

FROM THE HISTORY OF SEMITIC LINGUISTICS IN EUROPE:  
AN EARLY THEORY OF REDUNDANCY OF ARABIC CASE-ENDINGS

Yaakov Gruntfest

University of Haifa

In Semitic linguistics the 18th century was a period of gradual transition to historicism and "explanatorism", both from extra- and intra-linguistic standpoints. This tendency became especially evident in the 80's and 90's. Samuel Friedrich Günther Wahl (1760-1834), in his *Allgemeine Geschichte der morgenländischen Sprachen und Litteratur* (1784), proposed a new classification of Semitic languages, together with their historical description, based on Friedrich Carl Fulda's (1724-1788) theory of the stadal development of languages. Certain problems of the external history of Semitic languages were dealt with by August Schlözer (1737-1809). Conrad Gottlob Anton (1745-1814) endeavoured to analyze the morphological structure of verbal forms in all Semitic languages known at that time.

In this period the problem of the origin and efficiency of the nominal, as well as the verbal, inflection in Arabic (i.e., essentially, the correlation of the synthetic and analytic grammatical means) was discussed for the first time in European Semitology. This subject will be dealt with in the present paper. The problem of the correlation of synthetic and analytic constructions had a long history in European Semitology, on a descriptive level. In the early stages of Semitology the description of Semitic languages was based on the Oriental as well as the Classical (i.e. Latin) tradition, the prevalent approach being dependent on the author. The Latin tradition became especially evident in the description of nominal constructions in analytic Semitic languages. The nominal declension was regarded as an indispensable component of grammatical structure, and, since the morphological cases were absent from Hebrew, Aramaic and colloquial Arabic, Semitologists usually searched in these languages for analytic constructions which corresponded functionally to Latin cases and built declensional schemes of them.

For example, Johannes Reuchlin (1455-1522) in his pioneering *De rudimentis hebraicis* (1506: 556-557) discerns five cases in Hebrew:

Nominativus	'iš	
Genitivus	<i>hā-'iš</i>	(e.g. <i>šēm hā-'iš</i> )
Dativus	<i>lē-'iš</i>	
Accusativus	'et 'iš	
Ablativus	<i>mē-'iš.</i>	

Pedro de Alcala (late 15th - early 16th century), in his grammar of the Granadian dialect (1883:9-10), finds in vernacular Arabic all six Latin cases, which he designates by Latin as well as Arabic terms:

Nominativus	<i>mubtedé</i>	expressed by <i>a, al</i>
Genitivus	<i>mudáf</i>	<i>a, al, mīta, mītal</i>
Dativus	<i>maxrór</i>	<i>la, la!, li, lil</i>
Accusativus	<i>maf'uúl</i>	as Nom.
Ablativus	<i>darf</i>	<i>ba, bal, bi, bil</i>

		<i>fa, fal, fi, fil</i>
		<i>má'a, má'al</i>
		<i>min, minal</i>
Vocativus	<i>munéde</i>	<i>a, ya</i>

A similar approach to analytical quasi-case constructions also characterized early grammars of new European languages.

The authors of Classical Arabic grammars usually followed Arabic grammatical tradition. Nevertheless, they too were influenced by Latin grammar. Guillaume Postel (1510-1581) in his Arabic Grammar establishes correspondences between Arabic prepositional constructions and Latin cases (1538?:E iii v.). Thomas Erpenius (1584-1624), author of the first substantial grammar of Arabic, in keeping with morphology, as well as with Arabic grammatical tradition, finds three cases in Arabic — Nominativus, Genitivus, Accusativus — but indicates that Genitivus also includes Dativum and Ablativum (1636:135).

Obviously, the equation of prepositional constructions to case-forms had a negative side, in that it obscured the specific morphological nature of analytic patterns. On the other hand, this empirically established correlation of grammatical patterns was implicitly based on the fruitful idea that case-forms and certain prepositional constructions were semantically and functionally identical and could be substituted for each other.

This approach to nominal "declension" remained practically unchanged in Semitological literature until the end of the 18th century, while in Western linguistics a remarkable progress was achieved. In the works of prominent linguists, like l'abbé Gabriel Girard (ca. 1677-1748) and Nicholas Beauzée (1717-1789), the notions of synthetism and analytism emerged, albeit in a different terminology. In a brilliant thesis by Adam Smith (1723-1790), *A Dissertation on the Origin of Languages* (published in 1761), we already find a well elaborated theory of the development of languages from synthetism to analytism, illustrated by examples from the history of new European languages.

