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STUDIES IN HONOUR OF RICCARDO CONTINI, OFFERED BY
FRIENDS AND COLLEAGUES ON THE OCCASION
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Table of Contents

<i>Prefazione</i>	11
<i>A List of Contributions by Riccardo Contini</i>	15
<i>Tabula Gratulatoria</i>	29
 <i>Aramaic Studies</i>	
Christian Stadel <i>The Aramaic Words in the Hebrew Toledot Yeshu: Judeo-Syriac?</i>	33
Silvia Lischi - Enrico Morano - Marco Moriggi <i>An Inscribed Ostrakon from the City of Sumhuran, Dhofar (Sultanate of Oman)</i>	49
Alain J. Desreumaux <i>Quelques remarques sur l'orthographe de plusieurs noms propres en araméen christo-palestinien</i>	59
Alfredo Criscuolo <i>Il brontologion mandaico nel ʔAsfar Malwašia 250:11-252:1, preliminari di una comparazione</i>	75
Matthew Morgenstern <i>Yahia Bihram's Narrative Colophons. Part 3: Drower Collection 43</i>	105

Table of Contents

Geoffrey Khan	
<i>The Neo-Aramaic Dialect of Mawana</i>	121
Werner Arnold	
<i>Ausgestorbene und veraltete Wörter im Neuwestaramäischen</i> ...	133
Holger Gzella	
<i>Aramäisch im Sprachenkanon des Konzils von Vienne und die Bedeutung des Glottonyms Chaldäisch im lateinischen Mittelalter</i>	143
<i>Syriac Studies</i>	
Georges Bohas	
<i>Et si l'on prenait au sérieux les propositions de Bar Zoʿbî?</i>	163
Pier Giorgio Borbone	
<i>Svarioni in mostra, ovvero due note di epigrafia siro-turca: 1. Toshkent, Oʻzbekiston tarixi davlat museyi, Inv. N. 312/12 2. München, Museum Fünf Kontinente, Inv.-Nr. 23-15-128</i>	173
Valerio Massimo Minale	
<i>La Storia Ecclesiastica di Giovanni di Efeso sull'Imperatore Maurizio: un tentativo di prospettiva giuridica</i>	193
Sabino Chialà	
<i>Rappresentazioni trinitarie nella più antica innografia cristiana: le Odi di Salomone</i>	215
Emiliano Fiori	
<i>A Syriac Protestant Malphono: Micah the Clockmaker of Mosul (19th Century)</i>	231
Emidio Vergani	
<i>Il termine leššana in Efrem di Nisibi. Appunti di lettura</i>	253
Claudia Tavolieri	
<i>Efrem, Ammiano e il "lupo" Giuliano. Contesto storico e lessico della discordia</i>	269

Table of Contents

Arabic Studies

Carmela Baffioni <i>Science and Gnosis, Masters and Pupils in the Risāla al-Jāmi‘a</i>	289
Antonella Ghersetti <i>Bayān, Exegesis and Ethnicity: the Case of al-Zamahšarī</i>	305
Giuliano Mion <i>Freccia, tempo, destino. A proposito di azlam</i>	321
Luca D’Anna <i>On the History of Tripoli Judeo-Arabic</i>	337
Roni Henkin-Roitfarb <i>Narrative Styles in Negev Arabic and in Kufur Kanna</i>	355
Elie Kallas <i>Substrat araméen dans la nomenclature des outils agricoles à Sar‘īn et-taḥta (Liban)</i>	375
Roberta Morano <i>Traces of the Past: Vanishing Archaisms in the Omani Lexicon</i>	395
Gabriel M. Rosenbaum <i>Typical Lexical Components in Modern Spoken Egyptian Judeo-Arabic, with Some Parallels in Judeo-Italian</i>	413
Otto Jastrow <i>Notes on the Christian Arabic Dialect of Qarabāš (Diyarbakır)...</i>	431
Lucia Raggetti <i>I Doni della Zucca. A Festivity of Fresh Cucurbits in the Arabic Tradition</i>	451
Aziza Boucherit <i>Des chants de la contestation aux slogans du hirak algérien</i>	465

