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Arabic linguistics: overview and history

1.   Introduction

In approaching the study of human language in general, if the aim is to categorize, classify, and identify how languages work, then these functions must be based on clearly documented empirical observations. This kind of activity separates linguistics from anecdotal, philosophical, impressionistic, or speculative observations about language that may come from anyone anywhere. Linguistics can be defined as follows.

(1)   Linguistics is "the study of language as a system of human communication" (Richards and Schmidt 2010: 343).

(2)   Linguistics is "a natural science, on a par with geology, biology, physics, and chemistry." And "the task of linguistics is to explain the nature of human language, through active involvement in the description of language – each viewed as an integrated system – together with explanation of why each language is the way it is, allied to the further scientific pursuits of prediction and evaluation" (Dixon 2010a: 1).

(3)   "For the beginning linguist, saying that linguistics is a science can be interpreted as implying careful observation of the relevant real-world phenomena, classification of those phenomena, and the search for useful patterns in the phenomena observed and classified. For the more advanced linguist, saying that linguistics is a science is a matter of seeking explanations for the phenomena of language and building theories which will help explain why observed phenomena occur while phenomena which are not observed should not occur" (Bauer 2007: 17).

(4)   "Linguists believe that their field is a science because they share the goals of scientific inquiry, which is objective (or more properly intersubjectively accessible) understanding" (Aronoff and Rees-Miller 2001: xiv).

(5)   "The task of linguistics is to explain the nature of human language, through active involvement in the description of languages – each viewed as an integrated system – together with an explanation of why each

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language is the way it is, allied to the further scientific pursuits of prediction and evaluation" (Dixon 2010a: 1).

The field of linguistics is therefore seen as a scientific approach to language in all its diversity: spoken and written, formal and informal, internal and external. It concerns the analysis of language in use (such as conversation analysis), language as a universal form of human cognition (e.g., universal grammar), theories of language structure, and language acquisition in its various forms. Linguistics is descriptive rather than prescriptive; it aims to document and explain language as it is, rather than to prescribe rules of performance.[1]

1.1.   Linguistics and grammar

It is important to distinguish the realm of linguistics from the more subordinate concept of 'grammar.' In fact, it is important to delineate exactly what 'grammar' denotes. Usually, the term 'grammar' refers to the study of both morphology and syntax: word structure and clause structure. Because morphology and syntax often interact, a core component of grammar is morphosyntax. One definition of grammar states that "a grammar consists of a number of closed systems – categories such as tense, gender, and evidentiality – and a number of construction types, or ways of relating together words into phrases, clauses, sentences, and utterances" (Dixon 2010a: 23). A linguist's way of looking at grammar is as a "descriptive" mechanism that accounts for all the morphological and syntactic phenomena in a language.[2] A more didactic view of grammar is "prescriptive," i.e., a grammar indicates what is correct and incorrect usage. The former takes language as it is and describes it; the latter takes an idealized standard of language and provides rules for adherence to that standard. Both are useful in terms of language pedagogy, but it is important to know that linguists rarely see language in black and white – correct or incorrect; rather, they view language as a feature of human cognition and behavior, and try to characterize that behavior (or cognition, as it may be) as accurately and empirically as possible.

2.   Linguistics and Arabic

Arabic linguistics is a vast field combining study of the Arabic language with the analytical disciplines that constitute the field of linguistics. Linguistic theories, methods, and concepts are used to analyze the structure and processes of Arabic; but at the same time, Arabic with its millennium-long intellectual

traditions, its complex morphology, and its current broad diversity of registers, informs linguistic theory. Many linguistic approaches to Arabic language analysis have been applied over the past fifty years both within the Arab world and from the point of view of western scholars. These approaches and their disciplinary procedures are both varied and convergent, covering a wealth of data but also coming to terms with central issues of concern to Arabic linguistics that had been neglected in the past, such as validating the prominent role of vernacular Arabic and variation theory in Arabic society and culture. Arabic linguistics is now an active subfield in sociolinguistics, corpus linguistics, and computational linguistics as well as theoretical and applied linguistics. Both traditional and new genres of Arabic writing are now being examined within postmodern frameworks of literary theory and linguistic analysis. Media Arabic studies is a new and rapidly growing field; medieval texts are being re-examined in the light of new philology and discourse analysis; previously ignored forms of popular culture such as songs, advertisements, oral poetry, vernacular writing, letters, email, and blogs are now legitimate grist for the linguistics mill.

