

Shifts in Arabic Grammatical thought in the light of modern linguistics

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Abstract---This article traces the trajectory of the transformation of modern Arabic grammatical studies under the influence of contemporary linguistic approaches, especially the descriptive method and transformational-generative linguistics. The study starts from the Arab descriptivists' critique of traditional grammar in terms of its reliance on formal logic, its focus on specific corpora, and its conflation of levels of analysis. It then shows how this critique developed into reform projects that sought to maintain a connection with the heritage while remaining open to new approaches. The article focuses on four main milestones: Ibrāhīm Anīs's stance on inflection (i' rāb) and the theory of governance ('āmil), Tammām Ḥassān's reconstruction of the grammatical system in light of the theory of clues (qarā'in), and the use of transformational-generative linguistics in Arabic grammar by Māzin al-Wa'r and Khalīl Aḥmad 'Umāyrah. It concludes that these attempts despite their differences did not aim to abolish Arabic grammar, but rather to reread it from within, free it from some of its formal constraints, and build a modern Arabic grammar that takes living language use and meaning/semantics as its point of departure, while preserving the heritage roots from which it emerged.

Keywords---descriptive method, Arabic grammar, Ibrāhīm Anīs, Tammām Ḥassān, generative linguistics, Māzin al-Wa'r, Khalīl 'Umāyrah.

Introduction

Classical Arabic grammar took shape in a scholarly environment whose primary concern was to serve the Qur'ānic text and safeguard the tongue of the Arabs. Consequently, it was dominated by a prescriptive, rule-codifying character, and it managed to maintain its coherence for many centuries. However, the major transformations witnessed by the human sciences in the twentieth century,

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together with the emergence of linguistics as an independent discipline with its own tools and concepts, reopened serious questions about the usefulness of this grammar and the limits of its ability to account for living linguistic phenomena.

With the rise of the descriptive method and then transformational-generative linguistics, attention shifted from language as it is “taught in classical treatises” to language as it is “used in reality,” and from searching for causes and interpretive justifications to observing structure and usage. This shift resonated in the Arabic grammatical milieu, where critiques of traditional grammar multiplied: its association with Aristotelian logic; its reliance on specific texts; its restriction of the temporal and spatial environment deemed valid for citation; and its conflation of the levels of phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics.

From here emerges the problem of this article, which can be formulated in the following central question:

How did the descriptive method and transformational-generative linguistics contribute both theoretically and procedurally to reshaping modern Arabic grammatical studies, through the models of Ibrāhīm Anīs, Tammām Ḥassān, Māzin al-Wa‘r, and Khalīl ‘Umāyrah?

This problem branches into a number of subsidiary questions, such as:

- What is the nature of the critique that Arab descriptivists directed at traditional grammar, and how was it received within modern Arabic grammatical studies?
- How did Ibrāhīm Anīs formulate his position on i‘rāb and the ‘āmil? To what extent was this position influenced by historical linguistics?
- How did Tammām Ḥassān reconstruct the grammatical system by relying on the theory of clues instead of the theory of the ‘āmil?
- Did the generative/transformational applications of Māzin al-Wa‘r and ‘Umāyrah succeed in offering a new reading of Arabic syntactic structure without rupturing its roots?

Accordingly, the article aims to:

- Describe the most important features of the transformation in Arabic grammatical studies in light of the descriptive method and generative linguistics.
- Analyze the grammatical conceptions of Ibrāhīm Anīs and Tammām Ḥassān, with a focus on i‘rāb, the ‘āmil, and the concept of qarā’in.
- Evaluate the contributions of Māzin al-Wa‘r and Khalīl ‘Umāyrah in employing transformational-generative theory in the study of the Arabic sentence.
- Clarify the nature of the relationship between the grammatical heritage and modern linguistic scholarship: is it a rupture, or renewal from within?

To achieve these aims, the study adopts a descriptive-analytical approach: it examines the texts of these scholars, compares their premises and tools, and situates them within their broader theoretical context in contemporary linguistics while striving for a balanced reading that does not blindly side with either the old or the new

1.The Descriptive Method and the Transformations of Arabic Grammatical Studies

Following the course of Arabic grammatical study makes it clear that speaking of the descriptive method is not a mere theoretical luxury; rather, it is part of a deep shift in the very way language is approached.

Classical Arabic grammar arose within a specific historical and epistemic context. Its first aim was to understand the Qur’ānic text and regulate the language of revelation, it then proceeded to survey the language of poetry and oratory in order to infer rules that would safeguard the soundness of Arabic expression. For that reason, this grammar remained tied to religious and civilizational purposes and to a normative view of language which privileges the ancient “eloquent” text over changing everyday usage.

With the development of modern linguistics in the West, a sharp critique emerged of what came to be called “traditional grammar,” as opposed to descriptive structural grammar. This critique rested on accusing it of subjectivity, preoccupation with causal explanation and interpretive justification, neglect of language as it is actually used, and; moreover ,confusing levels of linguistic analysis. When the descriptive method moved into the Arabic scholarly environment, these objections were reflected onto Arabic grammar as well: it was charged with being influenced by Aristotelian logic; with restricting itself to a particular linguistic level (the language of the Qur’ān and poetry); with tying Arabic to a specific time and place; and with lacking clear boundaries between levels of analysis.