Table of Contents

Angela Daiana Langone	
<i>Il viaggio in America di Muḥyī al-Dīn Baṣṭārzī</i>	483

Hebrew Studies

Simon Hopkins	
<i>The Hebrew Word List of Arnold von Harff, Jerusalem, 1499</i>	497

Giancarlo Lacerenza	
<i>La fuga di Ehud</i>	529

Raffaele Esposito	
<i>Nomina sunt omina. Lingua, identità e memoria in un racconto di Aharon Megged</i>	541

Bayān, *Exegesis and Ethnicity:* *the Case of al-Zamahšarī*¹

ANTONELLA GHERSETTI

This contribution aims to provide an insight into the function of Arabic (and Arabic grammar) in terms of identitarian and ideological construction through a close reading of selected texts by al-Zamahšarī (d. 1144), an outstanding figure of the pre-modern Islamic world and a celebrated grammarian and philologist. Although he is best known for *al-Kaššāf*, a much admired – albeit controversial – commentary on the Qur’ān, he is also famous for his fierce defence of the Arabs: despite his Persian origins, he served and promoted the Arabic language and fought hard against the partisans of the *šū‘ūbiyya*. His approach to Arabic, examined here, aptly exemplifies the deep connection between language, religion and (ethnic) identity in the Arab intellectual tradition.

Keywords: al-Zamahšarī – Arabic language – Arabic grammar – ‘Arab – ‘Ağam – ethnicity

In the premodern Arab-Islamic empire ethnicity-related matters had a privileged place to be discussed «in the field of ideas concerning language».² Discourses on language and ethnicity are intertwined, as it is well exemplified in the opposition ‘Arab-‘Ağam (‘Ağam refers generically to non-Arabs, but is applied mostly to Persians),³ where the linguistic interpretation of these words

¹ A first draft of this article was presented at the Colloquium *Conceptualising Literary History: Foundations of Arabic Literature*, Yale 16th–17th April 2010.

² Goldziher 1967-1971[1888-1890] b, 208.

³ Gabrieli 1986; Bosworth 2011; Cooperson 2014.

seems to prevail over the ethnic one with the passing of time. Ayoub convincingly shows how the linguistic component led to understanding ‘*Ağam* as the antonym of “clear and eloquent” (*faṣīḥ*) thus obscuring the genealogical and ethnic denotation, and demonstrates that the linguistic acceptance, so intertwined with the notion of “alterity”, in fact predates the ethnic one.⁴ This is echoed in the meaning of *a‘ğamī* that al-Zamahšarī describes as «the one who does not speak a correct language and whose speech is not understandable, whatever his race may be».⁵

Arabic (‘*arabiyya*), with different nuances and shifts, plays a crucial role in the construction and perception of Arabness.⁶ The function of Arabic as an identitarian marker both in ethnic and religious terms is well-known, mostly under the form of the widespread opinion that grammar was born as a defence of pure Arabic from the corruption caused by Persians. The remarkable presence of non-Arabophones in linguistics studies seems to mirror the “original sin” (i.e. the corruption of Arabic) commonly attributed to the ‘*Ağam* exemplified by the sentence ascribed to the caliph ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (reigned 717 to 720) «the Persians should correct the grammar since they corrupted it».⁷ Examples are numerous: starting from Sībawayh (d. 796), the “father” of Arabic grammar, the history of Arabic linguistics is teeming with grammarians who, though speaking a Persian dialect, devoted themselves to a fervent activity of study and defence of ‘*arabiyya*, like al-Zağğāgī (d. c. 949-50), Abū ‘Alī al-Fārisī (d. 987), or ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Ġurġānī (d. 1078) and al-Sakkākī (d. 1229).⁸ Though to a lesser degree, other ethnic groups were involved in this dynamic: Ibn Ġinnī (d. 1002), the son of a Byzantine slave, probably suffered from his non-Arab stock in

⁴ Ayoub 2006, 21-31; 36-38.

⁵ al-Zamahšarī 1998, 5: 386. «People could acquire markers such as language and religion in such a way as to destabilize any rigid definition of such ethnonyms such as “Arab” and “Iranian” or “Persian”» (Cooperson 2014, 382).

