Chapter 1

THE ARABIC LANGUAGE:
ITS LINGUISTICS AND PHILOLOGY

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The designation used to refer to the Arabic language in all its forms is *al-lugha al-ʿarabiyya*. Generally distinguished are the written language and the dialects or *lahajāt* – the first being qualified as *faṣīḥa* (eloquent) and the latter as *dārija* (vernacular).

Arabic belongs to the family of Semitic languages and, more exactly, to their southern branch. The first manifestations of this language appear to go back to the second millennium BC. But the most ancient documents pertaining to Arabic go back to the eighth century BC. Consisting mainly of proper names, such documents do not really yield us sufficient knowledge of the language for these remote periods. The Arabic language as attested in pre-Islamic poetry and also in the specimens of various dialects mentioned by the grammarians and philologists was probably elaborated over a period ranging from the third to the sixth century AD. The dialects referred to were spoken by the nomads of Central and Northern Arabia. Thus *al-lugha al-ʿarabiyya* is the designation first used to refer to the language current in these regions. Tribal migration, however, seems to have favoured from very early on the spread of Arabic vernaculars to Southern Arabia as well as to the regions making up Syria, Palestine and Mesopotamia. Indeed, the language of the pre-Islamic poems was understood alike at the court of the sixth-century Ghassānid princes in the area of Damascus and at the court of their rivals in Mesopotamia, the Lakhmids of al-Ḥīra.

The rare epigraphic documents available allow us to suppose that the Arabic script was derived from the Aramaic and was developed from the third century AD. The script received further refinements down to the end of the seventh century AD when the Arabic alphabet was completed with diacritical points and vocalic signs, in order to avoid ambiguities in reading the text of the Qurʾān arising from the old system of writing.

While early Arabic, as might be supposed, was already fragmented into dialects, a true literary language still existed, as attested both by the pre-Islamic

poems and by the Qur'ān. This was a 'poetic *koine*' which transcended, as it were, the vernaculars of the various tribes and was understood by all Arabs. This was the language which grammarians and lexicologists then codified, as we shall see below.

The spread of Arabic

The Islamic conquests, which resulted in the creation of an Islamic State stretching at the height of its power from the Atlantic Ocean to the banks of the Indus, allowed the Arabic language to spread throughout the different areas of this vast domain. The bedouin tribes, who took part in the campaigns of conquest, took their language with them: northwards as far as the Taurus range and the southern reaches of the Armenian highlands; eastwards towards Iran; and westwards to Egypt and North Africa. It seems that the mingling of elements from the different tribes who joined in the campaigns, actually encouraged some uniformity of speech. But then contact between such an Arabic and the various indigenous languages of the conquered lands favoured the gradual emergence of local dialect forms. Arabic did not take root everywhere in the different regions of the Islamic State in the same way. In some areas, Arabic did supplant local vernaculars all together: this was the case for Syria, Iraq, Egypt, North Africa and parts of Sudan. But elsewhere Arabic was long resorted to only as a cultural language, notably in Persia, where it ended by being replaced by Persian for all purposes, and in Andalusia, where Arabic disappeared after the capture of Granada.

Contact with those languages which had been vehicles for higher culture and civilization, such as Persian and Greek, left traces in Arabic. Thus, for example, Arabic borrowed from the Persian its terms dealing notably with crafts, the fine arts and administration. Meanwhile, the translation of Greek works caused translators purely and simply to borrow actual Greek words. Moreover, to convey those ideas and notions of which Islam was the bearer, or those pertaining to the various civilizations of the conquered lands, ne-cessitated the creation of a new terminology and fresh coinages derived from Arabic roots. Sentence structure underwent similar influences. While Arabic in the initial decades of Islam had been mainly a language of poetry and religious preaching, it soon gave birth to prose forms fit for literary creativity, transla-tion and treatises in the most varied fields of learning: theology, linguistics, philosophy, history etc.

