

# SOME REMARKS ON SIBAWAYHI AND AL-KITĀB<sup>(\*)</sup>

**Dr. Kong Il-joo**

Hankuk University of Foreign Studies  
Department of Arabic - Korea

## I - Introduction

In the middle of the 8th century, the Persian-born scholar, Sibawayhi, made a functional analysis of Arabic in his book, *al-Kitāb*, which has been used not only as a major text for Arabic grammar, but also as a reference book for Arabic phonetics and dialects.

The main western academic studies on Sibawayhi were, «A critical Study of the Phonetic Observations of the Arab Grammarians,» (1950) by M.H.A. el-Saraan and, «A Study of Sibawayhi's Principles of Grammatical Analysis,» (1968) by M.G. Carter. Prior to these articles was «Sibawaih's Lautlehre,» (Leiden, 1911) by Schaade. All of these studies on Arabic grammar were mentioned in the book «A Short History of Linguistics,» (1967) by R.H. Robins. Robins indicated, as did others, that sibawayhi's study on phonetics preceded modern western phonetics. The contributions to general grammatic principles by Panini from India, Dionisius Thrax from Greece, Alexandrian scholars, and the french Port Royal School in the 17th century, were referred to by many scholars, but the true value of Sibawayhi's grammatic study was not well-known in general linguistic history. Khalil I. Semaan (1968) said that Sibawayhi made a great contribution to general linguistics, aside from being unrivaled in the studies of Arabic linguistics and grammar. M.G. Carter (1981) tried to correct westerners' mistaken opinions on the study of Arabic grammar.

The purpose of this study is to examine some aspects of the Arabic linguistic traditions as represented in Sibawayhi's *Kitāb* and his contribution within the West's overall knowledge of the development of the science of linguistics.

## II. A Synthesis of Arabic Grammar

The uninitiated might ask : What did Sibawayhi do that no one else has done ? Why should we consider him as the father of Arabic grammar, and who was the pioneer in describing Arabic grammar? The answer to such a question is as follows : 'Ibn Sallam (d. 232 A.H.) said that it was 'Abū al-'Aswad al-Du'alī (d. 69 A.H.) who is regarded as the founder of Arabic grammar. However, some grammarians disagreed with him, arguing that it was 'Abd al-Rahmān b. Hurmus or Naṣr b. 'Asim or 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb who invented Arabic grammar. M.G. Carter (1968 ; 2) observed that the surviving poetry of 'Abū al-'Aswad reveals no particular reason why he should be regarded as the founder of Arabic grammar. We may point out that 'Abū al-'Aswad al-Du'alī was mentioned in *al-Kitāb* (I :46, 142, 169 296) not as a grammarian, but as a poet. Most modern grammarians, however, accredited him as the founder of Arabic grammar. In addition, 'Abū al-'Aswad al-Du'alī might not have lived alone, but with other scholars. So, there could have been a scholar who created Arabic grammar, another who produced linguistic theory about the structure of Arabic and yet another who developed it to what we have today.

(\*) I am grateful to Prof. M. G. Carter for stimulating and inspiring this study.

Sibawayhi, the last scholar among them, may be called the scholar having synthesized Arabic grammar. His papers on grammatic theory numbered over one thousand pages. Afterwards, his papers were synthesized into the book, **al-Kitāb** or, **Kitāb Sibawayhi** and was looked upon as the most superior grammar book **al-Kitāb** was the major Arabic text up to the 14th century. Its study of syntax, morphology, and phonetics is still considered the fundamental book of Arabic grammar. Conclusively, we can say that Sibawayhi first integrated Arabic grammar.