⁶ Webb 2016, 298 ff.

⁷ al-Mubarrad 1956, 5.

⁸ Guillaume 2000.

such a manner that he tried to redeem himself through his knowledge of Arabic⁹ and a defence of its superiority and beauty.¹⁰

Al-Zamahšarī, whom Ibn Ḥaldūn mentions as an example of the relevance of *bayān* (lit. ‘clarity’, here to be intended as ‘rhetoric’) in the East,¹¹ seems to me a case in point. Despite his Persian descent, he is famous for his hostility against the Persophile supporters of the *šu‘ūbiyya*, a position also taken by other non-Arabs, like Ibn Qutayba,¹² and represents an interesting example of how language attitudes are affected by religion and ethnic issues, in a way that Goldziher describes as «unconscious identification of Islam with Arabism».¹³ After a presentation of al-Zamahšarī’s profile, here I intend to offer a close reading and a few remarks on selected texts useful to give an insight into his view of Arabic and Arabic grammar in terms of identitarian and ideological construct.

Abū l-Qāsim Maḥmūd b. ‘Umar al-Zamahšarī, known as Ġār Allāh “God’s neighbour”,¹⁴ is an outstanding figure of the premodern Islamic world «relatively unstudied in Western academia».¹⁵ Born at Zamakhshar (Khwarazm), the son of the imam of the local mosque, he moved to Djurdjaniyya, the capital of Khwarazm, where he died in 1144. He studied grammar, *adab*, lexicography, proverbs, rhetoric,¹⁶ theology and *tafsīr* and travelled widely, visiting Bukhara, Khurasan, western Persia,

⁹ Ibn Ġinnī 1952-55, 1: 7, 36.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1: 47.

¹¹ “In general, the people of the East cultivate this discipline [*bayān*] more than the Maghribis. [...] we might say (the reason is that) the non-Arabs (Persians) [*al-‘aḡam*] who constitute the majority of the population of the East occupy themselves with the Qur’ān commentary of az-Zamakhsharī, which is wholly based upon this discipline. [...] This discipline [*bayān*] is needed most by Qur’ān commentators. Most ancient commentators disregarded it, until Jār-Allāh az-Zamakhsharī appeared.” (Ibn Ḥaldūn n.d., 610-611; Ibn Khaldūn 1967, 3: 337, 338). The perception of an “ethnic divide” in relation with linguistic sciences seems to be clear in the eyes of Mamluk scholars, especially in Egypt.

¹² Mottahedeh 1976, 179.

¹³ Goldziher 1967-1971[1888-1890] b, 208.

¹⁴ Versteegh 2002; Madelung 2004; Lane 2006, 9-47.

¹⁵ Ally 2002, 318.

¹⁶ Ḍayf [1976], 219-270; [1979], 283-287.

Baghdad, Arabia, Yemen, Damascus, Mecca. He penned grammar treatises, the most famous of which is *al-Mufaṣṣal fī ṣanʿat al-iʿrāb* (*The Detailed [Presentation] of the Art of Clear Speech*, in the translation by Lane 2006, henceforth *al-Mufaṣṣal*) also known as *al-Mufaṣṣal fī ʿilm al-ʿarabiyya*, or *al-Mufaṣṣal fī l-naḥw*,¹⁷ and lexicographical works, like the bilingual Arabic-Persian dictionary *Muqaddimat al-adab* (*Introduction to Philology*), that contains an added Arabic grammar and a later Turkish part.¹⁸ «Although of Persian origin, al-Zamakhsharī was most basically motivated in his scholarship to serve and promote the Arabic language»,¹⁹ and bitterly fought the partisans of the *šuʿūbiyya*.