The discipline of linguistics has a growing number of subfields. The traditional four core divisions usually include theoretical linguistics, applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, and computational linguistics. Each of these has developed new applications, perspectives, hypotheses, and discoveries that extend their analytical power in novel ways, such as cognitive linguistics in theoretical linguistics, second language acquisition in applied linguistics, corpus linguistics in the computational field, and discourse analysis in sociolinguistics. When these perspectives and theories are applied to Arabic, the findings can be revealing, satisfying, or puzzling, but generally lead toward greater understanding of how languages work, how they resemble each other, and how they differ. The field of computational linguistics has provided ways to develop extensive corpora of spoken and written Arabic that can be used for pioneering research and analysis of language in use. An active subfield of linguistics – history of linguistics – examines linguistic historiography, the development of language analysis over time, and the evolution of grammatical theory in different cultures.

The phonological, morphological, and syntactic structures of Arabic reflect its Semitic origins and its essential differences from Indo-European languages. These differences and their cultural embeddedness are what make Arabic of interest to research in many fields of linguistics. For example, the particularly well-defined and elaborated verb system with its derivations reflect an aspect of classical Arabic that is both fascinating and rigorous in its structure and linguistic logic.[3] As another example, the contrasts between vernacular and written language, their different roles within Arab society, and the tensions between local and regional linguistic identities, form areas of sociolinguistics that pose particular challenges to data

collection, empirical study, and objective analysis. Many research challenges and opportunities still lie ahead in this regard.[4]

2.1.   Theoretical linguistics

In a very real sense theoretical linguistics is the mother of all branches of linguistic science and it is often referred to as "general linguistics" because of its wide range of coverage.

Prior to the emergence of the field of modern linguistics, philology was the term used for the study of language structure and literary tradition, with special focus on historical developments and relationships among cognate languages (comparative philology). The examination and analysis of language families, their relationships and development is referred to as diachronic analysis (analysis of language structure and growth over time).[5]

2.1.1.   Background

The nineteenth century witnessed a shift in perspective away from diachronic analysis to synchronic analysis; that is, the examination of language as it is at any point in time, especially contemporary language. In pinning down language as an object of study, one of the first steps of early linguists was to establish its systematic nature and the difference between abstract language-as-a-system and concrete language-in-use (see Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole*).[6] It was language-as-a-system that early twentieth-century structural linguists such as Jespersen, Sapir, and Bloomfield believed would yield the most fruitful research results because it was an objective reality measurable in reliable, empirical ways. Central to the structural linguistic approach is the difference between descriptive grammar and prescriptive grammar, the idea that theories focus on discovering and describing the structures and processes of language as it is, rather than on placing particular values on the type or register of language involved, or on prescribing rules for "correct" language use.

A turning point in theoretical linguistics was reached in the mid 1960s, when Noam Chomsky, in his seminal text on generative grammar, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, offered a distinction between human beings' knowledge of language ("competence") and their actual use of language ("performance") (1965: 4). The focus was still on language as a system, only Chomsky's theory crucially included cognition as a key component of language systems and processes. He stressed that "linguistic theory . . . is concerned with discovering a mental reality underlying actual behavior" (1965: 4).[7] In Chomsky's view, syntax – the structures and processes of sentence-building – is the key to revealing that mental reality. In addition to placing syntactic structure at the center of linguistic theory, Chomsky

posited the existence of linguistic universals, structures, and concepts that are common to all human communication, and which indicate that human beings are uniquely endowed with a shared cognitive capacity to learn and use language.

2.1.2.   Generative grammar and beyond

The notion of generative grammar within the study of linguistics is well defined by Haegeman, who states: "The total of all the rules and principles that have been formulated with respect to a language constitutes the grammar of that language. A grammar of a language is a coherent system of rules and principles that are at the basis of the grammatical sentences of a language. We say that a grammar *generates* the sentences of a language" (1994: 5) (emphasis in original). The concept of generative grammar is thus based on sentence grammar, how humans construct their syntactic rule-systems, and what those rule-systems are. Throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, debate and conceptual developments in theoretical linguistics have flourished, different theoretical approaches yielding different types of analysis, from the detailed descriptions done in terms of structuralism to the powerful formalisms of generative syntactic theory. In recent years various theoretical approaches to the study of language have developed in addition to generative theory, such as relational grammar, lexical–functional grammar, cognitive linguistics, construction grammar, functional linguistics, lexical semantics, and others.

2.1.3.   Basic linguistic theory and relational grammar

One approach that has been fruitful for the discussion and description of many languages is Dixon's "Basic Linguistic Theory" (BLT) (Dixon 2010a, b). BLT "consists in study and comparison of the grammatical patterns of individual languages" (Dixon 2010a: 5), and centers on the fact that "every grammar is an integrated system. Each part relates to the whole; its role can only be understood and appreciated in terms of the overall system to which it belongs" (Dixon 2010a: 24). Along these lines, Dixon also characterizes grammar as "an abstract system of interlocking elements" (2010a: 34). This concept of language structure helps to focus analysis not just on individual components of language (e.g., morphology, phonology, syntax), but how those parts interrelate with the whole; that is, how various language systems and sub-systems synchronize and synthesize to create a complex and effective network of communication.[8]