### III. Sibawayhi's Life and Study

'Abu Bisr 'Amr b. 'Uthman b. Qanbar, commonly known as Sibawayhi, was of Persian extraction. The date and place of his birth and death are uncertain. It is variously reported that his death took place in the years 161/177, 177/793, 180/796, 188 / 803 or 194 / 810, at al-Baydā', Sāwah or al-Baṣrah when he was 32 years old or over forty. It is clear from these inconsistent data that great confusion must have existed, for the difference between the earliest and latest dates given for his death is 33 years—a period that exceeds Sibawayhi's entire lifetime, if we accept the report that he died at the age of thirty-two. In view of these inconsistent data, it is very difficult to reach a definite conclusion. That Sibawayhi died in 166 A.H. Seems to be out of the question, for it is reported that he went Baghdad and confronted the Kūfan grammarian al-Kisā'ī in a debate that took place during the period of the Yaḥyā b. Khālīd al-Barmakī under Hārūn al-Raṣhīd (M. 'Ali al-Rayyāh : 134). Therefore, his death could not have been before 170/786. That Sibawayhi died in 194 A.H. is also unlikely for it is said that Sibawayhi died before al-Kisā'ī, who died while he was touring with al-Raṣhīd. On burying al-Kisā'ī, al-Raṣhīd paid his tribute to his memory by saying that he had that day buried the science of grammar. Hārūn al-Raṣhīd himself died in 193 A.H.

M. al-Shāṭir 'Aḥmad Muḥammad (1983 : 56) says that the year of 180/796 is the most appropriate to Sibawayhi's death. M. 'Ali al-Rayyāh (1975 : 135) tentatively concludes that Sibawayhi died in 177/793. Brockelmann, however, says that Sibawayhi died at

over 40 years old or 33. M. 'Ali al-Rayyāh asserts his death at 32, while M. al-Shāṭir 'Aḥmad M. says that Sibawayhi died at over 30 Years old or over forty. From these different views Sibawayhi seems to have died in 177/793 or 180/796, but most scholars generally accept the date of his death as 180/796.

As for the place of his death, it seems likely that he died in Persia, either at al-Baydā', or at Sāwah, or Shīrāz, probably at over forty years old. Whatever the case may be, setting out from Persia in quest of knowledge, Sibawayhi left his native country for al-Baṣrah in his youth, and started studying Ḥadīth (Tradition) under Ḥammād b. Salāmah (died 167/783). It is reported that Ḥammād was once dictating to Sibawayhi the following Ḥadīth : «laysa 'Abā al-Dardā'i», When Sibawayhi said «laysa 'Abū al-Dardā'i». Sibawayhi then said to Ḥammād that he would seek such knowledge. So Sibawayhi became a student of grammar and a disciple of al-Khalīl b. 'Aḥmad until he distinguished himself as a grammarian and wrote his most celebrated **al-Kitāb**, which indeed entitled him to be considered as the father of Arabic grammar. In his **Kitāb**, Sibawayhi constantly refers to the grammatical views of his predecessors, such as 'Abū 'Amr b. al-'Alā, Yūnus b. Ḥabīb, 'Īsā b. 'Umar, 'Abū al-Khaṭṭāb al-'Akhfash, 'Abd 'Allah b. 'Abī Ishāq and his master al-Khalīl.

Sibawayhi's **Kitāb** has enjoyed the praise of many prominent scholars. Of these scholars 'Abū 'Uthmān al-Māzinī said : «Any one who wishes to write a great book of grammar after that of Sibawayhi should feel ashamed of himself».

### IV. Sibawayhi's Grammatic Study

Sibawayhi's genius in **al-Kitāb** speaks for itself, for when systematizing the rule of Arabic grammar, he didn't confine his work to the enumeration of the problematical points, but rather elaborated them, giving examples of the various constructions of speech, pointing out the distinction between possible and impossible, correct and incorrect, good and bad usage of the language. Although in codifying grammar Sibawayhi gave priority to **Qiyās** (analogy), he also left the door open for **Samā'** or exceptional

idiomatic usages of the language. Further details of these *Qiyās* and *Samā'* are as follows ;

#### A - *Samā'* (Transmitted Data) :

The grammatical tradition was confronted by two distinct kinds of problems relating to linguistic data. The first was to distinguish based on explicit criteria what could and could not be considered as 'authoritative' (*Ḥujjah*) data-i.e. authentically representative of the actual use of the original Arabs. The second was to classify data according to their degree of relevance to linguistic analysis or to their status within the general system of the language.

Sibawayhi analyzed utterances performed by the speaker in order to achieve a specific conclusion from the informants of linguistic data. Sibawayhi's system of analysis presupposed that utterance was the final result of a sequence of operations made by the speaker. (G. Bohas, 1990 : 38). So he didn't analyze individual utterances, but groups of utterances.