Biographers underline his great zeal in the linguistic sciences and his mastery of grammar, but also strongly criticise his open espousal and overt exhibition of *muʿtazilī* doctrine.²⁰ His affiliation with this creed is not anodyne: the *muʿtazila* had a strong bias to ground some of its tenets on textual analysis. To give an example, the delicate subject of divine attributes aroused many questions, which «were answered by linguistic analysis» to such an extent that the «doctrine of attributes is based not on metaphysics but on grammar».²¹ The link between theology and linguistics of course is not unique to the *muʿtazila*: the *ẓāhirī* school, though radically different in attitudes and basic tenets, also gave an enormous importance to textual analysis and had an essentially linguistic orientation, but with different results, like in the case of Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064; see below) or his pupil Ibn Maḍāʾ (d. 1195), who wrote a virulent refutation of grammarians where he heavily attacked Ibn Ğinnī (another *muʿtazilī*) and his theories. Nevertheless, in the *muʿtazila*, linguistic concern and textual

¹⁷ On which Grodzki 2011.

¹⁸ Lane 2006, 275-276.

¹⁹ Madelung 2004, 840.

²⁰ He was “strongly attached” to the *muʿtazila* (*muʿtazilī qawī fī madḥabihi*, al-Suyūṭī 1979², 2: 579); *muʿtazilī l-iʿtiqād mutazāḥiran bihi*, Ibn Ḥallikān n.d., 5: 170; *muʿtazilī l-madḥab mutaḡāḥiran bi-dālika*, Yāqūt 1925, 7: 147; [*kāna*] *muʿtaziliyyan qawīyyan fī madḥabihi muftaḥiran bihi*, Tāšköprüzādeh n.d. 2: 87).

²¹ Van Ess 2005, 6322. On the *muʿtazila* see Gimaret 1991; on the *muʿtazila* and linguistic matters see also Nağğār in Ibn Ğinnī n.d., 1: 42-44.

analysis were more integrated into the conceptual framework of the school and, since the beginning, the *mu'tazilīs* showed a keen interest in textual analysis and rhetoric due to their habit of promoting lectures and debates and of carrying on doctrinal disputes in the attempt to overcome their opponents. Textual analysis, supported by the conceptual instruments of Greek logic, aimed to study contents and forms of the sermons, and this stimulated a thorough discussion on the semantic and the stylistic aspects of texts, including phonetic harmony; this was coupled with a constant training in the practice of debates and a special attention devoted to the intellectual tradition of ancient cultures.²² The rationalistic approach to texts and the need to be the defenders of orthodoxy against the attacks of other religious communities resulted in what will be the basis of the canonical rhetoric, i.e. the demonstration of the inimitability of the Qur'ān. There is nothing to be surprised of if the dogma of *i'ğāz al-Qur'ān* came from *mu'tazilī* authors, like al-Rummānī (d. 994) and 'Abd al-Ġabbār (d. 1025), who often were also Persophones.²³ Further, linguistics was a kind of neutral ground where sensitive questions could be dealt with so that when *mu'tazilīs* were unwelcome in theology many of them found in grammar «a new channel for their theories».²⁴ It is not by accident that glottogenesis is extensively dealt with by a *mu'tazilī* like Ibn Ġinnī,²⁵ who also proffers an apology of Arabic just as al-Zamaḥṣarī does. Al-Zamaḥṣarī's defence of rhetoric as the pillar of religious sciences, his concern for linguistics, his call to the mastery of Arabic as a necessary tool for exegetical activity and his constant and refined use of rhetorical tenets in his *tafsīr* seem thus well grounded in his *mu'tazilī* affiliation.

Al-Zamaḥṣarī's renown is mostly due to *al-Kaššāf* (biographers almost always mention him as *ṣāhib al-Kaššāf*), a much-admired *tafsīr* widely used but regarded with suspicion for its rationalist

²² Dayf 1976, 32 ff.

²³ Larcher 2009, 209.

²⁴ Versteegh, 1997, 131.