One may therefore consider that the advent of Islam, with all the poli-tical, social and cultural consequences it entailed, marked a crucial stage in the history of the Arabic language. Arabic not only became the main language in vast, hitherto non-Arab regions, but also a vehicle for the most far-ranging learning. And so, by way of consequence, it had to adapt to the evolution of

Islamic society itself. Stated simply, one might say that a standardized language had taken shape by the ninth century, one that has been used for writing ever since, though not immune to further evolution. While Arabic did tend to turn into a linguistic instrument used by poets, prose-writers and even scientists who were content to follow pre-established patterns and rehash stale clichés, nevertheless considerable variety in style and tone was shown by other writers dealing with the most manifold subjects, nor yet did the written language always escape the influence of local dialect usage. In fact, the capacity of Arabic to convey the subtlest and most profound ideas depended not so much on its particular degree of linguistic evolution as on the intellectual calibre of the individual writer who wielded it. Thus, a writer such as Ibn Khaldūn may have lived in a relatively stagnant period (the late fourteenth century) in the Arabic-speaking zone of Islamic civilization; yet through his creative genius, he was more than able to express, by means of Arabic, the most innovative ideas on history and society by forging the terms most apt, and style most fit, for his own purposes.

Modern Arabic

A second crucial stage in the history of the Arabic language came with the nineteenth century. Contact between the Arab world and modern Europe, usually considered to have begun with Bonaparte's Egyptian expedition of 1798, left the deepest imprint on Arabic, and especially on its written form. In order to convey the various aspects of modern civilization and deal with the different borrowings from the West to which Arab societies now started to open, the Arabic language showed undeniable evolution. First came terminology: ideas and various facets of modern life had to find expression either through outright borrowing or by having recourse to the internal resources of Arabic. But then came style: for Arabic could hardly escape transposing, through translation, virtual tracings, as it were, of whole English or French sentence structures. Such evolution, against which the purists, to be sure, put up a fight, was nevertheless indispensable if Arabic was to remain a language for communication. A new standardized language thus came into being, one which the French have termed *arabe littéral*, 'standard written Arabic', one understood in all Arab countries and used in books, newspapers and other mass media and also for teaching, conferences, or in official speeches. It might be no exaggeration to say that it was actually the mass media which gave a new lease of life to this 'standard Arabic', which was ultimately, in fact, a new form of the old literary Arabic. For it was indeed the mass media, by reaching out towards a large audience not only through the press but also through radio and television (now present in nearly every Arab home), which made the 'written' language familiar to ever wider sections of the population.

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Written Arabic, whether classical or modern, remains distinguished by a certain number of structural characteristics.

It includes twenty-eight consonants, three short vowels and three long vowels. Classification of its consonants may be patterned thus:

Place and mode of articulation

place	Voiced	Nasal	Pharyngalized	Voiceless	Pharyngalized
Labial	b	m		f	
Labiovelar	w				
Dental	d	n	ḍ	t	ṭ
Interdental fricative	dh		ẓ*	th	
Alveolar fricative	z			s	ṣ
Apical trill	r				
Lateral	l				
Palato-alveolar	j			sh	
Palatal	y				
Velar stop				k	
Velar fricative	gh			kh	
Uvular stop				q	
Pharyngal fricative	'			ḥ	
Glottal stop				'	
Glottal fricative				h	

* *Although usually transcribed as ẓ, this consonant is actually pronounced as a pharyngalized interdental dh.*

Arabic morphology uses consonantal roots, which are mainly triliteral. Words are formed by a play of vowels within the consonantal frame and, as may be the case, by adding a prefix or suffix. Conjugation of the verb observes two tenses, the 'accomplished' (perfective) and the 'unaccomplished' (imperfective). The 'accomplished' tense takes suffixes to indicate person, gender and number, while the 'unaccomplished' takes both suffixes and prefixes for this purpose.

In terms of syntax, Arabic resorts to two kinds of sentences: a verbal sentence, whose predicate is a verb; and a nominal sentence, whose predicate is a noun. Varying functions are indicated by declension of case. Three cases are distinguished: the nominative, for subject and predicate; the accusative, notably for the object of the verb; and the genitive, for what might be termed the complements to the noun and also for those complements introduced by a preposition. Qualifiers take the case of the word qualified. In a simple sentence, these different functions are normally carried out by nouns. In a complex sentence, one function at least will be taken by a preposition.