It might be expected that the achievements of Western philology would be applied to Arabic, which developed from synthetism (literary language) to analytism (spoken language) in essentially the same way as the new European languages. But precisely in this field, in the period under consideration, Semitology suddenly took an unexpected turn.

The problem of the Arabic inflection was dealt with by the prominent German orientalist, Johann David Michaelis (1717-1791), in his Arabic grammar (two editions: 1771, 1781), though his main idea on the subject had already been expressed in 1757 in one of his earlier works (1757:159). Comparing the grammatical structures of spoken and literary Arabic, Michaelis came to the conclusion that, primordially, the Arabic language had no case endings and that these endings were introduced into literary Arabic by mediaeval philologists after the Greek model; in other words, they were completely artificial. Consequently, those who sought the real nominal patterns had to turn to the spoken language, which remained outside the sphere of interest and normalizing activity of the grammarians (Michaelis 1781: VIII, LXVIII, 178-180, 250).

Michaelis did not expound his theory in detail, so we do not know how he perceived this supposed process of intervention by grammarians into the life of the lan-

guage. Nor do we know exactly what led him to his theory. We only have his indication that in his views on this subject he was deeply influenced by the grammar of vernacular Arabic by Antonius ab Aquila (middle of the 16th century), which appeared in 1650, but became known to Michaelis between 1781 and 1785, i.e. already after the publication of the second edition of his Arabic Grammar. In ab Aquila's Grammar Michaelis found corroboration and additional material for his theory ("*Ich hätte viel aus ihr [ab Aquila's Grammar] nehmen, viel bereichern, viel, daß ich furchtsam als Vermutung sagte, dreist bestätigen können*" (1796:274). Thus, we can only attempt to ascertain what would have led Michaelis to his views by a close study of ab Aquila's Grammar.

Not surprisingly, ab Aquila himself did not discuss the problem of the authenticity of the case-endings in Classical Arabic. Ab Aquila deals primarily with the spoken language and, in his description of case relations, he follows the traditional approach: certain analytic constructions are regarded as exponents of the six classical — i.e. absolute — cases. However, in ab Aquila's description of the analytic quasi-case constructions several important peculiarities are to be observed.

Ab Aquila begins by stating explicitly that the case-forms are not discernible in the spoken language ("*sciendum est, quod Arabes in lingua vernacula non habent distinctionem casuum*"; 1650:344).

Further, ab Aquila adduces signs (*notae seu signa*) which are used for distinguishing cases as follows:

Nominativus — no sign.

Genitivus — positioning of a substantive immediately after another substantive; also the particle *li-* (principally to express a question or possession).

Dativus — the particle *li-*.

Accusativus — positioning of a substantive after a transitive verb; also certain particles (*'inda, 'alā, 'ilā*).

Vocativus — the particles *yā, 'ayyuhā*.

Ablativus — certain specific prepositions, such as *min, fī, bi, ma'a* etc. (1650: 344-345).

Thus, unlike previous authors, ab Aquila, in adducing the "signs" of the cases, does not confine himself to prepositions only, but refers also to word order and the semantic-syntactic characteristic of the verb: transitivity. By virtue of this, his description of the quasi-case constructions becomes more comprehensive and these patterns prove to be better fitted into the framework of Arabic grammar.

No less important are the following factors: ab Aquila, in his enumeration of the *notae seu signa* of cases does not mention means which are specific to the spoken language only and are not found in the literary language, such as particles of Genitive *tabā', bitā'*, etc.; on the other hand he does not touch upon specifically literary constructions in which the use of case-endings is essential (e.g. *wāw al-ma'iyya* construction, general negation). Consequently, his description of the analytic expression of cases becomes applicable both to spoken and to literary Arabic. This is corroborated by the examples adduced in the grammar. All of them are given in Arabic script (i.e. have an outer classical form), are devoid of specifically vernacular elements and — irrespective of the author's intention — demonstrate that ab Aquila's

list of techniques for the "distinction of cases" in vernacular Arabic was equally valid for Classical language.

Obviously, on the basis of such a presentation of Arabic grammar, one could easily conclude that the case-endings were completely redundant in literary Arabic.