²⁵ Ibn Ġinnī 1952-1955, 1:40-46; Anghelescu 1993, 97-99 for a partial translation and further references.

interpretations deriving from al-Zamahšarī's *mu'tazilī* affiliation.²⁶ The popularity of *al-Kaššāf* in the Eastern part of the Islamic world had a counterpart in the critical attitude of the Western part, where Mamluk scholars like Šams al-Dīn al-Ḍahabī (d. 1348), Ibn Ḥağar al-'Asqalānī (d. 1449) and others levelled a severe criticism against the work. This hostile tendency, underlined in scholarly literature, has been critically reevaluated by Ally (2022), who puts back into context the several statements of Mamluk scholars showing that the depiction of a robust "anti-*Kaššāf* sentiment" in Mamluk society does not respond to reality and «foregrounding the importance of theology in our understanding of past Muslim societies had led to a misrepresentation of how a heterodox work like the *Kašshāf* was received». ²⁷ In the same way, the idea that the fame of the *mu'tazilī* character of the *Kaššāf* overshadowed its linguistic merits must be nuanced: recent research debunked the fame of the theological bias of this *tafsīr* and showed its eminently grammatical, lexical and rhetorical concern.²⁸

Considering the amount of scholarly literature available on *al-Kaššāf*, I prefer to focus on *al-Mufaššal*, offering a close reading of the introduction to it, putting it in conversation with the introductions of *Muqaddimat al-adab* and *Asrār al-balāğa* (*The secrets of eloquence*, a dictionary of tropes). The introduction to *al-Mufaššal*, that had an enormous success in the medieval Arab world, is a testimony of al-Zamahšarī's much-admired mastery of Arabic and a sample of the most elaborate style he used in his *adab* works. More interesting, it is a document whose acid tone against the representatives of the *šū'ūbiyya*, a term that here takes on a linguistic acceptance, is worth further consideration. Al-Zamahšarī starts by thanking God who made him an expert of Arabic (*min 'ulamā' al-'arabiyya*) and a fierce defender of Arabs (*'Arab*) and their "esprit de corps" (*'aṣabiyya*), and who spared him the affiliation to the *šū'ūbī* creed and «biased ideas that are nothing but curses and undermining the truth». ²⁹ This statement,

²⁶ Lane 2006, 2012; Ullah 2017.

²⁷ Ally 2022, 317.

²⁸ E.g. Lane 2005, 2006, 2012; Daldār 2007, 24; Ally 2022.

²⁹ al-Zamahšarī 1879, 2; translation Grodzki 2011, 48.

markedly ethnic-oriented, seems to constitute a response to the tenets of the first *šūʿūbiyya*, where ethnic pride was crucial; but during al-Zamaḥṣarī’s times the situation was radically different and *šūʿūbī* aspirations were confined to the literary domain.³⁰ The ethnic orientation is also visible in the praise of the Prophet, when his ethnic descent is emphasised in tribal terms through the mention of the ethnonyms ʿAdnān, the traditional ancestor of the Arabs of Northern Arabia, and Quraysh, Muḥammad’s tribe. This ethnic-oriented description of the Prophet is mirrored in *Muqaddimat al-adab*, where Muḥammad is described as *al-nabī al-arabī*, and his kinsfolk qualified as the most noble of the ʿArab³¹ and in *Asās al-balāġa*, where almost all the same terms (*al-nabī al-ʿarabī*, ʿAdnān) are recalled.³² The argumentation of *al-Mufaṣṣal* then takes a linguistic slant when the mission of the Prophet, whose scope is universal since he was sent to all mankind (*al-aswad wa-l-aḥmar*), is identified with the transmission of the Qurʾān, qualified as the “Arabic book” (*al-kitāb al-ʿarabī*). This easily drives to the well-known theme of the superiority of Arabic (*ʿarabiyya*) that emerges, coupled with the ethnic theme, in the following passage where it is said that God elevated this language by sending the best messenger and the best book to the ʿArab, and not to the ʿaġam, among all his creatures. This allusion to the superiority of Arabic (and hence the Arab) is echoed in a passage of *Muqaddimat al-adab* that opens with a clear statement: «God preferred the language of the Arab (*lisān al-ʿArab*) over all the languages and the Book revealed in this language (*al-kitāb al-munzal biḥi*) over all other books»; and later allusion is made to its majesty (*ġalāla*), a terms that echoes an attribute of God.³³ Language, ethnicity and religion are thus strictly intertwined. The same association recurs, but in more nuanced terms, in *Asās al-balāġa*, when Arabic is mentioned as the language with which God privileged the Arab prophet and in which God concealed the treasures of pure

³⁰ Mottahedeh 1976, 162.

