

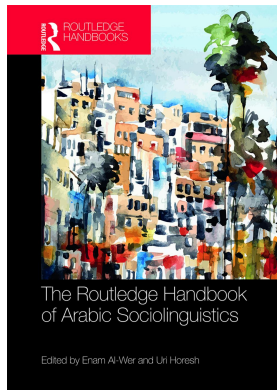
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3

VARIATION IN OLD ARABIC

Jonathan Owens

Types of variation

By ‘Old Arabic,’ I mean a cover term for all Arabic varieties attested in old written texts, as defined in Owens (2009: 4).¹ For typological purposes, these can be divided between non-normed and normed sources.² Beginning with the first, the oldest sources are the inscriptions, the oldest of which in Arabic script, Zabad in Syria goes back to CE 512.³ Others include the early papyri, some documents on parchment, which are attested from the earliest Islamic era (650/22, Hopkins 1984: xli). Among the normed sources are texts which consciously treat the problem of variation within the framework of an articulated linguistic theory. Here belongs the work of the earliest grammarians working in the Arabic linguistic tradition (ALT), Sibawaih and Farraʿ and the qiraaʿaat literature (Ibn Mujahid). The qiraaʿaat are nothing less than Koranic versions, which became ‘variationally normed’ in the work of the early 4th/10th-century grammarian Ibn Mujahid. In this work, seven ‘canonical’ versions were recognized as being equally legitimate Koranic texts (see the various works of Beck beginning in 1945 for a detailed discussion of the early history of this development). Within this last category, the nature of the earliest extant Quranic scripts (Diem 1976; Puin 2011) straddles the line between normed and non-normed language. An interesting genre is the lahn al-ʿaamm/ʿaawaamm (Molan 1978), which deals with dialectal interference in the Standard language. These works, however, either treat only a very limited number of examples, or, going back to the earliest work of this type (Kisaʿiy, in Brockelmann 1898), deal with variant forms which, with a few possible exceptions, have nothing to do with dialect interference, being rather of the type of work of Quṭrub’s *Muḥallaḥaat*, which deal with lexical confusion in the short vowels. Where Middle Arabic, attested via various sources including the papyri (see below), should be placed in this typology is an issue outside the scope of a short, introductory chapter. In this chapter I will treat the first category briefly, the second in more detail. Before beginning I will comment on the status of variation within the Arabicist linguistic tradition.

Variation in Old Arabic has always been recognized in both the Arabic and Western linguistic traditions. However, in Western scholarship, it has only been interpreted either in terms of concepts familiar to the West, such as dialectology, or in terms inherent to the works within which a western philological tradition operates, for instance variation in Koranic variants (e.g. the classic articles by Beck on Farraʿ, beginning in 1945). A major problem here, however,

is that there is still a great deal of variation attested in the corpus of Old Arabic which is not readily explicable in these terms (on a non-circular basis it needs to be emphasized), and even the basic constructs, such as ‘Old Arabic dialects,’ are quite problematic (see below).

In the Arabic tradition as well, variation is usually captured by the term *luyā/luyāat* ‘variant(s)’ (in contrast to its contemporary interpretation as ‘language’), often associated with areal or tribal designations such as *hijaazi*, *tamiimi*, *qaysi* and so on. While these invite the term ‘dialect,’ it is misleading to think that anything approaching a systematic dialectology was carried out by the Arabic grammarians. Rather, in the post-Sibawaihi era (see below) the implicit, sometimes explicit, *aṣ-ṣaḥiḥ* ‘correct,’ *al-faṣiḥ* ‘eloquent’ or *al-luyā al-ṣaaliya* ‘high variant’ standard of comparison is the ṢArabiyya, against which a number of terms may designate forms more or less deviant. The most widespread of such is *luyā* itself, which can mean ‘variant of any kind,’ as when Siyuṭi (*Muzhir* 97) gives lists of what he deems nonstandard variants of lexemes, such as *intaqaṣa* ‘turn pale,’ rather than *imtaqaṣa*, he terms the former a ‘weak variant’ (*luyā ḍaṣiifa*) without associating it with any entity whatsoever, dialectal or otherwise. On the next page, however, he says that *qurra*⁴ is ‘frog’ (*ḍafḍaf*) in some *luyāat*, which would appear to imply ‘dialects.’ A less-common term for Siyuṭi is *ṣaamma* ‘common.’ Otherwise, Siyuṭi has a set vocabulary, essentially taken from Sibawaihi (see below) which Siyuṭi used to designate sub-standard forms (*Muzhir*: 102–104) which includes *qabiḥ* (or *ṣaqbaḥ*) ‘ugly,’ *radii*? (or *ṣarda*?) ‘bad’ and *qaliil* ‘infrequent.’ For instance, in a chapter entitled ‘what is bad and reprehensible among variants’ (*Muzhir*: 102), Siyuṭi comments on variant forms of the 2FSG object suffix, discussed in examples (4) and (5), designating them the most repulsive pronunciation (*mustaqbaḥ al-alfaaḍ*). An initial look does not define a consistent application of these terms to one type of sub-standard form or another (phonological, lexical). As will be seen below, Siyuṭi generally applies Sibawaihi’s terms to phenomena which Sibawaihi himself never intended as ‘ugly’ or ‘bad.’ Instead, Siyuṭi exemplifies a post-hoc development of normative categories in which the primary criterion for citing variationist data was not a neutral description of the language, but rather a pedagogical-instructional motivation which highlighted deviance from an assumed standard.