Relational grammar (RG) emerged as an alternative to transformational/generative grammar in the 1970s. "RG sought to do justice to the interaction between grammatical relations, case relations, and thematic roles across language" (Butt 2006: 33). I have found that RG is useful in analyzing Arabic syntax and semantics,

in part because "RG implicitly assumes a relationship between overt case marking
and grammatical relations," (Butt 2006: 36) but also because of its compatibility
with traditional categories of Arabic dependency relations. In addition, concepts
from lexical semantics (formerly "generative" semantics) and lexical decomposi-
tion (especially predicate decomposition) are well suited to the analysis of Arabic
syntax and especially morphosyntax.[9]

2.1.4.   Arabic linguistics

As applied to Arabic, linguistic theory has yielded many insightful studies
and also ways of approaching the language with precise, well-delineated analytical
and discovery procedures. Particularly in the area of derivational morphology,
Arabic offers a highly systematic and even exemplary perspective on language
structure. In an overview of Arabic linguistics, Eid notes that:

> Two approaches are identified as being dominant in research in theoretical
> linguistics. One is more focused on developing a theory, or a part thereof,
> with data from individual language(s) serving as a testing ground for a
> specific model being developed or an argument being made. The other is
> more focused on analyzing linguistic data and discovering principles under-
> lying a linguistic system, with the theory being a means of approaching the
> data . . . Both approaches are well represented in the literature on Arabic
> theoretical linguistics.   (1990: 12–13)

Modern theoretical linguistics focuses to a large extent on syntax: phrase structure
and clause structure. Much of the linguistic work on Arabic in recent years has
centered around word order, subordination, coordination, conjunction, agreement,
relative clauses, prepositional phrases, transitivity, argument structure, and other
components of syntax and morphosyntax. The John Benjamins series,
Perspectives on Arabic Linguistics (now amounting to more than twenty volumes),
reproduces selected papers from the annual meeting of the Arabic Linguistics
Society, and is a key resource for anyone interested in current theoretical thinking
about Arabic.

As well as analyzing classical Arabic and MSA, theoretical linguistics has
significantly improved the understanding of vernacular Arabic grammatical struc-
tures through the results of persistent and painstaking fieldwork. The subdiscipline
of Arabic dialectology has produced extensive and valuable descriptive studies of
colloquial Arabic in numerous regions in the Arab world and sponsored confer-
ences on that topic (see, for example, the web site of AIDA: Association
Internationale de Dialectologie Arabe at www.aida.org.at). Publications such as
the journal *Zeitschrift für Arabische Linguistik* regularly provide a range of articles
on Arabic linguistics, examining both standard and spoken Arabic variants. Brill's

recent publication of the five-volume *Encyclopedia of Arabic Language and Linguistics* (2006–2009) has provided a much-needed reference work for researchers in Arabic linguistics.

3.   The Arabic grammatical tradition

"Every scientific discipline has a chronologically earliest paradigm, in other words, there is a definite point in time when a field achieves scientific maturity" (Percival 1976: 287). For Arabic, the earliest paradigm for language analysis dates to the days of the young Islamic empire. The examination and analysis of Arabic language structure do not start in the contemporary era. Centuries of indigenous erudition have preceded the application of current linguistic approaches to the description of Arabic, providing a powerful intellectual lineage for those who study Arabic today. The Arabic linguist who is not familiar with the key conceptual insights of the great Arabic grammarians is bound to see only part of the picture of Arabic language analysis. Because of the central importance of the Qur'an and its message, and because of the more practical but essential role of Arabic literacy in building and administrating an international political and religious power, Arabic language sciences were among the earliest disciplines to emerge in the context of the Islamic empire, starting as early as the seventh century AD.[10] Sociolinguist and historian of linguistics Dell Hymes proposed that the rise of linguistic analysis in any society is based on two factors: first, the existence of a corpus of written material; and, second, the recognition of language change – the awareness of discrepancy – either synchronic or diachronic, i.e., language differences emerging within a speech community, language change because of contact with other language groups, or a recognition of difference between the current stage of a language and a previous one. It is particularly this "consciousness of imminent loss" of a valued form of language that appears to be a driving force in the growth of conscious awareness of language structure (Hymes 1974: 5). In the case of Arabic, the language of the Qur'an was not only revered, but sacred, an "inimitable" rhetorical gift. Its preservation, therefore, and the analysis of its linguistic processes and structures became a foundational disciplinary activity in early Islam. The earliest Arabic grammarians used not only the Qur'an but also the highly regarded genre of pre-Islamic and early Islamic poetry as the cornerstones of eloquence and correct usage for Arabic. As the context of Arab society shifted to greater horizons, and with the passing of time, the language of the Qur'an and of the old poetic tradition became distanced from everyday spoken vernaculars, and the need for literacy in the written language became more

acute in order to maintain cultural awareness of the Arabic word – both sacred and aesthetic.

