

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The History of the Arabic Language – Origin and Development –

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Abstract:

The Arabic language belongs to the group of Semitic languages, which includes Arabic, Hebrew, Canaanite, Aramaic, Akkadian, the Arabic of the Arabian Peninsula, Ethiopic, and other languages branching from them. Arabic is perhaps the oldest language in this group at all, and the closest to the original Proto-Semitic, since it is among the most ancient and the most stable languages. It achieved wide dissemination after the emergence of Islam and the expansion of the Islamic state through major conquests, as the Arabs' control over vast regions of the Near East following their conquests in the seventh century CE created the reason for the introduction of abundant new words from the languages of the peoples who fell under Arab rule.

This prompted linguists and grammarians to collect their language in order to preserve it from distortion and corruption, and to understand the Qur'anic text, grasp its meanings, and comprehend its subtleties. As a result, Arabic lexical dictionaries appeared, grammatical studies flourished, schools multiplied, and grammatical, rhetorical, and phonetic works, poetic diwans, and literary creations emerged.

Keywords: Arabic language , Arabic lexical dictionaries, linguists and grammarians.

Introduction:

The Arabic language was among the languages that prevailed across the regions of Western

Asia from the Taurus Mountains in the north to Yemen and Ethiopia in the south. The German scholar Schröder (1798) applied the term "Semitic languages" to this group, including Arabic, Hebrew, Canaanite, Aramaic, Akkadian, the Arabic of the Arabian Peninsula, Ethiopic, and other languages branching from them. Researchers believe that comparing some Semitic languages with others may suggest that Arabic is the oldest of this group at all, and the closest to the original Proto-Semitic, rivaled in this only by Akkadian, according to some opinions.¹ The Arabic language is among the most ancient and most stable languages, and among the most geographically widespread. Arab grammarians succeeded in describing Arabic, establishing its morphological and grammatical rules, describing its sounds, explaining its phonetic system, and compiling dictionaries and various linguistic works. When we use the term "the Arabic language," it encompasses two branches: the southern Arabic language, which passed through historical stages such as Sabaean, Qatabanian, Hadrami, and Himyarite; and northern Arabic, which is the language we know. Discussion of this Arabic language may also proceed according to two historical considerations, each referring to a stage of its development: the language of inscriptions on the one hand, and the language of pre-Islamic poetry on the other. The Arabic of inscriptions does not concern us here except insofar as pointing out

¹ See: Tamam Hassan, *Articles in Language and Literature*, Alam al-Kitab, 1st ed., 2006, vol. 2, p. 11.

that the history of the Arabic language does not begin with the emergence of pre-Islamic poetry, but rather extends further back in time beyond the date of these inscriptions.²

“The moment at which our knowledge reaches the existence of pre-Islamic poetry was not the moment of the birth of the Arabic language; on the contrary, it was the peak of its maturity, splendor, and virility. Its initial beginnings must have preceded this period by centuries or even thousands of years; otherwise, what is the meaning of scholars’ statement that it is the closest of its sisters to the Proto-Semitic origin, and why did its earliest manifestations appear in the form of pre-Islamic poetry complete in form and content?”¹³

Thus, the Arabic language is deeply rooted in antiquity, even if historians have not found historical evidence proving this, because the Arabs did not know writing in ancient times.

The Arabic Language before Islam:

Before Islam, Arabic was a local language with a limited intellectual horizon, for reasons including the isolation imposed by desert life, which prevented the Bedouins from knowing the conditions of other nations; the harshness of living that left little room except for grazing or raiding neighbors; and pagan beliefs with their associated superstitions and falsehoods. Yet this very desert life, despite its limitations, endowed the Arab individual with a strong sense of self-esteem that made him see himself as though he were the center of existence. This individuality itself became a rich source for pre-Islamic poetry, with all it contained of pride in the self and the tribe, satire of the enemy, love poetry, wine poetry, chivalry, generosity, and zeal, and the protection of neighbors.²⁴

It was well known that desert isolation did not allow non-Arabic words to find their way into pre-Islamic poetry except in very rare cases, such as foreign proper names. Even foreign names might be Arabized in a way that cut them off from their original source, as we find

in the Mu‘allaqa of Tarafa ibn al-‘Abd, where the term “Binyamin” is Arabized to “Ibn Yāmin,” as he says:

- *Kanna hudūja al-mālikiyati ghudwatan khalāyā safīnī bi-l-nawāṣifi min dadd*
- *‘Adawliyyatin aw min safīni Ibn Yāmin yajūru bihā al-mallāhu tawran wa-yahtadī*³

Hence, there was no doubt, near or far, regarding the Arabness of the vocabulary of pre-Islamic poetry.