Arabic dialects

While 'literary Arabic' constitutes the favoured means of communication in all sectors of intellectual and written activity, dialects are used in everyday life. It is generally supposed that the origin of the modern dialects is to be sought in the ancient dialects of Central and Northern Arabia. In contact with the underlying speech forms in the conquered regions, these dialects evolved into the various vernaculars of today, which have been influenced not only by the ancient local tongues but also, in more recent times and to a not inconsiderable extent, by European languages such as French, English, Italian and Spanish.

Characteristic of all the dialects, in contrast to 'literary Arabic', is, notably, the jettisoning of case-endings and many verbal inflections; the almost complete disappearance of the passive form as expressed through the play of vowels; the regression or disappearance of the dual form in nouns, as well as the loss of the feminine plural form of the verb; the appearance of an analytic structure to mark possession; the use of a simplified relative form (*elli*); the formation of an interrogative pronoun (*aysh*, *wash*); and the disappearance or slurring of various vowels within the word.

While the morphological and syntactical structure of written Arabic has hardly suffered any notable change down the ages, this has been mainly due to the rigorous codification of such morphology and syntax as was established in the eighth and ninth centuries AD, a codification which then continued to be observed in the following centuries.

Grammatical and philological studies have indeed enjoyed pride of place in the cultural legacy of the Arabic-speaking Islamic world. Many writers through the centuries have lavished attention upon them. The late fifteenth-century author al-Suyūṭī, one of the last compilers of biographical dictionaries, listed more than 2,000 grammarians.

Nor was interest in philology and linguistics accidental. It may be explained by the rôle enjoyed by the Arabic language in the very religion of Islam. Because it was the language of revelation, Arabic acquired sacred status from the very outset of Islam. As the chosen vessel for a divine message addressed to all mankind, Arabic was considered to be the language of all those who converted to Islam, since access to the scripture (i.e. the Qur'ān) depended upon acquiring it.

For all these reasons, it is easy to see why Arabic linguistic and philological studies developed in close relation with concern about the text of the Qur'ān. Indeed there is no indication that Arabic ever benefited from any written codification before the coming of Islam.

The origins of linguistic science: the Qurʾān

The information we have hardly allows us to define with any precision the different stages of development in the grammatical and philological sciences before the second half of the second/late eighth century. Those who might be regarded as precursors in the field of Arabic grammar and philology became famous on account of the interest they showed in the text of the Qurʾān. At first transmitted orally in the lifetime of the Prophet, the Qurʾān was then set down in written form on the occasion of the recension carried out towards the middle of the seventh century AD during the reign of the third caliph, ʿUthmān b. ʿAffān. However, the script as then used noted only consonants, and indeed did not even properly differentiate between consonantal letters of similar form. Need was therefore soon felt to improve this script, especially by noting vowel signs and diacritical points. This task was carried out by personalities also described to us as having been grammarians, men like Abu-l-Aswad al-Duʾalī (d. 69/680) and Yaḥyā b. Yaʿmur (d. 129/746). The latter is, moreover, considered to have been regarded as an authority in the science of 'readings', that is to say, in the activity consisting in transmitting variants in the recitation of the Qurʾān, based on a chain of reliable informants going back to the Companions of the Prophet.

Be that as it may, the text of the Qurʾān may be considered, by the second half of the seventh and first half of the eighth century AD, as already providing the focus for manifold activities concerned both with establishing a definitive text and with its correct recitation - along with a proper justification for what 'reading' exactly was adopted. Without any doubt, it was these activities which then caused those interested in such matters to go on from the study of the Qurʾānic text to make observations on the functioning of the Arabic language itself.

Poetic recensions

The study of the text of the Qurʾān was also a major factor which contributed to the effort to collect pre-Islamic poems. For the 'readers', who were forerunners in terms of Qurʾānic exegesis, occasionally needed to refer to examples from poetry in order to clarify, or justify, the syntax of certain turns of phrase, or indeed thereby find means whereby to respond to detractors of the Holy Writ − who questioned just how far the text of the Qurʾān truly matched the norms of Arabic speech.

