Western and Arab scholars' interest in the Arabic linguistic tradition has greatly intensified during the last two decades or so, mainly as a result of the extensive advances in the various areas of modern linguistics in the second half of this century. Linguists versed in the theories and methodologies of modern linguistics have utilized insights from this discipline in an attempt to arrive at a new understanding and re-evaluation of the Arabic linguistic tradition, showing, in the process, its surprising modernity. Carter's work on Sibawayhi (1972, 1973, 1983), Anwar's study of speech errors in Arabic grammar (1983), Versteegh's investigation of pidginization and creolization in the history of the Arabic language (1984) and Owens's account of the foundations of medieval Arabic grammatical theory (1988) are but a few examples of the accelerating tendency to apply, in the treatment of the Arabic linguistic tradition, insights from the field of modern linguistics.

Yet, in spite of all this interest, the epistemological foundations of Arabic grammar (henceforth AG) have remained virtually untouched. This situation reflects a similar state of affairs in modern linguistics. By and large, modern linguists have shied away from epistemological questions, mainly because of the mistaken fear that interest in such questions smacks of philosophical theorizing which, in the old and distant past, had resulted in the subjugation of grammar to philosophy. Of course, interest in epistemological questions does not constitute a threat to the autonomy of linguistics as a discipline in its own right. On the contrary, it leads to the clarification of certain fundamental issues concerning the existential claims—or lack of them—of linguistic models, whether theories or descriptions (Suleiman, forthcoming).

The main purpose of this paper is to deal, in a global fashion, with the epistemological status of AG i.e., with the existential nature of what AG asserts about the Arabic language. This paper argues that AG is neither a universalist nor a restricted linguistic model, but, rather, a language-specific model which predominantly adheres to a 'realist' view of human language. A word of caution is necessary here, however. As my views are global in nature, I cannot be certain that further, more specific studies, may not lead to results which require a modification in the position advocated here. It is my belief, however, that any such modification would affect only the details of my position, rather than its core-substance.

Section i in this paper sets out the different senses in which the term 'grammar' is employed in modern linguistics. Here, we are interested in 'grammar' in the post-descriptive or post-theoretical sense as opposed to grammar in the pre-descriptive or pre-theoretical sense. This specification of the different senses of the term 'grammar' will serve as a general framework for dealing with whether AG is a universalist, restricted or language-specific linguistic model. The
The Different Senses of ‘Grammar’

Broadly speaking, the term ‘grammar’ is used in two ‘wide’ and two ‘narrow’, senses in modern linguistic literature. In its first wide sense, the term ‘grammar’ designates a general theory of, or a particular approach to, linguistic description, or, more generally, the study of language. The term ‘grammar’ appears in this sense in the labels ‘Transformational Grammar’, ‘Stratificational Grammar’, ‘Systemic Grammar’, etc. In spite of the fact that each one of these ‘Grammars’, i.e. linguistic theories or approaches, has its own distinctive features which set it apart from all other competing theories or approaches, they all have one feature in common, namely the property of being applicable to all human languages. By virtue of this property, a Grammar of this type is called a ‘universal’ Grammar.

In its second wide sense, the term ‘grammar’ is used to refer to a linguistic description of a particular language, for example, Arabic, Syriac, Persian, Turkish, etc. According to this sense, a grammar of language X is a description of all the features of the language in question which are deemed to be relevant under the theory presupposed by the description concerned. A grammar of this type normally encompasses the phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics of the language under investigation. It may also incorporate other features of human language which are regarded as pertinent under the theory applied in setting up the description. In this sense of the term ‘grammar’, one may talk about a Transformational, Stratificational or Systemic Grammar of, say, Arabic.

In its first narrow sense the term ‘grammar’ is used to refer to a linguistic model or approach which is specifically applied to the morphological and/or syntactic components of a human language or of any of their sub-parts. A paradigm example of this type of grammar is Matthews’s (1972, 1974) Word-and-Paradigm grammar, which principally applies to the inflectional component of inflected languages, such as Latin. Matthews argues against universal grammars, on the ground that such Grammars are far too general to deal with the vast range of structurally different languages in an adequate and simple manner. Instead, he advocates the idea of restricted Grammars, i.e. Grammars which apply to specific components of languages that are sufficiently related to each other typologically. Clearly, Grammars of this type are restricted in two ways: in their application to specific components or features of specific sets of structurally or typologically related languages.