Pre-Islamic poetry derived its strength and linguistic richness from the Arab tribes, which served as a vast reservoir of linguistic heritage and expressive richness of the Arabic language. “The Arab tribes were the substance of this language and the cause of its expansion and abundance, and the master poets of the pre-Islamic era were as though each of them were a tribe in creativity and innovation—metaphor, simile, and rhetorical embellishment. Then the Qur’an came as the ultimate goal, and then poets, writers, and literati followed. Whoever among them did not add to what existed did not diminish from it.”¹⁵

Pre-Islamic Arabic poems contained a wealth of vocabulary and a richness of expressions that made Arabic one of the richest languages in lexical wealth and among the most flexible in generating words.

“Arabic is extremely rich in a lexical wealth that no one is able to enumerate, because this wealth is so vast and extensive that it does not yield to anyone who wishes to limit or count it. Much of the material of the Arabic language is unused, and much of it is unknown. Yunus ibn Habib al-Basri narrated from Abu ‘Amr that he said: What has reached you of what the Arabs said is only a little; had much reached you, much knowledge and poetry would have reached you.”²⁶

² See: the same source, vol. 2, pp. 11–12.

³ Tamam Hassan, *Articles in Language and Literature*, vol. 2, p. 12.

⁴ See: the same source, vol. 2, pp. 12–13.

⁵ The same source, p. 13.

⁶ Shaykh al-Faqih Abu al-Taher Muhammad ibn Yusuf ibn ‘Abd Allah al-Tamimi, *Al-Musalsal fi Gharib al-Lugha*, Dar al-Kutub al-

Thus, Arabic reached a level of lexical richness and breadth of vocabulary that no language before or after it attained, due to the characteristics of the Arabic language—precision of rules, abundance of vocabulary, breadth of patterns, beauty of style, and solidity of rhetoric.

“And this wealth is multifaceted: poetry whose abundance astonishes you, to the point that you imagine every Arab to be a poet, and that his tongue utters poetry as it utters speech. It is diverse in purposes, meters, and meanings. Thus, from *Imru’ al-Qays* to *Bashshar ibn Burd*, we have large *diwans* that do not collect everything they said, but rather collect only a little of it. They deposited therein their pride and satire, sang of their emotions and feelings, described their anguish and longing for a homeland, their loyalty to the dead, and described the nature of their land, plants, and animals.”¹⁷

Arab brilliance, genius, and creativity in modes of expression were not limited to poetry; they excelled in eloquence in both poetry and prose. They possessed a wealth of sermons no less significant than poetry, through which they achieved their aims. They also excelled in proverbs and wisdom, through which they documented their experiences and the precision of their observation.

The Arabic Language and the Emergence of Islam:

The Qur’anic text had a tremendous impact on poets, who fell into two groups. One group embraced Islam and abandoned the purposes of the pre-Islamic poets except for one purpose: defending Islam. Their commitment to this single purpose led to a degree of slackening in the virility of their poetry, especially due to the change in their lexical stock from pre-Islamic vocabulary to the new vocabulary of Islam. This is noticeable, for example, in the poetry of *Hassan ibn Thabit*, the poet of the Messenger of Allah (peace be

upon him). The other group remained pagan, preserving pre-Islamic style and purposes, and much of their satire was directed against Muslims. In their poems, one finds amorous or ruin-lamenting preludes followed by a transition to the main purpose, and the pre-Islamic themes remained unchanged. Yet they were uneasy with this new text that stirred their confusion and fears.

Those among them who eventually embraced Islam and praised the Prophet (peace be upon him), such as *Ka’b ibn Zuhayr*, composed a pre-Islamic-style poem for an Islamic purpose. He addressed the Prophet as though he were one of the tribal elders, beginning with love poetry and transitioning to supplication, in the poem whose opening is:

*Bānat Su’ād fa-qalbī al-yawma matbūlu
mutayyimun ithrahā lam yughda makbūlu*¹⁸

Thus, the entry of the Qur’anic text among the Arabs led to a qualitative leap in the Arabic language, whose influence extended to pre-Islamic poetry, which acquired new purposes unfamiliar before Islam, imposed by the reality of the new religion. This resulted in a diversity between pre-Islamic vocabulary and the new refined vocabulary compatible with the purpose of defending Islam.