But then occasional recourse to poetic language soon developed into an object of systematic study in itself. Problems sometimes raised in connection with quotations from poetry, in order to explain or justify Qurʾānic usage, then necessarily required cross-checking.

In this way, from the very first decades of the eighth century, a 'corpus', as it were, was already made available for grammatical and philological studies, consisting both of the Qurʾān and of preserved texts of ancient poetry. Observations of a grammatical and philological nature thus were continually widened to embrace all linguistic facts. Thereby, the study of how the language functioned was distinguished from Qurʾānic studies proper.

While the texts in verse originated with poets from the Arabian Peninsula, especially from its central and eastern regions, grammatical and philological studies centred on Iraq. The first generations of scholars lived in Basra. Later, another city, Kufa, became an active centre in the field.

The codification of Arabic grammar

Two men played a pioneering rôle in classifying the data. These were al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad (d. 175/791) and his disciple Sībawayh (d. *c.* 180/796). The first of these was gifted with undeniable powers of synthesis and a remarkable capacity to marshal and give form to facts; from his scholarship developed several branches of learning. Thus, from the texts of the poems, al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad inferred and drew up the very principles and rules of Arabic prosody, which he schematically presented in a pattern of five circles, whence derive the sixteen metres used in poetry. He conceived the first Arabic dictionary by framing, as we shall see, a method for classifying vocabulary. He also set forth the first known description of the phonetics of the Arabic alphabet. Despite, however, his decisive rôle as a pioneer in these fields, and with all his manifold contributions, only few surviving works can be attributed to him. In point of fact, the lasting mark he made in the history of Arabic grammar lay mostly in his teaching. For his influence may be found in the hundreds of references to his ideas found in the work of his disciple, Sībawayh. Not only do these references prove that Arabic grammar, with al-Khalīl, had already attained the high level of development worthy of an independent science, they also show a thoroughly systematic approach to the material. In one of the rare texts by al-Khalīl which have been preserved, he explains his concern to justify linguistic data and their attendant rules, in other words, his concern to prove linguistic coherence, by comparing himself to a visitor inside a building, trying to understand just how it was put together and made to fit, that is, what was its underlying structural coherence. Such an approach was that of a true scholar, reaching beyond scattered data and various rules in an attempt to see things globally.

Not the least of the master's merits consisted in adopting as his disciple a grammarian of the calibre of Sībawayh, whose name has become synonymous, in Arabic, with that of absolute mastery in the field of grammar - and whose work became known simply by the title of *al-Kitāb*, or 'The Book'. This opus is the most ancient document on the material which has come down to us. We

should hardly err in assessing its content as representing all the data of Arabic grammar as drawn from the Qur'ānic and poetic corpus referred to above. Its data were set forth according to a major traditional division, that is, between syntax and morphology. Phonetics was dealt with within the framework of morphology so as to account for the modification undergone by the forms of words – as in the case of assimilation. This portion of the work notably included an exhaustive recension of all the possible patterns of the Arabic word – later grammarians would hardly register any further forms not already found therein. Sībawayh's book represented, indeed, a *summa* of grammatical learning. Not only did it mark the net result of a century of efforts in the field, but it went on in itself to constitute a point of departure for all later Arabic literature on grammar.

Grammatical controversies

Approaches to grammar now shifted. Once the facts had been assembled and all the rules drawn up, the task in hand henceforth was to furnish their justification. Grammarians now no longer mobilized to show how the language functioned, but concentrated instead on the reasons why.

Such concerns took on importance when rivalry of sorts came into play between the grammarians from Basra and those from Kufa. The followers of the two 'schools' confronted each other in Baghdad. What separated these scholars hardly stemmed from truly fundamental disagreement in their approaches to language. The differences which existed in their methods lay mainly in their respective attitudes towards such concepts as usage and analogy. The grammarians from Basra accorded priority to analogy and looked rather askance at concerns about rare forms of usage. Those from Kufa, however, while not rejecting the validity of the principle of analogy, tended instead precisely to dwell on matters of rare usage. Far from considering linguistic anomalies as stumbling blocks, the Kufan scholars sought them out and exploited them as points of argument, in order to widen and make more flexible the very codification of usage.