Although these criticisms did not dislodge Arabic grammar from its entrenched position, they did reveal an urgent need to reconsider its premises and tools, and they opened the door to reform projects that sought to reconcile the grammatical heritage with the facts of modern linguistic research. Within this framework came the contribution of a number of Arab descriptivists foremost among them Ibrāhīm Anīs and Tammām Ḥassān who called for adopting the descriptive method in reading grammatical phenomena. Hence this section traces the features of the descriptive method and shows how it contributed to transformations in Arabic grammatical studies, highlighting the dialectical relationship between critiques of traditional grammar and attempts to renew it from within.

The descriptive method constituted a transformation in the study of language. It continued to strive to change the old grammar in a way that accords with objective scientific research; yet that old grammar has been firmly established and remains so across many centuries.

Modern linguists refer to the old grammar as “traditional grammar” (...), and descriptivists elaborate at length on aspects of bias in traditional grammar; hardly any study is free of such discussion,¹ and we may summarize these aspects as follows:

1.The fundamental difference between traditional grammar and descriptive structural grammar is the difference between the method of the human sciences and the method of the experimental sciences. Perhaps the most important feature of the old grammar is that it determines the rules of language on the basis of understanding meaning first; this means that rules are determined according to the scholar himself ,i.e., on a subjective basis. Descriptive grammar, by contrast, bases its analysis of language on the interrelation of a phenomenon with other phenomena (...) and thus proceeds by an objective method.

2.Traditional grammar is primarily concerned with identifying the cause (‘illa), whereas descriptive grammar’s only concern is to report linguistic facts as indicated by observation.²

3.Traditional grammar did not distinguish between written and spoken language. Indeed, it focused its attention on the written language more precisely, on certain specific types of it. As a result, it presented rules on a normative and aesthetic (evaluative) basis.

4.Traditional grammar greatly confused the levels of linguistic analysis.

These are some aspects of traditional Western European grammar.

When the descriptive method moved into Arabic grammatical study, the very criticisms that descriptivists had leveled at traditional European grammar began to appear in most modern works addressing Arabic grammar. For the most part, they focus on the following:

1.Arabic grammar was influenced by Aristotelian logic from its earliest stages, and this influence became dominant in later centuries. This led to grammar becoming formal rather than empirical; consequently, it became concerned with causal explanation, positing and ellipsis, and interpretive justification, and did not focus its study on actual linguistic usage as it is.

2.Arabic grammar did not codify Arabic as its speakers actually use it; rather, it codified a particular Arabic represented in a specific level of speech—most often poetry or a Qur’ānic text. This resulted in ancient grammarians ranking Arabic speech in degrees according to its occurrence within that particular level of language(...).

That said, things should be understood in their context. Arabic grammar arose like other Islamic sciences in order to understand the Noble Qur’ānic text. The language to which grammarians devoted

their attention was precisely this text, which is the basis of rulings in Islamic life and which is also a linguistic miracle. Hence their recourse to literary texts, especially poetic ones, in order to extract the laws governing the Arabic in which the Noble Qur'ān was revealed. We consider this necessary for understanding the nature of Arabic grammar and placing it in its proper framework.

Moreover, the judgment that grammarians relied on this particular level of language contains something of truth and something of exaggeration; in reality, grammarians did not derive all their rules from texts alone, but also remained connected to linguistic life in its broader sense.

3. Along with restricting the level of language for which it codified rules, Arabic grammar also restricted the spatial and temporal environment of that language: it linked it to the deserts of Najd, the Ḥijāz, and Tihāmah, and to particular tribes not affected by urban life (...). This spatial restriction was accompanied by a temporal restriction as well: they set the "age of citation" as ending with the late Umayyad period (...). All of this made it according to them a grammar that does not represent all of Arabic, but rather one side of it (...).

In fact, this follows from what has already been clarified: the aim was to understand the Qur'ānic text, and that is what led to restricting a specific linguistic level, and restricting a specific time and place for that level.

4. Arabic grammar did not draw clear boundaries between the levels of linguistic analysis; rather, these levels were heavily intermingled.³

When the descriptive method moved into Arabic grammatical study, these criticisms taken by descriptivists against traditional European grammar began to appear in most modern writings that addressed Arabic grammar, and they largely focus on the following:⁴

- Arabic grammar was influenced by Aristotelian logic from its earliest stages, and this influence became dominant in later centuries. This made grammar formal rather than empirical; hence it became concerned with causal explanation, positing and ellipsis, and interpretive interpretation, and did not focus its study on linguistic usage as it is.

- Arabic grammar did not codify Arabic as its speakers actually speak it; rather, it codified a particular Arabic represented in a specific level of speech most often poetry or a Qur'ānic text. Consequently, ancient grammarians ranked Arabic speech in degrees according to its occurrence in that special level of language (...). Still, things should be understood in their context: Arabic grammar arose like other Islamic sciences to understand the Noble Qur'ānic text. The language to which grammarians directed their attention was that text, which is the basis of rulings in Islamic life and which is also a linguistic miracle; hence their orientation toward literary texts, especially poetic ones.

And in order to extract the laws governing the Arabic in which the Noble Qur'ān was revealed, and we believe this is necessary for understanding the nature of Arabic grammar and placing it in its proper framework. Moreover, the claim that grammarians relied on that particular level of language is partly true and partly overstated; in reality, grammarians did not take all their rules from texts alone, but also remained connected to linguistic life in its broad sense.