The Rise and Spread of Arabic:

“No language among the languages of the world has been granted what the Arabic language has been granted. God Almighty bestowed upon it preservation by preserving His great Book, for He revealed His Book in it to His Prophet (peace be upon him), distinguishing it with a clear Arabic tongue, and He preserved it by preserving the *diwan* of the Arabs. God Almighty says: *Indeed, We have sent down the Reminder, and indeed We will preserve it*” (*Al-Hijr* 9). Through the Qur’ān and the continuous efforts of those who preserve, recite, and study it, the language was

¹⁷ Ilmiyya, Beirut, Lebanon, 1st ed., 2013, ed. Muhammad al-Sayyid ‘Uthman, p. 12.

¹⁸ Prof. Dr. Muhammad Ahmad Hamad, *Lexical Wealth in the Arabic Language*, International Publishing House, Riyadh,

Saudi Arabia, 1st ed., 1428 AH / 2007 CE, p. 38.

¹⁹ See: Tamam Hassan, *Articles in Language and Literature*, vol. 2, p. 14.

preserved and its continuity maintained.”⁹² Were it not for the Qur'an, it would have vanished and become a dead language, dialects would have prevailed over time, and what is known as the common language (Classical Arabic) would have been lost.

“With the revelation of the Qur'an and the entry of people into the religion of God in multitudes from various regions of the world, non-Arab Muslims turned to learning Arabic in order to perform acts of worship and religious rituals in it and to read the Noble Qur'an. Therefore, the early generations were keen to learn Arabic and its sciences, as they are among communal obligations, and through them the Qur'an is understood. Although development is a universal law in all languages, and most manifestations of this development occur in semantics, Arabic remained preserving all its linguistic levels (phonetic, morphological, grammatical, semantic), and whatever developed did so within the framework of original meanings and in connection with them.”⁹³

Hence, the credit for the rise, spread, and development of Arabic returns to the Noble Qur'an—this sacred text that compelled scholars and researchers to study the sciences of language to protect Arabic from error on the one hand and to serve the Qur'an on the other. Thus, grammatical schools and phonetic studies emerged thanks to scholars who devoted their lives to serving the language and the Islamic religion.

The Flourishing of Arabic Linguistic Studies:

The credit for the flourishing of the Arabic language, the establishment of the science of grammar, and the consolidation of its foundations goes to the grammatical schools, foremost among them the Basran school.

“Most researchers hold that the founder of the science of grammar was Abu al-Aswad al-Du'ali, who died in 69 AH. He was assisted in this noble work by some of his students, who are rightly considered among the leading figures of the Basran school, the most famous

of whom are Nasr ibn 'Asim (d. 89 AH), 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Hormuz (d. 117 AH), and Yahya ibn Ya'mur (d. 139 AH). These pioneers had a great influence on those who came after them, such as 'Issa ibn 'Umar al-Thaqafi (d. 149 AH), Abu 'Amr ibn al-'Ala' (d. 154 AH), Abu al-Khattab al-Akhfash al-Akbar (d. 177 AH), and Yunus ibn Habib (d. 182 AH).”⁹⁴

The true founder of the Basran school, however, was the brilliant imam al-Khalil ibn Ahmad al-Farahidi (d. 174 AH), due to the extraordinary intelligence, creative faculty, and rare patience that God Almighty bestowed upon him. These gifts enabled him to uncover the secrets of Arabic, grasp its characteristics, understand its system, and compose its structures. Evidence of this is what Abu Sa'id al-Sirafi says about him in his book *Akhbar al-Nahwiyyin al-Basriyyin*: “As for al-Khalil ibn Ahmad Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Farahidi al-Azdi, he reached the utmost level in extracting grammatical issues and correcting analogy therein. He was the first to extract prosody, classify Arab poetry by it, and produce the first famous *Kitab al-'Ayn*, by which the control of the language becomes possible. He was among the ascetics of the world and those devoted to knowledge.”⁹⁵

Al-Khalil's grammatical, phonetic, and prosodic studies remain pioneering in linguistic studies to this day, as modern scientific technology and laboratory work have validated many of his theories and opinions, which were based primarily on intuition, sensitivity, and acumen. Many of his contemporaries benefited from al-Khalil's knowledge and merit, foremost among them his student Abu Bishr 'Amr ibn Qanbar, known as Sibawayh (d. 188 AH). Sibawayh excelled in grammar to the extent that he was called the Imam of Grammarians. Among his greatest works is his *Book*, which embodied the main principles of the Basran methodology alongside the grammatical rules and Arabic styles it contained.

⁹ The Noble Qur'an, Surah al-Hijr, verse 9.

