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## *Notes and Documents*



# The Language Legacy: Primary Sources and Corpus Planning in Classical Arabic

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### Abstract

This paper outlines the ideological dimensions of the codification process of Classical Arabic by discussing the role of primary sources in corpus planning. The contribution reflects on the ideology surrounding the language materials that served as the foundations for the grammar-making of Classical Arabic, emphasizing how sources are relevant for bearing linguistic value and historical significance while being particularly aligned with socio-cultural and religious values, thereby reflecting broader ideological considerations. By presenting current theoretical frameworks and assessing the state of the field, the paper highlights the essential role of extra-linguistic factors – such as social, cultural, and religious contexts – in shaping corpus planning strategies for Classical Arabic.

### Keywords

Classical Arabic – primary sources – corpus planning – language codification – language ideology

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## 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Language is a fundamental aspect of human identity, serving as both a medium of communication and a marker of cultural and social belonging. The study of language standardization reveals a complex interplay between linguistic development and social, cultural, and political factors. Standardized languages have historically been pivotal in constructing, challenging, and reshaping social and political boundaries.

In the context of Arabic, the classical high variety (*fuṣḥā*),<sup>2</sup> codified by Arabic scholars early in the Islamic era, has historically held such a symbolic role. The early centuries of the Islamic period witnessed a significant transformation in the linguistic landscape due to the socio-political changes brought about by the rise and expansion of the Arab-Islamic empire.<sup>3</sup> Classical Arabic was strategically selected as the standard language, primarily due to its perceived intrinsic connection to the Qurʾān, the *kalām al-ʿarab* ('speech of the Arabs'),<sup>4</sup> and pre-Islamic poetry; these three core elements, plus the *ḥadīṣ*

1 This contribution presents a line of research investigated in the framework of the "ALiDiM – Arabic Linguistic Discourse in the Making" project, started in May 2024 and based at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. The ALiDiM project is funded by the European Union (ERC, ALiDiM, 101115616). Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Council. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the conference "Foundations of Arab Linguistics 7", held in Tokyo on August 28–30, 2024. I am grateful to the organizers, speakers, and audience for their feedback. I also wish to thank Antonella Gherseti for reading and commenting on an earlier draft of this paper, and the anonymous reviewers for their valuable remarks.

2 Classical Arabic refers to the high variety of the Arabic language, the *fuṣḥā*, codified by Arabic grammarians in the first centuries of the Islamic era. With this expression, we thus refer to the variety of the Arabic language that eventually became a normative standard. See Fischer, "Classical Arabic"; Retsö, "What Is Arabic?"; van Putten, "Classical and Modern Standard Arabic".

3 For an account of the emergence of the Arab-Islamic empire and of the core questions about Arab identity and history, see Webb, *Imagining the Arabs*. With regard to the complex interactions between Classical Arabic and historical events, socio-political factors, and group identity during this see the works by Suleiman, e.g., *The Arabic Language and National Identity: A Study in Ideology; Arabic, Self and Identity*; "Ideology, Grammar-Making and the Standardization of Arabic"; "Ideology and the Standardization of Arabic".

4 *Kalām al-ʿarab*, 'speech of the Arabs', refers to the linguistic data from the varieties spoken by the (pre-Islamic) Bedouin tribes of the Arabian Peninsula, as presented in linguistic works by Arabic scholars. For an overview of linguistic data of pre-Islamic Bedouin varieties, see Rabin, *Ancient West-Arabian*; for a recent study on the *kalām al-ʿarab*, see Grande, "Per una descrizione del *kalām al-ʿarab*. Fonti, problemi e metodi".

(although more prominently at a later stage),<sup>5</sup> are the primary sources on which the process of codification of Classical Arabic was founded. With its status, the classical variety was ultimately established as a central component of the empire's cultural and administrative cohesion.<sup>6</sup>

In light of this background, this contribution presents the ideological components of language codification, with a focus on the role of primary sources and the underlying ideology driving corpus planning in Classical Arabic, which extends beyond concerns of authenticity to address their perceived relevance as influenced by socio-cultural and religious factors. By outlining the current state of research and relevant theoretical frameworks, this paper ultimately underscores the critical influence of extra-linguistic factors – such as social, cultural, and religious contexts – on corpus planning strategies for Classical Arabic.

## 2 Standard(ized) Languages

Language is a cornerstone of identity, playing a critical role in shaping and expressing individual and collective identities. Haugen's influential work *Dialect, Language, Nation* of 1966 describes how the development of a vernacular into a recognized language is deeply intertwined with the growth of nationalism and cultural identity. Language serves as a symbol of collective identity, distinguishing one community from another and reinforcing social cohesion and cultural continuity.

