necessary to give some examples. The word **كتب** for instance could read.

(**كَتَبَ**) Kataba (He wrote)

or (**كُتِبَ**) Kutiba (It was written)

² Al-Raghihi, Abdu: *Al-Tatbiq Al-Nahwi*. (Beirut: Dar AL-Matarif, 1970) p. 77

³ Abboud: op.cit., Part I, p. iii.

- or (كَتَبَ) Kattaba (He made someone write)
 or (كُتِبَ) Kutubun (books)
 or (كَتَبَ) Katbun (writing)

Also, the word كَتَبْتَ (the verb كَتَبَ + pronoun suffix ت) in the sentence "كَتَبْتَ الدرس" could read either

- (كَتَبْتُ) Katabtu (I wrote)
 or (كَتَبْتِ) Katabta (You (m.s.) wrote)
 or (كَتَبْتِ) Katabti (You (f.s) wrote)

Not only that, but also the meaning of the Arabic sentence depends on vowelings. Take this unvoveled sentence for example:

شكر أحمد أشرف (Shakara Ahmed Ashraf). It cannot be understood correctly except by vowelings its words. It could read. (أشرف شكر أحمد) Shukur Ahmedi Ashrafa with a *damma* above the last letter of the first word, and a *kasra* beneath the second, and a *fatha* above the third.

It could also read: شكر أحمد أشرف Shakara Ahmedu Ashrafa with a *fatha* above the last letter of "شكر" and a *damma* above the last letter of "أحمد" and a *fatha* above the last letter of "أشرف" to mean: Ahmad thanked Ashraf. It could also read: شكر أحمد أشرف Shakara Ahmada Ashrafu with a *fatha* above the last letter of both of "شكر" and "أحمد" and a *damma* above the last letter of "أشرف" to mean: Ashraf thanked Ahmad. The last two sentences are opposite in meaning, though they have the same words and the same order. This is because of the change of vowelings in each of them.

As for the grammatical material presented in the book it appears too much to give to a beginner. The authors mention in the introduction to the book that: "It was written to meet the need for an elementary textbook for the undergraduate student at universities in the United States and Canada."⁴ There are some grammatical subjects they should not have discussed in detail as they did in Al-adad (The Numbers pp. 310-21).

In presenting the grammatical material, the authors do not follow the traditional method the Arab grammarians take in the study of Arabic grammar. They reject this method and formulate a different way. This rejection has two aspects. first, they do not follow the

⁴ Abboud: op.cit., Part I, p. iii.

traditional view of studying the language as a group of sentences, with each sentence containing a noun, a verb, and a particle. The Arab grammarians introduce all the terms or words related to each of these parts. In the verb, they present the two tenses: the past and the present. In the noun, they introduce *Al fa'il* (doer) **الفاعل** *Hal-Maf'ul* (object) **المفعول** *al Tamyiz* (specification) **التمييز** *Al-Hal* (Hal. construction) **التعريف** *FAl-Na't* (adjective) and so on. In the particles, they present the prepositions, the conjunctions and the like.

Instead of that, the authors present Arabic grammar in another way which they developed. They start with the equational sentence, then in the sixth lesson, they mention the verbal sentence. Even in their discussion of the verb, they introduce only the active voice, and do not deal with the passive voice until lesson 30. Instead, in the writing of the Arabic grammar, we should start with the verbal sentence because on the one hand, the verb is essential in Arabic sentence construction, and on the other hand it is the root of the Arabic word.

The authors do not present the grammatical features as units, but they divide the units into several separated pieces. They introduce *ليس* *laisa* (pp. 32-4) (is not or are not) separately without mentioning the other verbs which belong to the same group known in Arabic grammar as **كان وأخواتها** *Kanna wa Akhawatuha* (Kanna and its sisters). They also mention **لعل** *La'alla* in page 419, lesson 27, then they refer to **إن** *Inna*, **لكن** *Lakinna* **لأن** *Li'anna* **أن** *anna* in page 263 in lesson 19. They then explain **أن** *An* **إن** *Inna* **أن**

is a gradual method of teaching, but it divides the subjects. It would have been much better to gather the talk on all these similar particles in one place or in one lesson, especially because they are of the same group called " **إن وأخواتها** " *Inna Wa Akhawatuha* (Inna and its sisters). Introducing 'inna and kanna as the Arabs do would avoid the unnecessary repetitions in explaining the grammatical rules.