The controversies which arose as a result of these different trends actually helped yield a number of principles and points of argument which, despite disagreements, could then be invoked by members of either party - the better to drive home their respective points of view on issues under dispute. All this allowed the elaboration of data under a form which came to be known as 'the basics of grammar'. As in the case of *fiqh* (jurisprudence), grammar too was endowed with rules of methodology. Such rules mainly pertained to the transmission of those linguistic data which grammarians and philologists took into their ken. Other rules laid down under which conditions recourse might be had to the principle of analogy, or what were the various arguments allowing for the statement, and classification, of different facts, with their re-

levant justification. Such rules were inferred, as it were, after the (linguistic) fact, and aimed to mark out the limits which grammarians were expected to observe, both in their appreciation of transmitted data and in their response to the controversies to which such transmitted data gave rise.

Grammar and logic

Having to grapple with controversial issues often led scholars beyond consideration of mere linguistic practice – and opened the way to pure speculation. Thus, it was no rare occurrence to see grammarians actually draw on arguments more pertinent to those of Greek logic, such as the principle of causality, say, or that of non-contradiction. But can one go so far as to suggest that Arabic grammar actually developed under the influence of Aristotelian logic? So much at least has been argued, from the late nineteenth century onwards, by those orientalists who have believed that the Arab grammarians, from very early on, adopted the categories of Greek logic in order to codify their language. Such a point of view, in the eyes of orientalists of this school, indeed finds support in the existence of such stated rules (among others) as those of the tripartite division of speech, of the notion of gender, or of the treatment of inflected case-endings. Other scholars, however, both Arab and European, have taken issue with this point of view, or even rejected it altogether. Now, while it might indeed go too far to argue that the origin and development of Arabic grammar would have been inconceivable without the decisive influence of Greek thought, it is still allowable to consider that at least some of the grammarians, from the third/ninth century on, were not insensitive to the advantages offered by Greek logic for the purposes of speculation. Reflections of Greek logic may actually be perceived in grammatical disputes. Some remarks go so far as to betray that Greek logic lay at the very heart of certain polemics between different grammarians, or even between grammarians and actual logicians.

At any rate, the fact remains that literature on grammar ultimately integrated many things: a full sum of grammatical rules; varied viewpoints, arguments and concepts of logic which fed the disputes between grammarians; and, finally, examples drawn from the Qur'ān or ancient poetic texts from the very outset, either to buttress a statement of grammatical rule or to justify a matter of usage. By the end of the tenth century, everything might be regarded as having already been said on the matter: rules were definitely fixed, their exceptions identified and principles of method and general explanations laid down.

There was nothing more for posterity to do, then, but to preserve this legacy and transmit it in the form of summaries, handbooks intended for beginners and encyclopaedic reference works. The summaries, sometimes composed in verse to help memorization, usually furnished the basic matter

for the handbooks. Through the centuries, the same works were commented upon and glossed by authors who intended to preserve this heirloom of the ancients and who were keen to present in turn the full sum of their acquired learning. Not that such later works are entirely devoid of interest. Without them, we should lack full or precise knowledge of the transmitted grammatical legacy. Moreover, the explanations which these later books offer, in as far as they reflect the efforts made by the commentators the better to understand the materials themselves, help shed light on certain notions by sharpening focus on what they presupposed, or then implied.

The main notions of Arabic grammar

The later works, mirroring their more ancient models, generally presented Arabic grammar according to morphology and syntax. The goal of morphology (*taṣrīf*) was defined as 'the knowledge of words considered under their fixed aspect', while syntax (*naḥw*) concerned 'knowledge of the mobile modalities of a word'. It would be difficult, in the limited space available here, to set forth in detail what these two branches of the grammatical sciences entailed, so only the broadest outline will be attempted here.