The perception of what the word “language” means has witnessed considerable changes over time, particularly “as a result of the concept of ‘national languages’, which has gained prominence since early modern times”.<sup>7</sup>

In *Imagined Communities*, Anderson discusses the several factors that play a role in the formation of national identities, including languages. Factors such as the rise of print capitalism and the standardization of languages made it possible for people to communicate across large areas; this linguistic unification helped forge national consciousness by enabling people to imagine themselves as part of a community. Anderson highlights how vernacular languages, rather than elite or sacred languages, became vehicles for national identity, allowing diverse groups to connect through shared language and print media.

5 Sadan, “Sibawayhi's and Later Grammarians' Usage of *Hadīts* as a Grammatical Tool”.

6 Versteegh, *The Arabic Language*, p. 53.

7 Dollinger, “Prescriptivism and National Identity: Sociohistorical Constructionism, Disciplinary Blindspots, and Standard Austrian German”, p. 121.

Although Anderson mainly refers to spoken varieties, by discussing connections among and within diverse groups, the author highlights the role of varieties that allow for connections, namely those language varieties that can serve the purpose of a shared means for communication.<sup>8</sup>

### 2.1 *Standard Languages in the Making*

Haugen<sup>9</sup> outlines the four main steps of codification processes:

(1) selection of norm, (2) codification of form, (3) elaboration of function, and (4) acceptance by the community. The first two refer primarily to the form, the last two to the function of language. The first and the last are concerned with society, the second and third with language. They form a matrix within which it should be possible to discuss all the major problems of language and dialect in the life of a nation.<sup>10</sup>

Selection refers to the initial decision to choose a particular variety or set of features as the standard form. This decision is often influenced by e.g., political or cultural factors, where certain varieties are elevated due to their association with centers of power or cultural prestige. Codification involves the formalization of a chosen dialect through the development of grammars, dictionaries, and orthographies. This process is essential for establishing consistent rules and conventions, allowing for the standardization of spelling, grammar, and usage. Codification not only aids in communication but also plays a role in legitimizing the language in official contexts such as education and governance. Elaboration refers to the expansion of the language's functions to cover all sorts of areas. This involves enriching the vocabulary and developing terminologies that can accommodate new scenarios, thus ensuring the language's adaptability and relevance in diverse circumstances. Finally, acceptance is the process by which the standardized form gains social approval and is adopted by the wider community. This step is critical as it requires the buy-in from both speakers and institutions. Acceptance often involves promoting the language through channels that reach the core of the community, ensuring that it becomes the norm in various domains of public and private life.<sup>11</sup>

Haugen's analysis hence underscores the intricate interplay between linguistic development and social dynamics, highlighting how the creation of

8 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, esp. chapter five "Old Languages, New Models".

9 Haugen, "Dialect, Language, Nation".

10 *Ibid.*, p. 933.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 933ff.

a linguistic norm is deeply intertwined with issues of power and identity. Through standardization, a variety is transformed into a standard(ized) language, thus also serving as a means for cultural cohesion.

### 3 Classical Arabic

The Arabic linguistic tradition offers a fascinating example of codification practices. Arabic-speaking communities have historically maintained a deep connection with the high variety of the language, which persists to modern times. Although non-native, Classical Arabic is a highly codified variety that plays a pivotal role in shaping a collective identity and serves as a significant symbol. It is perceived not merely as a means of communication but also as a repository of Arab-Islamic cultural and religious heritage.

The process that led to the codification of Classical Arabic by Arabic grammarians in the first centuries of the Islamic era reveals a complex interplay between language ideology and sociopolitical aspects, with language choices signifying social status, group membership, and personal identity, which is not “just a matter of symbolic meaning or rhetorical signification”.<sup>12</sup> The distinction between Classical Arabic and the spoken varieties spoken across the Arabic-speaking world historically reflects different layers of identity. Classical Arabic holds a revered status and serves as a unifying factor among Muslims, while regional spoken varieties reflect local identities and cultural diversity, often failing to gain recognized status from a linguistic perspective.<sup>13</sup> In the Arabic-speaking world, a clear distinction thus historically exists between two primary language varieties: on the one hand, Classical Arabic, a written variety central to high-status settings; on the other hand, spoken varieties of Arabic, spoken natively but often regarded as a less prestigious form reserved for informal communication.<sup>14</sup>

This linguistic hierarchy is deeply rooted in historical narratives that elevate the high variety to the status of a divine and pure language, while condemning linguistic deviations. In the Qurʾān itself, the Qurʾānic language<sup>15</sup> is described as a “clear Arabic language” (*lisān ʿarabī mubīn*, Qur 16:103; 26:195). This association between language and religion strengthens the bond between Arabic

12 Suleiman, “Ideology, Grammar-Making and the Standardization of Arabic”, p. 25.

13 See Bassiouney, *Arabic Sociolinguistics*, esp. p. 18ff.

14 For further discussion on this, see, among others, the works by Bassiouney, *Identity and Dialect Performance*; *Arabic Sociolinguistics*; and Ferguson, “Diglossia”; “Epilogue”.