We do not know whether Michaelis' reasoning did, in fact, conform to the above arguments. At all events, there can be no doubt that the grammar by ab Aquila could, as no other, have led the reader to conclude that the relational nominal inflection in Classical Arabic had no grammatical function.

Michaelis' postulate was developed by Johann Gottfried Hasse (1759-1806), a theologian and orientalist. He put forward his views on the question in an article *Vom Einfluß der Griechischen Grammatik auf die Arabische*, published in 1788.

In Hasse's opinion, the Greek language, this "Lieblings-Sprache des Orients", as he put it, exerted a strong influence on Arabic, of a kind which was designated in later linguistics as substratum effect. But, according to Hasse, this substratum did not influence Arabic grammar directly, but by means of philology. Hasse comments on different aspects of the influence of Greek civilization on the Semitic world and quite rightly sees one of its manifestations in the huge mass of translations of Greek authors into Arabic. At the same time he overestimates the influence of Greek culture on the Arab world, assuming that this influence affected not only different branches of science and philosophy, but poetry too. Apparently, he was also of the opinion that all translations of Greek authors were made directly from Greek to Arabic. All this led him to the conclusion that the Arabs "studied Greek and elaborated it grammatically in the same degree as their mother tongue" (Hasse 1788:232-234).

In all probability, Hasse continues (1788:234), Arab philologists began to compare the two languages with the object of improving their teaching methods. Having found that the Greek nominal and verbal inflections express grammatical relations more exactly, they introduced inflections into Arabic texts, at first into textbooks and later into the Qoran ("a general reading book of Arabs"), whence these additions (*Zusätze*) spread to other texts.

Hasse was of the opinion that not only nominal, but also verbal inflection — the endings *-u*, *-a* in imperfect, *-u*, *-a*, *-i* in perfect, *-n* (+ vowel) after long vowels — appeared in Arabic due to the Greek influence.

Hasse even reconstructed concrete sources of the Arabic noun- and verb-endings allegedly invented by the grammarians; for nouns: *probaton*, *echidnēs*, *sophian* (1788:236); for verbs: *legō*, *legeis*, *legei*; *typsō*, *etypsa* (1788:235). As for the unfortunate circumstance that the Arabic and Greek endings did not always coincide completely, he argued that Arabic had less vowels than Greek and could not express all the nuances of Greek phonetics.

Regarding the endings of nouns in the plural (*-ūna*, *-īna*) Hasse asserts that the real plural-ending is *-īna*, while *-ūna* is a dialectal variant; different case functions were given to these endings by mediaeval grammarians, also under the Greek influence.

The dual number is declared by Hasse to be entirely a grammarians' speculative innovation in Semitic languages: in Arabic under the influence of Greek, in Hebrew — in the few forms where it exists — under the influence of Arabic grammar (1788: 236-237).

On the issue of the functional importance of the nominal (relational) inflection Hasse is laconic, but unequivocal: "*casus* [i.e. case-forms] *sind in einer Sprache gar nicht notwendig*" (1788:234).

Hasse's reasoning demonstrates, more clearly than Michaelis', the two concepts on which these two authors' interpretation of the Arabic declension is based: comprehension of the redundancy of the case-endings, and, as a consequence, acceptance of the vernacular analytical constructions as basic patterns in Arabic. Nevertheless, the problem had another aspect, mentioned by both authors only in passing, but which apparently played a significant role in the development of their ideas.

At the end of the 18th century the prevalent opinion was that two or more languages could be regarded as cognate if they were similar both in lexicon and in grammar (see Monboddo (1714-1791) 1773:433). The Arabic relational inflection drew such a sharp distinction between inflective Arabic, on the one hand, and caseless Hebrew and Aramaic, on the other, that certain scholars refused to regard Hebrew and Arabic as closely cognate languages and to use Arabic for elucidation of difficult phenomena in the dead Hebrew language. Of course, contemporary linguistics admitted the possibility of changes in the grammatical structure of languages in the process of historical development (especially due to external influences), but this did not help in our case. Though theoretically it was admitted that languages could develop in two directions: from simple to complex and from complex to simple (or corrupt; Monboddo 1773:484-485), the observable history of languages testified that the development was directed from complex (synthetic) to simple (analytic) type. Thus, the affinity of Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic having been assumed, a two-fold problem remained to be addressed:

1. that the development in this linguistic group was from simple type (Hebrew) to complex type (Arabic), which was in contradiction to the general direction of linguistic evolution.

