Some remarks on arabic grammar : a first workbook by G.M. Wickens,

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This book resulted from the author's experience of teaching introductory Arabic[1] at the University of Toronto since the early 1960's. The material in this book was regularly used in xeroxed form by the author and other instructors at the same university. It is addressed to learners who "want to learn Arabic for a variety of reasons other than intellectual and philological interest: to read newspapers, or political and business documents; to study Islamic sociology, or the history of philosophy, religion or science; to use the Standard as the yardstick of reference for the practical learning of one or more colloquials". (p. 2)

This is an interesting book in more ways than one. It departs from the well-known and long-established tradition, predominant in most so-called modern Arabic text-books, of treating the Arabic language along the lines of the classical Arab grammarians, as though Arabic has ceased to evolve since their time. It is not an exaggeration to say that such grammarians are more concerned with 'codifying' the language than with describing it in its own terms. Wickens' attempt to address himself to the "hard recurring realities of the language itself" (p. 1), i.e. to adopt a synchronic and descriptive approach, is a welcome departure from the quasi-synchronic, prescriptive and normative approach of the traditional grammars of Arabic and so-called modern text-books based on them. Moreover, the traditional preoccupation with the 'rare' features of the language, or with what is normally known as 'the exception to the rule' phonomena in traditional Arabic

grammars, is accorded very little place in this book. Wickens'
aim is to present to the beginner the 'essential' features of
Arabic, and within this framework he realises that there is very
little room for the 'unique' or 'rare' features of the language
whose inclusion in a book of this kind would hinder, rather than
facilitate, the process of learning it. Such exceptions are, more
often than not, either the result of inadequate analyses of the
language or the outcome of an attempt, conscious or unconscious,
on the part of the describer, at 'codifying' it.

This book is also interesting for the view its author
expresses of the relationship between linguistics on the one hand,
and language teaching on the other. Linguists and language teachers
are both interested in 'language', but their interests are, to a
great extent, vastly different from each other. Generally speaking,
linguists are mainly concerned with the task of constructing
linguistic theories, and/or with the task of applying those theories
in setting up descriptions of languages. Language teachers, on
the other hand, are mainly concerned with the 'more mundane' task
of teaching languages. Of course, the language teacher is
interested in pure linguistic research in so far as the results
of this research may affect his field of interest or professional
operation; for the rest, however, the linguist and the language
teacher part company. For example, unlike the linguist the
language teacher may use certain notions or concepts which, from
a purely linguistic point of view, may be said to be ill-defined,
provided that these notions or concepts are of great practical
value in the language teaching-learning process.

Wickens adheres to this view of the relationship between

linguistics and language teaching. He writes (p. 2): "Because an inexact concept such as 'word' is difficult to accommodate in some languages and not acceptable within the full rigour of linguistic analysis, ... , there is no good reason to eliminate it from the practical study of a language like Arabic, particularly at the introductory level." He also points out that the concept 'word' is especially appropriate in the case of Arabic due to the fact that Arabic is the language of a "literate society, not a specialised and refined form-of every day speech" (p. 2). In the same manner Wickens gives 'notional' definitions of linguistic categories such as 'verb' and 'noun' in Arabic, despite the fact that definitions of this type are highly suspect in modern linguistic theory. As Wickens is mainly concerned with the task of teaching Arabic to beginners, and not with pure linguistic theorising, he does not hesitate to use "ad hoc purely practical explanations, hints and short-cuts" in explaining linguistic categories and concepts, because of the immediate usefulness of such explanations in the process of language teaching. The definition of the 'noun' in Arabic "as a name or a describing word for a person, a thing or an idea" illustrates this attitude (p. 40).

The book contains twenty-eight chapters in addition to an 'introduction', extensive exercise material and 'vocabulary'. The content of the book may be divided into four major parts. In the first part ('Introduction' and chapters 1-2) the author sets out the character of the course on Arabic presented in the rest of the book, gives many valuable hints on learning languages (these are presumably mainly addressed to the self-teacher, one

of the categories of users at which the book is aimed), and briefly
discusses the 'nature' of Arabic. In the second part of the book
(chapters 3-9) the author deals with the Arabic script. In the
third part (chapters 10-28) the main grammatical, i.e. morphological
and syntactic, features of the language are dealt with. The fourth
part, which the author calls 'Texts and Analyses', is mainly
exercise material; it also contains many valuable hints on Arabic-
English, English-Arabic translation, word-usage, spelling and
grammar. In what follows I shall discuss some of the points dealt
with in the book.