15 On Qurʾānic Arabic, see van Putten, *Quranic Arabic*.

and Islam, making the religious dimension a central component of the linguistic narrative.

In line with this framework is the selection of authoritative texts and language materials – such as the Qurʾān itself – to serve as the foundations of the codification process; the nature of primary sources underscores the importance of maintaining a linguistic standard that resonates with cultural identity, even when it diverged from the linguistic realities of everyday speech. Classical Arabic was thus presented as the means for accessing foundational religious texts and preserving cultural heritage, providing the language with historical depth and continuity that reinforced the narrative of a homogeneous, idealized language form.

The Arabic term for the language, *ʿarabiyya*, bears this narrative, being perceived by its speakers as

a cover term which refers to Arabic in its various forms, both synchronically and diachronically. In particular, it designates what the Arabs call *fushḥā* Arabic (lit. ‘pure, clear, or universally intelligible, → *fasḥ*) and the wide range of dialects – called *ʿammiyyāt*, *lahajāti*, or in North Africa the *dārīja* – which are the true mother tongues of Arabic speakers.<sup>16</sup>

This well-known linguistic duality mirrors historical circumstances dating back to the formative stages of the Arab-Islamic Empire. As the empire was growing, the far-ranging military expansions (*futūḥāt*) of the first century of the Islamic era (7th century CE) were exporting not only a religion but also a language.<sup>17</sup> In addition to the ideological components, practical considerations also played a significant role; aware of the linguistic diversity across the Arabian Peninsula, the imperial administration of the Caliphate recognized the imperative of a unified language to foster cohesion and facilitate effective communication.<sup>18</sup> The administrative infrastructure required a functional language, as Greek had been used as the primary language for official matters until the reign of ʿAbd al-Malik (d. 86/705). The shift to Arabic not only enhanced the functional status of the language but also further elevated Classical Arabic as a key instrument of cultural and political unity.

Arabic scholars built upon this idealized status and condemned variations thereof, although they were fully aware of the existence of the *luḡāt* (‘varieties’) and the ongoing process of language corruption (the so-called *fasād al-luḡa*).

16 Suleiman, “Arabiyya”, p. 173.

17 For a comprehensive account, see Donner “The Islamic Conquests”.

18 Versteegh, *The Arabic Language*, p. 53.

This concern reinforced the narrative around the high variety, *fushā*, emphasizing the efforts made to preserve it against the perceived decline brought about by language acquisition among the newly conquered peoples.<sup>19</sup> Language scholars thus defined the framework of linguistic correctness for the classical language, setting benchmarks of proper usage.<sup>20</sup> Deviations from these standards were labeled as *lahn* ('solecisms'),<sup>21</sup> and early efforts to document and correct such deviations – aimed at preserving linguistic purity – can be traced back to the very beginnings of the Arabic linguistic tradition.<sup>22</sup>

The corruption of the language through contact with non-Arabs was primarily addressed with regard to syntax and the correct use of declensional endings ('*rāb*'), but did further extend to lexical items. Lexicographical works were thus helpful in recording and preserving the lexical material “with the help of writing and systematic works for fear that it might be wiped out and that ignorance of the Qurʾān and the traditions would result”.<sup>23</sup>

Among the several legends recounting the beginnings of Arabic language studies, one tale stands out for its relevance to our discussion, since it offers a glimpse into the narrative surrounding the codification process. This account, narrated by Ibn al-Anbārī (d. 577/1181) in the *Nuzha*, describes how Caliph ʿAlī (d. 40/661), concerned about the integrity of the Arabic language amid interactions with newly conquered peoples, commissioned the grammarian Abū l-ʿAswad al-Duʿalī (d. 69/688) to safeguard and refine Arabic against perceived corruption.<sup>24</sup> According to the story, Caliph ʿAlī summoned al-Duʿalī and said: “I was reflecting on the language of the Arabs and noted that it had been corrupted by our mixing with these red people [*i.e.*, *foreigners*] and I wanted to

19 See, e.g., al-Ġāhiz, *al-Bayān wa-l-Tabayīn*, I, p. 613.

20 Arabic scholars argue that the distortion in language may be traced in the interaction of native speakers of Arabic and those who acquired Arabic as a consequence of their inclusion in the Islamic empire. The fear of corruption, and thus the need to preserve the language, are much present in literature and recorded by scholars such as Ibn Ḥaldūn (d. 808/1406). See, e.g., Ibn Ḥaldūn, *Muqaddima*, I, p. 742.