In its second narrow sense, the term ‘grammar’ designates a linguistic description of the morphological and/or syntactic components of a particular language, to the exclusion of all other features—whether phonological, semantic or otherwise—of the language in question. A grammar in this sense
incorporates the morphological and/or syntactic features which are deemed to be relevant under the theory employed in setting up the grammar concerned. A ‘Systemic Grammar’ of Arabic in this sense deals with the morphology and/or syntax of this language to the exclusion of other features. In contradistinction, a ‘Word-and-Paradigm Grammar’ of Arabic would deal mainly with its inflectional sub-component.

There is an implicit distinction in the preceding discussion between two types of usage of the term ‘grammar’ which intersect the wide versus narrow distinction, namely that between theory and description. In terms of the latter distinction, the first wide and first narrow senses emerge as theoretical in nature, while the second wide and second narrow senses turn out to be descriptive in character.

What is Arabic Grammar?

I agree with Owens (1988:23) that AG is ‘for the most part non-universalist’. I also agree with Owens (ibid.) when he declares that the ‘stated aim’ of AG ‘was to concern itself only with Arabic’, and that it displayed very little interest in comparing the Arabic language with other languages, ‘despite the fact that many of the best linguists were non-native speakers of Arabic’.

We may relate this property of AG to the centrality of the Qur’ān in the Arabic linguistic tradition both as a corpus of divinely-provided linguistic data, which should be protected at all costs, and as an object of pious linguistic elucidation and discussion. A further factor may have been the emergence of Arabic as a lingua franca in the lands ruled over by the Muslims, particularly in the intellectual field, as well as the desire to protect this language from the corrosive dangers of lahn (corruption) through the infiltration into its very fabric of non-native linguistic habits or behaviour. Comparisons of Arabic with other languages may have been judged to bestow on these languages a legitimacy that was too dangerous to foster, considering the primacy of Arabic in the theological, administrative, literary and intellectual spheres. Such comparisons may have also been construed as constituting a challenge to the widely-recognized beauty and excellence of the Arabic language. In any event, Arabic was the chosen vehicle for the divine revelation.

The Arabic linguistic tradition contains hints, in the form of unsubstantiated claims, of universalism. Two examples will help to illustrate this point. In his Ḩādiṣ, al-Zanjājī (d.337/949) claims that Sibawayhi’s division, or classification, of words (kalim) into noun (ism) and verb (fi’l) and particle (harf) is not unique to Arabic, but that it applies to other languages. The second example comes from Ibn Jinnī’s (d.392/1002) Khaṣāʾīs. In supporting the superiority of the Arabic language over other languages, Ibn Jinnī advances the following argument. He points out that the unsurpassed beauty of Arabic is acknowledged by non-native specialists in Arabic linguistics, whose training in this field enables them to arrive at a proper appreciation of their native languages, thus bestowing a validity on their judgement born of well-informed and well-founded comparisons between their native languages.
and Arabic (1,243). Clearly, Ibn Jinni’s argument rests on the basic premise of the transferability of linguistic expertise and knowledge from one language to another. Examples of this type, however, do not constitute a serious threat to the view that AG is non-universalist, i.e. Grammar in the first wide sense given above (section i).

Nor is AG a grammar in the first or second narrow sense (section i), simply because the scope of AG encompasses more than just the morphological and syntactic features of the Arabic language. In addition to these components, AG deals with the phonetic/phonological, semantic/lexical and discourse/rhetorical features of the Arabic language at some length (Owens 1988:15-18). In dealing with these areas of the Arabic language, AG adopts a predominantly synchronic perspective, although it contains information on matters of dialectical diversity and diachronic evolution. Clearly, AG most closely corresponds to grammar in the second wide sense, i.e. to linguistic description. In this sense it is a language-specific model.

This assessment of the nature of AG differs from that of Owens (1988), who refers to it as a ‘theory’. My reluctance to elevate AG, as it stands, to the status of a theory partly springs from its character as a language-specific model. It also springs from the fact that, whatever insights of a theoretical nature AG has, it incorporates them, largely, in an implicit fashion. For AG to be properly regarded as a theory it must, in the first place, be shown to be susceptible to explicit formulation and, in the second place, demonstrate its ability to apply adequately to languages other than Arabic, its primary target. Owens’s work deserves great credit, precisely because it tries to address the first task and, to a lesser extent, the second also.

iii

Two Epistemological Views

Broadly speaking, there are two general views concerning the epistemological nature of linguistic models: realism and instrumentalism, which are opposed to each other. Realism decrees that linguistic models have an empirical content and, therefore, they invite critical assessment on grounds of empirical truth or falsity. In spite of their agreement on this basic tenet, realist linguistic models manifest themselves in different forms. An extreme form of realism in linguistics, which held sway in the forties and fifties of this century, is ‘naïve realism’, or ‘essentialism’.

