

The Arabic language between the genius of heritage and modern linguistic culture

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Abstract:

The Arabic language is one of the best languages in terms of innovation, comprehension and eloquence. It is an Arab heritage left behind by generations, because it believes in linguistic study and the innovation of new names, terms and concepts that vary according to purposes and goals.

The emergence of some heritage concepts has become common over time, as they have taken their place among modern linguistics today. The Arab intellectual heritage has moved from the stage of studying language as a linguistic term to a vision that has touched linguistic discourse, as the Arab researcher has begun to adopt Western linguistic ideas and apply them in the age of speed, forgetting his ancient Arab intellectual heritage. Were Arab linguists able to establish Arab linguistic landmarks through their influence by the Western linguistic event? Have Arab researchers tried to prove that the linguistic heritage is comprehensive and rich in its modern linguistic studies and rejects Western culture? Is there a compatibility between the roots of Arab linguistic thought and new studies of linguistics?

Keywords: heritage, Arabic language, Western culture, authenticity, modernity

Introduction

Our Arabic linguistic heritage is rich in an extensive accumulation of linguistic knowledge. Modern linguistic approaches are predominantly Western approaches whose foundations were derived from the contemporary urban human experience. Attempting to establish a connection between the past and the present is a mark of scholarly rigor. The Arabic language has given rise to numerous branches of Arab scholarship, and the Golden Ages provide a clear example of this, as they witnessed the emergence of numerous inventions and scientific contributions of Arab and Islamic origin, which were later documented by Western authors in the book 1001 Inventions: Muslim Heritage.

The enduring status and resilience of the Arabic language for many centuries have been supported by intrinsic foundations that have enabled it to engage in an intellectual dialogue with its heritage. “As for the scientific heritage—even if modern scientific progress has surpassed it, particularly in its ‘applied dimension’—it remains an intriguing subject for those concerned with the history of science. A detailed examination of this heritage may reveal valuable remnants that can be transmitted across generations of Arabs as a means of remembrance, strengthening the scientific spirit, and stimulating it.”² Thus, the equation of conscious reading undertaken by Arab scholars between the linguistic heritage and the contributions of Western linguistics has opened the door to considerable ambiguity and complexity, particularly following colonialism, which left behind a gap through which its influence continued to manifest itself in human and linguistic existence within the context of shared interests.

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² Nihad al-Moussa, The Arabic Language in the Modern Era: Values of Stability and Forces of Transformation, Dar Al-Shorouq for Publishing and Distribution, Amman, Jordan, 1st ed., 1428 AH/2007, p. 52.

Before Islam, the Arabic language was characterized by sophistication and perfection in eloquence, clarity, and rhetorical expression. Following the advent of Islam, it benefited from being the language of the Qur'an, which further enhanced its beauty, prestige, and elevated status. It consequently came to be known as the language of Heaven, deriving its vitality from both its worldly existence and its noble religion. Subsequently, Arab linguists devoted considerable efforts to preserving their language, including al-Khalil ibn Ahmad al-Farahidi (d. 175 AH) and Sibawayh (d. 180 AH). Out of their deep concern for the Arabic language, they compiled books and dictionaries aimed at preserving its structure, solidity, and strength, and protecting it from foreign interference. Among these contributions was al-Khalil's *Kitab al-'Ayn*, as well as his pioneering work in the science of Arabic prosody. Such efforts contributed to the stabilization of the Arabic language's systems and its phonological, morphological, and grammatical rules, enabling it to become a language representing a unified cultural identity. This raises the following question: Have Arab and Western linguists alike benefited from our ancient linguistic heritage?

The Status of Arabic Linguistics in Society

The declining position of the Arabic language today within its modern linguistic environment is closely associated with the growing presence of foreign languages, which have increasingly penetrated the Arab sphere by reviving and developing their own linguistic systems. They have also influenced Arab citizens, who have increasingly adopted foreign words in both social and intellectual contexts. Consequently, the mother tongue has experienced a state of stagnation and weakness. The issue here is not simply a matter of Arabic versus foreign languages; rather, it concerns the human being himself, as individuals tend to adopt what appeals to them while relegating the remainder to the margins, thereby closing the door to resisting the influence of these languages.