21 “The diverging [in speech] from the correct form”, Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab*, 4013. From *l-ḥ-n*, *lahana* “to speak ungrammatical Arabic (interspersed with barbarisms)”, Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon Derived from the Best and Most Copious Eastern Sources*, p. 1011.

22 For instance, al-Kisāʿī (d. ca. 189/804–5) wrote *Mā Talḥan fihi al-ʿĀmma* (“The mistakes that commoners make’), prompted by a direct observation of the language. For a comprehensive overview, see Ayoub “Lahn”; on the topic of solecisms and instances of the genre *lahn al-ʿamma*, see also Ghersetti “« Dites, mais ne dites pas »”; Lindermann “A Shared Set of Solecisms”.

23 Ibn Ḥaldūn, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, III, p. 455; Ibn Ḥaldūn, *Muqaddima*, I, p. 756.

24 On the myth of the origins of Arabic grammar, see Larcher, “Les origines de la grammaire arabe, selon la tradition : description, interprétation, discussion.”

make something for them on which they could fall back and on which they could rely". The Caliph then handed him a text, which opened with "language is noun and verb and particle". Finally, 'Alī concluded by saying: "follow this direction and add to it what you find!"<sup>25</sup> This narrative occupies a prominent place in the Arabic linguistic tradition and offers significant insights into the central factors that prompted the process of language codification. It highlights the perceived necessity of preserving the purity of Arabic during the military expansion and the subsequent acquisition of the language by conquered peoples. Additionally, it provides a glimpse into the motivations driving early linguistic efforts, underscoring the importance of maintaining the integrity of the language in the face of rapid cultural and linguistic exchange. Furthermore, the story also provides us with information about foundational aspects of the Arabic linguistic reflections. For instance, the sentence read by al-Du'ālī, which is the opening of the *Kitāb*<sup>26</sup> by Sibawayhi (d. ca. 180/796). This text is the first and most representative treatise of Arabic grammar; as such, it represents the very foundation of Arabic language studies<sup>27</sup> and it is thus of no surprise that it features in the legend about how linguistic studies started. Another interesting element is the term *naḥw* used by Caliph 'Alī. The word *naḥw*, 'direction', derives from *naḥā – yanḥū*, which means 'to follow', 'to imitate', and later came to mean grammar;<sup>28</sup> in the Arabic tradition, in fact, 'grammar' is "what the speaker should emulate when you teach him the linguistic behavior of the Arabs. It is a science that grammarians extracted by induction from the speech of the Arabs".<sup>29</sup>

25 Ibn al-Anbārī, *Nuzha*, p. 4. The story is quite clear in pointing out the reasons why the process was set in motion, meaning mainly the fear of corruption, even though it is rather improbable in terms of historical veracity. Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 385/995 or 388/998), author of the *Fihrist*, despite stating that he had come to see a short *risāla* attributed to al-Du'ālī, is skeptical in confirming the reliability of the linguistic research. Nonetheless, such narrations give us a clear idea of the attention paid already in early Islamic times to the necessity of undertaking a process of linguistic reflection.

26 Sibawayhi, *Kitāb*, I, p. 1.

27 Carter, *Sibawayhi*; Olivieri, "Referencing Sibawayhi: The Reception of the *Kitāb* as a Source".

28 Carter, "When Did the Arabic Word *NAHW* First Come to Denote Grammar?"

29 Ibn al-Sarrāġ, *al-'Uṣūl fī l-Naḥw*, I, p. 35.



#### 4 Corpus Planning and Linguistic Tradition

Bassiouney describes that “there are two kinds of language planning: status planning and corpus planning: Status planning refers to the process of selecting a language or variety for use. Corpus planning is the process by which the language or variety selected is codified, i.e. choices are made to standardise spelling, grammar, lexicon etc”.<sup>30</sup> In the following, we will focus on the ideology behind corpus planning, outlining the cultural significance of primary sources used as the linguistic foundation for the codification of Classical Arabic in the first centuries of the Islamic era.

Corpus planning “goes hand in hand with status planning in the standardization of a language”,<sup>31</sup> and plays a pivotal role in the ideological framework surrounding Classical Arabic. The process of data collection and selection provided a successful narrative of language alignment with literary and cultural materials that held significant meaning for the community, as well as ensuring a perception of continuity with a shared past, represented by both poetical and spoken varieties.<sup>32</sup> Language scholars were central to this endeavor, emphasizing the preservation of classical structures and promoting a professed commitment to linguistic purity and continuity.