Non-normed texts

Non-normed texts are either those very few inscriptions which were written in pre-Islamic times, or papyri, which are more or less close to Classical Arabic, but which can, though need not, display nonstandard features. The inscriptions are problematic both because they lack all *tashkiil*, marks for short vowels and other syllabic marking, and differentiating consonantal points (having been written prior to their development in the 7th/1st century), and because the interpretation of individual letters itself is sometimes ambiguous. Although the entire corpus of inscriptions probably amounts to no more than 150 words, a number of alternative interpretations are typically proposed for individual texts (e.g. Larcher 2015 on four different renditions of the text of Jabal ṢUsays 528 CE). Despite these problems, many scholars (e.g. Bellamy 1985) see in them Classical Arabic, replete with case endings and the indefinite marker *tanwiin*, though there is not the slightest physical trace of these in the inscriptions. One needs to guard against the tendency to describe not the texts, but rather post-Sibawaihian grammatical rules. In any case, the corpus, interesting though it is, is far too small to give us profound insight into pre-Islamic Arabic.

The papyri, on the other hand, are incomparably more numerous. Sundelin (2004: 4) estimates upwards of 150,000 documents in Arabic (including those on paper). The vast majority of these come from Egypt, the climate being conducive to preservation. Unsurprisingly, the

number increases from a rather modest number in the 1st/7th century to a much larger number by the 3rd/9th, whereafter papyri were largely supplanted by paper as a medium for writing (see Munich University website directed by Andreas Kaplony). As with the inscriptions, the texts usually do not indicate any linguistic features marked by diacritic points, even in the papyri attested after the standardization of these conventions in the course of the 1st/7th century. Linguistically, the papyri would appear to fall within the genre known as Middle Arabic. This is a variety whose basis is Classical Arabic, but which often exhibits nonstandard elements which today are termed dialectal. However, given that these ‘dialectal’ elements are, by definition if attested in the early papyri, as old as Classical Arabic, their historical linguistic status can only be evaluated using standard methods of historical linguistics.⁵ A case in point is illustrated by Hopkins’ (1984: 2–3) discussion of a partial Greek-Arabic translation of Psalm 78, dated to 200/800, though perhaps older. This text shows unmistakable evidence of lack of short vowels, including the vocalic case endings, the criterion par excellence defining Classical Arabic. Yet in chronological terms the text is as old as Sibawaih, who first defined the case system. Thus the papyri provide important insights into early Arabic, whose interpretation, however, needs to be undertaken in a larger comparative context.

Normed texts: variation in the earliest sources

It was seen above that by Siyuṭi’s day (8th/16th century) variation in Arabic was understood not against a living language, but rather against assumed deviation against the written norm. There are, however, three major works which treat variation in the early history of Old Arabic. These are the *Qiraaʔaat*, Sibawaih’s *Kitaab* and the Maʕaaniy al-Qurʔaan (meanings of the *Koran*) literature, particularly the earliest of these by Farraʔ. These have a special status in any consideration of the nature of Old Arabic, for two reasons. First, the three works are simply the most central to an understanding of Classical Arabic. Second, because of their linguistic sophistication, they offer us far greater insight into many aspects of Old Arabic than do the unnormed sources. As Hopkins notes (1984: 2), without diacritics, the papyri provide only a partial picture of the language behind the script. The three sources summarized here, however, have as their goal the description of many domains of language. For instance, Sibawaih makes it his task to explicate the morphophonology of Arabic in detail, and to inquire into the grammatical nature of the syntactic construction which he defines.

The Qiraaʔaat

The first source, in fact, is the *Qurʔaan* itself. For its first 300 years of history, the text, the *mushaf*, was known through a written text, largely, though not completely invariant in its consonantal structure, but unnormed in its treatment of short vowel marking, gemination (tašdiid), and various low-level phonological phenomena such as pausal forms, long-aa imala (conditioned palatalizing change of aa > ii, ee or ie in vicinity of front vowel) and various types of assimilation. The qiraaʔaat fill in the missing details by adding a great deal of phonological and morphophonological information. Taken together, there are vast numbers of variants, so that it was only in the early 4th/10th century in the classic work of Ibn Mujahid (*al-Qiraaʔaat al-sabʕ* ‘the seven canonical readings, or versions’) that all of the variants were categorized and classified according to their respective traditions. All variants were assigned to one of seven eponymous readers (*qurraaʔ*, sg. *qaariʔ*, Nafiʕ, Ibn Kathir, ibn ʕAlaʔ, al-Kisaʔiy, Hamza, ʕAʕim and Ibn ʕAmir), though within each of these standardized renditions is still

found a large degree of sub-variation. Further compilations recognized ten or 14 sanctioned readers (see Shah 2004). Any *Qurʾaan* today adheres to one of these variants.

