Sībawayh

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?abuw Bišr ?ibn ?uṭmān ?ibn Qanbar Sībawayh (757-796) was born in an area which is now in the southwest of Iran, and attended school in Basrah (now in Southern Iraq).

His book is known as ?al-Kitāb, an analysis of Arabic.

Sībawayh is basically as famous in the Arab world as Pāṇini in the Hindu world.

Another similarity is that the grammar was originally intended for those for whom Arabic was not a mother tongue, but who wanted to read the holy texts (the Qur’an, in this case). Sībawayh was himself not an Arab.
An interesting difference between Pāṇini’s grammar and Kitāb is that the former is abstract and almost purely ‘generative’ whereas the latter discusses almost 10,000 example sentences and is more ‘usage-based’, and actually in many ways seems a precursor to construction grammar (generally, Arabic scholars may have invented the empirical and quantitative method).

The Kitāb quotes from Qur’an, from contemporary and classical Arabic literature, from other grammarians etc.

His works have been less known and less influential in the Western tradition than those of Pāṇini (so far).
Prescription and description

However, “[t]he Book itself is so descriptive as to be useless as a prescriptive grammar” (Carter 1973)

The book contains many subtle grammaticality judgements such as such as ḥasan ‘good’, ḥaḥsan ‘better’, ḟarabi: ‘Arabic’

“I have described the letters of the alphabet [i.e., the phonemes] for you in terms of these qualities simply so that you might know what is good and permissible and what is not good and permissible to assimilate” (According to Lutz Edzard, Sībawayh’s approach therefore “lends itself especially well to Optimality Theory”.)
Sībawayh sees language and speech as social activities, which involve at least a speaker and a listener.

Because it is behaviour, speech should be judged by behavioural criteria; Sībawayh therefore usually uses ethical terms to describe grammar.

Furthermore, he distinguishes between ḥasan ‘good/beautiful’ and qabi:ḥ ‘bad/ugly’ on the one hand, and mustaqli:m ‘right’ and maḥa:l ‘wrong’ on the other.

The former refer roughly to well-formedness, the later to meaning.
“What is right and wrong in speech. This comprises: right and good, wrong, right and untrue, right and bad and wrong and untrue.

1. Right and good is when you say *’ataytuka ’amsi* (I came to you yesterday) [. . . ]

2. Wrong is when you contradict the beginning of your utterance with the end of it, e.g. *’ataytuka gadan* (I came to you tomorrow) [. . . ]

3. Right and untrue is when you say *hamaltu l-jabala* (I carried the mountain) [. . . ]

4. Right and bad is when you put an expression is in what is not its place, e.g. *quad Zaydan nl ra’aytu* ‘I have Zayd seen’

5. Wrong and untrue is when you say [. . . ] ‘I shall drink the water of the sea yesterday’
Most of the modern work on Sībawayh points out that he was a precursor to modern theories (generative syntax, OT, construction grammar)

The fact that these modern frameworks are not always compatible, already makes this suspicious

Plus, ancient authors such as Sībawayh are of course also interesting for what they thought that is different

This all supposedly shows a very weird view of history: older authors are interesting just because they give our present ideas some extra depth
Phonology

The phonology of Sībawayh is based on the concept of the letter (harf). Sībawayh assumes that there are two classes:

- *majhu:r* (‘uttered loudly’): b, d, dʒ, q, ɻ, ʒ, v, dˤ, tˤ, zˤ, m, l, n, r, w, j, ɣ, ɑː, iː, uː
- *mahmuːs* (‘whispered’): t, k, ʃ, θ, s, ʃ, ɣ, ɻ, h, sˤ

“The majhuːr is a letter fully supported in its place and the flow of breath is impeded until the support is completed and the sound flows on...[The mahmuːs is] a letter weakly supported in its place and the breath is allowed to flow with it.”
mustaʔliya

- **mustaʔliya** (‘raised’): StateChanged, tStateChanged, zStateChanged, sStateChanged, χ

“X-ray studies of the reflexes of the mustaʔliya consonants in the modern Arabic dialects show that they all share uvular place of articulation, as primary place for q,StateChanged, and χ, and as a secondary place for the “emphatics” dStateChanged, tStateChanged, zStateChanged and sStateChanged [. . .]. Therefore, mustaʔliya must refer to the raising and retraction of the tongue body that are characteristic of uvular articulation.”
Problems of working with letters

The ‘accounts’ that Sībawayh has of certain phonological processes do not seem to make a lot of sense

- **Closed syllable shortening**: /jaraː lwaladu/ → [jara lwaladu] ‘the boy ran’; for Sībawayh this is just a deletion of a ḥarf: /jrʔ/ → [jr] in some context

- **Compensatory lengthening**: /muʔmin/ → [muːmin] ‘believer’ (for Sībawayh: mʔmn → mwmn)

- **Elision**: /radada/ → [radda] ‘he returned’ (for Sībawayh it is a question why this does not affect qu:wila = <qwwl>)
“But the respect in which Sibawayh’s conception of phonology seems most modern is his view of the rule-governed nature of phonological alternations. For Sibawayh, there is an underlying form, different from the surface, to which determinate phonological processes apply. He is exceedingly careful in establishing the various contextual conditions on these processes, as in his account of the umlaut process called ??imālalah, with its triggering and blocking segments and sequences.” (John McCarthy)
6 out of 571 chapter in Kitāb deal with ?imālah ‘inclination’

“The value of this special phonetic topic is that it is a coherent treatment of a prevalent phenomenon in classical Arabic. ?imālah was operative across dialectal boundaries in a variety of guises that may have baffled many analysts. What Sībawayh accomplished was to produce an overview of the inventory of observed changes [...] stating the conditions under which ?imālah took place. He showed it to be a regular, if an optional, process. What also fascinates an observer is that different dialects took advantage of this process in different ways; some applied it to certain classes of words, while others did not.”