³¹ al-Zamaḥṣarī 1843, 1.

³² al-Zamaḥṣarī 1965, 7.

³³ al-Zamaḥṣarī 1843, 1.

language and eloquence (*al-ḥaṣāḥa wa-l-bayān*).³⁴ The logical consequence is that those who lower the status of this language and deny it the privilege conferred by God, like the *ṣuʿūbiyya*, deviate from the true path.³⁵

The transition to the second point is easily made: al-Zamahšarī expresses astonishment at the injustice and aberration of those who bitterly criticise Arabic although they cannot dispense with it, because Islamic sciences (*al-ʿulūm al-islāmiyya: fiqh, kalām, tafsīr, aḥbār*) require a thorough knowledge of Arabic (*ʿarabiyya*). This is something that cannot be denied nor concealed, and from Arabic the argument moves to the core of linguistic studies, *iʿrāb* (here a synecdoche for “grammar”), which is crucial in legal discourse and in reading and interpreting all the texts, which are explained, commented and written in “this language” (*bi-hādā l-lisān*), i.e. Arabic.³⁶ The function of Arabic as a scholarly language also occurs as a topic in the introduction to *Muqaddimat al-adab*, followed and reinforced by a bitter complaint about the shortage of scholars mastering Arabic and devoting themselves to its study.³⁷

The link between Arabic linguistics and Qurʾanic exegesis is well-known,³⁸ but if in early Islam there was a separation between *tafsīr* and grammar, later they came closer, and the insistence on the grammatical skills required in Islamic scholarship made by a famous *mufasssīr* like al-Zamahšarī seems particularly meaningful in this perspective. A similar theme is found in the introduction of *Asrār al-balāḡa*, where Zamahšarī presents *balāḡa* (here intended as ‘eloquence’) as the hallmark of the Qurʾān and praises his book which scrutinises Arabic in all its pure and elegant expressions (*mā ḥaṣuḥa min luḡātihā wa-maluḥa min balāḡātihā*) based on authoritative oral and written sources, and concludes with the

³⁴ al-Zamahšarī 1965, 7.

³⁵ al-Zamahšarī 1843, 1.

³⁶ al-Zamahšarī 1843, 1-2.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

³⁸ E.g. Versteegh 1993.

related mention of *i'rāb*, *ma'ānī* and *bayān*, all of which are required to master eloquence and elegant diction.³⁹

In *al-Mufaṣṣal* al-Zamahšarī insists on Arabic as the language of schooling, controversy and scientific debates, adding that in Arabic are written legal and administrative documents so much so that people are confronted with it wherever they go.⁴⁰ After having emphasised this pervasive presence, he expounds on what he considers a paradox, i.e. that though they use it, people deny the prestige of Arabic, refrain from honouring and extolling it, forbid to learn and to teach it, and pretend that they can dispense with it. Why then, he asks provocatively, they do not abandon “*al-luġa wa-l-i'rāb*” in exegesis and law (*tafsīr*, *fiqh*)? This paradoxical challenge is followed by a list of morphosyntactic phenomena frequent in legal language intended as a demonstration that *naḥw* (i.e., knowledge of *i'rāb*) is crucial in reading and interpreting texts. The argument goes further, investing the social sphere, when he presents correct speech as the mark of a high rank, both in terms of knowledge and social status: speaking bad Arabic during lectures (*maġālis al-tadrīs*) and debates (*munāẓarāt*) deprives knowledge of its splendour, and ridicules the elite (*al-hāṣṣa*) making it similar to the masses (*al-ʿamma*).⁴¹

This emphasis on the cultural function of Arabic and on its universal spread seems a response at the linguistic situation of the Eastern provinces where, contrary to other regions, like Egypt, Arabic had been readily adopted but also readily abandoned by people who, for all their needs, reverted to their national idioms and left Arabic reserved for collateral use.⁴² In al-Zamahšarī's time the cultural and administrative policy of the Seljuk dynasty had contributed to enhance the use of Persian, so reducing the prestige of Arabic as the only lingua franca,⁴³ and Persian was also used to write treatises in fields previously considered dominated by Arabic, like prosody and lexicography. Al-Zamahšarī was well

³⁹ al-Zamahšarī 1965, 7-8.