The Maʿaaniy al-Qurʾaan ‘Meanings of the Koran’ literature

Ibn Mujahid’s compilation of the *Qiraaʾaat* reflects the product of several centuries of background linguistic research. Two in particular stand out. One is the *Maʿaaniy al-Qurʾaan* literature, in particular the earliest of these by Farraʿ. In this genre, linguistic questions of all kind relating to various Koranic passages were discussed. Variation plays an important role. One type of variation is meta-variation. A single Koranic passage might have two, or three, or by the time of Nahhas (338/950) in the mid 4th/10th centuries, over 20 different analyses. Meta-analyses can imply different forms. If *yayr* in the following (1) is an adjective (naʿt) to *alladiyna* ‘who.PL’ it is in the genitive since *alladiyna* as a *muḍaaf ʾilayhi* (possessor) is in a genitive position (Farraʿ, *Maʿaaniy* I: 7).

- (1) *yayr-i l-mayḍuubi ʿalayhim* (Q1.7)
‘Those whose portion is not wrath’

This same *yayr-a* can also be interpreted as being a circumstantial modifier, *qaʿf* (Farraʿ’s special terminology, roughly equivalent to *haal* ‘circumstantial complement’) and if so it needs to be accusative. In other instances variant meta-analyses have no effect on form. For instance, *yayr-i* can also be interpreted as a ‘substitute’ (*takriir* lit. ‘repeating, repetition’ in Farraʿ’s terminology) for *alladiyna* and in this case, as in the first, it is in the genitive. A large amount of the discussion of variation in the Maʿaaniy literature pertains to such competing grammatical interpretations.

A second type of variation records variation in the speech community. Right at the beginning of Q1.1 Farraʿ records four variants:

- (2a) al-ḥamd-u li-llaahi
(2b) al- ḥamd-a li-llaahi
(2c) al-ḥamd-i li-llaahi
(2d) al-ḥamd-u lu-llaahi

(2a) is said to be the consensus of the Koranic readers (*ʾajmaʿa al-qurraaʿ*). (2b-d) are attested among Bedouins. Farraʿ (*Maʿaaniy al-Qurʾaan* I: 3) gives a linguistic account of each variant. (1c), for instance, arises via assimilation of the final vowel of *al-ḥamdu* to the following – *i* of *li*.

Whereas the *Qiraaʾaat* come to us as a single, finished product – we have for instance no actual texts of what the reading version of any single reader was independent of Ibn Mujahid – the Maʿaaniy are interesting because development in this genre can be followed from author to author. Here there are clear differences between older and later exegetes, and between different individuals. In regards the first, the earlier exegetes – Farraʿ (207/822) and Axfash al-ʾAwwṣat (221/835, *Maʿaaniy al-Qurʾaan*) – were fairly open as to what could be rendered in the Qurʾaan. Farraʿ simply noted that whereas the readers chose (2a), other constituencies, the Bedouins, used (2b-d). There isn’t a hint of prescriptivism. Zajjaj (311/923, *Maʿaaniy al-Qurʾaan wa ʾiʿraabuh*: 7), on the other hand, introduces a dramatic stricture: only (2a) is countenanced in the *Qurʾaan*, and whereas (2b) may occur in the language

(kalaam), (2c, d) are not Arabic at all and are to be avoided at all costs. However, the march to prescriptivism took an interesting turn with Nahhas (338/950, *ʔifraab l-Qurʔaan* I: 170) who rather than follow Zajjaj's lead, fully endorsed Farraʔ' s four versions, even adopting his phonological explanation. Still, Nahhas marks an important innovation. While he accepts all of (2a-d), he does so with an implicit proviso: each variant attested must be associated with a reading tradition (isnaad) and with a sociolinguistic entity, a tribe or area. (2c) for instance is associated with the early 2nd/8th century reader al-Hassan al-Baʔri, and with the Tamim.

Our excursus into this first domain of variation is instructive, as it indicates how quickly the domain of 'Arabic' for the grammarians narrowed from being a variety which could be defined from multiple sources – muʔhaf, Arabs, poetry – to one effectively restricted to written sources (cf. Zajjaj's rejection of [2c, d]) and interpreted within socio-cultural constructs such as isnaads (verified chains of transmission), which circumscribed the independence of linguistic observation (see Al-Jassar & Owens 2015 for detailed discussion of these points). It is mainly in the very earliest grammatical works that one finds what one would call authentic material on variation in Arabic. In this regard, Siyuʔi's reinterpretation of real-world variation into essentialized 'good Arabic – bad Arabic' though interesting from the perspective of the history of ideas, is an instructive episode which reminds one that one must be very careful in assessing the 'original' state of Old Arabic on the basis of classical sources. These have their own history, and by Siyuʔi's day, it was a history effectively as far removed from the original sources as we are today.

