The Greek Influence on Arabic Grammar

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Abstract: The purpose of the article is to reexamine the validity of the influence of Greek concept of thinking on the Arabic Language. Is it the case that influences which have been claimed by some intellectuals are concentrated on vocabulary, the linguistic corpus or the grammatical system of Arabic itself?

A Brief History of Greek thinking

There have been debates and discussions on the influence of Greek on Arabic. Modern historians such as Ahmad Amīn in his book *Ḍuha al-Islām*(1969) say that Hunain bin Ishāḳ(260H/873A.D) (J.Ruska,1980:134) went to Rome to learn Greek and then came back to Baṣrah to learn from Khalīl (Amīn Ahmād, 1978:v.1:313). This idea is strongly supported by Mustafa Naẓīf when he states that Khalīl was visited by Hunain to study Arabic (1978:vol.1:313). Modern historians believe that time were influenced by Greek civilization such as Bustānī, a learned man who was very competent in Greek, and Khalīl, who was influenced by Aristotle`s ideas especially on the concept of cause and effect (Mahdī al-Makhzūmī,1986:68). Muṣṭafā Ṣadiq Rafʿie says that *al-harakāt* in Arabic did not originate from Arabia but from Syria when it was governed by the Romans, who put some small *harakāt* when they read the Bible (Karl Brokelman, 1968:vol.1:105).

When we look at the historical stages by which Greek became a lingua franca, we find that at the same time the Aramaic dialect of Syria developed into an independent and important language under the influence of Greek civilization (C.H.M. Versteegh, 1977:1-2). Another version has it that the Persian Empire had built the school of Jundisapur near Kufa While it became a `refugee school` for those who had run away from other universities, like those of Alexandria and Antioch because of their heretical opinions (1977:2). This institution, disseminated the ideas of Greek philosophy in Mesopotamia and Greek writings were translated into Syrian and

Persian directly. It is evident here that Jundisapur became the greatest institution in giving inspiration and that it was the first sign of Greek influence on other cultures.

Triggered by this influence, the first juridical speculation appeared among Muslim scholars in the shape of the first *Muʿtazilit*e debate on the ķur'ān, the problem of free will and the doctrine concerning the attributes of Allah (1977:2). It was also believed that the Hellenistic universities not only provided courses in Greek philosophy but also in the Greek language which was the most important medium of teaching and which constituted a compulsory subject for every student of philosophy (1977:3). Greek exercised an enormous influence upon Syrian in the form of many loan words, the system vowel-signs, even the literary style (1977:3). Obviously, this process became important after the Arab invasion of Syrian, now the Syrian versions were rendered into Arabic (1977:15) and the ideas of the translations passed into the language of administration such as for the tax register in Damascus (1977:17). Moreover, in the late 10th / 4th century, Hamzah Aşfahānī (d. 961 c.e.) used Greek historical materials directly in the court of Işfahānī (1977:18).

According to G.Troupeau, A.Merx, (G.Troupeau,1993:vol.V11:913) a famous historian in his book *Historia Artis Grammaticae Apud Syros* tried to relate the dependence of Arabic grammar on the logic of the appearance of declension, the division of words into three parts of speech, the distinction of three tenses and the notions of ʿ*arf* and *hāl* (C.H.M. Verstegh,1977:8). Merx also believes that the influence of Greek linguistics appeared after the introduction of Greek logic which had been discussed among the *Muʿtazilites* (1977:16).

The above discussion suggests that the influence of Greek thinking on the Arabic language was clearly used in the development of the judicial process during the time of the *Muʿtazilites* especially in the logic. However, the early historians argued that the influence of Greek on Arabic started from the establishment of the `Hellenistic Institution` when books of Greek philosophy and literature were translated into another language such as Syrian. Thus, most of the historians believe that Syrian became the intermediary between Greek and Arabic. In Fact, there were a few famous translators at that time such as Hunain Ibn Ishāķ and Yahya Ibn Biţriķ. Evidently, Damascus became a center for the Greek language on 3rd, 4th and 5th century (

William Wright, 1998:vol.2:470) in which the language was officially used in the courts and administrative offices.