Human beings constitute the intellectual vessel through which language develops and renews itself, enabling it to carry values, aspirations, and creative ideas. Within our social environment, and in the aftermath of colonialism, the Arab individual began seeking to rebuild self-confidence; however, he has often remained fascinated and influenced by the West. He has also sought the prosperity enjoyed by Western societies in order to achieve a decent standard of living, believing that they are advanced and developed in various areas of life. Yet, he has not always considered that such an orientation might lead to distancing himself from his identity, culture, and heritage, nor has he accorded them the value they deserve.

The fulfillment of his material and personal aspirations has often become his primary concern. Hence, "Peoples may be bound in chains, have their mouths silenced, and be driven from their homes, yet remain rich; a people becomes impoverished and enslaved when it is deprived of the tongue bequeathed to it by its ancestors, and at that point it is lost forever."³

The issue here is therefore a matter of readability before reading itself. We must not forget that we are all human beings and that we are all capable of creativity. Accordingly, we should not marginalize the Arabic language, which represents a distinctive dimension of Arab existence through its culture and authenticity. We, too, possess our own distinctive characteristics and foundations, and we were among the earliest to make significant contributions to the development of language. We cannot simply choose to follow others merely because they possess their own distinctive characteristics, for such an attitude constitutes failure in its clearest form.

Language in the Age of Civilization and Culture

The emergence of modern linguistics in the late twentieth century was accompanied by the adoption of its principles, foundations, and methodologies as a scientific discipline derived from Western linguistics, like many other fields of knowledge. Its various calls and approaches were grounded in the principles of renewal and modernity. "The linguistic heritage clearly referred to many general linguistic issues that Western linguistics did not recognize until approximately a century ago at the earliest. Although these issues require further elaboration and considerable comparative effort, anyone familiar with modern foreign linguistics is likely to encounter these issues in ancient Arabic linguistics, where they emerge and interact automatically, without prior authorization, with the latest developments in the fields of Western linguistics"⁴

There are those who emphasize the need to establish a rupture with the linguistic heritage, while others support the ancient linguistic heritage and reject modern linguistics as an academic discipline. There are also those who advocate the possibility of studying the linguistic heritage in light of modern linguistic

³ Mahmoud Ahmad al-Sayyid, *The Arabic Language and the Challenges of the Age*, Damascus, 1428 AH/2008, p. 37

⁴ Abd al-Jalil Murtad, *Fi Rihab al-Lughah al-Arabiyyah* [In the Realm of the Arabic Language], University Publications Office, Ben Aknoun, Algeria, 2nd ed., 2007, p. 167.

transformations and developments. This constitutes one of the central issues raised today: how can we adapt to the present if we remain exclusively attached to the past?

The renewal of the Arab mind entails reading the heritage through its own concepts and objectives, viewing it as an important stage in the development of human linguistic thought, particularly in terms of its functional orientation. This would allow it to move beyond its traditional framework and serve modern linguistic knowledge as a reservoir of cultural and civilizational heritage. Living in accordance with the requirements of the contemporary age does not mean attempting to weaken the heritage; nor does its renewal negate its authenticity. Rather, it gives it a new dimension through reinterpretation and renewed reading. The process of acquiring and organizing knowledge in which we are engaged today necessarily requires linguistic communication. Therefore, a number of scholars in the Arab world have called for the revival of the Arab heritage, as exemplified by Al-Khalil's contribution of new knowledge to Arabic grammar, as well as for the advancement of the cultural heritage.

A group of Arab scholars from the Arab intellectual environment turned to the study of linguistics in Europe. Their subsequent efforts demonstrated the existence of a relationship between Western linguistics and Arab linguistic research. Among these scholars are Ahmad Al-Mutawakkil, Kamal Bishr, Nihad Al-Mousa, Michel Zakaria, and other modern Arab linguists. Among them is also Abdul Qadir Al-Fassi Al-Fihri, who regarded language as a tool for constructing intellectual thought and assimilating concepts related to human life in order to achieve full intellectual sovereignty. He states: "It is erroneous to believe that the descriptive apparatus used to analyze either contemporary or ancient Arabic necessarily requires the concepts and foundations of the ancients, or, in other words, the ancient Arabic grammatical thought. We have demonstrated on several occasions that this conception is mistaken, and that the descriptive apparatus available to the ancients has no particular advantage in describing Arabic; rather, it is inadequate in many respects"⁵

Here, he calls for a rupture with the ancient linguistic heritage, which represents a symbol of the Arabic language. Conversely, however, the Arabs have left behind a substantial body of intellectual and linguistic contributions that it is our responsibility to investigate, examine, and highlight within linguistic studies.