Sibawaih

While a variationist reading of Farraʔ and the Maʔaaniy literature is long overdue, from a linguistic perspective Farraʔ' s task was the elucidation of a text, not a comprehensive grammar of Arabic. He cannot be expected to have provided details on all aspects of Arabic. This latter task, as is well known, was one carried out by Farraʔ' s slightly earlier contemporary Sibawaih (177/793). Sibawaih was a true linguistic genius. His level of descriptive detail is astoundingly high, his theoretical coherency is significant, his coverage of all domains of language encompasses not only the classical areas of phonetics – his phonetics is remarkably exact – (morpho)phonology and syntax, but also extends in interesting ways to semantics (Baalbaki 2008: 170–191), pragmatics and sociolinguistics (Owens 2009: chapter 7).

Precisely because we are inclined to think in terms of contemporary linguistic categories, it is relevant to define in what sense Sibawaih worked with variationist constructs. The basic perspective here is that for a given construction a number of variants occur which Sibawaih explains by associating with them various nonlinguistic entities. Some of these match up well with familiar contemporary concepts, like dialect,⁶ a few appear to have a sociolinguistic basis, but many Sibawaih associates with anonymous entities or entities whose identities are known only through the *Kitaab*⁷ itself – individual linguists, unnamed individuals whom he has heard speaking or from whom he has collected information or what he presents as universal information (see Table 1, 2).

As with Farraʔ, much of the variation discussed in Sibawaih is generated by his own linguistic or other linguists' grammar-immanent rules (see Owens 2009: 90–96 for extensive discussion of a complex set of these). Rather, like Farraʔ (see [1] above) it is defined by the logic of Sibawaih's conception of grammar. Some is also ascribed to poetic license (e.g. *Kitaab* I:

7–10, but also in many other places) which, Sibawaih says, allows forms which contravene grammatical rules.⁸ Indeed, Sibawaih developed a meta-vocabulary for evaluating variants including *muhaal* ‘contradictory,’ *qabiih* ‘ugly,’ *radii?* ‘bad,’ *kaḏib* ‘false,’ *qaliil* ‘rare’ (Ayoub 2011: 127 for schematic typology, Carter 2004; Noy 2012).

Even leaving aside such cases, there is a great amount of variation in Sibawaih. Most of this passes without application of his evaluative meta-parameters. The function, if it can be called that since it abstracts away from Sibawaih’s own immediate interests, in his grammar is in most cases not the documentation of variation for its own sake, but rather to elucidate the linguistic issue at hand. Examples to these points introduce the topic.

A rich set of variation is attested around the imala phenomenon (conditioned *aa* → *ie*) discussed by Sibawaih in great detail, (I: 279–294; Owens 2009: chapter 7). Sibawaih distinguishes different types of imala. The basic phenomenon is a conditioned change to /ie/ in the context of a high front vowel /i/, as in (3).

(3) *kitaab* → *kitieb* ‘book’

Another is an unconditioned change which occurs whenever a stem does not contain an emphatic sound, as in *naas* → *nies* ‘people.’ However, Sibawaih notes that Hijazi Arabic never has the first type of imala, and Tamimi only occasionally has it. The second type is reported to be rare among all Arabs. In discussing the imala variation Sibawaih associates particular usages with no less than fifteen different entities, who can be classified into the following groups.

It is in his description of imala where Sibawaih probably comes closest to expressing a generalized variationist observation, when he says (II: 284) that not all Arabs who imalize necessarily imalize all of the time, and that one speaker may imalize in a set of lexemes while another does so in a different set (Owens 2009: 207 for quote). Sibawaih essentially adumbrates the idea of lexically based social variation here.

Still, it is noteworthy that for Sibawaih the imalized alif ([ʔ] above, II: 452) belonged to the second tier of phonemic variants (see below), a form allowed in Koranic recitation and in poetry. Despite its second tier status, the phonology of imala commands more attention than any other single⁹ phonological phenomenon. Clearly Sibawaih was not guided in his choice of detailed linguistic description by what, from a post-Sibawaih perspective, can be seen as a fixed standard, a single, invariant *fuṣḥaa* ‘normed Classical Arabic.’ In his description of imala there is no intimation that it is a sub-standard, or a socially proscribed form. This, with qualifications to be given below, applies in general whenever Sibawaih offered detailed variationist

Table 3.1 Entities adduced in discussion of imala

Tribes: Tamim, ʔAsad, Qays, as well as Bedouins (ʔArab)
Area: ʔAhl al-Hijaz
Grammarians: Xalil
Readers: Abu ʔIshaaq, Al-ʔAamma (consensus of readers)
Unnamed entities: ‘those of reliable Arabic,’ ‘many people,’ people in general (<i>qawm</i>), some (people, <i>baʔḏuhum</i>), these (speakers), two groups (who have two different variants), conditional linkages (people who say X [e.g. those who imalize <i>miel</i> ‘wealth’] say Y [e.g. do not imalize <i>yaab</i> ‘he was absent’]) because the latter have imala inhibiting sound (/y/ in example).

analysis. To underscore this point one can consider the so-called *kaskasa* and *kaškaša* (II: 322–323). While nominally these are to be read as restricted to the realization of the 2FSG object/possessive suffix – *ki* as either – *ši*, –*kiš* or – *kis*, I have argued (Owens 2013), that they in fact are – *ši*, –*či* and (perhaps) – *tsi*.

