The *Kitāb Sībawayhi* Project
Sībawayhi from Sībawayhi's perspective:
A thematic approach to the translation of the *Kitāb*

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1.   Introduction[1]

The *Kitāb Sībawayhi* Project[2] aims at a new English translation and analysis of the *Kitāb Sībawayhi*, with an innovative approach that will shed light on the way the linguistic system of Arabic has been described by the most prominent figure of the Arabic linguistic tradition.

The translation will be accomplished by means of a novel lexicon-based approach, starting from a number of medium-frequency words belonging to specific semantic fields, and proceeding with the analysis of the immediate context in which such words occur. Our approach envisages that the meaning of the word is drawn from the immediate context, namely considering the word(s) and sentence(s) in closest proximity.

The approach that we intend to adopt is groundbreaking in that, unlike other translations and works on the subject, it will not consider additional literature to provide explanations of the linguistic themes addressed in the text.

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1 All authors have contributed equally to this work, but since it refers to a modular project, LANCIONI should be mainly credited for §4.1; OLIVIERI for §1, §2.1, §4.2, §4.3; D'ANNA for §2.3; VILLANO for §2.4; SOLIMANDO and OLIVIERI for §3; CAMPANELLI for §2.2.

2 We wish to thank Kees VERSTEEGH, as the main discussant, and the public attending the presentation of The *Kitāb Sībawayhi* Project on July 1, 2019, at Roma Tre University for the valuable remarks. We also thank Michael CARTER for commenting on this paper. Of course, responsibility for the information and views set out herein lies entirely with the authors.

Our project is, hence, novel in both its methodological and theoretical approaches, for it will shed new light on the formative period of the Arabic linguistic tradition, accounting for a clearly defined corpus free from non-coeval influences. In fact, we aim to provide a deeper insight in theories and arguments as presented by Sībawayhi himself in his work, and ruling out those aspects of his reasoning which have been processed and (re-) interpreted by later scholars.

2. Why the *Kitāb*?

2.1. The *Kitāb* between tradition and linguistic reality

The *Kitāb Sībawayhi*, the work that laid down the foundations of grammatical studies on the classical language, constitutes not only the theoretical framework under which the Arabic grammatical studies on the subject developed, but also a corpus of data, which would be re-employed by later scholars.[3]

Besides the importance of the work in itself, the significance of the *Kitāb* lies in its collocation within a wider linguistic debate, accounting for the processing of coeval linguistic data and putting in motion a process of language standardization.

Arguments presented in the *Kitāb* mirror the linguistic debate that took place at the earliest stage of the Arabic grammatical tradition, by discussing data from different sources. The significance of the work is also evident in that Sībawayhi (d. 180/796) aims at a more grammar-oriented analysis of the linguistic features of the text rather than an exegetical approach to the Qurʾān. Besides, linguistic elements ought to be verified in their consistency with the wider *kalām al-ʿarab* (the Bedouins' language or speech), for no expression could be accredited unless commensurate with elements attested in a Bedouin variety. Such an approach displays a particular attention to describing linguistic phenomena through attested data, which serve as the essential basis for the grammatical reasoning.

The sources presented in the text include: (i) the Bedouins' language or speech (*kalām al-ʿarab*); (ii) pre-Islamic poetry; and (iii) the Qurʾān, which is perhaps the source for grammatical reasoning, being a fundamental element for early grammarians and possibly one of the reasons why the linguistic sciences themselves developed (VERSTEEGH 1993).[4] The *kalām al-ʿarab*, above all others, represents a substantial cultural as well as linguistic element. In the Arabic linguistic tradition, when referring to "the Arabs" grammarians mean those Bedouins whose Arabic language can be trusted (*ʿarabun yūṯaqu bi-ʿarabiyyati-him*) because of their innate and profound—but at the same time unconscious—linguistic knowledge, and their role and wisdom are praised by grammarians in their works, for instance by al-Zaǧǧāǧī:

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[3] In the massive production on the subject, we here suggest two fundamental works for further discussion: CARTER 2004, and BOHAS/GUILLAUME/KOULOUGHLI 1990. Further references and information are provided below, §3.

[4] For further discussions on the sources, see CARTER 2004: 49. Cf. also OLIVIERI 2018.

> The Arabs speak according to their instinct and nature, and they know the structure of their speech. In their minds, there is a solid knowledge about its rules.[5]

And al-ʾAzharī:

> They speak according to their desert nature and their ingrained instincts. In their speech you hardly ever hear a linguistic error or a terrible mistake.[6]

The Arabic grammarians were perfectly aware of the existence of different varieties (*luġāt*) and acknowledged the rather fictitious nature of the *kalām al-ʿarab* as a monolithic entity. They thus recorded variants and varieties in lexicographical as well as grammatical works and did not condemn these as long as they belonged to the classical period of the *ʿArabiyya*.