- Along with restricting the level of language for which it codified rules, Arabic grammar also restricted the spatial and temporal environment of that language: it linked it to the deserts of Najd, the Ḥijāz, and Tihāmah, and to specific tribes not influenced by urban life (...). This spatial restriction was accompanied by another temporal restriction, as they set the end of the "age of citation" to the late Umayyad period (...). All of this made it according to them a grammar that does not represent Arabic as a whole, but rather one side of it (...). In fact, this follows from what has already been clarified: the purpose was understanding the Qur'ān, which is what led to restricting a specific linguistic level and restricting a specific time and place for that level.

- Arabic grammar did not clearly demarcate the levels of linguistic analysis; rather, these levels were heavily intermingled.⁵

These are some of the criticisms directed at Arabic grammar. They did not affect its rootedness and stature, and many of them have been answered; the relevant responses can be found in books devoted to this topic. One may refer, for instance, to Dr. Ibrāhīm al-Sammarā's Arabic Grammar in the Face

of the Age (al-naḥw al-‘arabī fī muwājahat al-‘aṣr). This is not our subject here; rather, we have only sought to pave the way for what follows and to clarify the ground that prepared for the emergence and development of modern Arabic grammatical study.

For these aspects of descriptivists’ critique of Arabic grammar reveal a clear influence of Western descriptivists’ critique of traditional grammar. The thrust of these criticisms is to go beyond that grammar and replace it with the descriptive method—the method adopted by Arab descriptivists who called for embracing it as an alternative to Arabic grammar. Among those we may mention are Ibrāhīm Anīs and Tammām Ḥassān.

In sum, it becomes clear that the descriptive method did not come to Arabic grammatical study from nowhere, nor was it merely a passing scholarly fashion. Rather, it represented a response to broader transformations in the human sciences, and a shift from viewing grammar as a closed formal system to treating it as an analysis of usage phenomena in their living contexts. Yet the descriptivists’ critique of Arabic grammar while right to draw attention to certain shortcomings, such as excessive reliance on causal explanation, captivity to a particular logic, and restricting the time and place deemed valid for citation often overlooked the epistemic context in which this grammar arose: the service of the Qur’ānic text and of Arabic at a decisive moment in its history the regulate

Accordingly, one may say that the descriptivists’ argument was not sufficient to topple or surpass Arabic grammar as much as it served as a powerful impetus to review it, correct its course, and renew its tools and concepts in light of modern linguistic approaches without severing kinship with its heritage foundations. Thus the dialogue between traditional grammar and the descriptive method became a framework that generated many renewal projects in the work of figures such as Ibrāhīm Anīs and Tammām Ḥassān, and contributed to shaping the contours of modern Arabic grammatical study. On this methodological ground, the following sections will be built, as we trace how the descriptive method was employed in reading Arabic syntactic structure and in the attempt to construct a grammar that both accommodates the heritage and remains connected to linguistic reality and the usage of its speakers at one and the same time.

2. Ibrāhīm Anīs and the Transformations of Arabic Grammatical Study in Light of Modern Linguistics

Among the grammatical concepts that descriptivists were unanimous in criticizing are the theories of inflection (i‘rāb) and governance (‘āmil), in a serious attempt to rid Arabic grammar of them, given so they argue their philosophical frame of reference. Ibrāhīm Anīs was among those descriptivists who set out his position on the theory of i‘rāb in his book “On the Secrets of Language”, under the prominent heading: “The Story of I‘rāb

In summary, his view is that case-vowel endings carry no semantic value. He argues that the inflectional vowels did not determine meanings in the minds of the ancient Arabs, as grammarians claimed; rather, they were no more than vowels often needed to connect words to one another (...). As evidence that there is no relationship between the meanings of speech and inflectional vowels, he suggests that we read a short news item in a newspaper to a man with no exposure to grammar whatsoever: you will see that he understands its meaning perfectly, even if we deliberately confuse the case endings raising what should be accusative, or putting the nominative in the accusative or genitive.⁶

Yet this view did not escape criticism, for it was influenced by the historical method in a way that led him to build his claim about i‘rāb on data from historical linguistics, reconsidering what Arab grammarians had inferred from a synchronic perspective. He concluded that i‘rāb is not present in dialects, and is not clearly and convincingly present in other Semitic languages either; thus, it was not present in Classical Arabic, and what was taken as i‘rāb in grammar books is in fact derived from the disagreements among grammarians.⁷

3. Transformations in Arabic Grammatical Study with Tammām Ḥassān: From the Theory of the 'Āmil to the Theory of Clues (Qarā'in)

Tammām Ḥassān studied linguistics at an English university during a period in which linguistics had reached maturity: its major hypotheses defining its object and regulating its domains had been fully formulated, and he had absorbed the ideas of the descriptive method. This appears in his descriptions of two dialects: the dialect of al-Karnak in the Qena Directorate, which he studied for his master's thesis at the University of London, and the dialect of Aden in the south of the Arabian Peninsula, which he studied for his PhD at the same university. One fruit of this was his book *Manāḥij al-Baḥṭh fī al-Luḡha* (Methods of Research in Language), regarded as the first Arabic book to present the basic concepts of linguistics after its methodological maturation as established among scholars of descriptive linguistics; it was published in 1954.

His next book, "Language between Prescriptivism and Descriptivism" despite its engagement with Arabic grammatical heritage served as a complementary work to *Manāḥij al-Baḥṭh fī al-Luḡha* (...). Then came his third book "The Arabic Language: Its Meaning and Its Structure", which he devoted to critiquing the Arab heritage and reformulating it according to the descriptive method.⁸

In what follows, we attempt to address some of the issues through which he accomplished this.