Data pertaining to phonetics were nearly always set forth within the framework of morphology, in order to explain the aspects of word-endings. But even in this connection, the mass of information offered – however limited the means of study available to these grammarians – showed a sharp sense of observation and a shrewd sense of analysis. Consonants were accurately identified according to their points of articulation: their listed order yields us a shadowy outline, as it were, of the mental image which these grammarians held of the vocal organs. Consonants were thus classified according to what was designated by the name of 'characteristics' (*ṣifāt*). Initial classification divided them between the *majhūra* (clearly proclaimed) and the *mahmūsa* (whispered), which we might translate simply by 'voiced' and 'unvoiced'. A second classification went on to divide them between *shadīda* (hard) and *rikhwa* (soft), terms which might be defined as corresponding to 'plosive' and 'fricative' consonants. Exact notions are also to be found concerning vowel length or changes in vocalic pitch. All such data were made use of in order to explain various occurrences pertaining to the phonetics of combination, notably those dealing with partial or total assimilation, or, on the contrary, dissimilation.

Regarding morphology, the grammarians considered an Arabic word to be made up of a consonantal root, formed by at least three consonants. Only substitute words and particles were excepted in this approach. A root could be turned into a lexical unit, even a minimal one, only by means of vowels. A root could, however, receive, in addition to vowels, various prefixes or suffixes in

order to form more complex units. The term for 'derivation' (*ishtiqāq*) covered all such processes.

In order to study the form of Arabic words, along with whatever irregularities they might show within the framework of the system, the grammarians graphically set forth the different possible structures by means of a pattern. This pattern was drawn around a nucleus made up of the triliteral symbol *f-ʿ-l* (*fiʿl* 'deed'), along with the vowels, prefixes and suffixes which indeed did appear in the units considered. Such a pattern offered an efficient tool for morphological description. The full diversity of word structures could thereby be covered and classified. The patterns were canonic, as it were, and allowed the reader at once to spot apparent anomalies in the word system and search for primordial structures - or what were considered to be such.

The more ancient grammarians do not seem to have had much of a problem in dealing with the notion of the word as a minimal unit. The later grammarians, however, did try to define just what a word was, and also to respond to the various questions raised by such a notion.

For it did not escape these later grammarians that if they merely defined a word as a simple form, conventionally expressing a single meaning, then inherent problems remained to be explained. Cautiously, they sharpened their definition by adding this: a word is a form of which it cannot be said that part of its structure expresses part of its meaning. Or, to put it otherwise, a word was considered to be any unit expressing a meaning, but not divisible into independent component parts, each of which would express part of that meaning. Even this sharper definition, however, failed to resolve all difficulties. For when they happened to be nouns or verbs, units considered to be words were invested not only with a lexical sense but also with a significance pertaining to their grammatical category. In certain cases, as with the regularly formed marks of the plural or the feminized genders, such a grammatical significance corresponded to prefixes or suffixes, that is to say, to elements distinct from the unit, which was invested with the lexical meaning alone. But in other cases, words appeared under, as it were, an amalgamated guise: one not susceptible to division into individual component parts adding up to express a sum meaning. This problem was formulated in a remarkably lucid manner by a grammarian who did not hesitate to consider that regularly formed marks of the plural, feminine forms and even inflected case endings, all belonged to a single order: that of the word. To put it in other words, any noun with the mark of the feminine form or of the regular plural could be analysed as two successive segments, that is to say, as two words.

Words as a whole were classified into three categories: nouns, verbs and particles. No argument was raised against such a tripartite division. In fact, such a classification was considered as the only one possible, and one valid indeed for all languages, language being the means by which 'every human group might express its purposes'. The only need was for nouns, to designate

beings, bodies and concepts; verbs, to designate processes; and particles, to ensure linkage between the other two.

Various definitions for each of these categories were, however, submitted. In addition to the intellectualizing definitions above, which ultimately prevailed, others were put forth to deal either with the function of each category, or with its location in discourse – that is to say, its environment or distribution.

Still, the tripartite division could hardly suffice to account for all the multiplicity and complexity to be found within each category. Notably there was a need for a classification among themselves. Hence, subclasses came to be distinguished: generic nouns; proper names; verbal nouns; substitutes; and the like.

Sentences were obviously described and analysed according to the tripartite division above. The sentence was regarded as the fundamental unit of discourse. It was semantically defined as 'an expression which exists of itself and suffices unto itself'.