The corpus of linguistic data presented in the *Kitāb Sībawayhi* presents the correct way of speaking through precise lexicon and utterance construction. This will remarkably become the basic corpus of information in use by later grammarians (CARTER 2000), paving the way for the—at that point inevitable—process of language systematization. Data in the *Kitāb* were representative of the correctness of the speech and would as such be a source to present what to avoid, as coeval and later traditions show (VERSTEEGH 1983).

Being the significant work it is, several scholars drew on both data and theorizations of the *Kitāb*, and a number of studies produced in the Arabic linguistic tradition were devoted to further explaining Sībawayhi's arguments (HUMBERT 1995). Nonetheless, such studies led not only to the explanation but also to reformulations of the author's intent. Hence, Sībawayhi's propositions were provided with additional interpretations, not necessarily coinciding with those of the author.

To be sure, later in-depth studies on the subject provide a high level of detail on the grammatical theories, but often with a lower degree of consistency in the transmission of Sībawayhi's propositions, too, because of the inevitable reinterpretation. Hence, both theories and basic data have been evolving over time even to the present day in a process of investigation committed to thoroughly explaining what the *Kitāb* aimed at. But then, one might wonder how much of the original message has been subject to inevitable variations and has been thus transmitted through a rereading.

2.2. Sībawayhi's descriptive approach

Sībawayhi's *Kitāb* was principally intended to be an exhaustive analysis of all the utterances known to occur. The grammarian reported, described and analyzed a large body of transmitted data, thus providing a comprehensive linguistic paradigm meant to guide the speakers in the correct use of language (see above, §2.1).

Nonetheless, the author does not omit to set out the basic presuppositions of grammar, among them the notion of *ʿamal*, to which he refers in explaining the inflectional system of the Arabic language. However, these basic tenets, illustrated in the seven introductory chapters of the *Kitāb* known as *al-Risāla*,[7] are not accompanied by theoretical definitions or

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5   al-ZAǦǦĀǦĪ, *ʾĪḍāḥ*: 66; quote attributed to al-Ḫalīl.

6   al-ʾAZHARĪ, *Tahḏīb*, I: 7.

7   SĪBAWAYHI, *Kitāb*, I: 12-33.

speculative argumentations: Sībawayhi simply gives practical examples so that they could be easily understood by learners. It suffices here to mention the way the author deals with the concepts of *kalim* 'words', *ism* 'name', *fiʿl* 'verb', and *ḥarf* 'particle':[8] their meanings can only be inferred by the linguistic examples provided, without the help of any technical definition.

Considering the above, the *Kitāb* should not be conceived as a prescriptive or a normative grammar: although it undoubtedly contains rules to be kept in mind during the production of linguistic acts, these rules are much less rigid compared to later traditions. Besides, according to Sībawayhi, both listener and speaker play a vital role in the choice of the correct linguistic form. As Carter (1973) illustrated, Sībawayhi considered the speech as a form of social behavior. It is the listener who determines the rightness: 'right' (*mustaqīm*) utterances are those where the speaker satisfies the listener and, hence, fulfills his social obligation to communicate. In Sībawayhi's analysis, the concept of *maʿnā* ('meaning') is thus inextricably linked to that of *lafẓ* ('linguistic form'). As for the speaker, he is the other major character of the linguistic process. Contrary to the later generations of grammarians, who progressively started to consider the parts of the speech affecting each other as if they were concrete elements—as it can be seen in their approach to the 'theory of government' (*naẓariyyat al-ʿamal*)—, Sībawayhi traces back this 'action' (*ʿamal*) to the speaker himself. What emerges from his work is that the concept of *ʿamal* must be intended metaphorically, since the ultimate responsible for the distribution of grammatical cases is no-one but the speaker. This evidently appears in the use of the second singular person in expressions such as *wa-lam tuʿmil-hu fī l-ism* "you didn't make it operate on the noun"[9] or *li-ʾanna-ka turīd ʾan tuʿmila-hu* "because you want it to operate"[10] and similar other examples which fill the pages of the *Kitāb*.

Nonetheless, the *Kitāb* cannot be considered as a speculative treatise. In his work, Sībawayhi tried to justify the attested linguistic phenomena, to examine the relationships existing among the constituents of the structure and to propose theoretical origins (*ʾaṣl*) from which forms and patterns may have been developed. But these justifications are subsidiary in his analysis, and the grammarian never loses sight of the linguistic reality along with its fundamental components (*lafẓ*, *maʿnā*, speaker, and listener). Later grammarians exacerbated the theoretical reflection inside their treatises: the speculative character of their works raise grammar to a high level of abstraction, now far from accessible to all. Instead of simply illustrating the linguistic rules, they filled their pages with complicated explanations in order not only to demonstrate the perfection of language, but also their intellectual skills.

2.3. The *Kitāb* as a source of linguistic data: methodological and practical issues

The nature of the linguistic data discussed in the *Kitāb* has been the object of much discussion, especially after CARTER (1973: 146) described Sībawayhi's approach as

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8 SĪBAWAYHI, *Kitāb*, I: 12.