- (4) *baytu-ki* ‘your-F.SG house’
baytu-ši
baytu-či
baytu-tsi

Here again Sibawaih discusses these without any hint of disapprobation. – *ši* is associated with the Tamim and ‘some Asad,’ while the other two variants are simply observed to be spoken by ‘some Arabs’ (*naas min al-ʿArab*) or ‘people’ (*qawm*). Indeed, integrating these variants into his linguistic thinking, Sibawaih reasoned that a form such as *baytu-ši* made more morphophonological sense than did *baytu-ki*, since in pausal position the latter neutralizes with the MSG, *baytu-ka*.

- (5) Pausal forms
baytu-ki → *baytu-k#*
baytu-ka → *baytu-k#*
 vs. *baytu-ši* → *baytu-š#*

This last point is worth emphasizing. It has been observed that Sibawaih was a descriptivist, rather than a prescriptivist as were later grammarians (Carter 1973). While one can fully endorse this observation if one should compare Sibawaih with, say Siyuṭi (see above, and below), it needs to be qualified in an important way. Namely, nothing in Sibawaih was pure descriptivism. He was not a simple tape recorder reproducing whatever he heard. Rather, all of his observations on variation needed to be justified and conceptualized against his own theoretical constructs. In the current case, for instance, he does not simply say that the FSG suffix has the variant – *ši*. He must also point out that the form is functionally grounded, for the reasons stated. Note that Sibawaih’s treatment of this construction is completely at odds with Siyuṭi’s later interpretation (see above).

Indeed, often Sibawaih’s own linguistic judgements obtrude into an evaluation of raw variationist data. Remaining with the same data set, Sibawaih observes that in the double object construction, the 2FSG suffix has two variants, –*ki* and – *kii*.

- (6a) *ʔu-ʕʔii-kii-hi*
 I-give-you.F-it.M
 ‘I give you.F it.M’
 (6b) *ʔu-ʕʔii-kii-haa*
 I-give-you.F-it.F
 ‘I give you.F it.F.’

These are implicitly opposed to the short forms of the 2.F.SG, e.g.

- (6c) *ʔu-ʕʔii-ki-haa*
 I-give-you.F-it.F
 ‘I give you.F it.F.’

This lengthening (6a, b) runs parallel to a lengthened – *kaa* in the masculine.

- (7) *ʔu-ʕʔii-kaa-haa*
 I-give-you.M-it.F
 ‘I give you.M it.F’

He then observes that Xalil reports that ‘people’ (naas) lengthen – *ii* in the 2FSG person suffix as well, before a suffix.

- (8) *darab-tii-hi*
 hit-you.F-him
 ‘You.F hit him.’

This, however, is judged by Sibawaih to be uncommon (qaliil). This is a term Sibawaih uses regularly, though ‘uncommon’ in what (general speech, poetry, Koranic recitation) is never specified. Moreover, it is not clear that the basis of his judgement is his own observations at all. He only comments on (6), saying that the short form is better (ʔajwad) and more common (*ʔakṯar*), because one does not need to lengthen after the – *k* and – *t*, as one does with the – *h*, i.e. the 3FSG *haa*.¹⁰ This is an observation Sibawaih makes on other occasions (e.g. II 163.15), whereby, since the /h/ is considered a ‘hidden’ (maxfiyya) consonant, it requires a long vowel to protect it, or make it visible. /k/ and /t/ do not require this support. A question which requires dedicated research in this context, is whether Sibawaih comes to the conclusion that (7) and (8) are dispreferred (qaliil) because they were, in fact, less common than the short forms, or whether, according to his linguistic reasoning, lengthening shouldn’t occur because, in his conceptualization of the phonological properties of /t/ and /k/, lengthening isn’t needed. If the latter, then indeed one is confronted with a prescriptivism, though of a linguistically more sophisticated type than Siyuṭi’s. One might term it, ‘theoretical prescriptivism,’ the preference of a certain variant because it better conforms to the linguistic system as conceived of by Sibawaih.