At an initial stage, Arabic grammarians could make use of two sources of literary Arabic, i.e., the Qurʾān and pre-Islamic poetry.<sup>33</sup> These, along with the variety spoken by the Bedouins, constituted the primary sources for the process of language codification.<sup>34</sup> Bedouin varieties represented reliable colloquials and a connection to an authentic lifestyle, a meaningful representation of a shared past for the Arab society. Bedouins living in the desert were thus called upon to support the linguistic endeavor, as they were considered authoritative sources. In fact, when referring to ‘the Arabs,’ grammarians mean those Bedouins “whose Arabic language can be trusted”<sup>35</sup> because of their innate – but at the same time unconscious – linguistic knowledge.

In addition to these primary sources, Arabic classical works did feature other types of data. In describing Sibawayhi’s *Kitāb*, Carter presents six categories of linguistic data, which he lists in “descending order of naturalness and hence of normativeness:

30 Bassiouney, *Arabic Sociolinguistics*, p. 205.

31 Suleiman, “Ideology and the Standardization of Arabic”, p. 3.

32 Larcher, “Arabe préislamique, arabe coranique, arabe classique: un continuum?”

33 Versteegh, *The Arabic Language*, esp. p. 57ff.

34 Rabin, “The Beginnings of Classical Arabic”; Carter, *Sibawayhi*; Olivieri, “Early Arabic Grammar: Sources and Codification”.

35 Sibawayhi, *Kitāb*, I, p. 232.

1. the natural language of the Bedouin
2. the artificial language of Arabic poetry
3. the inherently different language of the Qur'an
4. the Traditions of the Prophet (Hadith)
5. proverbs and idiomatic phrases
6. made-up words and sentences"<sup>36</sup>

There are evident differences in the nature of these data, where “the first and last items on the list represent the poles of authenticity, number 1 being based entirely on observation and number 6 being often no more than a grammarian’s conjecture, while all the intermediate categories represent different levels and kinds of artificiality, none of them productive”.<sup>37</sup>

As described by Carter,<sup>38</sup> Sībawayhi’s work centers around drawing from a variety of sources that would emphasize the authenticity and purity of the language; central to this effort was Sībawayhi’s reliance on Bedouin speech, considered the most authentic form of Arabic due to its natural and untainted patterns. Sībawayhi reported data from these varieties; additionally, he utilized Arabic poetry to illustrate grammatical rules and stylistic elegance, selecting examples that adhered to linguistic norms and offering outlooks of historical and literary usage. The Qur’an, regarded as ultimate linguistic authority, was used to validate grammatical rules, underscoring its role in setting a standard for eloquent and correct language. *Hadīṭs* also contributed rich linguistic content,<sup>39</sup> though Sībawayhi approached them cautiously due to varying authenticity levels, using them to gain insights into the spoken language of the Prophet’s era. Proverbs and common sayings reflected everyday speech and societal values, offering practical examples and demonstrating regional variations and idiomatic expressions. Moreover, Sībawayhi invented examples to illustrate specific grammatical points, allowing for flexibility in demonstrating hypothetical constructs and aiding in the teaching of complex concepts. His emphasis on authenticity was driven by a desire to preserve the language’s purity, ensuring that grammatical rules were based on genuine usage rather than theoretical constructs. Although his direct interactions with Bedouins were likely limited, Sībawayhi possibly relied on accounts from urban centers like Baṣra to access authentic language patterns. Finally, his approach was

36 Carter, *Sībawayhi*, p. 39.

37 *Ibid.*

38 *Ibid.*, p. 39–49.

39 On the *hadīṭs* in Arabic grammatical works, see Sadan, “Sībawayhi’s and Later Grammarians’ Usage of *Hadīṭs* as a Grammatical Tool”.

both descriptive and prescriptive, documenting natural speech patterns while establishing norms for correct usage.

The Arabic linguistic tradition after Sibawayhi maintained the same approach to employing primary sources such as pre-Islamic poetry and religious scriptures, which formed the backbone of codification efforts. Materials from the Qurʾān, the Bedouin varieties, and pre-Islamic poetry were always considered benchmarks for linguistic correctness, serving as models for the language ideal form, and thus employed as examples for norms. As discussed by Baalbaki,<sup>40</sup> the linguistic data were possibly dated to a same limited period of time, the so-called *ʿuṣūr al-iḥtiṣāḡ*, “epochs of reliable usage”, that ended approximately in the second half of the eighth century CE. To make the high variety of the language more coherent, language scholars thus undertook a process of studies which would result in a firm and well-defined structure of the language, with the professed objective to strive for a detailed description of Arabic.

This would be accomplished by relying on culturally relevant sources. Considering the aim and the descriptive approach of early Arabic scholars, the first attempts to describe the language had evidently no teaching nor pedagogical purposes,<sup>41</sup> but were rather meant as – still rather systematic – registrations of linguistic data, alongside their analyses.