The Arabic Language between Authenticity and Modernity

Modern linguistic studies have been built upon the foundations of the traditional studies developed by Arab scholars. Modern researchers have examined the works left by ancient scholars and have drawn upon them in their contemporary linguistic studies.

In light of these linguistic developments, many ancient Arabic lexical terms and their usages dating back to the pre-Islamic period have disappeared. Some of these terms are mentioned in certain dictionaries but omitted from others. Consequently, discrepancies exist among dictionaries in their treatment of such terms, depending on the theories adopted by their respective authors, particularly amid the abundance and interconnectedness of linguistic structures and terminology. "Arabic, among Arabs and among non-Arab speakers of the language, is a source of pride, eminence, dignity, greatness, and honor because of its close connection with the eloquence and rhetorical excellence of the Holy Qur'an. If the Arabic language becomes corrupted, the Qur'an is corrupted with it; if the Holy Qur'an becomes corrupted, religion is corrupted with it; if religion becomes corrupted, society is corrupted with it; and if society becomes corrupted, chaos spreads throughout it and the conditions of the pre-Islamic era prevail among its various social strata"⁶

This relationship, extending from language itself to the Holy Qur'an, then to religion and society, constitutes an interconnected and complementary structure. If language profoundly affects human existence in its historical dimension because it is regarded as the language of revelation, then there is an inseparable relationship between this conception and what Ismail Mira has stated. The cultural, epistemological, technological, political, and economic development of a language is primarily dependent on its use and widespread circulation, and secondly on identity. The production of tools such as dictionaries and translated books is nothing more than a means of preserving and perpetuating it.

⁵ Abd al-Qadir Al-Fassi Al-Fihri, *Al-Lisaniyyat wa al-Lughah al-Arabiyyah: Namadhij Tarkibiyyah wa Dalaliyyah* [Linguistics and the Arabic Language: Syntactic and Semantic Models], Dar Toubkal, Casablanca, 4th ed., 2000, pp. 60–61.

⁶ Ismail Mira, *Min Wahy al-Lughah al-Arabiyyah: Lughah al-Ilm wa al-Hadarah lil-Allamah al-Nahrir al-Shaykh Muhammad al-Sadiq al-Siddiq* [Inspired by the Arabic Language: The Language of Science and Civilization by the Eminent Scholar Sheikh Muhammad al-Sadiq al-Siddiq], introduction by Abd al-Razzaq Qassoum, Dar Al-Nouman for Printing and Publishing, Algeria, 2017, p. 190.

Today's reader no longer devotes all of their time to traditional approaches, which are characterized by slowness in conveying information, as well as by complexity and density. It is therefore incumbent upon modern linguists to facilitate the reading and understanding of the linguistic heritage in accordance with their insight and linguistic knowledge, employing advanced tools whose bridges extend from the past to the present.

In addition to the richness and abundance of the ancient Arabic linguistic heritage, grammar, for instance, constitutes one of the most complex issues, particularly with regard to syntactic structure and its function. Grammatical rules are what establish the relationships between linguistic elements and linguistic structures. This enables us "to recognize the actual need for grammatical inflection in linguistic formation, as well as the dependence of grammatical meanings upon it, all with the aim of preventing confusion between the subject, the direct object, the genitive complement, and other grammatical functions."⁷ Thus, every syntactic function emerges and is determined through its corresponding linguistic markers.

Some modern Arab linguists have found no alternative to this except the science of grammar, which has expanded within the scope of Western linguistic research and come to dominate various fields—not only language, but also many other branches of the humanities. Consequently, the Arabic language has increasingly been approached through mechanisms and methodologies originally developed for languages other than Arabic.