Against this background one further significant type of phonological variation should be noted, and that is the case represented by Sibawaih’s account of the (consonantal) phonemes of Arabic (II: 452–454). He divides these into three sets. The first are the 29 consonants (including the alif) known in Classical and Standard Arabic. The second are six further phonemes which are deemed proper for poetry and Koranic recitation, and the third are a set of seven proscribed variants, not to be used in poetry and Koranic recitation. Among the second set are those well known in contemporary varieties, imala variants of /aa/ and /ʕ/ for *jim*, for instance. The third set includes de-emphatic forms (e.g. ‘the *ṣaad* like a *siin*’) and, it was argued in Owens (2013), the /č/ variant of *kaaf*, though conceived of as an independent phoneme (or allophone), not as the reflex of the 2FSG object suffix (see above [5]). Why Sibawaih included three sets of phonemes is never specified (see below), and in this case, unusually, he does not give any linguistic-internal justification for the tripartite division. In any case, the inclusion in particular of the third, proscribed set is significant as it suggests he valued descriptive comprehensiveness above the establishment of narrow, fixed norms.¹¹ The interest of Sibawaih in phonetic and phonological variation is confirmed when one considers other domains where he provides fascinating, detailed accounts of varying realization. This includes but is not limited to assimilation of various kinds (II: 455–481), the realization of short vowels in pause (II: 307–309), epenthesis (II: 309), length variation in the two 3MSG object pronouns – *hu* and – *hum* (II: 313–314, 318–320), and specific variation in individual consonants, such as *ḍaad* (II: 452–453).

The discussion on variation in Sibawaih has to this point concentrated on phonetics and phonology. There is a reason for this, and this is that in all likelihood, it is here that we have the most direct insight into what variation actually looked like in the Arabic of Sibawaih's day. This is not to say that Sibawaih also didn't have a very significant amount to say about variation in morphology and syntax. Here, as noted above, grammatical logic plays an important role, though the entities to whom judgments on variation are ascribed are in principle at least the same as for morphophonological variation. However, looking at these entities around which variation was structured in morphosyntax, it is striking that tribal and geographical parameters are relatively less important than other grammarians and social institutions like the *ʿamma*, the linguistic consensus derived from the Koranic reading tradition. For instance, a similar set to Table 1 pertaining to the entities cited in describing types of noun modifiers (I: 195–207, Owens 2009: 209) mentions no specific tribal names.

Similarly, the discussion of *man* 'whoever, the one who' and *maa* 'whatever, what' as conditionals or relatives (I: 385–395, beginning chapter 245) calls up the grammarians (*nahwiyyuwna*) once, Xalil twelve times and Yunus, twice. Indeed, much of chapter 245 reads like a dialogue between Sibawaih and Xalil. In neither of these two cases are tribes or geographical areas mentioned.

These differences are not necessarily unexpected. A great many issues in morphosyntax turn on what the appropriate case or mode is, and the resolution of this question nearly always hinges on grammatical reasoning such as could be provided by other grammarians. It is probably not accidental that one term Sibawaih used to describe a disallowed utterance, *muhaal* 'incorrect, inappropriate usage of structurally well-formed utterance' (see Ayoub 2011; Noy 2012; Owens 2015) rarely if ever occurs in conjunction with phonetic or phonological issues. In the entire fifteen pages on the *imala* Sibawaih never resorts to any of his critical meta-vocabulary. The validity of variation in these latter cases could be decided by direct observation, whereas in grammatical matters an element of evaluative confirmation via grammatical rule, *qiyaas*, was always present. Thus, in his discussion *man* and *maa* is frequently encountered a range of evaluative terminology – *qabiih/qubh* 'ugly, structurally bad,' *hasan/husn* 'good,' *laa yastaqiim* 'false, ill-formed' these as above, but also *fihi ɢuf* 'a weak variant,' *yukrah* 'hated, dispreferred' as well as others.

How original Sibawaih was in incorporating observations from competing variants can be seen in two ways. On the one hand, Sibawaih's observations are often confirmed independently from other early sources. For instance, Sibawaih's 'šaad like a zaa?' (= [z]), which is listed in his second tier of phonemic variants, is also found in Ibn Mujahid (105), with *ziraat* for *širaat* path.¹² *Imala* is noted to be characteristic of the Koranic reading tradition of *ibn ʿAlaʿ*, though other readers are also said to use it occasionally (*ibn Mujaahid*: 145–152)

Table 3.2 Entities, noun modifiers

Arabs (i.e. Bedouins)
Grammarians:
Xalil
Yunus
ʿIysaa
grammarians (<i>nahwiyyuwna</i>)
Unnamed entities:
linkages: those who say X also say Y
common language (<i>kalaam an-naas</i>).

and is also attested in an early papyri in Greek transliteration (Psalm 78 discussed above, Hopkins 1984: 8). On the other hand, there are also interesting early indications of variation which Sibawaih or Farraʿ did not mention, for instance, the *idyaam al kabiir* tradition in the *Qiraaʿaat* (Mujahid 1979: 112–127), in which all final short vowels, including case and mode endings can be lost. This latter, though not found in Sibawaih, is adumbrated in Farraʿ (II: 12) (Owens 2009: chapter 4), and as noted above, can be read off of some of the papyri. Farraʿ, on the other hand, did not mention the imala of /aa/, even though he lived in the same city as *ibn ʿAlaʿ* a generation after him (see Kinberg 1996: 779).

On the other hand, not all contemporaries documented variation. Notable here is Xalil (Talmon 1997; Sara 2013: 523), who limited his phonetic observations to the 29 basic sounds. Here one finds a kind of negative confirmation of Sibawaih’s originality. Sibawaih’s observations cannot be taken for granted; rather they reflect a linguistic mind of great curiosity.