9 SĪBAWAYHI, *Kitāb*, I: 69-70.

10 SĪBAWAYHI, *Kitāb*, I: 80.

'descriptivist', as opposed to the prescriptivism of later grammarians. As OWENS (2006: 88) and BAALBAKI (1990: 18) put it, attributing a purely descriptivist approach to Sībawayhi would be misleading, especially when looking at descriptivism through the lens of modern linguistics. Throughout the *Kitāb*, in fact, the author is clearly pursuing his own agenda, which consists in describing Arabic as a self-contained and internally consistent system. Even though Sībawayhi was presenting linguistic data "…within a coherent system" (BAALBAKI 1990: 18), there is little doubt that the *Kitāb* represents an invaluable source on 8th century Arabic. While Sībawayhi reaches an unparalleled level of detail and completeness, his *Kitāb* is, on the other hand, not the best example of "…organization and clarity of style" (OWENS 2006: 87). Most of the crucial issues on which Sībawayhi strives to shed light are, in fact, scattered around in separate chapters whose titles seldom provide a satisfactory account of their content. The nonlinear (cf. CARTER 1972b; 1999) way of presenting the data becomes particularly evident when scholars try to investigate specific issues of Arabic grammar.

Agreement is a case in point. In the history of written Arabic, the system of agreement underwent a process of standardization and variant reduction that closely parallels the standardization of Arabic as a whole. In a period ranging from the 6th century CE (i.e., from the oldest *muʿallaqāt* in our possession) to, roughly, the 10th century (BELNAP & GEE 1994: 127), the rich variation featured in the agreement system of pre-Islamic Arabic was almost completely leveled. Dating back to the 8th century, Sībawayhi's *Kitāb* should thus reflect a stage in which the mandatory rules of Classical (and, later, Modern Standard) Arabic had not yet supplanted the much more nuanced variation obtaining in pre-Classical Arabic, and still preserved in all the Arabic dialects (BETTEGA 2019). For this reason, Sībawayhi's description of agreement represents a crucial point in reconstructing the diachrony of agreement in written Arabic. From this point of view the *Kitāb* offers a twofold perspective on the issue. What Sībawayhi has to say with regard to agreement constitutes in fact one of the very first attempts at rationalizing such a complex domain as the agreement system of pre-Classical Arabic.[11] At the same time, however, agreement—as it emerges from the way in which Sībawayhi writes—is equally important since it is a valuable specimen of 8th-century prose. Finally, a comparison between these two aspects shows, with particular reference to this specific issue, the extent to which Sībawayhi commits to describing real language usage in his work. Despite the tremendous importance of the points just mentioned, no study on the diachrony of agreement ever mentioned Sībawayhi's description of the system obtaining in the 8th century. Quite to the contrary, Yehudit Dror even wrote that "traditional Arab grammarians usually ignore the agreement issue" (DROR 2016: 103). This statement is, of course, inaccurate, and a survey of the description of agreement by Arabic grammarians, starting from Sībawayhi, is to appear in D'ANNA & BETTEGA (forthcoming). The reason why Dror, as well as other scholars, missed the treatment of agreement in traditional grammars of Arabic, and specifically in Sībawayhi, lies precisely in the unsystematic way in which data are presented. The survey offered in D'ANNA & BETTEGA (forthcoming) was, in fact, only possible thanks to the ever-increasing

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11 For a full description of agreement in pre-Classical Arabic, with specific reference to pre-Islamic poetry, see D'ANNA (in press).

number of searchable digital versions of the classics of the grammatical Arabic tradition. Even so, due to the frequent lack of consistency between the title of the single chapters and their content, the search had to start from a number of words whose occurrence might predict a discussion on agreement.[12] In this rudimentary form, the process was extremely painful and time-consuming, yet it rewarded us with a comprehensive knowledge of the agreement system of 8th century Arabic as seen by Sībawayhi.

Our approach to the translation of the *Kitāb* can be considered as a much more refined version of the methods used to analyze Sībawayhi's description of agreement. As such, it will help us to obtain a comprehensive picture of Sībawayhi's reflection on different issues, at the same time clarifying, without the help of later commentaries, the meaning of the specialized vocabulary appearing in the *Kitāb*.

Such an approach will prove to be extremely helpful in the analysis of how the *Kitāb* accounts for variation. Despite striving to describe Arabic as a self-contained and consistent system, in fact, Sībawayhi constantly makes room for the occurrence of variants, to which he applies the term of *luġāt*. Scattered around the entire bulk of the *Kitāb*, such variants potentially give back an idea of the diatopic variation to which Sībawayhi was exposed, yet they can do so only when they are woven together, like threads of a tapestry. This is exactly when the thematic approach proposed here comes into play, bringing together all the occurrences of a single term/concept.