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In contrast, some historians and linguists believe that the Arabic language was totally free from Greek influences and its grammar originated with the Arabs themselves. We will discuss the concept of *an-nahw* in Arabic starting from (Mahdī al-Makhzūmī, 1986:63-64) *al-juzʾī ilā al-kullī* otherwise the concept of logic in Aristotle moving from *al-kullī ilā al-juzʾī* . The word *Nahw*, which literally means intention, path or direction, has in the course of time acquired a special usage connoting a technical term *an-nahw*. However, it is not the only Arabic word whose sense has been restricted to denoting a particular discipline. `*Fiḵh*`, which literary means knowledge or apprehension, has also been used to designate a special branch of the Islamic sciences, namely Jurisprudence (Jamīl ʿAlūsh, 1980:17) . Information as to how the word *nahw* became a technical term or when the science of *nahw* first came into existence or who developed this discipline, is very obscure. Although nearly all the anecdotes which are reported in connection with this problem name Abū al-Aswād al-Duʿalī (Jurjānī, n.d.:78, Al-Sīrāfī,1985:34-37, Abū Ṭayyib, 1955:27, Shawqi Ḍaif,1995:13-15) when attempting to answer these questions, the information supplied by them is inconsistent. One of these anecdotes reports that Abū al-Aswād al-Duʿalī, having seen a paper on which it was written that all speech falls into three categories; *ism, fiʿil* and *harf*,(Ibn al-Anbāri, 1967:4) Alī said to Abū al-Aswād: *Unhū haẓa an-nahwa wāḏf ilaihi mā waqaʿa ilaika* (Follow this direction adding to it whatever comes your way). In response to Caliph Alī asked him to include it. After that, Abū al-Aswād wrote two chapters on ʿatf and na`at (Shawqi Ḍaif,1995:5) followed by two other chapters on *taʿajjub* and *istifhām* (1995:15), and continued to compile his grammar up to the chapter on *inna wa akhawātuhā*(Ibn al-Anbāri, 1967:5) but, for some reason or other, he forgot to include lākinnā. In revising the work, Caliph ʿAlī asked him to include it. After that, Abū al-Aswād submitted every chapter he wrote to ʿAlī addressing Abū al-Aswād said : *ma ahsana hadha an-nahwa al-laẓī nahūta* (What a marvelous direction you have followed). It is said that this occasion was the origin of the word *nahw* in the sense of `grammar`. It is also said in this connection that ʿAlī was motivated to put forward the fundamental principles of

grammar by hearing a Bedouin read the Ḳur`anic verse *lā ya´kulu illā al-khaṭṭa´ūna*
incorrectly as(1967:8) *lā ya´kulu illā al-khāṭṭi´īna* .

Another anecdote attributes the reason for Abū al-Aswād applying himself to his
grammatical work to the fact that his daughter once said to him *ma ahsanu as-sama`*
(What is the most beautiful part of the sky), and on hearing this, Abū al-Aswād
replied *nujūmuhā* , its stars. When his daughter told him that she should have said *ma
ahsana as-sama`*, he began writing his grammar starting with the chapter *at-ta‘ajjub*
(al-Sirāfī, 1989:36).

A third anecdote reports that, during the caliphate of ‘Umar al-<u>Kh</u>aṭṭāb, a Bedouin, on
asking to be taught the qur’ān, was instructed by an unnamed Moslem whose
incorrect reading of the verse (*Surat Taubah, Āya 3*) *innallāha barī´un mina al-
mu<u>sh</u>rikīn warasūlihi* corrupted the meaning , for he said ` *warasūlihi* ` (genitive)
implying that god is a governee rather that a governor towards His creator. In fact,
classical Arab grammarians believed that the word *nahw* comes from an Arabic word
meaning `a path` and the first man who introduced it was Abū al-Aswād al-Du`alī by
using the word *unhu* and *nahwan* (Ibn <u>Kh</u>alikān, 1299h:217). There are differences in
terms between grammar and logic, for example, the preposition in grammar has an
adequate meaning and it helps in combining elements in a sentence. In contrast, the
logical approach is that there must be three elements to make a sentence combine well
with a noun, a verb and a connective (Mahdī al-Ma<u>kh</u>zūmī,1986:64). There is
evidence which shows us that the ancient Arabs loved reading and writing. As a
result, we find poems and great stories such *al-Mu`allaḳāt* (good poems which put on
Ka‘abah by great poets such ‘Amru` al-Ḳais). It means that pre-Islamic Arabs did
know how to read and write but only that they did not posses a highly developed
morality. From here, we can say Arab civilization of thinking had started when many
other nations and races were still in darkness or illiteracy (‘Abd al-Salīm al-
Makram,1993:10,16).