(Solomon Sara)
Example

- kitaːb → kiteːb
- The shift is triggered by /i, y, u/, so the process is similar to umlaut
- Among classical Arabic scholars, there has actually been a long discussion about which vowel is ‘primary’ and which is ‘secondary’
- There is also a backward shift (tafkhim)
Conditions (1): \( i \ C(C) \ a:\ \\

- One segment: \( niha:d \rightarrow nihe:d \) (girl’s name)
- Two segments: \( \check{\text{s}}imla:l \rightarrow \check{\text{s}}imle:l \) ‘small amount’
- Three segments: \( yadribaha:\rightarrow yadribahe: \) ‘that he hit her’

However, in this case, two conditions are determined: (i) the consonant is /h/, (ii) the vowel in the middle is /a/

“There is no \( \text{?imālah} \) of the \text{alif} when the verb is in \text{raf}\text{c} [with the vowel \text{u}] as \( yadribuha:\rightarrow yadribuhe: \)
Conditions (2): aː C i

- Monomorphemic: caːbid → ceːbid ‘worshipper’
- With a genitive marker: min an-naːs-i → min an-nesi
Conditions (3): j C aː

- **Adjacent**: bajːac → bajːec ‘salesman’
- **With one intervening segment**: šajbaːn → šajbeːn (name of a tribe)
- **With two intervening segments**: majalaːn → majaleːn ‘deflection’
- **With four intervening segments**: jadahaː → jadaheː ‘her hand’
  ḥharakat do not count, for Arabic grammarians
Conditions (4): iː C aː

- With one intervening segment: diːbaːẓ → diːbeẓ ‘silk brocade’
- With many intervening segments: jakiːlahaː → jakiːlaheː ‘he weighs it’

Harakat do not count, for Arabic grammarians
Conditions (5): \( aː \ C \ r \)

- \( \text{tarid} \rightarrow \text{terid} \) ‘driven away’
- \( \text{taʔif} \rightarrow *\text{teʔif} \) ‘migrant’
- \( \text{yaʔim} \rightarrow \text{yeʔim} \) ‘one who pays’
- \( \text{yaʔib} \rightarrow *\text{yeʔib} \) ‘absent’

(These were just a small subset of application cases for ʔimālah)
Another important topic for Sībawayh is idgaːm (lit. ‘insertion’, but we would call it ‘assimilation’)

the term ‘covers both what we would call partial or total assimilation and what we would call haplological syllable ellipsis” (Lutz Edzard)
The *maSadir* of *watada*

- A *maSadar* is an infinitive
- Sībawayh studies the different forms the infinitive can take for the root *wtd* ‘to pin’
- Sībawayh observes that there are many different forms for the *maSadar* of *mtd*, ranging from *watd/watid* (in the Hijaz) and *wadd* (with the Tami:m) to *tida*
- The first two are most ‘faithful’, the second is most ‘natural’ to pronounce, and the third is a compromise between the two
Assimilation across word boundaries

- ihħfaz Salama \(\rightarrow\) ihħfas Salama
- yadu Da:wuda \(\rightarrow\) yadda:wuda
- hal ra’ajta \(\rightarrow\) haraa’ajta ‘did you see’
- (?) ja’ala la-ka \(\rightarrow\) ja’alla-ka ‘he did for you’
- (*) Tawbu Bakr \(\rightarrow\) tawbbakr ‘the robe of Bakr’
- (*) ismu Mu:sa: \(\rightarrow\) ismmu:sa: ‘the name of Musa’

“It is, however, a fascinating feature in the Kitab that Sībawayh also discusses what we nowadays would call ‘starred’ forms.”
In his work on syntax, Sībawayh proposes many ideas that look very much like construction grammar (at least to me, but I am not a specialist).

He is also quite clearly a functionalist: he does away with most (traditional) formal distinctions, viz. nouns and verbs.

In contrast, he has 70 functional classes (‘annexing’, ‘describing’, ‘negating’, making an error’, ‘asking a question’, ‘being surprised’, etc.)

These can be identified as ‘ways of speaking’, i.e. (more or less) illocutionary force of Austin and Searle.
Sībawayh’s constructions

Most functions come in triads such as those below

What binds such constructions together is that they can be replaced by a single word: this makes them into constituents

‘amal’

’a:mil ma’mu:lfi:hi

‘amal = grammatical effect; ’a:mil = ‘grammatically affecting’; ‘ma’mu:lfi:hi = ‘grammatically affected’