First: The Question of the 'Āmil (Governance)

Tammām Ḥassān categorically rejects the idea of the 'āmil. He says, in effect: in truth there is no 'āmil; the nature of language makes it a system of "apparatuses," each complete in cooperation with the others. Each apparatus consists of a number of conventional syntactic patterns linked to linguistic meanings; and each such pattern aims to express a functional meaning in the language. Thus, if the subject is nominative in grammar, it is because the Arabs conventionally linked the idea of subjecthood with the nominative without any clear logical reason. It would have been entirely possible for the subject to be accusative and the object nominative, had conventional happenstance not proceeded as it did.⁹

In his critique of Arabic grammar's operational concepts, Tammām Ḥassān drew on Firth's contextual theory of meaning. This led him, in *The Arabic Language: Its Meaning and Its Structure*, to adopt the division of meaning he proposed and to assign each level its own chapter. For him, meaning divides into three branches:

1. Descriptive meaning, encompassing the phonological system, the morphological system, and the syntactic system.
2. Lexical meaning
3. Semantic/social meaning.¹⁰

Second: Components of the Grammatical System in Tammām Ḥassān

Tammām Ḥassān says that his aim in this study is to cast a new, illuminating light on the entirety of Arabic linguistic heritage, proceeding from the descriptive method in the study of language. This new application of the descriptive perspective, he claims, is the first comprehensive attempt to reorder linguistic ideas since Sībawayh and 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī; it inaugurates a new era in understanding Classical Arabic its meaning and its structure and helps ensure good use of it for this generation and those to come.¹¹

He organized his book into eight chapters addressing: speech and language, sounds, the phonetic system, the morphological system, the grammatical system, contextual phenomena, the lexicon, and semantics. What matters for our study is Chapter Five, on the grammatical system, in which he lays out its components as follows.

Tammām Ḥassān holds that the grammatical system is built on these foundations:

1. A set of general grammatical meanings, which they call the meanings of sentences or styles.
2. A set of particular grammatical meanings, or the meanings of individual "chapters," such as subjecthood, objecthood, and annexation.

3. A set of relations linking the particular meanings so that, when combined, they can express the intended meaning such as predication and specification.

4. What phonetics and morphology provide grammar in the way of phonetic or morphological clues, such as vowel patterns, morphological templates, and the forms of verbal clues.

Differential values or oppositions between members of each element.¹²5.

He further holds that i'rāb requires the results of phonetics and morphology, for we cannot except for purposes of research separate phonetics, morphology, and syntax in understanding. He emphasized this in his first chapter ("Speech and Language") when he likened language systems to the systems of the human body: just as growth in the human body depends on the endocrine system, the digestive system, blood circulation, respiration, and other systems whose operations cannot be scientifically separated so that one separates functions only for analytic purposes so too does the inflection of a text depend on the functions of sounds, morphological forms, clues, and the system of relations. One separates these only for purposes of linguistic analysis; in actual construction, there is no separation.¹³

Third: Clues of "Attachment"

Semantic clues¹.

a) The clue of predication:

the relation binding the subject and predicate, and likewise the relation between the verb and its subject (or deputy subject)

b) The clue of specification:

a major contextual relation from which more specific semantic clues branch: transitivity, accompaniment, adverbiality, delimitation, emphasis, concomitance, explanation, exclusion, and contrast.

c) The clue of attribution:

a major clue like specification, under which subsidiary semantic clues fall.

d) The clue of dependency:

another general semantic clue, under which fall four clues: adjective, coordination, emphasis, and apposition.¹⁴

2. Verbal/formal clues

These include: the inflectional marker, word order/rank, morphological form, agreement, linkage, pattern/system, particles/tools, and intonation.

Tammām Ḥassān holds that the convergence of all these clues renders unnecessary the notion of the grammatical 'āmil proposed by the grammarians.

We have sought in this section to highlight the most important features of Tammām Ḥassān's renewal project in grammar: how he analyzed grammatical questions by employing modern approaches, how he excelled in this, and how he reached conclusions that place him among the great grammarians such as Sibawayh, al-Jurjānī, and others.

In his famous *The Arabic Language: Its Meaning and Its Structure*, as in his other works, Dr. Tammām Ḥassān presented an integrated theory for studying Arabic that opposed what had become established from Sibawayh's time to his own. He rejected the theory of the 'āmil on which Sibawayh built Arabic grammar in the second Hijrī century and which both earlier and later scholars followed, and he formulated in its place the theory of linguistic clues (qarā'in), thereby surpassing Arabic scholars including those who had preceded him in criticizing and rejecting the 'āmil.

Sibawayh, in the theory of the 'āmil on which he constructed grammar, had treated the inflectional marker as the sole clue for understanding meaning; grammarians followed his path, with only a few exceptions among those who critiqued it, such as Ibn Maḍā' al-Qurṭubī in the sixth Hijrī century. Yet the matter remained a partial critique conducted within the theory, without being able to break free until Tammām Ḥassān did so: he reformulated the entire Arabic grammatical system on the basis of the idea that multiple linguistic clues jointly determine meaning, and that the inflectional marker does not determine it alone. He regarded the case ending as merely one clue that may disappear in some situations and thus cannot, by itself, determine meaning.

With this theory, Ḥassān built a coherent grammatical system founded on semantic and verbal clues. Whereas grammar had been viewed by many as mere syntactic parsing (i' rāb), this new theory carries major significance one that becomes fully apparent only when its applications to understanding and interpreting the Noble Qur'ān are read. This is what Tammām Ḥassān accomplished in his remarkable book *al-Bayān fī Rawā'i' al-Qur'ān*, a scholarly application of his theory.