It is not surprising that later grammarians, at best, could mimic Sibawaih’s observations on variation, since it was in the course of the 3rd/9th century that corpus of Classical Arabic became closed to a standard canon of *Qurʿaan*, poetry, and the early grammars and *Maʿaanii* works themselves. There was no new variation to be found, even if later grammarians probably invented variants on the basis of their own application of *qiyaas*, as when Ibn Mandhur reports (*Lisaan* VI: 197) on the 2FSG variant – *si*, which is probably assumed on by the following analogy:

(9) -kiš : -kis :: -ši : X (= -s)

That is, if -*kiš* and – *kis* exist (see discussion around [4] above), then there must be – *si* parallel to – *ši*.

The fate of Sibawaih’s variation is an issue unto itself. It is remarkable that much of it was incorporated directly into later works of various genres. *Zajjaj*, seen above as critical of Farraʿ’*s* variational observations for instance, introduces all but verbatim Sibawaih’s account of the four phonetic variants of the 3MSG object suffix – *hu* (= *-huw*, *-hu*, *-hiy*, *-hi*) into his *Maʿaanii* (I: 12–14). Much later, as seen above, *Siyuṭi* turns Sibawaih’s dispassionate observations on the morphophonemics of – *ki* into a chapter on proscribed variants. *Siyuṭi*’s remarks are more interesting for what they tell us about the changing social status and perception of Standard Arabic in the post-Sibawaihian world than about the language itself.

Conclusion

The current chapter should be read more as a blueprint for what a variationist-based account of early Arabic would look like, than as a summary of a dedicated body of research with this topic as its focus. Nothing of the sort exists. It should be clear that the range of sources which need to be brought together are considerable, probably no single individual today actually having research experience across all of the domains of research mentioned here. Arguably the only person who undertook a holistic look at variation in the early period was Rabin (1951). In this classic work he limited himself to what he termed ‘ancient West Arabian.’ Significant though the work is, its very contradictions indicate the immensity of the task of drawing together different strands of research. On the one hand he suggested that West Arabian bordered on being a language different from Classical Arabic (1951: 2), but on the other admitted that actually defining any single West Arabian dialect was impossible (1951: 13). Rabin’s predicament is understandable against the variegated set of sources which need to be brought into consideration and the fact that even when they are, huge gaps may remain in defining familiar linguistic entities, such as dialects or sociolects.

This chapter looks at variation in Old Arabic as a general linguistic phenomenon, not one embedded in a particular sub-discipline, even if it is closest to dialectology and sociolinguistics. Such a perspective is unusual in Arabic and Semitic linguistics. To the extent that variation has been treated systematically at all, it has been shunted into traditional concepts, particularly dialectology, and, as with *Siyuṭi*, defined simply as that which is not Standard, even if this is a Standard defined in the post-Sibawaih era. However, variants which are specifically associated with dialectological entities, such as Arabic tribes, make up so small a part of Old Arabic that, as Rabin recognized, no dialectology of Old Arabic will ever be possible. As a case in point, Sibawaih's important description of the 13 second and third tier consonantal variants (see above) associates only a single one with a dialectal name (the backed alif, *mufaxxama*, of the *Ṣahl al-Hijāz*).

Where this discussion points to is that better understanding the nature of Old Arabic involves understanding variation, and understanding variation requires first of all a typology of what exists. The exposition serves as an extremely rough typology for this task.

While one can well imagine that such a study will establish its own individual standards and categories, it will also feed into a better understanding of traditional domains of Arabic linguistics, for instance dialectology by better defining what elements were and what were not conventionally understood as associated with a dialectal entity (tribes or geographical area), and, following Rabin, by delimiting the scope of what can realistically be defined in this regard. It is relevant to sociolinguistics for understanding on what basis those elements that by the 4th/10th century became standard were preferred over those many variants which did not. Closer study might also show that certain variants are weighted for prestige (e.g. Owens 2013 on lack of prestige of the /ʕ/ variant [4] above). It is very relevant to historical linguistics for distinguishing elements which were genuinely embedded in a speech community as opposed to those elements which simply were introduced via linguistic and philological reasoning.¹³ Establishing an historical pedigree is important in two directions, in one direction backwards, for integrating Arabic into the larger history of Semitic, and in the other, forwards for establishing a realistic connection between Old Arabic and contemporary Arabic. Even if a one-to-one match up between contemporary linguistic constructs and entities in the Old Arabic era is hardly to be expected, the degree of detailed correspondence between what is found throughout contemporary Arabic, and what is found throughout the entire variational spectrum of Old Arabic is immense and invaluable for reconstructing the language history (Owens 2009). The primary perspective that should be adopted is the following. Variational material in and of itself tells us something about Old Arabic and secondarily, how should this variation be contextualized, conceptualized, labelled for contemporary observers?

