

THE ARABIC LEXICOGRAPHY*

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1. ABSTRACT

The present paper treats the development of the Arabic dictionary, not in a historical or chronological order, but rather in a thematic way. It outlines the major difficulties faced by Arab lexicographers such as the relation between the dictionary and the lexicon (or, in other words, the selection of entries), the arrangement of entries, derivations under roots, and senses under each sub-entry. Arab lexicographers have been trying hard to find solutions to these problems, but the ideal solution is far from being achieved.

On the other hand, this paper highlights the main characteristics of Arabic dictionaries such as the provision of satisfactory phonological, morphological and semantic information. Complementary information such as proper names, illustrative quotations, and subject labels are also provided and considered as an essential part of the lexicographical tradition of the Arabic language.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Needs and Prerequisites for Lexicography

Like any other intellectual or scientific activity, lexicography was initiated by specific practical needs, and was preceded by certain essential prerequisites.

Dictionaries are tools of information designated to satisfy precise needs. The great number of existing dictionaries in modern societies indicate the variety of needs they cater for. However, the original needs that gave rise to lexicography, although in its rudimental form, were limited in number and are still valid. Ancient dictionaries came into existence mainly to help people understand some texts of their own language, or to comprehend the language of other people with whom they were in contact.

In general, the basic prerequisites for dictionary making are writing and a schooling system that facilitates the acquisition of writing. Dictionaries are either printed or computerized, and in both cases writing is their means of recording. Societies with only oral tradition cannot

produce lexicographic works. On the other hand, the content of dictionaries indicates the level of civilization attained by the societies which compiled them.

2.2. The Arab World is the Cradle of Dictionary Making

The prerequisites and needs for dictionaries were found first in the Arab World ; consequently lexicography was first born there.

Cuneiform and helographic ideographic signs appeared in Mesopotamia (present Iraq) and Egypt respectively in the fourth millennium before Christ. The first alphabets were developed in Syria and Palestine and were the forerunners of the Greek and Latin alphabetic writing⁽¹⁾. As it is known to all linguists, the names of Greek letters : Alpha, Beta, Gamma, etc. represent originally Arabic words : ox, house, camel, etc.

The Sumerians sowed the seeds of our modern civilization in the southern part of Mesopotamia more than five thousand years ago. They developed agriculture, invented the wheel, designed writing, created schools, constructed libraries and produced rich literature and fine arts. Schools flowered in their many cities like Ur, Eridu, Larsa, Uruk, Kish, Lagash and Nippur.

In their schools, the Sumerian schoolboys used to copy lists of cuneiform signs and their explanations on clay tablets. Several of these clay tablets, discovered recently by archeologists, contain cuneiform signs and their explanations classified under subject headings such as professions, family relationships, the status of children, etc. Copying these lists of words served the double purpose of practising writing and acquiring knowledge.

The Acadians conquered the land of Sumer around 2350 B.C. and unified Mesopotamia under their leadership. Their great king Ḥamurabi (1728-1686 B.C.) chose Babylon as the capital of the new empire. As the Acadians assimilated Sumerian civilization and learned their language which was not semitic, the schoolboys had to use a kind of rudimental bilingual vocabulary containing the Sumerian cuneiform signs and their Assyrian equivalents.

* A paper presented to the Conference held in Colombo, Sri Lanka, Dec. 1992, on the occasion of the completion of the Sinhala Dictionary.

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مركز تقيمت كميونير علوم اسدي

شماره ثبت	١٤٠٤٨٥
رده بندی	
تاریخ	١٣٨٦ / ٣ / ٢

کتابخانه بنیاد و نهادهای علمی

N° 36

1992