⁴⁰ al-Zamahšarī 1879, 2-3.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴² Ayyad 1990, 413.

⁴³ Meneghini 2004, 10-11.

aware of this situation: in the court of Atsiz Garchā'i (to whom he dedicated *Muqaddimat al-adab*) he got acquainted with men of letters writing both in Arabic and Persian, like Rašīd al-Dīn al-Waṭwāṭ (d. 1177), the chief secretary of the court who wrote his ornate letters in Arabic and Persian, and with whom al-Zamahšarī had a series of conversations witnessed by the *Risālat Rašīd al-Dīn al-Waṭwāṭ fī-mā ġarā baynahu wa-bayna al-imām al-Zamahšarī min al-muḥāwarāt* (*The treatise of Rašīd al-Dīn al-Waṭwāṭ on the dialogues between him and al-imām al-Zamahšarī*). Al-Waṭwāṭ also penned a bilingual treatise on versification, which probably reveals that, in spite of the growing prestige of Persian, men of letters were still reluctant to draw up "serious" works entirely in Persian. Anyhow, Arabic was still the predominant language in religious sciences, even if by that time interlinear Persian translations of the Qur'ān were judged permissible and Persian translations of the Holy Book were not uncommon; but the use of translation for *tafsīr* was something that seems to need for a justification.⁴⁴ Though scholars and men of letters felt they should use Arabic when writing on elevated subjects, the balance between the two languages was changing, and a growing number of texts on medicine, astronomy, philosophy, mystics etc. were written in Persian. This could explain the reason for al-Zamahšarī's dismay and his fierce defence of Arabic.

In *al-Mufaṣṣal* he also insists on grammar, when he speaks highly of *i'rāb*, which is «far better than anything else» and the staircase (*mirqāt*) raised to *bayān*, that allows to bring to light the textual subtleties (*nukat naẓm*) of the Qur'ān (a reference to *al-Nukat fī i'ğāz al-Qur'ān* of the *mu'tazilī* grammarian, rhetorician and theologian al-Rummānī), to highlight its beauties (*maḥāsin*) and to discover its treasures, to such an extent that to be diverted from it is tantamount to closing the ways of good.⁴⁵ An interesting equivalence *kalām al-'Arab/i'rāb* is outlined in what follows, when al-Zamahšarī explains that he wrote *al-Mufaṣṣal*, which is focussed on *i'rāb*, out of his concern for the desire of the Muslims to learn

⁴⁴ O'Kane 2009, 5-6.

⁴⁵ al-Zamahšarī 1879, 3.

the speech of the Arabs (*kalām al-‘Arab*) and out of his solicitude for colleagues interested in philological disciplines (*adab*).⁴⁶

Some arguments seem worth of consideration. First, the privileged status of Arabic, the language of revelation addressed to all human beings, that acquires a special status among all languages. Though this is a widespread argument used to demonstrate the superiority of Arabic,⁴⁷ it is not universally accepted, and other linguists had different positions. The Andalusian Ibn Ḥazm for instance, in spite of his «religious respect for the language in itself, in which his Zāhirī doctrine has its roots»,⁴⁸ denies the superiority of Arabic on the ground that in this regard all languages are equivalent to each other (*tasāwat al-luġātu fī hādā tasāwīyan wāḥidan*).⁴⁹ Second, the role of Arabic as a scholarly language; this is so rooted in the minds of the cultural elite that they did not even think to express themselves in another idiom: Abū ‘Alī al-Fārisī (d. 987), a distinguished grammarian suspected of *mu‘tazilism* whose mother tongue was Persian, was such a severe defender of ‘*arabiyya*’ that he refused to match Arabic and Persian.⁵⁰ In grammar there was no room for *šu‘ūbī* claims, nor was there in rhetoric: ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Ġurġānī, a Persian and Persian-speaking, penned works in praise of Arabic and of its beauty, included one (*Dalā’il al-i-ġāz*) demonstrating the inimitability of the Qur’ān with linguistic arguments. The identification of Arabic with Arabs, and Arabs with Islam which

⁴⁶ al-Zamahšarī 1879, 4.