Abu al-Tayyib al-Lughawi says: “A group learned grammar from al-Khalil, among whom—and among others—there was none like Sibawayh. He is ‘Amr ibn Qanbar, the most knowledgeable of people in grammar after al-Khalil, and he authored his book which people called the Qur'an of grammar.”¹

Abu Ishaq al-Zajjaj says: “When you examine the examples in Sibawayh's Book, it becomes clear that he is the most knowledgeable of people in the language.” Abu Sa'id al-Sirafi says: “Because of the fame and merit of Sibawayh's Book, it became a landmark among grammarians. In Basra it was said, ‘So-and-so read the Book,’ and it was known to be Sibawayh's Book; and ‘He read half the Book,’ with no doubt that it was Sibawayh's Book.” Muhammad ibn Yazid al-Mubarrad used to say to anyone who wished to read Sibawayh's Book: “Have you sailed the sea?”—to magnify it and to emphasize its difficulty.

Al-Mazani used to say: “Whoever wishes to write a large book on grammar after Sibawayh's Book should be ashamed.”²

Thus, Sibawayh's Book had a great impact on subsequent grammarians, as it is the first book on Arabic grammar that has reached us in a form that is nearly complete and of a high degree of reliability and confidence.

There is also a group of scholars who relied wholly or partially on the grammatical and morphological material in Sibawayh's Book, deriving from it what enabled them to produce specialized works in each of the two fields—morphology and grammar—or to combine them in a manner that even surpassed Sibawayh in this regard.¹

Thus, the influence of Sibawayh's Book extended to grammatical and morphological works, as well as to scholars themselves, making the material of that unique book a repository to which every researcher in language and grammar resorts up to the modern era.

The Impact of Converted Peoples on Lexical Wealth:

The Arabs' expansion over vast regions of the Near East following their conquests in the seventh century CE created the cause for

introducing a large number of new words from the languages of the peoples who came under Arab rule. Thus, the Arabic of the Levant contains much Syriac, while the Arabs of Iraq used elements of Persian. Many non-Arabs who embraced Islam—and perhaps not a few Arabs as well at that early time—were bilingual. It is natural that the Arabic of Spain and Sicily also borrowed from Latin or Romance languages.²

This influx of foreign vocabulary into Arabic prompted linguists of that era to work to protect it from mixing and thus protect the Noble Qur'an from error.

Among the reasons that drove Arabs to increase their concern for their language was “their concern for the Qur'anic text, which led them to strive to purify their language and preserve its eloquence, especially after non-Arabs entered Islam, resulting in the mixing of Arabic with foreign and borrowed words. Linguists and grammarians therefore aimed to collect their language to preserve it from distortion and corruption, and to understand the Qur'anic text, grasp its meanings, and comprehend its subtleties. This confirms the close connection between Arabic and the Qur'an, for a scholar of exegesis must be well-versed in the sciences of Arabic.”¹

The spread of Arabic in other lands and its mixing with their languages caused it to be influenced by them and to borrow from them, despite its dominance. This influence appeared in sounds, vocabulary, meanings, styles, and rules. The leading figures of Arabic therefore sought to highlight its beauty and precision, build its style and rules, and encourage learning it. As a result, Arabic lexical dictionaries appeared, beginning with *Kitab al-'Ayn* by al-Khalil ibn Ahmad al-Farahidi. Grammatical studies flourished, schools multiplied, and grammatical, rhetorical, and phonetic works, poetic diwans, and literary creations emerged.

The Origin of Arabic Writing:

The history of Arabic writing that has reached us goes back to the pre-Islamic era, but what has reached us of it is very limited. This is due to several factors, including that the Arabs in

ancient times did not attach great importance to writing. Most of their literature—poetry, sermons, proverbs, wisdom, daily commercial dealings, and stories—was transmitted orally. Arabic writing then flourished with the emergence of Islam and the compilation of the Qur'an.

“The Arabic script that we use today branched from the alphabetic (or alphabetical) writing invented by the Phoenicians in the fifteenth century BCE. Before that, civilized nations used pictographic writing (idéographie), that is, a set of images that approximately depict the meanings intended to be conveyed, such as ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics. However, this type of writing required great effort and hardship due to the large number of its symbols and the severity of its complexity, and it also failed to fulfill all that humans need to express, since meanings are limitless.”¹

The invention of writing with letters made it possible to encompass meanings used for expression by combining an innumerable number of words from a limited number of letters, and then composing sentences that express human needs.

The credit for this invention goes to the Phoenicians. Other peoples who were in contact with them—such as other Semites like the Arameans and the southern Arabs—then adopted it. From them it spread to the Berbers, Persians, Indians, and Greeks, and from the Greeks to all the countries of Europe. It reached the northern Arabs through the Arameans. All Semitic writing systems derived from the Phoenician script share a number of characteristics, some of which they have in common with others, and some of which distinguish them from them.²

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