Transmitted data referring to conventional linguistic materials were used by Sibawayhi. Because his knowledge was limited to that of his predecessor, he only transmitted it. And there has been no evidence to confirm if he had lived and communicated with Arabs. If he had gained his knowledge through field study, the grammatic disputes with al-Kisā'ī would never have occurred.

#### B- *Qiyās* (Heuristic Reasoning) :

The usual rendering of the term *Qiyās* as 'deduction by analogy' is rather infelicitous, for a number of reasons. The main one is that in many (possibly most) instances of *Qiyās*, the process of reasoning involved is by no means deductive but rather inductive. The problem is in recognizing a particular and usually quite singular entity as an instance of a general type, not with standing the peculiarities which it presents and which might obscure the fact that this singular entity indeed belongs to an existing and well-known class of phenomena.

What seems characteristic of *Qiyās* in all its forms is its heuristic character : building a *Qiyās* consists of exploring an unknown configuration of

data and trying to recognize in it a patterning already met, and which, in other situations, lent itself to analysis. If such a patterning emerges, then a *Qiyās* may proceed by assigning to the data of the new configuration a status similar to that of those entities in the reference situation which most closely matches the pattern.

It is well known that Sibawayhi was strict with his reasoning. He reasoned not from rare usage but from many common usages. But there have been instances in which he took only one example and generalized it to all Arabic dialects. Why does he reason from rare usage, choosing common instances for the objects of reasoning ? Because he transmitted from his master al-Khalil b. 'Aḥmad, without adding his own opinion. It is partly because he didn't know many Arabic dialects and partly because he transmitted linguistic data without discriminating truth from falsehood, nor examining them. If he had known many dialects, he would not have generalized individual and particular grammar. According to Carter (1983), Sibawayhi's grammatical analysis is similar to Harris's (1951) structural analysis.

#### V. Grammatical Theory

Now we can examine Sibawayhi's grammatical theory. The main difficulty in discussing sibawayhi's approach is that, contrary to classical grammarians, he never explicitly states the basic theoretical principles on which he works. His grammatic subjects appear so loosely connected that it is impossible to derive from them any clear statements about the object and methods of his grammar book.

Sibawayhi's *Kitāb*, as Carter (1973) has noted, is almost unusable as a pedagogical tool. Versteegh (1977) aptly describes it as «... a *Dīwān* (collection) of all the curiosities and *Nawādir* (oddities) of the Arabic language...». It is based on a coherent (though not yet fully understood) theoretical framework, but it is a framework whose principles are generally implicit and hence obscure to the non-expert.

So we will ponder over how Sibawayhi has stated his opinions in *al-Kitāb* to study his theory.

First of all, the sentences, «I came to know...» - 'A'lamu - and, «And I came to know... (I : 17,24)» are the parts added to his own views. Further, the sayings transmitted from his master or predecessors are stated, such as, «He asserted...» - za 'ama- «And he asserted... (II : 112, IV : 160)». Furthermore, his heavy dependence on al-Khalil is expressed, as in «I asked him---» - sa'altuhu - (III : 282, 312).

Ultimately, we can hardly grasp his theory in the expressions of «sa'altuhu» or «Za'ama» but only vaguely in «'A'lam» because there are no statements clarifying the principles of his theory. So G. Bohas (1990 : 47) and others are perfectly aware that their hypothesis still needs further discussion and many readjustments in order to be really adequate.

Moreover, it should be stressed that while Sībawayhi's originality appears mostly in the syntactico-semantic level, his morpho-phonology and morpho-syntax are basically identical to that of the later grammarians. So it can be understood that they failed to perceive what was most original in the *Kitāb*.

Nonetheless, Carter (1983 : 243) points out that «We have to recognize the remarkable similarity between Sībawayhi's goal and methodology and those of the twentieth century linguists». He adds that «Had Sībawayhi been born in this century, he would have been ranked between De Saussure and Bloomfield.»

## VI. Conclusion

Sībawayhi's *al-Kitāb* has been the basic of Arabic grammar and linguistics. It shows Sībawayhi's thoughts and views, though they may have been transmitted from his predecessors. Combined with the annotations of his predecessors' view, Sībawayhi's grammar is difficult for us to understand. Moreover, his own theory of and contribution to grammar are not entirely clear, due

to his combining his own views with those of his predecessors.