The study of sentence structure was endowed with remarkable form, for it was analysed according to four groups of function. These were the basic nucleus (*'umda*), made up of the subject and predicate; a group of complements (*faḍla*); a group of annexation (*iḍāfa*); and a group of determinatives (*tābi'*). Such analysis enjoyed the advantage of presenting a pattern for global organization.

In fact, the Arabic language being a rectional one (whereby a verb governs a grammatically determined complement), analysis of sentences had to take into account two criteria not always easily made to agree with one another: for while one criterion concerned the function of each component part, the other concerned their case-governed rection. The first criterion pertained to what was passively signified, since it corresponded to the relation between units; the second pertained to that which was actively signified.

The grammarians considered inflected endings to correspond to three groups of function: Subject, complement and annexation. But this was a theoretical explanation which could hardly give account for all the complexities of fact. Or to put it otherwise, it was not always an easy matter to explain each case-ending by referring it to the function to which it was supposed to correspond. For no perfect isomorphism existed between each inflected case-ending and a function. A sentence's subject, for example, might take a direct case (nominative) when preceded by a number of particles. But while complements also took a direct case (accusative), it was not rare for nouns playing the same role to take the oblique case (genitive) when preceded by a preposition. Finally, the criterion defined by function could hardly justify the various inflected case-endings of what was always a verbal predicate performing, as such, a single function. Hence, in practice, the grammarians resorted to a second system of explanation founded upon the notion of rection.

In this system a sentence was analysed according to its active and passive governed terms. Such a system had the advantage of providing, by the same process, justification for all the inflected case-endings, whether these corresponded to truly definable functions, or only appeared to be the consequence of the presence of a particle – with a meaning which changed according to context and accordingly introduced different functions. In the case of verbs, the efficiency of the system was undeniable.

Arabic lexicography

The earliest appearance of an interest in vocabulary was closely connected with a concern about the Qur'ānic text. Here, too, the issue was to explain certain rare usages – or to justify how they might conform to ideal norms – by exploiting information provided by the Companions of the Prophet. The criteria of such ideal norms – again derived after the (linguistic) fact – were drawn not only from Qur'ānic usage but also from the language of the old Arab tribes, considered to have been linguistically absolutely uncontaminated.

With this goal in mind, examples of usage began to be collected – though in no definite order. Then the material so harvested soon came to be presented in virtual monographs, combining Qur'ānic usages considered to be rare with elements of vocabulary pertaining to the same lexical field. The first philologists composed whole books bringing together all the terms and expressions concerned with, say, the camel, or the horse, or bees, or reptiles, or the date-palm, or mountains, and so on. Despite drawbacks, this way of collecting and presenting vocabulary was adopted for many later lexicographical works. The largest of these, compiled by the Spanish-Arab Ibn Sīda (d. 458/1066), was a sum of all previous monographs on the subject.

The elaboration of the first dictionary

But the merit of devising a proper lexicographical approach fell, again, to al-Khalīl ibn Aḥmad. His method not only allowed an inventory of the vocabulary of Arabic but also its presentation according to a system of classification to facilitate the search for those terms whose meanings one wanted precisely to define. It involved an alphabetical system of classification based on a sequence of phonemes from the laryngeals to the labials. In the introduction to his dictionary, entitled *Kitāb al-ʿAyn* from the name of the phoneme *ʿayn*, which he believed to be articulated in the innermost recesses of the vocal apparatus, al-Khalīl defined his method of classification, the two most important elements of which were the initial letter of the root and the various combinations of consonants making up the root. This made it possible to draw up a repertory of all the words that were theoretically possible, which could then be controlled through recourse to the accepted corpus. In his

introduction, al-Khalīl also set forth his conception of the structural characteristics of the Arabic language. Thus he presented a classification of the phonemes of Arabic according to their characteristics and where they were articulated in the vocal apparatus; identified verbal roots by their component consonants in biliteral, triliteral, quadriliteral or quinquiliteral combinations; and calculated the number of such consonant combinations possible within each category.

Al-Khalīl's introduction constituted a first theoretical text in the field of Arabic lexicography and testified to the highly formalized structure of Arabic vocabulary.