Mahdī al-Ma<u>kh</u>zūmī, one of the Arab linguists, refutes the claim that Hunain Ibn
Ishāḳ`s work as a translator of Greek texts into Arabic is proof that Greek influenced
the Arabic language, especially when he learned Arabic directly from <u>Kh</u>alīl .If so,
this means that the influence of Greek on the Arab world came long after the Arabic

language had been established, since everybody knows the contributions of K̲h̲alīl and his predecessor in creating the grammatical system of the Arabic language. Another evidence is that Hunain Ibn Ish̲āḳ was born in 194h/809-810a.d. (J.Ruska, 1980:134) whilst K̲h̲alīl Ahmad died in 180h/ late 791a.d means 14 years after the death of K̲h̲alīl.

During the late 7ᵗʰ early on centuries (Mahdī al-Mak̲h̲zūmī,1986:64) Syrian and Arabic were spoken in neighboring countries. It is a reasonable conjecture that Syrian first received the Greek influence but Arabic was exposed to in next.

Thus, the information regarding the independence of the Arabic language from Greek influence gives us a new picture of the establishment and development of Arabic. The concept of logic and grammar are totally different, so how can they mix together?

It is also believed that the ideas of ʿĀmil (Grammatical governor in Arabic grammar) had been discussed before K̲h̲alīl`s time when Abdullah Ibn Abū Ishāḳ al-Haḍramī criticized a *shiʿi*r of Farazdaḳ (Ibn al-Anbārī, 1967:64):
*waʿḍḍū zamāni yabna marwān lam yadaʿ * mina al-māli illa musahtan au mujarrafun*
The word *mujarrafun* should be read as a genitive style(*al-naṣb*) because of its system same as *musahtan* the word which came before. This fact indicates to us that it was during Abū al-Aswād`s time that an attempt was made to reform the foreign speaker`s use of Arabic. Otherwise, K̲h̲alīl had concentrated on phonology until he produced the dictionary of phonology called *al-ʿAyn*. This is not to say that he overlooked the subject of *nahw*. He actually classified nahw in Arabic into three categories: noun(*ism*), verb(*fiʿil*) and connectives(*hurūf*). What we need to stress here is that the system of *nahw* which is not discussed in al-ʿĀmil itself was not quite familiar in Abū al-Aswād time although it was used in poetry. The dispute between Ibn Abū Ishāq al-Haḍrāmī and Farazdak led to a difference of opinion on the question of *harakāt* but by Sibawayh`s time a general agreement was reached in support of a single view.

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Here we can assume that the parts of *nahw* comprising *ḍommah, fathah* and *kasrah* are taken from older languages such as Syrian, Hebrew, Persian and Sanskrit but the

micro system of Arabic grammar comes from the Arabs themselves especially in confirmation of *ʿĀmil Ma'nawī* in subject, predicate and present tense. The Basrah School of linguists believe *al-ʿĀmil al-ma'nawī* concept of *rafa'* in subject and present tense to be the *Ibtida'*. We believe this feature is not evident in many other languages because this *rafa'* indicate that it is free from an intruder such as *nāṣob* or *jārr*. Otherwise, the accusative (*nāṣob*) and generative (*jārr*) are called *al-Āmil al-Lafẓī* which could change the case form or declension. We should not forget that in Arabic the invisible governor or element zero in ideas of *al-ʿĀmil* called *al-ishtighāl*. We cannot find exactly where the governor of the sentence is. In contrast, the governee appears very clearly, for example in *Zaydān ḍarabtuhū* (Zayd that I had beaten him) *Zaydān* becomes the governee whereas the governor of the sentence is *ḍarabtuhū* which is the precedent of the sentence and diasappears according to the Basran School. Otherwise, another group of Arab grammarians called the Kufah School believe that the governor of the sentence is *ḍarabtu* after *Zaydān* because *ḍaraba* comes from *fiʿil mutaʿaddī* (transitive verb). However, we do not want to dwell on their squabbles; what we have to point out here is that in Arabic grammar according to Basran School that an invisible *al-ʿĀmil al-Muqaddam* existing.