As for the second aspect of rejecting the usual Arabic way of presenting Arabic grammar, the authors change the system of presenting the pronouns which the Arab grammarians use. They start with the first person, and follow that with the second person, and finally the third person. It is the same method used in other languages such as French, and English.⁵

Instead of this, the authors take a new system in presenting the pronouns by starting with the third person, and following it by the second person, and finally the first person. A look at the following

⁵ Rodman, Robert and Victoria F.: *An Introduction to Language*, (U.S.A. 1968) p. 216.

box shows you the change the authors make in presenting the Arabic independent pronouns:

| The presentation of pronouns by the authors: | | The presentation of pronouns by the Arabs: | | |
|--|------------|--|------|-----------|
| هو | He | أنا | Anna | 1.s I |
| هي | She | أنت | Anta | 2m.s You |
| أنت | You (m.s.) | أنتِ | Anti | 2f.s. You |
| أنتِ | You (f.s.) | هو | Hwa | 3m.s. He |
| أنا | I | هي | Hya | 3f.s. She |

It is worth mentioning that the Arabs use the same method which starts with the first person even in the case of mentioning a series of different pronouns, or pronouns and nouns. The normal system is to begin with the first person first, then the second person and the third person comes at last:

| | | | |
|------------|-----|-----------------|------------------------|
| أنا وأنت | - ١ | Anna Wa Anta | (I and you) |
| أنا وسامير | - ٢ | Anna Wa Samirun | (I and Samir) |
| أنتِ ووداد | - ٣ | Anti Wa Widadu | (You (f.s.) and Widad) |

This is, of course the reverse of the English order (you and I) and (Samir and I) and (Widad and you).

Similar to this is the authors' presentation of the cases (p. 49). They start with *AL-Raf'* (nom.) and follow it with *AL-Jarr* (Dat.), and then end with *AL-Nasb* (acc.). The way which is familiar to the Arab grammarians is to start with *Raf'*; because it is the strongest in speaking, and follow it with *AL-Nasb*, because it is weaker than *AL-Raf'*, then end with *AL-Jarr* because it is the weakest. A look at

the following box will show you this change in the presentation of the cases made by the authors:

| The case order by the authors | The case order by the Arabs |
|-------------------------------|---|
| مكتُبك Nom. | مكتُبك Maktabuka (your office) Nom. - ١ |
| مكتُبك Dat. | مكتُبك Maktabaka (your office) Acc. - ٢ |
| مكتُبك Acc. | مكتُبك Maktabika (your office) Dat. - ٣ |

The vowel signs (*damma* ُ *fatha* َ *kasra* ِ) appear above or beneath the last letter of the word, that is to say the "ب" here in the word "مكتُب"

4. The Terminology

As for the second point, the use of the grammatical terms, the authors apply the English grammatical terms (originally Latin) to Arabic grammar instead of using the Arabic grammatical terms. This method leads to confusion for the student on the one hand, and causes the authors themselves to make mistakes on the other. In defining the Arabic verbal sentence, they give the same definition as the English verbal sentence, which says it is the sentence which contains a verb, though in Arabic, the verbal sentence is the sentence which starts with a verb. This is what distinguishes it from the equational sentence which starts with a noun, though it could contain a verb in the middle or at the end.

In fact, the authors ought not to use the English grammatical terms in their study of Arabic grammar, since they do not do a contrastive study between English and Arabic grammars. They only present the grammar of Arabic. So they ought to use the Arabic grammatical terms in order to prepare the foreign student to be familiar with these terms in case that he or she wants to pursue advanced studies. Besides, it would avoid their making mistakes. For instance, they use the English grammatical term "subject" to stand for what is called *Fa'il* (فاعل) in Arabic (p. 3). This English term is not equal to the Arabic one. The latter means only the doer or agent or the performer of the action. But they use this term "subject" for *الفاعل* and also for *المبتدأ* *AL-Mubtada'* (the start), that is to say the noun which the equational sentence starts with.

Take for example, the word أحمد in the two following sentences.

