

# Sībawayh

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# Sībawayh

- ʔabuw Bišr ʔibn ʔuṡmān ʔibn 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 ʔal-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

# ʔal-Kitāb

- 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’, *ʔaḥsan* ‘better’, *ʕarabi*: ‘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”).)

# Language as ethics

- 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 *mustaqi:m* ‘right’ and *maḥa:l* ‘wrong’ on the other
- The former refer roughly to well-formedness, the later to meaning

# Sībawayh on grammaticality

“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. *qad 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'

”

# Modern grammarians and the ʔal-Kitāb

- 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 (ḥarf). Sībawayh assumes that there are two classes:
  - *majhu:r* ('uttered loudly'): b, d, dʒ, q, ʔ, ʕ, z, ʁ, d<sup>ʁ</sup>, t<sup>ʁ</sup>, z<sup>ʁ</sup>, m, l, n, r, w, j, ʕ, aː, iː, uː
  - *mahmu:s* ('whispered'): t, k, f, θ, s, ʃ, χ, ħ, h, s<sup>ʁ</sup>

“The *majhu:r* 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 *mahmu:s* is] a letter weakly supported in its place and the breath is allowed to flow with it.”

# mustaʕliya

- *mustaʕliya* ('raised'): ʁ, d<sup>ʁ</sup>, t<sup>ʁ</sup>, z<sup>ʁ</sup>, s<sup>ʁ</sup>, ʁ

“X-ray studies of the reflexes of the *mustaʕliya* consonants in the modern Arabic dialects show that they all share uvular place of articulation, as primary place for q, ʁ, and ʁ, and as a secondary place for the “emphatics” d<sup>ʁ</sup>, t<sup>ʁ</sup>, z<sup>ʁ</sup> and s<sup>ʁ</sup> [. . .]. Therefore, *mustaʕliya* 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*: /jara: lwaladu/ → [jara lwaladu] ‘the boy ran’; for Sībawayh this is just a deletion of a ʔarf: /jrʔ/ → [jr] in some context
- *Compensatory lengthening*: /muʔmin/ → [mu: min] ‘believer’ (for Sībawayh: mʔmn → mwmn)
- *Elision*: /radada/ → [radda] ‘he returned’ (for Sībawayh it is a question why this does not affect *qu:wila* = <qwwl>)

# Rules

“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 ʔima:la, with its triggering and blocking segments and sequences.”  
(John McCarthy)

# ʔimālah

- 6 out of 571 chapter in Kitāb deal with *ʔimālah* ‘inclination’

“The value of this special phonetic topic is that it is a coherent treatment of a prevalent phenomenon in classical Arabic. ʔimālah 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 ʔimālah 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

- kita:b→kite:b
- 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→nihe:d (girl's name)
  - Two segments: šimla:l→šimle:l 'small amount'
  - Three segments: yadribaha:→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 ʔimālah of the *alif* when the verb is in *raf<sup>c</sup>* [with the vowel *u*] as yadribuha:→yadribuhe:

## Conditions (2): a: C i

- Monomorphemic: ca:bid→ce:bid ‘worshipper’
- With a genitive marker: min an-na:s-i→min an-nesi

## Conditions (3): j C a:

- Adjacent: baj:ac→baj:ec ‘salesman’
- With one intervening segment: šajba:n→šajbe:n (name of a tribe)
- With two intervening segments: majala:n→majale:n ‘deflection’
- With four intervening segments: jadaha:→jadahe: ‘her hand’  
ḥharakat do not count, for Arabic grammarians

## Conditions (4): i: C a:

- With one intervening segment: di:ba:ʕ → di:beʕ ‘silk brocade’
  - With many intervening segments: jaki:laha: → jaki:lahe: ‘he weighs it’
- ḥharakat do not count, for Arabic grammarians

## Conditions (5): a: C r

- tarid→terid ‘driven away’
- taʔif→\*teʔif ‘migrant’
- ɣa:rim→ɣe:rim ‘one who pays’
- ɣa:ʔib→\*ɣe:ʔib ‘absent’

(These were just a small subset of application cases for ʔimālah)

# idga:m

- Another important topic for Sībawayh is idga:m (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 haploglogical syllable ellipsis” (Lutz Edzard)

# The *maSadir* of *watada*

- A *maSdar* 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 *maSdar* 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 → ihħfas Salama  
yadu Da:wuda → yadda:wuda  
hal ra'ajta → haraa'ajta 'did you see'
- (?) ja'ala la-ka → ja'alla-ka 'he did for you'
- (\*) Tawbu Bakr → tawbbakr 'the robe of Bakr'  
(\*) ismu Mu:sa: → 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. ”

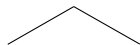
# Sībawayh as a construction grammarian

- 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'