”Applied Example: “Not everything a person wishes for is attained

We may add a brief literary example that supports the same idea:

We can observe the convergence of clues as well in the poet's line: “Not everything a person wishes for is attained”, where the following converge:

Semantic clues: -

.The clue of negation: the particle "mā" negates the universality of fulfillment and directs the overall meaning of the sentence before we consider the roles of individual words.

.The clue of predication: the relation between “kullu mā yatamannā al-mar'u” and “yudrikuhu”, insofar as the verb is predicated of its real subject (the person, al-mar') through an implicit subject understood from context..

Verbal/formal clues: -

.Word order (rank): the initial nominal constituent “kullu mā yatamannā al-mar'u” appears in the position of the subject/topic (mubtada'), followed by the verbal clause “yudrikuhu” in the position of the predicate (khabar).

.The inflectional marker: "kullu" is nominative as the head of the nominal structure, with the remaining elements attached to it structurally not merely through an “agent” that mechanically assigns case.

. Morphological form and pronouns: the third-person pronouns in "yatamannā" and "yudrikuhu" refer back to "al-mar'", tightening the semantic cohesion of the sentence.

This network of clues makes an interpretation of the sentence solely in terms of the "āmil" an incomplete interpretation, because grammatical functions are determined in Tammām Ḥassān's view through the interplay of predication, specification, negation, pronouns, word order, and morphological forms, rather than through an inflectional marker that works mechanically on words.

What emerges from the foregoing is that Tammām Ḥassān's project of renewing Arabic grammatical study did not stop at criticizing the theory of the "āmil" and demonstrating its shortcomings. He went further, constructing an integrated alternative grounded in the concept of "qarā'in" both semantic and verbal within a modern linguistic vision that draws on descriptive and contextual research. Our analysis of the components of his grammatical system sentence meanings and “chapter” meanings, the relations that bind them, and the cues provided by phonology and morphology shows that "i' rāb" is merely one clue within a wider network of converging markers, not the sole determinant of functions and meanings.

The applied example from the poet's line “mā kullu mā yatamannā al-mar'u yudrikuhu” likewise shows that understanding syntactic structure cannot be reduced to the action of a supposed agent that raises one element and assigns accusative to another, but must instead be traced to the convergence of clues of negation, predication, word order, morphological form, pronouns, and their contextual relations. In this way, Tammām Ḥassān's theory of clues represents a qualitative leap in conceptualizing how Arabic grammar works: it reordered its components in light of the modern descriptive method and opened new horizons for applying this conception to the Qur'ānic text and other Arabic texts achieving a careful balance between fidelity to the heritage and openness to the methods of contemporary linguistics.

4. Generative Linguistics in Modern Arabic Grammar

This new orientation by which I mean transformational-generative theory drew the attention of many researchers after it made its way into multiple cultures, and Arab culture had its share of that. This

theory began to become known in our scholarly environment from the early 1970s, and its entrance was accompanied by a number of serious attempts to apply it to the Arabic language.

Among the most prominent of these attempts are what Dāwūd ‘Abduh presented in his book “Studies in the Arabic Language” and his book “The Internal Structure of the Verbal Sentence in Arabic”; what Mishāl Zakariyyā wrote in “Transformational-Generative Linguistics and the Rules of Arabic”; Muhammad ‘Alī al-Khūlī’s “Transformational Rules for Arabic”; Māzin al-Wa‘r’s “Toward a Modern Arabic Linguistic Theory”; and Khalīl Aḥmad ‘Umāyrah’s “On the Grammar of Arabic and Its Constructions”, among other studies. These works sought either to employ the data and tools of transformational-generative theory in analyzing the Arabic sentence, or to uncover prior roots for it in the Arabic grammatical heritage, reading that heritage anew in the light of Chomsky’s theory.

In what follows, we will pause at some of these models in order to clarify the nature of the benefit drawn from transformational-generative theory in modern Arabic grammatical study.

4.1. Māzin al-Wa‘r and the Attempt to Build a Modern Arabic Linguistic Theory for Arabic Grammar

Māzin al-Wa‘r’s project represents one of the most prominent Arabic attempts to invest modern linguistic approaches in reading the Arabic grammatical system and renewing its theoretical foundations. His work comes in a context of growing awareness of the need to connect Arabic linguistic study with Western linguistic theory, without remaining at the level of mere reception or external exposition of its concepts. Thus, al-Wa‘r moves toward articulating a modern Arabic theoretical framework: open to contemporary linguistic concepts and techniques, yet at the same time faithful to the specificity of Arabic constructions.

This study of Māzin al-Wa‘r seeks to achieve two aims. The first is to contribute to clarifying certain Arabic linguistic concepts so that they feed into broader knowledge of Western linguistic theory. The second is to apply some modern Western linguistic techniques to the basic constructions of Arabic. By achieving these two aims, the study counts as an attempt to provide a modern, precise linguistic analysis of the basic constructions in Arabic, while at the same time seeking to expand the general theory of basic constructions in grammar.

This work draws its theoretical framework from three sources:

1. Transformational-generative grammar, as developed by the American linguist Noam Chomsky.
2. The semantic theory developed by the American linguist Walthrock.
3. The Arabic linguistic theory developed by the ancient Arabs in the eighth century.¹⁵

Māzin al-Wa‘r divides constructions in Arabic into two types: the nominal construction and the verbal construction, relying by his own statement on the views of the majority of Arab grammarians. For him, the concepts of predicate (M), predicate-of (M1), and adjunct (F) constitute the cornerstone of the Arabic linguistic theory of constructions, and the relation linking these components is called predication (isnād).