⁴⁷ E.g. Ibn al-Sarrāġ, *Uṣūl*, 1: 2; Ibn Ġinnī 1952-1955, 1: 4.

⁴⁸ Arnaldez, 1986, 792.

⁴⁹ Ibn Ḥazm 2008, 1: 34. « Toutes les langues existantes sont également capables de recevoir la révélation et d’exprimer la vérité [...] L’arabe n’a donc pas, en tant qu’idiome, le moindre privilège » (Arnaldez 1956, 47). On multilingualism in the Islamic vision of language Salvaggio 2024.

⁵⁰ His pupil Ibn Ġinnī relates: “I asked about the two languages [i.e. Arabic and Persian] the scholars of Arabic of Persian descent trained in their language [Persian] before becoming Arab (*ista‘raba*). They did not match them [i.e. the two languages] and even did not accept such a question, by far remote from their mind: they were convinced and fascinated by the superior beauty of Arabic. I repeatedly asked Abū ‘Alī, and his answer was like what I have just related” and continues “No one of my masters – and he listed their names – never put them [i.e. Arabic and Persian] on equal footing nor brought them closer together” (Ibn Ġinnī 1952-1955, 1: 242-243; see Versteegh 1997, 106).

inspired the virulent words of al-Ġāḥiẓ,⁵¹ was not valid anymore, and by the time *al-Mufaṣṣal* was penned, «the debate was nearing its close; and unconscious identification of Islam with (linguistic) Arabism had taken root in the conscience of the believers».⁵²

A further element worth of consideration is the meaning of *i'rāb*. *I'rāb*, considered the distinctive feature of Arabic par excellence, is often used as a near synonym of *'arabiyya* or *kalām al-'Arab*, an equivalence that forms the backbone of the Arabic grammatical tradition. This was not a purely philological matter, since *i'rāb* was bound up with politics:⁵³ texts are teeming with anecdotes featuring “correct” (i.e. inflected) speech as an intrinsic character of rulers and political elites, or portraying political authorities as the defenders of the purity of *'arabiyya*.⁵⁴ Though this is motivated by his personal interest (it represents the transitional passage between the introduction and the inscription to the dedicatee of the work, Atsiz Garchā'i), al-Zamahšarī's words in *Muqaddimat al-adab* insisting on the favour of the rulers for those mastering Arabic, even after the end of “the Arab empire” (*dawlat al-'arab*)⁵⁵ reveal a clear perception of the link between power and language, political elites and Arabic.

Al-Zamahšarī's approach to Arabic exemplifies the deep interconnection between language, religion, and (ethnic) identity in the Arabic intellectual tradition.⁵⁶ Arabic, as the primary vehicle of Islamic scholarship, law and literature, extended far beyond its original homeland, becoming a dominant linguistic and cultural force across the Muslim empire. Unlike the mere imposition of a conqueror's tongue, its spread was not solely dependent on military conquests but was propelled by its role as the language of the Qur'ān, governance, and intellectual life. In this regard, Arabic paralleled the expansion of Greek in the classical world, serving as both a medium of cultural transmission and a symbol of prestige.

⁵¹ Norris 1990, 35-36.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 44.

⁵³ Owens 2000, 122.

⁵⁴ E.g. Fück 1955, 23-25; al-Ṭanṭāwī n.d., 16-26.

⁵⁵ al-Zamahšarī 1843, 1-2.

⁵⁶ Suleiman 2003, 46.

As a marker of social status and a unifying element, Arabic transcended ethnic and cultural boundaries, integrating diverse populations into a shared linguistic and intellectual tradition. Its mastery was indispensable for the ruling classes and the learned elite, who relied on it not only for scholarly pursuits but also for advancing their material and political interests. The ability to communicate in Arabic became a prerequisite for participation in the highest echelons of society, reinforcing its status as the language of power and erudition. Thus, Arabic was a vehicle for social mobility, cultural assimilation, and intellectual engagement, shaping the trajectories of individuals and communities across the medieval Islamic world.

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