Variation did not only occur at the diatopic level. Quite to the contrary, Sībawayhi regularly crosschecks his sources. For this reason, a comprehensive picture of all the occurrences of such a validation, and the ways in which it confirmed or strayed from the Qurʾānic norm, also shed new light on the relation between these two main sources of traditional Arabic grammar. It goes without saying, however, that the complex cross analysis involved in this process can only be carried on through a thematic approach such as the one here proposed.

2.4. Terminological issues

The real nature of the terminology adopted by Sībawayhi and the actual existence of a technical lexicon to be found in—and consistently interpreted through—the *Kitāb* have been the object of much scholarly debate since the very beginning of Western scholarship on Sībawayhi and the Arabic grammatical tradition.

During the 19th century, Western scholarship on the *Kitāb* was mostly driven by the desire to place the book in the wake of the great world linguistic traditions. Scholars aimed at making this work accessible to the educated European readers, explicitly forcing Sībawayhi's linguistic ideas into the categories found in classical (mainly Latin) linguistic traditions (e.g., SILVESTRE DE SACY et al. 1829; cf. KOULOUGHLI 2005: 10).

The most important complete translation of the *Kitāb* is still the one by Jahn (1895-1900) who explicitly tries to read the *Kitāb* in the light of the interpretation provided by the most famous and influential among Sībawayhi's commentator, Abū Saʿīd b. al-Marzubān

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[12] With reference to agreement, such words were "feminine singular", "feminine plural", "rational", "irrational", and a few others.

al-Sīrāfī (d. 368/979). However, in many cases, his work has proved to be a later interpretation and not compatible with the linguistic data and the theoretical reflections found in the *Kitāb* itself (see, e.g., LEVIN 1981; 2002).

A completely different approach to the lexicon of the *Kitāb* may be found, much later, in TROUPEAU 1976 who, in an attempt to demonstrate the originality of the Arabic grammatical tradition, explicitly refuses to adopt the terminology of the classical Latin linguistic tradition in his translation of Sībawayhi's lexicon (cf. KOULOUGHLI 2005: 10). Moreover, rearranging by roots and lemmas the whole lexicon of the *Kitāb*, Troupeau is, as a matter of fact, the first who manages to give a systematic and consistent view of the terminology used by Sībawayhi throughout the whole *Kitāb*.

The most critical issue in relation to the lexicon and terminology of the *Kitāb* is related to the nature and development of a grammatical technical language at the time of Sībawayhi. Given that the *Kitāb* is the first grammatical treatise that has been transmitted to us, many scholars (notably TROUPEAU 1976; but cf. also SARA 2003–2017) argue that in the 2nd/8th century the metalanguage of grammarians was still not fully autonomous from ordinary usage. They thereby try to restore the inner meaning of the metaphors used by Sībawayhi by proposing a return to the ordinary meaning of his very words (BOHAS, GUILLAUME, and KOULOUGHLI 1990: 32). The lexicon of the *Kitāb* must indeed be liberated from later interpretative traditions. Nonetheless, it is quite absurd to pretend that at the time of Sībawayhi there would not yet be a developed and functional technical lexicon of grammarians to which the author continuously refers, and which he probably himself modifies to better accommodate it to his own methodology and linguistic ideas.[13]

Moreover, much work needs to be done to connect the *Kitāb Sībawayhi* more closely with the wider context of the Baṣran *milieu* in which it was actually generated. It is clear in many aspects and instances of the *Kitāb* the profound intertwining of its technical lexicon with those of most Arabic and Islamic scholarly disciplines, like Qurʾānic philology (*qirāʾāt*), Qurʾānic exegesis (*tafsīr*), theology (*kalām*), law (*fiqh*), and the whole science of traditions (*ḥadīṯ*). All these were in fact being developed in the same years and in the same places, and if not by the same people at least in very close and strongly interrelated intellectual circles.[14] The simultaneous emergence of the same key terms, such as *manzila*, *mawḍiʿ*, *niyya*, *musnad*, *tafsīr*, *šarḥ*, *ʾaṣl*, *farʿ* in different scholarly fields, in fact, seems to strongly suggest a common lexical development in a shared intellectual *milieu*, only later specialized with differentiation of meanings in each single field (see on this VILLANO forthcoming).

Another critical terminological issue, finally, is related to the coherence and consistency of Sībawayhi's technical lexicon in the *Kitāb*. For very general terms, such as *ism*, *fiʿl* and *ḥarf*, there can be very little—if any—doubt that they are actually used by Sībawayhi as grammatical technical terms and that they indeed need to be translated consistently throughout the *Kitāb*. Other very general terms, such as *rafʿ* and *naṣb*, even if used by Sībawayhi in different contexts to designate separate linguistic phenomena (*sc.* verbal and

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13 On the difference between Sībawayhi's and Ḫalīl's usage of the technical terms *musnad* (or *sanad*) and *musnad ʾilayhi* and on the possible lack of uniformity of 2nd/8th century grammatical technical terminology, see VILLANO (forthcoming).