Al-Wa‘r’s indebtedness to Chomsky’s framework appears in his presentation of the grammatical and semantic assumptions of deep (or underlying/estimated) structure. In this context he proposes another element capable of converting the basic construction in Arabic into new derived constructions, and he calls this element the particle/tool (Ad). It may be an interrogative particle, a negation particle, a conditional particle, or the like.¹⁶

If these two formats represent the two sentences “a-aḍribu Mūsā ‘Īsā?” (“Shall I strike Moses [and] Jesus?”) and “ḍaraba al-mūsiyāni al-‘īsiyyayni” (“The two Mūsās struck the two ‘Īsās”), then through them he displays the estimated deep structure of the construction, using the semantic roles proposed by Cook in his classificatory semantic approach, namely:

)Fā) agent, (Mj) genitive/oblique, (Ms) beneficiary, (Mk) location, (Mw) theme/topic alongside the use of case vowels: nominative, accusative, and genitive.¹⁷

4.2. Khalīl Aḥmad ‘Umāyrah and Renewing Arabic Grammatical Study“ In Arabic Grammar and Syntax”

Khalīl Aḥmad ‘Umāyrah’s project comes within the effort to benefit from the results of contemporary linguistics in rethinking Arabic grammar and constructions, beyond the limits of traditional “school” frameworks. The author proceeds from the centrality of meaning in building the Arabic sentence, seeking to make semantics the axis for reorganizing grammatical chapters within a modern linguistic vision. Hence his openness to transformational-generative theory and his attempt to “domesticate” it in the Arabic context, while its terminology in a way that suits Arabic. In this context, his book “In Arabic Grammar and Syntax” is presented as a renewal-oriented vision for studying Arabic stylistic patterns.

The book offers a viewpoint on studying linguistic styles in Arabic in light of the results and data of contemporary linguistics, with strong emphasis on the meaning contained in linguistic constructions, in order to highlight it on foundations derived from Arabic itself and to make it the nucleus for reorganizing the chapters of Arabic grammar into a semantic linguistic study. In it, we have presented a new viewpoint for transformational-generative theory, in which we used terms with new, specifically defined meanings.¹⁸

After surveying leading figures in modern linguistics, the author addresses the Arabic sentence in Chapter Three, applying to it some data and tools from transformational-generative theory.

Definition of the Sentence in Khalīl ‘Umāyrah

Khalīl ‘Umāyrah defines the sentence as follows:

It is the minimum set of words that carries a meaning upon which it is appropriate to pause. We call it the generative (or “productive”) sentence (active participle), on the condition that it follows one of the sentence-building patterns in Arabic. It is “generative,” and from it branch two parts:

1. The generative nominal sentence, whose frames are limited to the following:

- a. definite noun + indefinite noun..
- b. interrogative noun + definite noun..
- c. prepositional phrase+ indefinite noun.¹⁹

The generative verbal sentence, whose most important frames are limited to:

- a. verb + noun (or what takes its place, overt or covert), as in the imperative.
- b. verb + noun + noun, or a noun accompanied by a preposition.

The Transformational Sentence

A change may occur in the above frames either in their morphological building blocks (morphemes) or in the secondary phonemic features (stress and intonation). This yields a shift in meaning and a shift in the label assigned to the sentence: the sentence becomes transformational in its meaning (for nominal sentences) or in its form (for verbal sentences). This occurs through transformational elements, including the following:

Reordering (word order):1.

one of the most prominent and clearest transformational elements, because the speaker may advance a morpheme whose place (in what is transmitted from the Arabs) is normally delayed, or delay what is normally advanced, to disclose how meanings are arranged in the speaker’s mind.

²⁰.He considers the sentence “akram(a) Khālīd(un) ‘Aliyy(an)” (“Khalid honored ‘Alī”) a generative verbal sentence with no special focus on any part of meaning; whereas “Khālīd(un) akrama ‘Aliyy(an)” is a transformational verbal sentence, produced via reordering so as to focus on the subject (Khālīd) for attention and emphasis.²¹

Addition:2.

by “addition” he means what is added to the nucleus sentence from extra words what grammarians call adjuncts/complements to achieve an increase in meaning; every increase in form entails an increase in meaning.²²

Deletion:3.

deletion is treated as a transformational element, the opposite of addition: when an element is deleted from a sentence, it becomes transformational, and the purpose of the transformation is economy/achievement.²³

4. Case-vowel movement:

case vowels in Arabic are original phonemes; an Arab pronounces them to convey a specific meaning, then changes them so that the new phoneme conveys a new meaning (...). Thus, changing them achieves what the speaker intends to disclose or express. If the speaker says “al-asadu” (with *ḍamma*), the hearer understands he intended mere report; but if he says “al-asada” (with *fatḥa*), the meaning shifts to warning.²⁴

Intonation:5.

intonation is level in declarative sentences, rising in questions and commands, and falling in lamentation and grieving. Ancient grammarians recognized the value of intonation in transforming a sentence from one category to another; thus, it too is a transformational element.²⁵

Applied Example: Deep Structure and Transformation in al-Wa‘r / ‘Umāyrah

1. In Khalīl ‘Umāyrah’s perspective: the generative (nuclear) vs. transformational sentence

The mechanism of distinguishing between a generative sentence and a transformational sentence as formulated by Khalīl ‘Umāyrah becomes clear in a simple example such as:

Generative (nuclear) sentence:

“akram(a) Khālīd(un) ‘Aliyy(an)”

This sentence represents, in his view, a generative verbal frame of the pattern:

Verb + Noun (subject) + Noun (direct object)(

It is a “neutral” sentence with no special focus on any particular part of the meaning.