In the eyes of the scholars of the Arabic linguistic tradition, the sole language deemed worthy of preservation and transmission was the idealized classical variety, the *fushḥā*. In their works, this language is often equated with that of the Qurʾān and is commonly portrayed as the one spoken by the Prophet Muḥammad and his tribe, the Banū Qurayš. Additionally, this variety is also linked to the language of pre-Islamic poetry, portraying a narrative of linguistic continuum.<sup>42</sup> This was meant to provide the necessary historical depth to the language, but also a perceivable connection between linguistic aspects and wider cultural components. The language represented in fact a bond for the emerging Arab-Islamic society and profoundly contributed to the formation and development of a social community. So profound was its influence that

40 Baalbaki, *The Arabic Lexicographical Tradition*, p. 29–36.

41 Early grammatical treatises cannot really be considered teaching handbooks, being too difficult to be used as teaching grammars but still too fundamental to be left aside. This eventually boosted the birth of parallel lines of grammatical production more easily accessible to disciples. On this, see Baalbaki, “Arabic Linguistic Tradition I”, p. 103ff.; “Grammar for Beginners and Ibn Hišām’s Approach to Issues of ʿirāb”; Kasher, “Early Pedagogical Grammars of Arabic”.

42 Larcher, “Arabe préislamique, arabe coranique, arabe classique: un continuum?”; “La langue du Coran : quelle influence sur la grammaire arabe ?”

grammarians such as al-Zağğāgī (d. 337/949) linked the study of the Arabic language and its grammar to key components of the Arab-Islamic culture. In the *ʿĪdāh*, al-Zağğāgī states that the benefits of learning grammar lie in “being able to speak the language of the Arabs accurately, without any distortion or alteration”, emphasizing the idealized Bedouin variety. He also notes that learning grammar is essential for correctly interpreting the Qurʾān, “the foundation of both religion and worldly affairs”, and for properly understanding the sayings of the Prophet, as well as “to establish their true meanings”, which “cannot be fully understood without giving them their proper grammatical rights”.<sup>43</sup>

The corpus selection, hence, was evidently based on primary sources with a substantial cultural meaning to the community of speakers. The presentation and use of primary sources are critical aspects of linguistic works; they provide the empirical data upon which linguistic analyses are based, but their careful presentation and interpretation are essential also for ensuring norms’ validity and reliability. Additionally, the selection of data from culturally relevant sources ensures wider acceptance.

The selection of sources by Arabic grammarians, along with their motivated interpretation, poses a substantial issue in terms of reliability, particularly given that the claimed descriptive method may conflict with the actual handling of the data.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, the cultural prominence of the sources utilized was so that the selected data would still be considered reliable. Let us consider, for instance, the efforts made to prove that Qurʾānic words of foreign origins would actually have an Arabic origin.<sup>45</sup> The same holds true for unusual, or allegedly incorrect (oftentimes meaning colloquial) grammatical structures present in the Qurʾān for which targeted explanations were found. This meticulously curated collection of linguistic data culminated in the

43 al-Zağğāgī, *ʿĪdāh*, p. 95.

44 Generally speaking, early Arabic grammarians adopted an approach that Owens calls “explicatory descriptivism”, whereas later scholars would be more prescriptivist. Owens, “The Grammatical Tradition and Arabic Language Teaching: A View from Here”, p. 105.

45 Efforts were made to justify, for instance, non-Arabic lexicon in the Qurʾān, as well as to explain non-strictly classical locutions. With regard to the lexicon, examples of the approach are al-Suyūṭī’s (d. 911/1505) works, such as *al-Mutawakkilī fīmā warada fī l-Qurʾān bi-l-luġāt*; the text is named after the Caliph who commissioned the work on the Qurʾānic words “to be found in the speech of Ethiopians, the Persians, or any people other than the Arabs” Bell, *The Mutawakkilī of As-Suyūṭī: A Translation of the Arabic Text with Introduction, Notes, and Indices*, p. 14. However, in its early stages, the tradition was not totally against the acknowledgment of the foreign nature of some words present in the Qurʾān; one example is the treatise attributed to Ibn ʿAbbās (d. 68/687), titled *Kitāb Luġāt al-Qurʾān*, discussed by Rippin in “Ibn ʿAbbās’s *al-Luġāt fī l-Qurʾān*”; and “Ibn ʿAbbās’s *Gharīb al-Qurʾān*”.

establishment of a closed corpus, serving as the foundation upon which subsequent grammarians built their analyses.<sup>46</sup>

## 5 Prescriptivism and Primary Sources

Prescriptive attitudes<sup>47</sup> towards Arabic are heavily influenced by primary sources that underscore historical and cultural significance. These sources provide a framework for understanding linguistic change and continuity, reinforcing the classical model as the ideal standard.