14 On the place of grammar among the Islamic sciences, see CARTER 1999.

nominal inflection), definitely require a unified solution to be adopted. Much more complicated is the case of still more fundamental terms, such as *ḍāraʿa* and derivatives, and *tamakkana* and derivatives, of which Sībawayhi really seems to make a very wide and not univocal usage. In those cases, finding unified solutions might be difficult, but the context and the internal relations found in the *Kitāb* itself will be our only guidance towards a coherent and consistent translation (see below, §4.1-2). We need, indeed, to look at things with completely fresh eyes to liberate the *Kitāb* from centuries of later and stratified interpretations, and bring it back to its original linguistic reality

3. What after and on the *Kitāb*?

As presented in the previous sections, the *Kitāb* has been the object of so much scholarly debate that generations of scholars for centuries and across the world have shown interest in this work, and nobody could ever question the influence of the *Kitāb* over several traditions of studies.

In the Arabic tradition the *Kitāb* is at the very basis of the development of the linguistic disciplines and its influence (through the expansion of the Arabic linguistic tradition) has reached fields and traditions culturally close to the Arabic world, but also others that one would have not so easily guessed,[15] boosting a massive production of works on the matter.

Within the Arabic linguistic tradition, grammarians have devoted major efforts to explaining Sībawayhi's views,[16] and broadening his grammatical model by producing a considerable number of treatises that contributed to the establishment of a scholarly tradition of studies on the Arabic language. At the same time, since the *Kitāb* and similar works would be too difficult to be used as teaching grammars but still too fundamental to be left aside, they boosted the birth of a parallel line of grammatical production based on the achievements of scholars like Sībawayhi, but more easily accessible to disciples.[17]

Modern Western scholars, too, have shown great interest in the matter. The importance of the *Kitāb* in the Arabic linguistic tradition and its relation to linguistics and Islamic studies led to the publication of a number of works on Sībawayhi as well as on the grammatical tradition, the textual background, the terminology and methodology of his book. Most of these studies were produced between the 1970s and 1990s, a period in which there was great interest in Arabic grammarians and the tradition they inaugurated.

The uniqueness of the *Kitāb* derives largely from the fact that it appears to be structured both in form and in content in a way that defies precedent. It bears witness to the emergence of a proper grammatical thought, which makes the *Kitāb* the most cited work in studies on Arabic grammarians. Nevertheless, it should be again pointed out that in spite of being an essential point of reference for the linguistics of medieval Arabic, the

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[15] Among the latest works, see e.g., JEREMIÁS 2019 and VERSTEEGH 2019.

[16] One of the many examples is, for instance, the *Šarḥ Kitāb Sībawayhi* by al-Sīrāfī mentioned above (§2.4). But we could easily say that most of the production within the Arabic linguistic tradition drew inspiration on Sībawayhi's *Kitāb* and somewhat developed from it.

[17] For a wider discussion on the topic, see BAALBAKI 2019.

Kitāb was never the object of a systematic study offering a complete picture of the text in its entirety.

Carter's monograph (2004) is one exception, as he aims at providing an overview of the figure of the grammarian as well as of his contribution to the field:

> This work is aimed at the general reader who is interested in the history of Arabic grammar and particularly in the achievement of Sībawayhi, the founder of the discipline. It gives a short account of Sībawayhi's background and life, his grammatical ideas as set forth in his book *al-Kitāb*, and the fate and historical importance of this work. (CARTER 2004: vii)

To the present day, studies undertaken on the matter can be roughly divided into (i) analyses of single phonological, morphological or syntactical aspects (BAALBAKI 1979; AL-NASSIR 1993; CARTER 1982; BOHAS & GUILLAUME 1984), and (ii) studies on the manuscript tradition (HUMBERT 1995) or its reception (BERNARDS 1997). The *Kitāb* has also been exploited as a source where scholars would find elements to support their own theories into the origins of Arabic grammar (CARTER 1972a), the relationship between Arabic linguistics and law, or, more generally, the relationship between linguistics and Islamic studies (VERSTEEGH 1993).

Although the *Kitāb* is the most cited text in the extant literature, several attempts to translate it and research projects were initiated but not completed.[18]

Above all, JAHN's translation, the one entire translation of the text, helps us only partially to appreciate the complex passages of the *Kitāb*. While Jahn's translation is important in that it guides the reader through Sībawayhi's labyrinthine style, it is not so much a translation as a re-interpretation of Sībawayhi through the medium of al-Sīrāfī. Jahn approached the *Kitāb* with the conviction that the only way to make sense of it was to use al-Sīrāfī's commentary. His slanted reading of the text thus does not always result in a reliable translation, particularly with regard to technical terminology (CARTER 2016: 54).