1. The Nature of Arabic

The variety of Arabic which this book aims to teach is referred
to by the term 'Standard Arabic'. According to Wickens, one feature
of Standard Arabic, in comparison with (Standard) European languages,
for example English, French or German is this: the "cleavage" between
Standard Arabic and the colloquials, unlike the "cleavage" between
European languages and their corresponding colloquials, is said to
be "one of identity". By this Wickens appears to mean that Standard
Arabic and the colloquials unlike, say, English and its corresponding
colloquials, form different languages.[2] He gives the following
arguments in support of this claim:

1) Arabic colloquials, especially those used in countries which
     are vastly separated from each other geographically, e.g. Iraq
     and Morocco, are not mutually intelligible to illiterate
     speakers who only know either the one or the other colloquial,
     but not both. Furthermore, they are said to be unable to
     understand Standard Arabic.

2) Even within the same speech community, Arabic colloquials are either supplemented by Standard Arabic or completely replaced by it in talking about technical subjects, for example "economic development and atomic fission" (p. 9).

The above claim concerning Standard Arabic and the colloquials and the two points given in support of it are rather dubious. To begin with, the "cleavage" between Standard Arabic and the colloquials is, to a great extent, similar to the "cleavage" between, say, Standard English and the colloquials. It is not difficult to find in English parallels for (1-2) above which are adduced by Wickens in support of his claim. The <u>first</u> point is more or less true of English. There is perhaps as much truth in the claim that an "Iraqi peasant cannot really converse with his Moroccan counterpart though both may be Arabs unless one learns the colloquial of the other or both learn Arabic" (p. 9) as there is in the claim that an illiterate peasant from John O'Groats cannot really converse with his Land's End counterpart though both may be English-speakers unless one learns the colloquial of the other or both learn Standard English. As far as the <u>second</u> point is concerned, what is true of Standard Arabic and the colloquials in this respect is more or less true of Standard English and the colloquials. If there is any difference between the situation concerning Standard Arabic and the colloquials, on the one hand, and the situation concerning Standard English and the colloquials, on the other, it is, most probably, a difference of <u>degree and not of kind</u> and, therefore, cannot be validly used to draw radically different conclusions concerning the two language-situations under consideration in this section. It seems to me that, for consistency reasons, we either extend Wickens' view of the relationship between

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Standard Arabic and the colloquials to cover Standard English and the colloquials too, i.e. say that the "cleavage" between Standard English and the colloquials is "one of identity", or we reject it for Arabic. [3]

2. The Arabic Script

Wickens points out that various letters of the alphabet form groups or families; each group or family is said to be characterised by a basic letter shape which is shared by each member of the family. Moreover, each basic letter shape is said to assume different configurations in different positions. Members of each letter family are said to be distinguished from each other by the "placing of the point or points" (p. 16) above or below the basic letter shape (emphasis Wickens'). For example, the letter family B which has the following members:

ب – b

ت – t

ث – th

can be accounted for in the following manner:

a) it has the basic letter shape   which distinguished it from other families of the alphabet;

b) the basic letter shape assumes the following configurations in the positions indicated

initially : ...ب

medially : ..ـبـ..

finally : ـب ..

isolated : ب

c) the members of the family are distinguished from each other by the "placing of the point or points" above or below the basic

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letter shape; this is, implicitly, the _sole_ feature which distinguishes between the members of each letter family.

However, the last feature is _not_ adequate with respect to the letter families established by Wickens, i.e. it is _not_ the sole feature necessary for distinguishing between the members of each letter family. To demonstrate this, I shall first give the letter families established by Wickens:

1) the family _B_:

        ب - b

        ت - t

        ث - th

2) the family _J_:

        ج - j

        ح - h

        خ - kh

3) the family _D_:

        د - d

        ذ - dh

4) the family _R_:

        ر - r

        ز - z

5) the family _S_:

        س - s

        ش - sh

6) the family _S_:

        ص - s

        ض - d

7) the family T̲:

        ط - t

        ظ - z

8) the family ̲:

        ع - ʿ

        غ - gh

9) the family F̲:

        ف - f

        ق - q

10) the family K̲:

        ك - k

        ل - l

Looking at the above letter families we notice, first, that the following features are actually involved in distinguishing between the members of each letter family:

i)   the presence versus the absence of the point or points;

ii) the number of points;

iii) whether the point or points are placed above or below the basic letter shape; and

iv) the presence versus the absence of the slant line (/)

and, secondly, that the members of each letter family are distinguished from each other by one or more of the above features in the following manner:

A) the members of the letter families D, R, S, S̲, T and ʿ are distinguished from each other by feature (i);

B) the members of the family F are distinguished from each other by feature (ii);

C) the members of the family J are distinguished from each other

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by features (i) and (ii);

D)   the members of the family B are distinguished from each other
      by features (ii) and (iii);

      and

E)   the members of the family K are distinguished from each other
      by feature (iv).