Grammar has also not been spared from the claims made by some linguists regarding its authenticity. Ancient scholars did not adopt a clear and rigorous methodology in their works; rather, they tended to rely on linguistic intuition and confidence in the formulation of their ideas. Modern scholars, however, have established a set of ideas centered, at times, on the perceived need to dispense with the heritage. This position may be justified to some extent if their objective is to establish distinctions and barriers between the past and history, on the one hand, and what is being produced daily in the constantly changing and rapidly evolving world, on the other. "What is even more remarkable is that we find some people who derive no benefit from grammatical knowledge in their writing or in understanding linguistic structures. Indeed, we find some who evade their responsibility to refer to any area of grammar, even when such reference is, in principle, necessary for understanding semantic or syntactic issues. This applies to all those working in the field of communicating ideas, meanings, or information in Arabic. This situation can be attributed to the absence of an integrative perspective and the lack of methodological comprehensiveness in both teaching and understanding."⁸

There is no doubt that this science has also found a broad resonance within the field of grammatical research, where calls for the reform of Arabic grammar have expanded, particularly in response to the reluctance of Arabic speakers and learners who have encountered difficulties with the rules of Arabic grammar, given their numerous details and diverse orientations from one grammatical school to another. As some contemporary scholars have drawn upon the linguistic heritage as a starting point for revitalizing and renewing Arabic grammar—as in the attempts of Ibrahim Mustafa and Shawqi Dayf to reform Arabic grammar with the aim of making it easier for learners—another group has emerged seeking to adopt Western linguistics as a point of departure and to employ its principles in order to re-describe the Arabic language and establish a new grammatical theory as an alternative to the traditional theory, which has often been regarded by students of Arabic as difficult.

Thus, in the modern era, a number of contemporary scholars have emerged whose views are consistent with the idea of freeing Arabic grammar from difficulty and complexity. Consequently, calls for renewal and simplification have emerged in light of the methodologies of Western linguistic studies. These developments have resulted from differences in vocabulary and pronunciation, as well as from the diversity and overlapping of terminology through the interaction between its various components and linguistic structures.

The purpose of grammar has become closely associated with achieving a teleological understanding of speech. Al-Fassi Fehri explains that: "There is grammatical inflection, the inflection of boundaries, which is assigned to the subject, the object, or the complement of a particle according to the operation of morphology (i.e., agreement), the verb, or the particle, respectively. There is also semantic inflection, which is assigned to adjuncts such as adverbials, specifications, circumstantial expressions, etc., on account of their

⁷ Abdelhalim Ben Aissa, *The Syntactic Structure of the Linguistic Event*, Publications of the Laboratory of Arabic Language and Communication, Dar Al-Adib Publications, Oran, 2006, p. 79.

⁸ Ahmed Azzouz, *Linguistic Schools: Their Scholars, Principles, and Methods of Analyzing Communicative Performance*, Dar Al-Ridwan, Oran, Algeria, 2nd ed., 2008, p. 16.

indication of these meanings. There is also the inflection of abstraction, which is assigned to functions that are neither arguments nor adjuncts, such as the subject and the predicate, for example.”⁹ This means that the characteristics of the syntactic structure of linguistic elements are manifested through grammatical inflection and its formal regulation, which may alter the interpretation of a sentence and contribute to distinguishing between its constituent elements and between meanings that are formally equivalent.

Linguistic meaning has multiple dimensions. Some of these are related to linguistic structure or vocabulary, as well as to the amount of information conveyed by a linguistic message and to the civilization reflected by the language, of which it represents one of its most significant manifestations. “If grammatical rules provide us, in every linguistic production, with a means of constructing a well-formed and acceptable syntactic structure, thereby eliminating unacceptable structures, then the semantic features of the linguistic element provide us with a means of producing the specific semantic structure in order to achieve an intended communicative purpose. Here, it should be noted that the correctness of semantic interpretation is not determined solely by what is prescribed by grammatical rules; rather, it also remains connected to the semantic relations embodied between the units constituting the linguistic composition.”¹⁰ Grammatical rules are not limited merely to regulating the endings of words or to the internal structure of the word; rather, their scope extends to linguistic constructions, subordinate sentence structures, meanings, and sounds.

The relationship between the linguistic event and the factor of time brings about changes that move language beyond its temporal confines and carry it toward new horizons through mechanisms that support its continuity and preservation. The theories introduced by some contemporary linguists have consequently acquired particular significance. Modern scholars have benefited from scientific methods of lexicographic compilation, whereas classical scholars tended to focus on linguistic and historical derivation. Modern scholars, by contrast, emphasize lexical forms and the multiple meanings of words in their various contexts. “What is no longer a matter of dispute among linguists is that grammatical, morphological, phonological, and lexical systems cannot be studied without taking into consideration the meanings of their words and constructions, even though Chomsky (1957) claimed that it was possible to study the phonological and grammatical system of a language without any consideration of meaning, which he regarded as part of the function of language and as secondary and subordinate to the grammatical system, and as something that does not properly belong to linguistics.”¹¹