One of the problems that Troupeau highlights in the introduction to his *Lexique-Index* (1976: 7ff.)—and that is of central importance to any translation of the *Kitāb*—is its absolute unique quality, both in its theoretical references and its methodology. To avoid distorting the grammatical thought at play, Troupeau prefers to translate new grammatical terms by staying close to their etymology and detailing their grammatical usage. This approach is based on Troupeau's desire to distance himself from a growing trend among Arabists at that time, which is seeing these grammatical rules of Arabic as antecedents of contemporary linguistic theories, particularly with regard to Structuralism and Generative Grammar. This approach is exemplified in GRUNDFEST 1984 and also in CARTER 1980, who makes a brief explicit reference to examine:

> The broader coincidences in approach to language of the twentieth century structuralism and the eighth century grammar known as the Book of Sībawayhi. The form of the paper will be to present certain generalizations about language, with documentation mainly from de Saussure and Martinet, and then to show that these

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18 We here refer to the sections translated by Solomon SARA (2003–2017), and to the *Sībawayhi Project* launched by Michael CARTER (<http://www.sibawayhi.org/>, last accessed July 22, 2019).

same generalizations are either explicit or implicit in the Book of Sībawayhi. (CARTER 1980: 22).

The main problem emerging from the various approaches to the *Kitāb* concerns the way in which the individuality of the text can be recognized, dispensing with contemporary linguistic theories or interpretations of the text proffered by later grammarians and commentators.

A successful example of a novel approach is Solomon SARA's translation, albeit partial,[19] of the *Kitāb*. Sara observes in his paper *Translating Native Arabic Linguistic Terminology*:

> After all, who would dare or care to change or challenge such firmly established universals like consonant and vowel, noun and verb, adjective and adverb? The issue here, however, is whether these terms are transferable across cultural and linguistic boundaries without residual distortion, or whether respect and fidelity to different linguistic traditions grant the linguistic sciences a larger perspective on discipline beyond the traditionally established and partially fossilised terminological vocabularies. (SARA 2004: 107).

Sara's philosophy for translating Arabic grammatical works led him to advance precise translation choices, for instance 'act' rather than 'verb' for *fiʿl*, and 'motion' rather than 'vowel' for *ḥaraka*. This attempt, albeit partial, responds to the need for a new approach to the *Kitāb*.

Finally, given the massive production on the subject and the overwhelming amount of works produced, one could ask: why such a project?

The reason is simple: all these works, and the translations in particular, are not on the *Kitāb* only but account for a whole series of studies on the subject to provide explanations to Sībawayhi's words. Despite their incontrovertible value, none of the works mentioned so far, including the translations, deals exclusively with Sībawayhi's words. Not without reason, scholars have reproduced Sībawayhi's statements in the light of later explanations simply because—as we've seen also for the case of teaching grammars, or the use of later commentaries for translating the *Kitāb*—Sībawayhi's work did need an extra layer of elucidation, being rather obscure, especially in certain passages. Other Arabic grammarians have valuably contributed to the clarification of the *Kitāb* and their words have then been accounted for by modern scholars in their works and translations.

Our aim, as will be described in detail in the next paragraphs, is instead to rule out all these extra layers of interpretation, and let the work speak for itself.

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19 Translation is provided for chapters 1 through 80.

4. The project

4.1. Theoretical assumptions

As any project that aims to renew methodology in a specific research field, the *Kitāb Sībawayhi Project* is based upon a number of theoretical assumptions that are crucial to its definition and are meant as contrastive to current practices.

The first issue is going back to the sources.[20] Most studies on early Arabic grammar rely heavily on later commentaries and reinterpretation of statements and theory by later traditions. While in many cases this may be perfectly fine, it is methodologically wrong to assume without discussion that early and later sources necessarily agree on every single point. On the contrary, a number of studies (e.g., by Owens, Levin, and others) showed that Sībawayhi and later grammarians differed in the way they used the same terminological items in some specific details.

Since we aim to break new ground in the analysis of the *Kitāb*, the only reasonable choice is to leave later traditions entirely out in the first stage of the project, while possibly reconsidering them only once the work on the text has been completed. Of course, what later grammarians say about the meaning and interpretation of a specific passage of the *Kitāb* cannot be magically wiped from a researcher's mind: yet a healthy methodological principle is that any interpretation, whatever its source, *can be supported only by internal evidence*, and reference to external evidence is simply not allowed.

Of course, what internal evidence means needs to be contextualized. We do not think that the meaning of common, non-technical words should be defined without referring to external sources: the general meaning of *ḍaraba* does not need to be inferred by examples or quotations in the *Kitāb*. Referring to general dictionaries, for instance, is allowed to ascertain the meaning of a word or a lexical item more in general (including sub-word morphemes and multi-word expressions); yet, *it is not allowed to refer to dictionary definitions of technical terms*. As an example, I am allowed to check the general, non-technical meaning of *fiʕl* in the Kazimirski dictionary; yet, I am not allowed to refer to Kazimirski to help determine the technical meaning of *fiʕl* in the *Kitāb*.