The emphasis on Classical Arabic reflects broader cultural and political concerns about identity and authenticity. Suleiman<sup>48</sup> highlights how prescriptivism in the Arabic-speaking world, up to modern times, involves a concerted effort to protect the language's classical form from perceived encroachments of external and colloquial influences. This linguistic conservatism is linked to broader political and cultural concerns about identity and authenticity, where the integrity of Arabic is seen as integral to the integrity of Arab identity itself. The role of primary sources, such as pre-Islamic poetry and religious scriptures, has been crucial in shaping these prescriptive attitudes. By drawing on these sources, grammarians sought to align language usage with fixed norms, advocating for the relevance of classical forms to ensure the language's authenticity and relevance.

Primary sources in the codification of Arabic are deeply intertwined with the cultural and historical framework of the language, serving as pivotal anchors for linguistic prescriptivism. Central to this is of course the Qur'ān, revered as a linguistic ideal due to its divine nature. Its language was seen as the ultimate standard, making deviations from it not just linguistic errors but cultural transgressions. Alongside the Qur'ān, the Bedouin dialects were idealized for their eloquence and linguistic purity. Despite the historical reality of linguistic diversity among the Bedouin varieties, this narrative of a homogeneous and

46 Hallberg, "Standard Language Ideology and Prescriptivism in the Arabic-Speaking World", p. 290.

47 On prescriptivism and national identity, see Dollinger, "Prescriptivism and National Identity: Sociohistorical Constructionism, Disciplinary Blindspots, and Standard Austrian German"; on normative grammars, see Pullum, "Why Grammars Have to Be Normative – and Prescriptivists Have to Be Scientific"; on prescriptivism in the Arabic-speaking world, see Angheliescu, "La relation normatif-théorique dans les diverses périodes de la grammaire arabe classique"; Hallberg, "Standard Language Ideology and Prescriptivism in the Arabic-Speaking World".

48 Suleiman, "Ideology, Grammar-Making and the Standardization of Arabic".

pure variety of Arabic functioned to reinforce the legendary values of early Arab society. The Bedouins were seen as custodians of these values, particularly because of their isolation from urban centers where contact with foreigners was thought to corrupt the purity of the language. To reinforce this ideal, much of the linguistic data recorded in early grammatical and lexicographical sources were to be drawn from Bedouin varieties deemed most trustworthy. Arabic scholars were well aware, in fact, of the linguistic heterogeneity even within Bedouin varieties. They classified dialects based on their degree of reliability as sources of linguistic data. For example, Sibawayhi refers to particular usages as *radī ʿiddan* ('very bad');<sup>49</sup> while al-Fārābī (d. 339/950) lists the tribes considered the most reliable, offering explanations for their linguistic purity, and ultimately giving valuable insights in the complex relationship between linguistic ideals and the reality of language use.

They [grammarians and experts of language use] learnt their language and its eloquent aspects from those who live in the deserts, and not from dwellers of the villages. Then [they] choose from among the inhabitants of the deserts those who live in the center of these deserts, and they select those who are most wild, uncivilized and unruly. and those people are Qays, Tamīm, Asad, Ṭayyī' and then Huḍayl. Those are the majority of people from whom we take the language of the Arabs.<sup>50</sup>

The material collected among these varieties was perceived as so relevant that it needed to be documented. In lexicographical works, single words, poetry, proverbs, and anecdotes filled the corpus recorded in various ways, later systematized in major works such as al-Ḥalīl's (d. 170/786) *Kitāb al-ʿAyn*. In linguistic literature, Arabs are said to be grammarians without knowing it, and their reliability ultimately stems from their innate and instinctive knowledge of the language. As al-Zaḡḡāḡī mentions in a quote attributed to al-Ḥalīl, "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."<sup>51</sup> The role of language scholars, therefore, is to put into words what is natural to their informants.

This veneration of ancient sources belongs to the narrative of preservation of linguistic purity and authenticity discussed above, which eventually defined

49 On the Bedouin data used in the *Kitāb*, see Carter, *Sibawayhi*, p. 40–42.

50 al-Fārābī, *Kitāb al-Ḥurūf*, p. 147.

51 al-Zaḡḡāḡī, *ʿIdāh*, p. 66.

a closed corpus that set the boundaries of acceptable language.<sup>52</sup> The prescriptive nature of Arabic codification arises also from this reliance on culturally relevant primary sources, establishing fixed norms intended to maintain continuity with a celebrated past. As a result, prescriptivism in the Arabic linguistic tradition was not merely about linguistic rules but was deeply rooted in the desire to protect a rich cultural heritage, fostering resistance to change perceived as a threat to historical and linguistic integrity.<sup>53</sup> Through these primary sources, linguistic literature not only preserved the language legacy but also celebrated a cultural identity, emphasizing the enduring influence of its foundational linguistic data.