From this it is clear that Wickens' claim that the members of
each letter family are distinguished from each other by the "placing
of the point or points" above or below the basic letter shape is
not entirely true and, therefore, may be misleading to the learner.

2.1.   The Letters w (و)and y (ي)

Wickens treats the letters w and y as consonantal letters
in Arabic. This is in full agreement with the common practice of
the classical Arab grammarians. In this section, I shall examine
the assumptions underlying this classification with view to
demonstrating that these assumptions actually lead to contradictory
results concerning the consonantal status of these letters.

To begin with, the Arabic script is said to be made up of
two major categories: the alphabet, which constitutes the consonantal
part of the script, and the non-alphabetic signs including, among
other things, the vowel signs. The latter category, in contra-
distinction to the former one, has the following features:

1)   unlike the members of the first category, the members of the
      second category can be left out, as it is usually the case,
      in normal written Arabic. However, in cases where misreading
      of words is likely to occur non-alphabetic signs are normally
      used;

      and

2) the members of the second category are dependent on the members of the first category in that whenever they are used, they are placed in relation to, i.e. above or below, the members of this category.

Because w and y do not fulfil the above two conditions, they are said to belong to the alphabetic, and therefore, the consonantal part of the script.

Secondly, the letters of the alphabet are regarded as 'consonants' because they are said to represent 'consonantal' elements of the spoken chain. However, looking at the following tables containing elements taken from Wickens:

1) Some words formed from و - w

page reference	written form	consonants used	possible pronunciation including vowels
p. 27	وجــد	w j d	wajada[4]
p. 32	فــول	f w̓ l	fūl[5]
p. 49	لــون	l w n	laun

2) Some words formed from ي - y

page reference	written form	consonants used	possible pronunciation including vowels
p. 28	يبـس	y b s	yabisa
p. 32	ميـل	m y l	mīl
p. 32	ميـل	m y l	mail

we notice that w and y are used to represent elements of the following

type in the spoken chain:

a) semi-consonants in the first row of each table;

b) long vowels in the second row of each table; and

c) diphthongs in the third row of each table.

From the preceding discussion it is clear that the two features

mentioned above yield conflicting results concerning the status of

the letters w and y as consonantal letters. According to the first

features w and y are clearly alphabetic, and, therefore, consonantal.

According to the second feature, and on the basis of the correlations

a) - c) above, w and y cannot be said to be consonantal letters.

But how could one and the same set of letters be said to be

'consonantal' and 'non-consonantal' at one and the same time?

3. Grammar

The grammatical content of the book is quite adequate for an

introductory course on Arabic. The book covers a wide range of

topics in the morphology and syntax of the language. In some instances, however, the grammatical material in the book is not adequately treated; to illustrate this point I shall consider Wickens' treatment of the "attached personal pronouns" (pp. 53-55) and "agreement" (pp. 46-48). According to Wickens (p. 53) "attached personal pronouns" are suffixes which occur with, i.e. are attached to, verbs, nouns, and prepositions. This, however, does <u>not</u> exhaustively cover the 'privileges of occurrence' of this category of personal pronouns. In addition to the above contexts, "attached personal pronouns" occur with what might be called 'partitive' words, e.g. jamī ʿ , baʿd and kull and with the category of 'elatives', e.g. akthar, akbar, etc. The occurrence of 'attached personal pronouns' with the latter categories of words is common enough to warrant a mention in any Arabic text-book, including those, like Wickens', which are addressed to beginners. In dealing with "agreement", i.e. the "relationship between verbs, nouns, pronouns, ... , and adjectives" (p. 46), Wickens makes use of such terms as "higher animals" and "near rational" beings in stating agreement patterns. However, because Wickens does not explain or exemplify what he means by these terms, his treatment of "agreement" remains vague. This vagueness is bound to complicate the task of learning this portion of the language.

The grammatical part of the book suffers from two short-comings. The <u>first</u> is the lack of 'unity' in the presentation of grammatical material. For example, the 'verb' and 'noun' are dealt with piece-meal in various chapters of the book, which also deal with other features of the language. One gets the impression that the author never argues to a conclusion, as he constantly interrupts the

discussion of one point to deal with another. This may have the
effect of leaving the learner with a jumbled and unstructured
picture of the language, which can make the task of learning it all
the more arduous and frustrating.