A naïve-realist linguist believes that language in the pre-descriptive sense has an inherent and discoverable structure, and that it is the task of the linguist, first, to discover this theory-independent structure, and, secondly, to describe it as accurately, objectively and economically as he can (Hockett:1948). Each such description is thought to capture the essential features inherent in the language it seeks to describe, and, furthermore, to present an explanation of those features. In naïve-realist linguistics, language in the post-descriptive sense is hypothesized to be identical with language in the pre-descriptive sense. It may even be argued that, in naïve realism, the distinction between pre- and post-descriptive sense of language is only
procedurally relevant.

A quick survey of the linguistic literature reveals that there are, roughly speaking, two views concerning the type of reality predicated to linguistic models. According to the first and perhaps older view, the reality ascribed to a linguistic model is said to be psychological or mentalistic in nature. This view was articulated by de Courtenay in the second half of the last century, and by de Saussure and Sapir in the first half of this century. In more recent times, this view has been strongly advocated by proponents of Transformational Grammar (TG) in its earliest stages of development, most notably and unequivocally by Katz in his article ‘Mentalism in Linguistics’ (1964). In this paper, Katz (p.133) declares that ‘every aspect of the mentalistic (linguistic) theory involves psychological reality’. He explains this point as follows:

The linguistic description and procedures of sentence production and recognition must correspond to independent mechanisms in the brain. Componential distinctions between the syntactic, phonological and semantic components must rest on relevant differences between three neutral sub-mechanisms of the mechanism which stores the linguistic description. The rules of each component must have their psychological reality in the input-output operations of the computing machinery which groups such input-output operations and makes the performance of operations in one group a pre-condition for these in another to be performed.

The second type of reality attributed to linguistic models is structural reality. Viewed from this structuralist-realist standpoint, a linguistic model is said to consist of units of different types and varying degrees of complexity, occurring on different levels or strata, and of different types of relations which hold between the units on each level concerned. Relations of a specific kind, for example ‘realization’ or ‘manifestation’, are said to hold between units on different levels or strata, thereby tying these levels together into a coherent whole. This view predominated in Bloomfieldian and neo-Bloomfieldian linguistics. It is also characteristic of Pike’s Tagmemics, Lamb’s Stratificational Grammar, Martinet’s Functionalist Linguistics as well as a host of other contemporary linguistic theories or approaches.

The opposite of realism in linguistics is instrumentalism. Instrumentalism establishes a sharp distinction between theory and description. In accordance with this view, a linguistic theory is an ‘instrument’, a ‘leading principle’ or an ‘inference ticket’ (Nagel 1974) whose purpose is to enable the linguist to formulate factually-based conclusions about the universe of speech-phenomena which fall within its scope. An instrumentalist linguistic theory cannot be logically derived from observations about speech-phenomena, nor can it be evaluated by directly confronting it with counter-examples drawn from the universe of speech-phenomena. This of course implies that an instrumentalist linguistic theory cannot be evaluated on grounds of factual truth or falsity. As Nagel (1974) puts it, an instrumentalist theory is not a ‘projected map’ of some aspect or aspects of the universe of speech-
phenomena, but a ‘set of principles for mapping’. The two most prominent examples of instrumentalist theories in linguistics are Hjelmslev’s Glossematics and Mulder’s Axiomatic Functionalism.

A linguistic description based on an instrumentalism theory is normally evaluated by reference to the logical and formal criteria of consistency and simplicity, respectively. Another criterion which is normally invoked in the evaluation of an instrumentalist description is adequacy, in the sense of full coverage of the data in terms of width and breadth.