- أحمد حضر ١ - Ahmed Hadara
(Ahmed came)
- حضر أحمد ٢ - Hadara Ahmed

أحمد is a *Mubtada'un* (start) in the first sentence, whereas he is a *fa'ilun* (subject) in the second one.

The same thing occurs in the authors' using of the other English grammatical terms such as: genitive (p. 20), adverb (p. 58), preposition (pp. 116-18), definite (pp. 320-21), indefinite (pp. 173-74), perfect (pp. 54-5), imperfect (p. 163), object (p. 58), accusative (pp. 227-79), mood (p. 163) and so forth. Their use of the term "preposition" leads them to mix up the particle with both the adverb and the noun. They mention that دون (*Duna*) is a preposition (p. 500) but, in fact, it is a noun. They also mention that بعد *Ba'd*, and قبل *Qabl* are prepositions (p. 331), though they are adverbs of time. They say also that سوى (*Siwa*) is a preposition (p. 365) although it is a noun. Also they say that عند (*'anda*) is a preposition (p. 356), whereas it is an adverb of time or place. They claim that مثل *Mathalan* is an adverb (p. 358), but it is مفعول مطلق *Maf 'Ul mutlaq* (cognate). They also assert that طويلاً *Ta-Wilan* is an adverb (p. 358), though it is an adjective modifying an omitted *Maf'ul mutlaq*. I believe that these mistakes are a result of the preoccupation and frequent use of English grammatical terms.

The authors use English terms which do not have the same meanings as the Arabic terms. For example, they use the term Genitive to indicate حالة الجر *AL-Jarr case*, or when the noun comes after a preposition (p. 20). Genitive in English is not used to refer to a prepositional phrase such as "At home" في البيت (*Fi AL-Baiti*). It is used rather to indicate possession, as in the phrase "Shakespeare's plays" This is equivalent to الإضافة *the Idafa* construction in Arabic as in the following phrase:

مسرحيات شكسبير Shakespeare's plays
The term which is used to refer to a prepositional phrase in English is Dative, and not Genitive which the authors use mistakenly to refer to حالة الجر *Jarr case* (prepositional phrase).

A similar example is the authors' use of the term: "Perfect" for الماضي *AL-Madi* (p. 54), and Imperfect for المضارع *A-Mudari* (p. 163). They (the terms) do not give the meaning of each of the two Arabic terms. The first means past tense, and the second means the present.

⁶ Braun, Frank: *English Grammar for Language Students*, (Michigan: Ulrich's Books, 1947) p. 4

Not only did the authors use the English terms to apply to Arabic grammar, but they also occasionally invent new terms, which are neither known, nor originally used in Arabic grammar. Hence the term "complex Idafa" (p. 79) is reflected in the English term "complex sentence" Or consider the terms "direct object" (p. 340) and "indirect object" (p. 340) which are used to indicate *الفعل الأول AL-Maf'ul Al-awwal* (the first object) and *الفعل الثاني AL-Maf'ul Ath-thani* (the second object) of some of Arabic verbs as *جعل Ja'ala* (made) and its sisters. For instance, in the following sentence:

جعل المدرسُ الدرسَ سهلاً Ja'ala Al Mudarisu Addarsa Sahlan. (The teacher made the lesson easy).

The authors consider *الدرسَ* to be the direct object, and *سهلاً* to be the indirect object.⁷ But the word *سهلاً* cannot be called an indirect object, simply because the indirect object is that noun which is preceded by a preposition, and this word is not preceded by a preposition.

5. Conclusion

In their formulation of these new terms the authors of E.M.S.A. appear to be strongly influenced by English grammatical terms. In doing so, they have done the same thing some English grammarians did when they studied the English grammar under the influence of the Latin terms. "They accepted Latin categories and ideals in matters of syntax, vocabulary and style"⁸ ... Of course "There are occasions when it is useful to take over terms from other language descriptions especially where there is a reasonable overlap lexically"⁹ But when the terms of a language contrast with those of the other language a confusion is likely to be created.

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⁷ Abboud: op.cit., Part II, p. 801.

⁸ Crystal, David: *Linguistics*, (New Zealand: Penguin Books, 1976), pp. 69-70.

⁹ Payne E.M.F *Basic Syntactic Structures in Standard Malay*, (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1970), p. 24.

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