Another issue concerns technical terms. A well-known feature of the *Kitāb* is that terms that have a technical meaning are rarely defined; even when they are (as it happens in the so-called *Risāla*), their definition raises a number of issues: e.g., how relevant definitions are in later discussions in the *Kitāb*, as is shown by the well-known contrast in the discussion of *musnad* and *musnad ʾilayhi* and the relative irrelevance of this distinction outside the *Risāla*.

However, despite this relative scarcity of explicit definitions, Jonathan Owens's idea of quasi-definitions—excerpts where the meaning of a technical term is made clear enough without being explicitly defined— is really enlightening, since it shows how far internal evidence can reach in the determination of the meaning of core technical terms. Owens discusses them under the heading *When is terminology terminology?*:

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[20] The HĀRŪN edition of the *Kitāb* is used as the basis version for a number of reasons, including the practical availability of an electronic version in the Shamela Library (<http://shamela.ws>). Nonetheless, considering the manifest issue of text variants, we shall include variants from other editions as well.

> A question that looms especially prominent in a consideration of early Arabic theory is what constitutes technical terminology. The early Arabic grammarians tend to be unhelpful here, rather rarely giving explicit definitions for the terms they use […] The basic criteria for establishing whether or not a given linguist was using a given term as a fixed concept are clear. When a term is consistently used to represent a constant extensional class or a fixed process it can be taken as a technical term. (OWENS 1990: 11)

Yet a broader issue arises: what is a technical term to begin with? While the answer to this question is inherently complex, a very strong methodological point has again to be stated in order to be able to pursue fruitfully the analysis of a text.

This point is: *unless clear textual evidence of the contrary, every word in the text is regarded as a technical term*. This statement may look too extreme, yet it is the only reasonable position to take, for a number of reasons.

First, the *Kitāb* itself is unquestionably a technical work: the only aim of its author is to discuss extensively and thoroughly every issue relevant to linguistic theory. In such a work, the discourse, outside of citations and examples (that together form the database for the discussion), is metalinguistic: theoretical—although not necessarily explicit—discussion on language and practical application of theoretical principles to actual linguistic utterances. Unlike later linguistic treatises, the *Kitāb* has no place for stories and anecdotes outside technical discussion.

Second, each chapter (*bāb*) of the *Kitāb* is devoted to a single linguistic issue, clearly announced in the title and developed in the text. Such an organization makes the technical relevance of the whole text an obvious unmarked case.

Third, deciding whether a word is a technical term is pointless before the whole work has been analyzed: a seemingly non-technical word might reveal itself in a technical usage elsewhere, even at a great distance from the first occurrence. Regarding every word as technical unless the context clearly shows otherwise is the best possible choice to avoid losing potential linguistic information.

The project capitalizes on this theoretical stand by progressively building a glossary (see below, §4.2), where the information gathered so far is used to determine the technical meaning of a word or perhaps to show that a word has no technical meaning at all in the *Kitāb*.

Another important issue derives from the definition of "technical term" and is best discussed here: what about words that, while being technical, may have two or more meanings that cannot conflate in a single definition?

This issue has been discussed several times in the literature, for instance by Bohas and Guillaume with regard to the two uses of *ma'nā* in the Arabic linguistic tradition (Bohas and Guillaume 1984: 23-56). Other commonplace cases of multiple meanings are terms applied to case/mood endings (see Michael Carter's rendering of *marfū'* as 'independent' and *manṣūb* as 'dependent' as a solution to this seeming ambiguity, in BADAWI / CARTER / GULLY 2004: 364), *ḥarf* as both letter/grapheme and particle, and so forth.

Even in this case, our position will be firmly maintained until the whole translation has been performed: we will assume that every technical term has a single meaning, unless the context makes it impossible to find one. This is a necessary assumption, since the

assumption that a technical term must be a word with a single meaning is almost axiomatic: if users of a technical term find that it covers two unrelated meanings, they will introduce a second word to solve the ambiguity. While an ambiguous situation might conceivably arise later, when older terms continued to be used despite possible shifts in their meaning, it is difficult to understand that ambiguities could be there in the very formative stage of a discipline, and therefore of its terminology.

From a practical point of view, this position means that a single translation is to be found for every term found in the *Kitāb*;[21] translations may be provisional, even tautological (e.g., a transcription of the Arabic word), yet a unitary label must be kept until the end of the translation. The glossary will be again the locus of discussion for problematic renderings and doubts about the possibility of a single meaning for a given word.

As a final theoretical and methodological point, such a collaborative interpretation and translation project rests crucially on a number of "rules of the game". This concept, loosely inspired to Ludwig Wittgenstein's conception of language (WITTGENSTEIN 1953), implies that people involved in the project commit to formal principles of conduct, renouncing to put forth ideas they may agree upon if these are not supported by what the rules allow.

4.2. Methods

The method we propose for the investigation is groundbreaking in that—unlike other translations of the *Kitāb* described above (§3)—in the rendering of the technical terms we will not account for additional literature to describe the linguistic themes.