We believe there are differences between the national varieties of Arabic, with the Kur'ān as its model and Arabic grammar which is based on standard written. It is possible that historians of Arabic are not always aware of these differences. Thus, they treat the Arabic language and Arabic grammar in the same manner. Actually from our analysis the situation is totally different. We could not deny that the Arabic language has been influenced by other languages which in their own turn strongly influenced by Greek, like Assyrian, Syrian, Persian and Sanskrit. The influences are clearly seen in that we find many loan words from other languages such as Greek (Ahmad Amin,1969:vol.3:267) (*Fasafah, Geografiah, Zaburūd, Zamrūd, Yaqūt)*; Sanskrit (1969:vol.3:267) (*Zanābil, Kapūr, Babghāk, Khaizurān, Filfīl, Ahlīlāj*); Assyrian (Magīd Khair Bīk, 1992:25-26) (*Akhū, 'Ummatun, Tiṣhū, Zabū,ilā, Qarbun, Malākū*) and Syrian (Aramaic dialects) (*Ābā, Shama', Hablā*). There were even some pronouns similar to Aramaic such as *'Anā 'īnu* which means *'Anā* in Arabic and *'Ant Anta* which means *Anta Antuma*.

To strengthen the point, this paper agrees that Sibawayh was the first grammarian who brilliantly undertook the task of assembling the linguistic facts, which form part of a social system, into a juridical organized corpus(C.H.M. Versteegh, 1977:14). He adduces four important terminological arguments: first the use of moral criteria in grammar such as *hassan* (good), *Ḳabīh* (bad), the *Ḳiyās* (a juridical method), *Maudhiʿ* (derived a legal turn). A great many linguistic terms have a juridical connotation, e.g. *Sharṭ* (condition),*ʿIwād* (compensation), *Badal* (replacement), *Hadd* (limitation), *Hujjah* (argument), *Niyyah* (intention) (1977:14). However, we believe that it cannot be accepted if we base a spontaneous linguistic corpus on Sibawayh alone, because he himself acknowledged that many authorities named in his book, such as Abū al-Aswād al-Du`alī, Yūnus bin Habīb, Khalīl, Abū Amrū, Kisā`ī and Farrā` also helped in collection of linguistic corpus. This kind of information shows us that Sibawayh never ignores the contribution of others. It is possible that as a supporter of the theory of *Nahw* in Arabic he moulded the theory according to his own understanding of the life of the Arab tribes of his time. Nevertheless, he introduced the system which contrasts with his own Arabic grammar and he called it `*Lughah Akalūnī al-Barāghīthū*` where one governor governs two governees. This phenomenon Sibawayh found in use by the tribe of *al-Ṭhai* and *Azdī as-Shanū'ah* (As-Sayūṭī, n.d.:514). In the case of *Tanāzuʿ,* on the other hand, two governors govern one governee as in ʿAmrū Ibn al-Ḳais`s verse:

*Walau anna māʿā li adnā maʿīṣatin * kafānī walam aṭlob ḳalīlun minal al-mālī*

One of the strictest rules in Arabic syntactic theory is precisely that one governor can never govern more than one element at the same time, for instance in the verse quoted above the words *kafānī* and *walam aṭlob* are *al-ʿĀmils.* He didn`t say *ḳalīlan* but *ḳalīlun* with *ḍommah* meant it is belong to *kafānī* nor *walam aṭlob*. This verse indicates that Arabic was not influenced by Greek thinking at the time that ʿAmrū Ibn al-Ḳais introduced the system of *al-ʿĀmil* accidentally. This point has been supported by C.H.M Versteegh "We do not assert that Arabic linguistic thinking was a copy of Greek grammar, but we do believe that the instruction of Greek grammar was the model and the starting point for Arabic grammar"(1977:15).

These pieces of evidence strongly suggest that the influence of Greek on Arabic occurred only in respect of vocabulary. The system of *Nahw* in Arabic came from the Arab intellectuals themselves. So, the claim that Arabic language has been influenced by Greek grammatical thinking is very questionable and needs to be modified.

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