The continuity of lexicographical production

Thereafter, Arabic lexicography mobilized many authors. The tenth century in particular saw intense lexicographical activity, which took shape in no fewer than six major dictionaries. Other works, vaster still, saw the light of day through the succeeding centuries down to the eighteenth. Next to these compendia, more limited or specialized works aimed to present condensed versions or particular varieties of vocabulary, such as synonyms, homonyms, borrowings, or words from the dialects. Lexicographical activities blossomed afresh after the middle of the nineteenth century, at first with the efforts of the Lebanese Jesuits, and then with those of the new Arabic Academies, especially that founded in Cairo in 1934, one of whose purposes was specifically to compile specialized dictionaries, including an historical dictionary.

In our times, the most widely used dictionary, *al-Munjid*, was compiled by a Lebanese Jesuit. Another dictionary, *al-Muʿjam al-wasīt*, was put together by the Academy of Cairo. Endless specialized lexicons continue to appear, dealing with technical terminology relating to such varied fields as medicine, chemistry, sociology, geography, psychology or library science. While some dictionaries are composed by single authors, others are compiled by commissions working under the patronage of inter-Arab organizations such as the Office for the Co-ordination of Arabization, with its headquarters in Morocco.

Lexicography as practised by the successors of al-Khalīl down to the eighteenth century was usually characterized by a concern to present the vocabulary of Arabic according to a system of classification allowing easy consultation of a dictionary. The major dictionaries normally followed one of three methods. The first of these was initiated by al-Khalīl himself. It consisted in taking account of the first letter of words, respectively obtained through different combinations of consonants ranging from a minimum of two to a maximum of five. This method spawned a number of works not all that easy, however, to use. To search for a word in such compilations, the user had not only to be aware of how to infer its verbal root, but also to bear in mind the different combinations which such a root's consonants might allow.

Still, this was the method drawn upon for a large number of works, of which two enjoy a special place in the history of Arabic lexicography: the *Tahdhīb* (Rectification) by al-Azharī (282–370/895–980) and, in the next century, the *Muḥkam* (Accurate One) by Ibn Sīda. But there is no doubt that the method's inconvenience soon caused scholars to search for other criteria of classification, especially one based on alphabetical order, with preference, however, for the last consonant of verbal roots over the first, since the latter could all too often be masked when preceded by prefixes. Many dictionaries came thus to be composed through the centuries. Such were the *Lisān al-ʿArab* (Language of the Arabs) by Ibn Manẓūr (d. 711/1311), *al-Qāmūs al-muḥīṭ* (The All-Encompassing Lexicon) by al-Fayrūzābādī (d. 817/1415), the *Tāj al-ʿarūs* (The Bridal Crown) by al-Zabīdī (d. 1205/1789) and others.

The encyclopaedic character of such dictionaries made them true compilations of the entire legacy bequeathed by successive generations of lexicographers. Although each author would acknowledge the merit of his predecessors, he would not hesitate to justify his own endeavours by arguing that previous dictionaries had not handled the subject exhaustively, or lacked proper methodology. Still, whatever generations they belonged to, the lexicographers never expressed any intention to include new words, nor did they propose to take into account the vocabulary used by the writers of their own age, not even the greatest of them. One should without doubt not go so far as to say that the Arabic dictionaries completely excluded such new words – for if so, compilations like the *Lisān al-ʿArab* would be far less voluminous than they are. Examples of new words incorporated thus included borrowings from the technical terminology of sciences developed in later periods. Still, the myth maintained was that the dictionaries should encompass only the pure language attested by the Qurʾān, and spoken by the early Arab tribes, with no trace of alteration.

In any case, the work of the Arabic lexicographers amounts to a rich legacy. Both in quantity and in quality, their field of study showed remarkable development. The various systems they used to classify their vocabulary disclose an assured concern with method. Whatever the drawbacks in their attempt to preserve the language from all alteration, the result of their efforts was still to impel them to ferret out examples and quotations to justify every definition they submitted. And this allowed them to preserve for us quite a number of examples of usage which, without them, would have perished.