The second short-coming concerns the lack of sufficient
examples to illustrate some of the concepts dealt with in the book,
e.g. the author's discussion of the "use of mudari€" ('perfective')
(pp. 51-52). It is true that examples are given in the section
"Texts and Analyses" at the end of the book, but this method of
exemplifying grammatical concepts is, in my opinion, hardly adequate
for learning a language, especially in the initial stages. It
requires the beginner to jump from one part of the book to another,
thus interrupting the flow of the discussion, to find the appropriate
examples to illustrate the concepts under consideration at that
particular moment.

4. Final Remarks

Some of the words and constructions given in the book are
not common in Standard Arabic, e.g. the words ajnad (p. 44), akhabaz
(p. 50) and musafara(h) (p. 131), and the construction shahran
shahrain and many others of the same type used in the book. The
construction al-hayawanatu al-hamli 'beasts of burden' (p. 130) is
not grammatical.

The following remarks concern the translation material in the
book. The author translates the word akbaru in the sentence hiya
akbaru minhu into 'taller' in English. Though akbaru is sometimes
used in this sense, it is actually more commonly used to mean
'bigger' or 'older'; a better translation of 'taller' is atwal in
Arabic. The words jarida(h) (p. 124) and balad (p. 130) which are

translated into 'journal' and 'land' by Wickens are better translated
as 'newspaper' and 'country', respectively. Another possible
translation of the construction kitābu al-waladi hādha (p. 61), in
addition to 'this book of the boy' given by Wickens, is 'the book of
this boy'; in other words, the construction in question is
ambiguous. Finally, of the two plurals of akh, namely ikhwa(h) and
ikhwān (p. 83), Wickens says: "First pl. denotes real, or natural
brothers; second plural refer; to figurative brothers, e.g. members
of a league or a club". As . matter of fact the difference in usage
between these two plurals is not as rigid as the above remarks might
suggest. The plural ikhwah is sometimes used to refer to "figurative
brothers", especially in political speeches, e.g. ayyuha al-ikhwatu
al-muwātinūn.

I have noticed the following misprints:

p. 71, l. 26 : the (;) between talaʿa and ittalaʿa becomes (:)

p. 75, l. 28 : 'then' becomes 'than'

p. 86, l. 19 : the first 'have' must be deleted

p. 119, l. 15 : hadd becomes haḍḍ

p. 138, l. 15 : mashūr becomes mashhūr

p. 144, l. 34 : batala becomes baṭala

p. 144, l. 39 : isbaʿ becomes iṣbaʿ

5. Conclusion

It is highly unlikely that the 'self-teacher' will benefit
a great deal from this book because of the frequent lack of sufficient
examples and general 'unity' in the presentation of grammatical
material. Even as a native speaker of Arabic and as a trained
linguist with some experience in teaching Arabic to English native
speakers, I have found the book somewhat hard to follow in some

parts due to these two factors.

Nevertheless, the book has many good points in addition to the ones I have outlined at the beginning of this paper. It contains many useful hints concerning the task of learning languages in general and Arabic in particular. It also contains many valuable comparisons between Arabic and English which make the task of learning Arabic by English native speakers, or by those who are sufficiently acquainted with English to be able to read this book, an interesting and stimulating task to pursue.

The book contains a useful amount of exercise material in the "Texts and Analyses" section (pp. 105-159), with many valuable hints on grammar, word-usage, and translation between Arabic and English, and vice versa. The 'postscript' is adequate and contains many useful suggestions on the major works on Arabic for the benefit of the learner who wishes to continue with Arabic at a more advanced level. The book also includes a list of all the vocabulary items used in it, written in both Arabic and English with page numbers.

All in all, this is an interesting text-book around which an introductory course on Arabic can be organised. Wickens hopes to "follow this grammar with a reader more or less geared to it" (p. 4). Such a "reader" would be most welcome.

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NOTES

(1) The term 'Arabic' in this review refers to what is traditionally known as Standard Arabic.

(2) This point is further complicated by the vagueness of the concept 'language' and bv the fact that linguists are not in full agreement concernir a general definition of this concept.

(3) For recent discussions of this point the reader may refer to El-Hassan (1977), Meiseles (1980) and Mitchell (1975).

(4) Elements representing _9 (w) and ﻱ (y) in tables (1) and (2) are underlined.

(5) The line above a letter indicates that the letter in question represents a long vowel in the spoken chain.

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