The Epistemological Status of Arabic Grammar

The question of the epistemological status of AG did not escape the attention of the Arabic grammarians. There are hints at this issue, albeit truncated ones, in the Uṣūl of Ibn al-Sarrāj (d.316/928), the Ḥadīth of Zajjājī (d.337/949) and Fiqh al-lugha of al-Šāhībī (n.d.), to mention but a few sources. For example Ibn al-Sarrāj begins his much-celebrated Uṣūl by describing nahw (grammar) as a ‘science which the early grammarians distilled from the speech of the Arabs by means of induction’ (p.37). He further adds that nahw enables the grammarians to grasp the purpose (gharad) which the initiators of the Arabic language had in mind (ibid.). Similarly, he suggests that uṣūl literature, i.e. linguistic studies concerning the foundations of AG, enables the linguist to distill the ’illas (causes, reasons) present in the uṣūl on whose basis the speakers of authentic, genuine Arabic operated (ibid.). Clearly, what Ibn al-Sarrāj is dealing with here are the existential claims made by the nahwiyyun (grammarians) and the lughawiyyūn concerning their accounts of AG and its underlying foundations.

Another linguist who deals with the epistemological status of AG and its uṣūl is Ibn Jinnī (d.392/1002). There are various references to this issue in different parts of his famous Khaṣā’īṣ. However, the importance of epistemology in Ibn Jinnī’s approach is underscored by the fact that he devotes a whole chapter in the first volume of Khaṣā’īṣ (Chapter 34, pp.237-51) to this issue.

As far as I can tell, Ibn Jinnī’s main thesis in this chapter is that Arabic speakers had a conscious and explicit grasp of the rules and uṣūl of AG. One implication of this thesis is that the Arabic language in its pre-descriptive sense is identical with the Arabic language in its post-descriptive sense. As a matter of fact, this relation of identity between the two objects renders the distinction between them redundant. Thus, the grammarian’s rules and the linguist’s uṣūl are, qua content, the same as the rules and uṣūl of the native speaker, and vice versa. Clearly, Ibn Jinnī advocates a realist, even a naïve-realist, interpretation of AG and its uṣūl.

Ibn Jinnī is fully aware of the empirical nature of his thesis or claim. He takes as his empirical point of departure the observed uniformity and consistency (iṭṭirād) of the Arabic language, pointing out that this property is all the more striking because of the long history of Arabic and its extensive and diverse spatial domain (p.238). Ibn Jinnī then ascribes this property of Arabic
to the conscious and explicit grasp of the *rules* and *usūl* on the part of Arabic speakers (p.245). To support this claim, he presents two types of evidence which he calls *ghā'ib* (lit. absent) and *hādir* (lit. present) (ibid.), placing more emphasis on the latter than on the former.

Evidence of the first type concerns the native speaker’s latent (non-explicit) intuitive grasp of features of his language, chiefly in the area of language attitudes or what may be called ‘linguistic aesthetics’. In arriving at this linguistic ‘baggage’, the linguist utilizes features of the speaker’s socio-cultural world (pp.245-8).

The second type of evidence, which is given prime importance by Ibn Jinnī, concerns the native speaker’s conscious and explicit, *albeit* untutored, grasp of structural features of his language, for example, features of verb-noun agreement (p.249) and syntactic function (p.250). Ibn Jinnī reports the following anecdote to illustrate the grasp by native speakers of ‘syntactic function’ in their language (p.250):

I asked al-Shajari one day: ‘Abū ‘Abd-Allāhi, how do you say *darabtu akhāka* [acc.] (I hit your brother)?’ He said, ‘In the same way’. I [then] asked him, ‘Do you ever say *darabtu akhūka* - [nom.]?’ He replied, ‘I never say *akhūka* [nom.]’ I continued, ‘How do you say *darabanī akhūka* [nom.] (Your brother hit me)?’ He answered, ‘In the same way’. I retorted, ‘But have you not claimed that you never say *akhūka* [nom.]?’ He said, ‘What is it you are saying? The two utterances have different purposes (ikhtalafat jihat al- kaldm)’.

Ibn Jinnī adds the following comment: ‘Is not this the same as our saying that the object (in: *darabtu akhāka* [acc.]) has become subject (in: *darabant akhīka* [nom.]). Although al-Shajari does not use these terms (subject, object) at all, there is no doubt whatsoever that this is what he means’ (ibid.).

A brief examination of the preceding quotation reveals the following additional characteristics of Ibn Jinnī’s position: (a) although the native speaker’s grasp of the rules present in his language is conscious and explicit, he is normally incapable of articulating these rules by means of technical terminology; (b) the native speaker can recognize both grammatical and ungrammatical utterances in his language. Thus al-Shajari accepts as grammatical the sentences *darabtu akhāka* and *darabanī akhūka*, but rejects as ungrammatical *darabtu akhīka*; and (c) there is no doubt whatsoever that Ibn Jinnī advocates a realist view of the epistemological basis of AG.