To Hymes' two factors for the development of language analysis I would add two more that apply, especially to the situation of classical Arabic: first, the need for transference of language skills to other groups, i.e., the need to teach Arabic as a foreign language; and, second, the demand for translations and translators. These four factors were all at play during the early days of the Islamic empire as it spread its culture, religion, and language over a vast expanse of territory, encouraged popular conversion to Islam, and developed a sophisticated cultural/political base in and around the Abbasid capital, Baghdad. With the establishment of a definitive written version of the Qur'an during the reign of Uthman, the third Caliph (644–656) had come the need to define principles of Arabic orthography, and with the stabilization of orthography came increased attention to grammar and lexicon.[11] Scholarly momentum and literacy burgeoned during the first hundred years of Islam, and a great thirst for systematized knowledge pervaded the Muslim world in the eighth and ninth centuries. Language disciplines were leading components of the surge in translation, commentary, exegesis, documentation, education, and legislation that were needed to form the foundations of Muslim culture, civil society, science, and governance. At the same time, other disciplines – medicine, alchemy, music, astronomy, and mathematics to name a few – began to flourish and form principles of practice, each with their own needs for taxonomies and technical terms, translations, forms of education, and transmission of knowledge.[12]

The foundations for classical Arabic grammar and lexicography were set by the end of the eighth century AD, with the extraordinary lexicographical legacy of Al-Khalil ibn Ahmad (*Kitaab al-ʕAyn*), and the evergreen grammatical masterwork of Sibawayhi (*Al-Kitaab*). The Arabic grammatical tradition thus consolidated its fundamentals in written form over a thousand years ago, and constituted a background against which disciplinary progress could be initiated, taxonomies could be compiled, terminology could be refined, and theoretical speculation could be engaged in – a matrix of information, analysis, and procedure that fostered the development of a lasting research tradition in Arabic language study.

The story of the development and elaboration of Arabic grammatical theory is a long, intellectually fascinating, and distinguished one. Further readings in this area are listed at the end of this chapter. I encourage those who have not yet had the experience of dealing with Arabic primary sources from the late classical period/ early Islamic period to try their hands at reading Sibawayhi, at reading Ibn Jinni, Al-Khalil, or many of the prominent grammarians of early Islamic times, probing their architectures of linguistic complexity. Careful, close reading of original sources helps us contemporary readers to integrate the intellectual discourses of the past into our epistemological frameworks and to prepare us for grounded,

thoughtful, and coherent analyses and queries not only about Arabic language but of linguistics as applied to the Arabic language. Foundational questions may now yield transformational answers.

4.   Aims of this book

This work aims to provide readers with a systematic introduction to the descriptive methods and terminologies of contemporary Arabic linguistics, especially as regards modern standard Arabic (*al-fuşħaa*). This book deals with levels of linguistic analysis beginning with the sound system (phonology), progressing through morphology (derivational and inflectional), and to syntax. At each level, descriptive analysis is provided as well as an introduction to various theoretical approaches and intellectual trends. In addition, each chapter includes review and discussion questions as well as suggestions for further reading.

Questions and discussion points

(1)   Some definitions of linguistics are given at the beginning of this chapter. Do they all agree? Do you know of others? Look up two more definitions of linguistics and see how they compare.

(2)   How does linguistics differ from the traditional field of philology? How does it differ from the study of "grammar"?

(3)   The terms "diachronic" and "synchronic" linguistics make a key distinction in how the study of language structure is approached. Discuss this difference and its implications for Arabic.

(4)   A further key distinction is between Chomsky's use of the terms "competence" and "performance." How do these terms relate to each other, and what do they imply for the study of Arabic linguistics?

(5)   Discuss and evaluate the four factors mentioned in this chapter that are prerequisites for the initiation of language analysis within a particular culture. Do you agree that these are foundational? Do you think that there are other factors that were especially pertinent for the emergence of Arabic language science?

Further reading

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Notes

1. "Linguistics is an empirical science, like biology or physics or astronomy. As such, its goal is the structure of explanatory hypotheses: empirically vulnerable accounts (theories) of observed phenomena" (Green and Morgan 1996: 37).
2. Dixon states further that "the grammar of a language has two components, syntax and morphology. Some linguists treat phonology as a third part of a grammar; others regard phonology as distinct from grammar, but linked to it. A feature can be called 'morpho-syntactic' if it both occurs in a morphological paradigm and marks syntactic function; for example a system of case affixes" (2010a: 93).
3. See Danks 2011, for an extensive analysis of the Arabic verb system.
4. See Appendix A for an outline of sociolinguistics, applied linguistics, and computational linguistics as applied to Arabic.