From it, multiple transformational sentences can be derived through the transformational elements he identifies, for example:

Reordering transformation for emphasis/foregrounding1.

“Khālīd(un) akram(a) ‘Aliyy(an)

Here, the subject is fronted to highlight it. The surface order changes, but the deep relational roles (subject/object) remain the same.

.Deletion transformation for brevity2

“akram(a) Khālīd(un)”

The direct object is deleted because it is recoverable from context. The resulting sentence is transformational, because its deep structure still requires an omitted object that is inferred by contextual clues

3. Transformation via Case-Marking: Changing the Noun’s Function

“ukrima ‘Aliyy(un)

In this transformation, focus shifts to the object, which becomes the deputy subject in the passive form. The case ending therefore changes from accusative to nominative, while the semantic relation in deep structure remains (the “honoring” still falls upon “‘Alī”).

Through these examples, it becomes clear that the generative sentence in ‘Umāyrah’s account is a stable nuclear structure, and that transformational sentences are merely different surface realizations of a single deep structure, produced by operations such as reordering, deletion, and case-change in a way that makes semantics the central axis for reading these transformations.

This section shows that Khalīl Aḥmad ‘Umāyrah’s project in “In Arabic Grammar and Syntax” represents a serious attempt to renew Arabic grammar in light of modern linguistics while preserving Arabic’s particularity. He treats the generative sentence as a nucleus, and the transformational sentence as the product of reordering, addition, deletion, case-marking, and intonation linking every change in form to a corresponding shift in meaning. In this way, the tools of transformational-generative theory are no longer a merely imported framework, but an “grounded” system serving a more precise semantic reading of Arabic constructions and opening wider horizons for reorganizing grammatical topics around meaning rather than purely formal classification.

Results

1. The descriptive method as a response to epistemic shifts, not a mere “academic fashion”

-Presenting the critique directed at Arabic grammar shows that the descriptive method emerged within a general movement in the human sciences toward observation and objectivity, rather than as mere hostility toward heritage.

-Yet much of that critique overlooked the founding context of Arabic grammar serving the Qur’ānic text which calls for a more equitable reading of the tradition before judging it.

2. Ibrāhīm Anīs’s critique of i’rāb and the ‘āmil reopened fundamental questions

-Anīs argued that case-vowel endings are not meaning-bearers in the Arab’s mind, and that the link between meaning and “i’rāb” is weaker than grammarians portrayed leading him to doubt i’rāb’s centrality.

-This position was built largely on historical-linguistic data and comparison between Arabic and other Semitic languages, which made it itself open to criticism; nevertheless, it stirred stagnant waters and reopened some settled assumptions to review.

3. Tammām Ḥassān offered a coherent methodological alternative through the “theory of clues”

-He rejected the theory of the ‘āmil from the ground up, viewing language as an integrated system that does not need an external “agent” to govern it.

-He built the grammatical system on the convergence of semantic clues (predication, specification, attribution, dependency...) and formal clues (case marking, word order, morphological form, agreement, linkage, particles, intonation), thereby making “i’rāb” one clue among many not the sole source of meaning.

-His applications -especially in Qur’ānic analysis- demonstrated this conception’s capacity to explain many phenomena that purely i’rāb-based analysis struggles to account for.

4. A shift from parsing to a broader semantic/contextual system

-Under the theory of clues, grammar is no longer merely identifying subject/object and controlling case endings; it becomes a reading of semantic and contextual relations between components and the predication/specification/linkage that governs them.

-The poetic line “Not everything a person wishes for is attained” shows how semantic and formal clues converge to determine meaning, away from the idea of “a single agent”.

5. Transformational-generative linguistics opened a new horizon for reading the Arabic sentence

-Māzin al-Wa’r and Khalīl ‘Umāyrah sought to benefit from Chomsky’s notions of deep structure and transformation while respecting Arabic’s particularity.

-For al-Wa’r, Arabic constructions are formulated around the predicate / predicate-of binary, supported by semantic roles (agent, beneficiary, location, theme...) to reveal deep structure.

-He proposes the notion of the “tool/particle” (interrogation, negation, conditionality...) as an element that triggers transformations from a nuclear structure to diverse surface forms.

6. Khalīl ‘Umāyrah reorganized grammar around the generative/transformational sentence

-He defined the generative sentence as the minimum meaningful unit, from which transformational sentences are derived via reordering, addition, deletion, case-marking, and intonation.

-Examples such as “akram(a) Khālīd(un) ‘Aliyy(an),” “Khālīd(un) akram(a) ‘Aliyy(an),” and “ukrima ‘Aliyy(un)” show how surface forms multiply from one deep structure depending on the transformation, with overall meaning preserved or shifted in controlled degrees.

7. Renewal projects were not a rupture with heritage, but a critical dialogue with it

-Despite the sharpness of some formulations, these projects cannot be described as calls to abolish old grammar; rather, they attempt to renew it either by critiquing some of its concepts (i’rāb, ‘āmil) or by reorganizing its chapters around meaning and context.

-The grammatical heritage remains a present reference in these works: concepts are drawn from it and reviewed in light of modern approaches, not discarded wholesale.