In dealing with Ibn Jinnī’s position, I have, on purpose, avoided the term ‘knowledge’ and used instead the term ‘grasp’. Similarly, I have characterized the native speaker’s ability to sort out grammatical from ungrammatical utterances in his language as ‘recognition’, not ‘knowledge’ (point (b) above). This timidity on my part reflects my reluctance to commit Ibn Jinnī’s position to a full-blooded mentalistic interpretation, without, however, denying that his position has a strong mentalistic flavour. Ibn Jinnī’s work also reflects a strong structuralist flavour, as does that of Sibawayhi and Ibn al-Sarrāj, to mention but two linguists who represent this trend in AG (see section iii for
‘structuralism’).

Nevertheless, AG is not fully realist in character, despite the overt intention of the Arabic grammarians to establish it as such. Instrumentalism characterizes portions of AG, not out of a theoretical commitment to this epistemological standpoint, but as a result of the unduly excessive application of certain theoretical positions to Arabic linguistic data. Dimashqiyya (1978: 145f.) gives one such example. One point of difference between the Basran and Kufan linguists revolves around whether the overt subject in a bi-verbal sentence functions in this capacity with respect to the first or second verb, e.g.:

\[ \text{ḥadara wa-khaṭaba Zaydun} \]

\[ \text{lit. came and gave a speech Zayd} \]

\[ \text{(Zayd came and gave a speech)} \]

The Basrans asserted that ‘Zayd’ functions as ‘subject’ with respect to the second verb by virtue of its proximity to it. In contradistinction, the Kufans took the position that ‘Zayd’ functions as subject of the first verb because of its precedence over the second verb in the linear arrangement of the utterance. To illustrate the instrumentalism present in the linguistic practice of the Arab grammarians, I will concentrate on the details of the solution provided by the Basrans.

Having decided on the basis of adjacency that ‘Zayd’ is the subject of the second verb in the above sentence, the Basrans, who adhere to the theoretical tenet that each verb in a verbal sentence must govern a subject, find themselves forced to propose that the subject of the first verb is a suppressed entity. This ‘suppressed subject’ is an ‘instrumentalist fiction’ which the Basrans invent in order to maintain the generality of their theoretical dogma. In the sentence \( \text{ḥadara wa-khaṭaba Zaydun} \) there is no doubt that ‘Zayd’ is the one who performed the ‘act of coming’ and ‘giving the speech’ and, therefore, the linguistic entity designating it in the utterance, i.e. \( \text{Zaydun} \), should be recognized as the subject of the two verbs. We may generalize the situation described here and say that instrumentalism arises in AG whenever the Arabic grammarians try to extend the domain of their preconceived theoretical positions to data which can be accounted for by means of a descriptively more adequate solution. Their attempts to do so invariably create a Procrustean bed into which the data are forcibly fitted for the sake of maintaining theoretically-inspired neatness in description.

\[ \text{v} \]

Conclusion

It is my hope that this paper demonstrates the significance of epistemology in assessing AG and that scholars will find it worthwhile to enter this, yet, largely uncharted terrain of Arabic linguistics. The following two paragraphs summarize my main conclusions:

1. AG is essentially a language-specific descriptive model which accounts for, \textit{inter alia}, the phonological, morphological, syntactic and lexical features of Arabic. But, since every descriptive model implies an underlying theoretical
framework upon which it is based (Popper, 1969), it follows that AG implies such a model. This largely implicit underlying model contains theoretical insights which can be generalized beyond their immediate scope, i.e. features of the Arabic language.

2. Epistemologically, AG is predominantly realist in character, combining elements of both structural realism and mentalistic realism. However, there are also instrumentalistic practices in AG—the justification for these practices is not descriptive adequacy, but their utility as instrumentalist fictions which enable the grammarians to cover the face of Arabic data with a shining veneer of uniformity, consistency, generality and neatness.

Note

1. A third view predicates of linguistic models a neuro-linguistic reality. I have excluded this view from my discussion because it has no bearing on the question of the epistemology of AG.

Bibliography


Ṣāḥibī Ibn Fāris, Ahmad (n.d.) al-Ṣāḥibī fī fiqh al-lugha, ed. by A. Ṣaqr, Maktabat ʿĪsā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī wa-Shurakāh, Cairo.

I would like to thank Professor John Burton for reading through a draft version of this paper and for making many valuable comments and suggestions.