The connection between traditional Arabic dictionaries and grammar is sufficient and capable of producing and selecting the symbols of communication with others and conveying them to the listener with an understanding and assimilation of these symbols and their analysis. In this way, language acquires its actual existence as a language that is used rather than merely stored. “Linguistic studies during the period of Al-Khalil and Sibawayh had reached their linguistic peak, and the deficiency was no longer a deficiency in terminology, as was the case with such distorted modern Arabic linguistic terms. Rather, scholars moved toward scientific integration in order to employ all general linguistic elements, and they proceeded, as far as we can discern from linguistic theories, in accordance with global linguistic theories” Had modern Arabs¹² been able to understand Sibawayh’s Book, they would have studied the grammatical facts contained therein, which are no less significant than the grammatical facts he introduced. Chomsky’s study of grammar, for instance, is a formal study of the sentence, which is divided into phonology, morphology, and syntax. However, this requires considerable effort, since there are no clear indicators of its underlying motivations within the context of contemporary Arabic linguistic studies.

The reader does not benefit from focusing exclusively on a particular approach; rather, they are free to choose the methodology that corresponds to their studies and perspectives. The purpose of this is to serve the Arabic language. Abd al-Jalil Murtagh states: “We are no longer haunted by any hesitation concerning the overwhelming authority exercised by that sacred grammatical paternity over all linguistic elements in the Arabic language. This authority was essentially attributable to the network of internal relationships within the semantic structure of the Arabic language—a structure that acquires meaning only through its entirety and through the interaction of all linguistic elements, without diminishing the importance of any single element within it... It is the semantic structure as a whole”¹³ Thus, syntactic structures, grammatical elements,

⁹ Abdelhalim Ben Aissa, *The Syntactic Structure of the Linguistic Event*, p. 81.

¹⁰ Abdelhalim Ben Aissa, *The Syntactic Structure of the Linguistic Event*, p. 177.

¹¹ Abdeljalil Mortad, *Linguistic Intervals*, University Publications Office, Ben Aknoun, Algiers, 2018, p. 33.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 240.

¹³ Abd al-Jalil Murtagh, *Fawasil Lughawiyya [Linguistic Boundaries]*, p. 239.

sounds, word forms, and their meanings are all subject to change and development, as well as to certain deviations that may occur within them.

By selecting an appropriate methodology, the researcher will find that Arabic grammar is much easier than they might imagine when constructing a new framework for the Arabic language, provided that neither the linguistic heritage nor contemporary approaches are overlooked. Furthermore, the proliferation of schools and methodologies, such as the descriptive, functional, transformational, and generative schools, among others, has opened the field for readers and researchers to engage with whatever aspects they wish to study. There is nothing wrong with drawing upon what is useful today for studying, facilitating, and understanding the Arabic language in light of new scientific developments, since such approaches have become essential for dealing with and analyzing language.

Conclusion

In conclusion, reading the heritage can be understood as a process of recovering its constituent elements, drawing lessons from the past and weighing them against contemporary studies. There is no doubt that the Holy Qur'an provides an exemplary model of such a reading, as it encompasses and integrates all its constituent units. The contemporary linguistic event, meanwhile, is nothing more than an examination of recent developments in light of the diversity of approaches to linguistic research. This is particularly evident in the context of the various methodologies, which may constitute a problematic issue capable of hindering the mechanisms of proper reading and leading to interpretations that deviate from their intended direction within the space of the heritage text. Reading is fundamentally based on epistemic awareness at the moment of intellectual creativity, as the reader strives to apprehend the different cognitive levels of language as manifested through creative expression.

There is no doubt that linguistics is reconsidering the integration of the various branches of linguistic science in the light of the heritage, within which phonological, morphological, syntactic, structural, semantic, and lexicographical levels are closely intertwined. It also reconsiders the methods of analyzing these levels in order to develop a distinctive Arabic linguistics capable of understanding contemporary linguistic issues and establishing sound scientific foundations for addressing them. Between authenticity and modernity, the reader finds themselves in a position where they can draw upon their intellectual heritage when addressing any given subject, while employing scientific and technical tools appropriate to the contemporary era, and presenting, formulating, and developing it in an effective manner.

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