Nonetheless, *al-Kitāb* reveals Sībawayhi's originality with his methodology of phonetics as well as syntax and morphology. (Kong Il-joo, 1989 : 276-7). In particular, that most of the latter chapters are assigned to morphology, proves his perceiving of the importance of Arabic morphology and his excellent linguistic views.

Thus *al-Kitāb* has been a critical book for Arabic scholars and contributed to the study of rhetoric and dialects as well as to Arabic grammar and phonetics. Many of Sībawayhi's later scholars have focussed transcribing it as it is. For example, 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (d.471 A.H.) cited it in his writing of rhetoric, and 'Abū Maṣṣūr al-Tha 'alībī in his book of linguistics.

The methods of Sībawayhi's grammatic study are different from those of succeeding grammarians, still more classifying the themes of grammar and dividing chapters. He has categorized the contents of grammar primarily through reasoning. That it cites many examples from Qur'ān or Arabic poetry or prose to expound Arabic grammar is the greatest merit of *al-Kitāb*. Sībawayhi has integrated Arabic grammar in *al-Kitāb* primarily with the dialect of Ḥijāz, mixing grammatic contents with rhetoric and referring frequently to his predecessors' sayings, in particular al-Khalil b. 'Ahmad al-Farāhīdī's. We can also see the terms of law and ethics in *al-Kitāb* (M.G. Carter, 1968 : 326), which probably resulted from his majoring law at first.

In conclusion, *al-Kitāb* is a treasure book of Arabic grammar and linguistics, and Sībawayhi is the scholar who first integrated Arabic grammar, and who was praised by later grammarians. Considering that this achievement took place in the 8th century, we can say that his study of grammar is not inferior to any westernes'.

\* \* \*

## Bibliography

- 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī, 'Asrār al-Balaghah, Cairo : Maṭba'at Muḥammad 'Alī Ṣubayḥ wa-'Awlādihi.
- 'Abduhu al-Rājihī (1979), al-Naḥw al-'Arabī wa al-Dars al-Hadīth, Beirut : Dār al-Nahḍah al-'Arabiyyah.
- 'Abdullah Ḥamad (1992), Some Remarks on the Conceptual Foundations of the Arabic Linguistic Tradition, AL-LISAN AL-ARABI, N 36.
- Bohas, G., et.al., (1990), The Arabic Linguistic Tradition, London :Routledge.
- Brockelmann, C., (1959), Tārīkh al-'Adab al-'Arabī, Cairo : Dār al-Ma'ārif.
- Carter, M.G., (1968), A Study of Sībawaihi's Principles of Grammatical Analysis, Unpublished Ph. D.thesis, Uni. of Oxford.
- Carter M.G., (1981), Arab Linguistics, Amsterdam : John Benjamins B.V.
- Fawzī Mas'ūd (1986), Sībawayhi, Cairo : al-Ḥay'āt al-Miṣriyyah al-'Āmmah lil-Kitāb.
- Khalīl I.H. Semaan (1974), Sībawaihi, AL-LISAN AL-ARABI N.13.
- Kong Il-Joo (1989), Teaching the Qur'ān for Korean Languages Speakers, unpublished Ph. D.Thesis, Omdurmān Islamic University.
- Kong-Il-Joo (1989), Arabic Phonetic and Phonological Studies by Ibn Jinnī, The Korean Journal of the Middle East Studies, Vol.10.
- Kong Il-Joo (1993), Arabic Phonetics, Seoul : Songsan Publishing Co.
- Maḥmūd Fahmī Hījāzī, (1973). 'Ilm al-Lughah al-'Arabiyyah, Kuwait : Wikālat al-Maṭbū'āt.
- Muḥammad 'Alī al-Rayyāh (1975), Sībawayhi and al-Kitāb, ADAB, Vols 2 & 3, Khartoum : K.U.P.
- Muḥammad al-Shātir 'Aḥmad M. (1983), al-Mūjaz fī Nash'at al-Naḥw, Cairo : Maktabat al-Kulliyyah al-'Azhariyyah.
- Owens Jonathan (1988), The Foundations of Grammar, Amsterdam : John Benjamins Publishing Co.
- Sībawayhi (1993), al-Kitāb, Vol. I-V, Beirut : 'Ālam al-kutub.