The relevance of corpus planning and prescriptivism in the Arabic-speaking world was deeply rooted in the classical linguistic tradition and in the development of Arabic grammar into a sophisticated discipline. Classical sources, such as the works of early scholars such as Sibawayhi and al-Ḥalil were instrumental in this codification process. Their works presented language materials, deriving rules and norms that were seen as reflective of the idealized linguistic practices of the early Bedouin tribes. Although their works contain information about variants and varieties, and even distinguish between correct and incorrect forms, their narrative of linguistic data prompted a prescriptive framework that emphasizes the purity and eloquence of Classical Arabic. This framework has had a lasting impact, with subsequent generations of grammarians and language scholars adhering to these early prescriptive norms, viewing them as the authoritative guide to proper language use.

In the context of Arabic, where classical and colloquial varieties have historically coexisted being functionally distinguished, the classical tradition of prescriptivism serves to reinforce the prestige and authority of the high variety. This situation underscores the classical roots of Arabic prescriptivism, as the use of the codified variety is seen as a marker of cultural and intellectual sophistication, deeply intertwined with Islamic and literary traditions. About this, Hallberg discusses different sorts of prescriptivist approaches. One example is the stylistic prescriptivism,<sup>54</sup> which is characterized by detailed judgments on linguistic correctness, focusing on maintaining high standards. This form of prescriptivism is evident in various classical texts and style guides, which emphasize the importance of adhering to established norms and preserving

52 Hallberg, "Standard Language Ideology and Prescriptivism in the Arabic-Speaking World", p. 290.

53 On this, see Ayoub's account on "Laḥn".

54 Hallberg, "Standard Language Ideology and Prescriptivism in the Arabic-Speaking World", p. 294ff.

the linguistic heritage of Classical Arabic. Standardizing prescriptivism,<sup>55</sup> another classical strand, aims to regulate the status of different varieties of Arabic, emphasizing the superiority of the high variety over non-standard forms. This approach, deeply rooted in the classical tradition, carries a moralistic tone, portraying deviations from Classical Arabic as threats to the linguistic and cultural integrity of the Arabic-speaking world, although eventually some deviations in morphology, syntax and lexicon became gradually accepted.<sup>56</sup> The classical prescriptive practices thus play a crucial role in shaping the dominant language ideology, promoting the high variety as the ideal form of Arabic and a key component of Arab identity.

## 6 Concluding Remarks

The codification of Classical Arabic illustrates a complex process involving linguistic, cultural, and socio-political elements. Codification was not solely a linguistic endeavor; it was deeply intertwined with issues of identity and culture. The ideology driving standardization was closely linked to the socio-political context, reflecting the need to assert cultural cohesion and maintain linguistic purity amidst perceived threats, including that of language mixing. Codifying the language was crucial for maintaining a unified cultural identity across the diverse and expanding Arab-Islamic empire; the approach based on the integration of linguistic, religious, and cultural elements, gave it enduring significance, ensuring its place as a symbol of unity and heritage.

The culturally significant primary sources selected as the basis for this linguistic endeavor, whose relevance was amplified by the narratives built around them, were pivotal to its success. Corpus planning in the Arabic-speaking world was in fact deeply intertwined with cultural preservation and maintenance of linguistic purity, and the ideology guiding the selection of primary sources capitalizes on their perceived significance. This process aligned the language with cultural materials that held profound meaning for the community; by drawing on primary sources such as the Qurʾān, pre-Islamic poetry, and Bedouin varieties, corpus planning emphasized professed authenticity and integrity. These classical sources ultimately served as the foundation for linguistic norms, highlighting a commitment to preserving historical values and traditions. Prescriptivism, in this context, was not merely about enforcing

55 *Ibid.*, p. 291ff.

56 On this, see Fück, *Arabiya: Untersuchungen zur arabischen Sprach- und Stilgeschichte*, esp. p. 73ff.



grammatical rules; it was a cultural imperative aimed at safeguarding a rich tradition against threats to its cultural and linguistic identity. Reliance on these revered sources illustrated a broader cultural narrative that prioritized a perception of continuity and cultural significance. By maintaining the classical structures and linguistic standards set by these sources, scholars ensured that Arabic would remain a living connection to its illustrious past. This approach positions the Arabic language as both a symbol of identity and a bastion of cultural pride. The preservation of linguistic purity through corpus planning reflects a commitment to maintaining a shared heritage that revolves around Classical Arabic, underscoring the language's role as a vessel of cultural memory.

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