Thus, the approach we propose envisages implementing the analysis by means of contextual or inter-textual evidence, with no reference to non-coeval production.[22] The whole lexicon of the treatise, except examples and quotes, is considered specialized vocabulary, unless contextual elements prove otherwise. Since the ultimate objective of this project is to accomplish a translation of the text providing only the information available in the very same textual evidence, we aim at an outcome not driven by a specific theory or tradition, but that will let the text speak for itself.

The pilot phase, ongoing at the moment, is needed as a small-scale implementation that is used to prove the viability of the project and test the methodology in the field, so that when the preliminary draft of the assigned sections is carried out, many or all methodological issues will have been addressed and solved. Also in this stage, we are currently envisioning the possibility of restricting the preliminary phase to relatively less

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21 For instance, we do envision the possibility to translate technical terms in a way that, although not providing information on the actual function, would give an idea of what the term refers to in a broader sense. This would allow us to conform to one single rendering even for polysemous terms, e.g., 'u-form' for *rafʿ*. Michael CARTER suggested us a similar approach, proposing that "We could interpret the term *ḥarf*, for example, as having the generic meaning of our suffix "eme", with the reader left to deduce from the context whether *ḥarf* meant graph-eme, phon-eme, morph-eme, syntagm-eme etc." (*p.c.*)

22 Of course, leaving aside substantial works on the *Kitāb*, first and foremost al-Sīrāfī's *Šarḥ*, might raise some issues. Nonetheless, for the ultimate aim is to provide an analysis of what Sībawayhi expressed in the *Kitāb*, we have opted for not considering additional sources for interpreting the text.

contentious issues (e.g., phonetics) in order to bootstrap the translation with a substantial share of the total text, while leaving thorny points for later discussion and re-examination.

The approach we have designed is based on a patchy strategy, starting with a list of medium-frequency technical terms. Translations are carried out by tracking the occurrences of these terms, working on their rendering according to the context in which they occur (i.e., the sentence(s) in closest proximity), and then proceeding with a gradual integration of longer portions of text.[23]

Given the different expertise of the researchers involved in the project, the pilot list of terms is drawn up to take account of each member's field of research. For instance, Olivieri will work on the specialized grammatical lexicon, D'Anna on the *luġāt* and the *kalām al-ʿarab*, Solimando on the *ʾiḍmār*, Villano on the development of Sībawayhi's technical lexicon and the relationships between grammar and coeval Arabic and Islamic scholarly disciplines, and so forth.

Translated terms are collected in a shared and constantly updated glossary. Each contributor revises the proposed translation of the term(s) encountered, and this serves as the source on which the other contributors draw when working on their sections.

In case of disagreement on a rendering, the contributor submits a ticket to discuss other possible translations.[24] Other translations of the *Kitāb Sībawayhi*, like those by Jahn, Troupeau or Sara, will be used as touchstones and critical contributions to foster discussion on proposed renderings. Homogenous rendering of the lexicon is important in that we aim at a uniform translation of Sībawayhi's actual words, devoid of arbitrary textual interpretations and multiple renderings of the meaning(s). The glossary will also be one of the deliverables of our project, for it will include terms and definitions together with their occurrences.

Being a modular project, collaborative editing and shared platforms have been set up forthwith in order to ensure sharing, validation, and consistency from the very start. In fact, since the text is investigated by more than one team member (either on the whole or in the double-checking stage), the drafts are currently processed on shared spreadsheet programs included as part of free and web-based software office suites. Results will then merge into one platform displaying the fully-fledged translation.

4.3. Expected outcomes

The *Kitāb Sībawayhi* Project offers an innovative method of identifying and cataloguing Sībawayhi's grammatical terminology in such a way that the vocabulary and structure of the fundamental text of Arabic grammar can be studied synchronically in depth.

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23 With regard to the context, the basic assumption is to consider only the sentence or paragraph in which the term occurs. Nonetheless, the actual range to be accounted for is at the discretion of the contributor, who may decide to consider a longer portion of text. This issue intersects with the later character of paragraph divisions, which are of course due to editors: contributors may feel on occasion that a different division makes more sense within the economy of the text.

24 As it happens in other collaborative projects, we envision a voting mechanism to solve issues where no consensus can be reached among participants, possibly with a minority report.

The contribution of this project to the field will lie in academic advances, across and within disciplines, including significant progress in understanding, methods, theory, and application.

One immediate outcome of our project is surely its novel methodology, for all available translations of the *Kitāb* are based on explanations of the linguistic themes in terms of later grammarians' formulations, whereas we promote a new approach to the study of classical Arabic sources. In fact, with this project, we wish to encourage the scholarly community to further explore new methods of investigating traditional Arabic sources.

The translation will be the main output of the project. Other deliverables include the glossary resulting from the text processing, and a number of articles that will discuss the main themes addressed in the course of the project (on both methodological and content-related issues). All project members will in fact contribute to the dissemination of the outcomes by writing a number of papers on substantial matters dealt with in the course of the project.

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