Recommendations and Proposals

1. A balanced reading of Arabic grammar between critique and appreciation

.We should move beyond the binary of “glorifying heritage” vs. “demolishing it,” toward a calm scholarly reading that sees classical grammar as a response to a particular context, while accepting its review in light of developments in linguistics.

2. Expand applied studies of the theory of clues and transformational models

.Broader application of Tammām Ḥassān’s theory of clues, and al-Wa‘r/‘Umāyrah’s concepts of generative and transformational sentences, to varied texts Qur’ān, ḥadīth, poetry, and contemporary language to test explanatory power in practice.

3. Rebuild grammar-teaching curricula in light of these projects

.Benefit from these conceptions in school and university curricula by presenting grammar as a tool for understanding meaning and context, not merely a set of abstract case rules while simplifying concepts like clues, deep structure, and transformation.

4. Deepen dialogue between modern linguistics and Arabic heritage

.Encourage comparative research clarifying points of convergence and divergence between Arabic grammar and Chomsky’s theories and descriptive linguistics, avoiding literal importation of Western terminology or mere claims of “heritage precedence” without analysis.

5. Engage real corpora of contemporary Arabic

.Build studies grounded in textual corpora to measure how well the proposals of Anīs, Tammām Ḥassān, al-Wa‘r, and ‘Umāyrah align with actual usage of Arabic across registers (standard Classical/Modern Standard, contemporary formal Arabic, dialects.(...

¹- See: Ibrāhīm al-Sammarrā’ī, *al-Naḥw al-‘Arabī fī Muwājahat al-‘Aṣr*, Dār al-Jīl, Beirut, Lebanon, 1st ed., 1995, p. 22

²- See: ‘Abduh al-Rājiḥī, *al-Naḥw al-‘Arabī wa-l-Dars al-Ḥadīth*, Dār al-Nahḍa al-‘Arabiyya, Beirut, Lebanon, 1st ed., pp. 46–47 .

³- See: ‘Abduh al-Rājiḥī, *al-Naḥw al-‘Arabī wa-l-Dars al-Ḥadīth*, previously cited, p. 47

⁴- See: Ibrāhīm al-Sammarrā’ī, *al-Naḥw al-‘Arabī fī Muwājahat al-‘Aṣr*, previously cited, pp. 24–25 .

⁵ - See: Ibrāhīm al-Sammarrā’ī, *al-Naḥw al-‘Arabī fī Muwājahat al-‘Aṣr*, previously cited, p. 28.

⁶ - Ḥāfiẓ Ismā‘īl ‘Alawī, *al-Lisāniyyāt fī al-Thaqāfa al-Mu‘āṣira*, Dār al-Kitāb al-Jadīd, Beirut, Lebanon, 1st ed., 2003, p. 240.

⁷ - ‘Izz al-Dīn Majdūb, *al-Manwāl al-Naḥwī al-‘Arabī: Qirā’a Lisāniyya Jadīda*, Dār Muḥammad ‘Alī al-Ḥāmī li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzī’, Tunis, 1st ed., 1998, pp. 31–32

⁸ - ‘Izz al-Dīn Majdūb, *al-Manwāl al-Naḥwī al-‘Arabī: Qirā’a Lisāniyya Jadīda*, previously cited, pp. 37–38

⁹ - Tammām Ḥassān, *al-Lugha bayna al-Mi’yāriyya wa-l-Waṣfiyya*, ‘Ālam al-Kutub, Cairo, Egypt, 1st ed., 2000, p. 57

¹⁰ - Ḥāfiẓ Ismā‘īl ‘Alawī, *al-Lisāniyyāt fī al-Thaqāfa al-Mu‘āṣira*, previously cited, p. 244.

¹¹ - Tammām Ḥassān, *al-Lugha al-‘Arabiyya: Ma’nāhā wa-Mabnāhā*, Dār al-Thaqāfa, Casablanca, Morocco, 1st ed., 1994, p. 10

¹² - Ibid., p. 172.

¹³- Ibid., p. 185 .

¹⁴- Tammām Ḥassān, *al-Lugha al-‘Arabiyya: Ma’nāhā wa-Mabnāhā*, previously cited, pp. 191–192.

¹⁵- Māzin al-Wa‘r, *Naḥwa Naẓariyya Lisāniyya ‘Arabiyya Ḥadītha li-Taḥlīl al-Tarākīb al-Asāsiyya fī al-Lugha al-‘Arabiyya*, Dār Ṭalās li-l-Nashr, Damascus, Syria, 1st ed., 1987, p. 13

¹⁶- Ḥāfiẓ Ismā‘īl ‘Alawī, *al-Lisāniyyāt fī al-Thaqāfa al-Mu‘āṣira*, previously cited, p. 276

¹⁷- Ibid., p. 277

¹⁸ - Khalīl Aḥmad ‘Umāyrah, Fī Naḥw al-Lughā al-‘Arabiyya wa-Tarākībihā, ‘Ālam al-Ma‘rifa, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, 1st ed., 1984, p. 88

¹⁹ - Ibid., p. 88.

²⁰- Khalīl Aḥmad ‘Umāyrah, Fī Naḥw al-Lughā al-‘Arabiyya wa-Tarākībihā, previously cited, p. 88

²¹ - Ibid., pp. 94–95.

²² - Ibid., p. 26

²³- Ibid., p. 134 .

²⁴ - Ibid., p. 155

²⁵- Ibid., p. 173.