2. that the developmental direction was from Arabic-type to Hebrew-type, i.e. that Arabic represented a more ancient linguistic type — an idea which was hard to accept at that epoch when the belief that Hebrew was the First language had been shaken, but not yet abandoned.

The Michaelis-Hasse theory eliminated these difficulties and cleared the way for the use of Arabic for explanation of Hebrew.

The advantages of the Michaelis-Hasse theory were obvious. No less obvious — possibly even to its authors — was the artificiality of the idea of a drastic intervention of the grammarians into the life of a language. Even so the Michaelis-Hasse theory exerted a certain influence on Semitic linguistics in the next few decades. The theory of the artificial introduction of the *ʾrāb*-endings into Arabic grammar by mediaeval grammarians was accepted uncritically by such prominent philologists — authors of fundamental surveys of the languages of the world — as S.F.G. Wahl (1784:427) and Johann Christoph Adelung (1732-1806; 1806:384). Ernest Renan (1823-1892), in his famous *Histoire générale et système comparé des langues sémitiques* (first published in 1855), argued against this theory (1958:477), but he was also of the opinion that the Arabic *ʾrāb*-endings, being purely relational, could not be regarded as real inflections ("*les voyelles finales ... ne sont pas de vraies flexions*"; *ibid.* 523) and were to some extent redundant ("*elles ont quelque chose de superficiel et d'inorganique*" *ibid.* 498).

The theory of Michaelis and Hasse was the second attempt after Ouṭrub, and the first in European Arabistics, to reevaluate the efficiency of the inflection in Arabic. It preceded the modern criticism of *ʿrāb* by over a century and a half. And though from the modern point of view the solution to the problem proposed by Michaelis and Hasse seems fantastic, if not ridiculous, their theory deserves a place in the history of Semitic linguistics as an early exponent of the idea of the irrelevancy of Arabic inflection.

## REFERENCES

- Adelung, Johann Christoph. 1806. *Mithridates oder allgemeine Sprachenkunde*. Erster Theil. Berlin: Vossische Buchhandlung.
- Antonius ab Aquila. 1650. *Arabicae linguae novae et metodicae institutiones*. Roma: Congregatio de propaganda fide.
- Burnett, James (Lord Monboddo). 1773. *Of the Origin and Progress of Language*. Vol.I. A Scholar Press Facsimile; 1967. England: The Scolar Press limited.
- Erpenius, Thomas. 1636. *Grammatica arabica, ab auctore emendata et aucta*. Lugduni Bavorum.
- Hasse, Johann Gottfried. 1788. "Vom Einfluß der Griechischen Grammatik auf die Arabische." *Magazin für die biblischorientalische Litteratur und gesammte Philologie*. Erster Abschnitt, Erster Theil; Anhang: Vermischte Abhandlungen, 230-238. Königsberg und Leipzig: Gottlob Leberecht Hartung.
- Michaelis, Johann David. 1757. *Beurteilung der Mittel, welche man anwendet, die ausgestorbene Hebräische Sprache zu verstehen*. Göttingen: bey Abram Van den Hocks Witwe.
- . 1781. *Arabische Grammatik nebst einer Arabischen Chrestomathie*. Zweite, umgearbeitete und vermehrte Ausgabe. Göttingen: Victorinus Bossiegel.
- . 1796. *Literarischer Briefwechsel von Johann David Michaelis*. Geordnet und herausgegeben von Johann Gottlieb Buhle. Dritter Theil. Leipzig: in der Weidmannschen Buchhandlung.
- Pedro de Alcalá (Petrus Hispanus). 1883. *De Lingua arabica libri duo*. Pauli de Lagarde studio et sumptibus reptiti. Göttingen: Arnold Hoycr.
- Postellus, Guilielmus. 1538? *Grammatica arabica*. Parisiis: apud Petrum Gromorsum.
- Renan, Ernest. 1958. "Histoire générale et système comparé de langues sémitiques". *Oeuvres complètes*; tome VIII, 127-589. Paris: Calmann-Lévy.
- Reuchlin, Johannes. 1506. *De rudimentis hebraicis*. Pforzheim: G. Symler.
- Wahl, Samuel Friedrich Günther. 1784. *Allgemeine Geschichte der morgenländischen Sprachen und Litteratur*. Leipzig: Johann Gottlob Immanuel Breitkopf.