Finally, in terms of the intellectual history which defines Arabic linguistic thinking, focusing on variation will contribute to a more realistic understanding of Arabic in general by providing a basis against which the essentialism of later observers, whether Arab (cf. criticisms of *Siyuṭi* above) or western (see n. 5) can be critiqued in the context of the differentiated primary sources and rich linguistic thinking which makes the study of Old Arabic so interesting.

Notes

- 1 Not to be confused with the 'Old Arabic' of Al-Jallad (2015: 11–14). Al-Jallad combines Safaitic and Himaic with an unspecified 'Arabic,' apparently on the basis of ten isoglosses between Classical Arabic and Safaitic. This is a declarative not a comparative historical linguistic exercise which, roughly, collapses under the term 'Arabic' what traditionally were viewed as distinctive varieties subsumed under the rubric 'North Arabic.'

Al-Jallad's suggestion requires individual attention outside the scope of this short article. Two general points can be made, however. First, whereas Al-Jallad (2015) is an excellent descriptive work and significant addition to the reference material on Semitic languages, the methodology it assumes tends to force the assumption of an Arabic affiliation. Thus typically the Safaitic is introduced against a summary of the state of affairs in Classical Arabic (e.g. 2015: 101, 109, 197) or an assumed proto-Semitic. While the considerable defectiveness in the Safaitic record of most domains of grammar requires analogical comparison with other Semitic languages to help understand gaps and inconsistencies (e.g. only two values of independent pronouns are attested), the very act of making frequent comparison will tend to assimilate the variety to that which it is compared to.

Second, from a comparative historical linguistic perspective, even for the sake of argument allowing for the re-christening of hitherto non-Arabic varieties as Arabic, the significance of this for understanding the history of Arabic remains to be explained. If Safaitic is, say, a 'dialect' of Arabic, how does it fit in? Safaitic, for instance, did not have a demonstrable case system like that of Classical Arabic (Al-Jallad 2015: 61–62, 69–70). However, Safaitic is attested in the range of 500–900 years prior to Classical Arabic (taking Sibawaih as the start of Classical Arabic). Did Classical Arabic develop the system in the interim, are there parallel systems (Owens 2009: 114–118), is case irrelevant to defining Arabic. . . ? At some point the declarative classification will need to be augmented by hard comparative linguistic reconstruction.

- 2 One will object that many of the documents subsumed under 'non-normed' obey the rules of Classical Arabic perfectly. One needs to distinguish here between type and token. Normed Arabic is the Arabic of high culture, poetry, science, law and linguistics. Non-normed are the papyri and Middle Arabic documents in general. As a type, non-normed Arabic shows deviation from Classical Arabic, even if not every token document within the class does so.

As a representational note, I do not mark long vowels in Arabic personal names, unless they are so represented in original, transliterated sources.

- 3 Transitioning to the first attestation of Arabic script are a number of Arabic inscriptions in Nabataean dated to between the 1st century BCE – 5th century CE (Daniels 2013: 422).
- 4 Cf. *ḡurra* or *gurra* 'frog,' the latter attested in the Horan, the former north of Damascus (Behnstedt 1997: 884).
- 5 I.e., as argued in Owens 2009, a basic, if simplistic, assumption among Semiticists (Hasselbach 2013 is a typical example) and many Arabicists is that Classical Arabic is a proto language from which the dialects derive.
- 6 Baalbaki (2008: 39) writes that Sibawaih cited Tamimi/Hijazi 67 and 72 times respectively. While this is far more than any other dialect, it is clear that the numbers alone are far too few for a dialectology. Even more problematic is the fact that as often as not a single tribal/areal source is given, but not the form in its counterparts. Added to this problem is the ambiguous reference of Tamimi/Hijazi, sometimes designations for eastern vs. western dialects in general, sometimes used in contrast to other groups (for which see e.g. [4] below).

It should be recalled that Sibawaih, so far as we know, never worked outside of Basra, so that all of his information is filtered through whatever constructs he or the Basran linguists of his day understood as Tamimi, Hijazi, and so on.

- 7 Sibawaih's compendious *Kitaab* (nearly 1,000 densely packed pages) effectively defines and elaborates the grammar of Classical Arabic as we know it today.
- 8 I. e. even here it would be naïve to assume that in all instances poetic license is simply 'Classical Arabic minus some rule.' Poetically deviant forms might themselves reflect a different norm, which is exceptional only in relation to Sibawaih's grammatical reasoning.
- 9 I.e. observations on a single sound; there are general topics, such as *idyaam* 'assimilation,' which are treated at far greater length than *imala*. *Idyaam*, however, involves tens, if not over 100 pairwise combinations of different sounds.
- 10 In fact, Sibawaih's explanation is a little unclear here, as he speaks of 'lazima ḍalika al-haa? fi l-tadkiir' 'the – h is required in the masculine.' In the Derenbourg edition used here, shortly before this passage on II 323.15 there is a printing (?) error, with 'haa?' instead of 'kaaf,' and making the same substitution here would marginally improve the meaning. One should perhaps check the passage against other manuscripts.
- 11 If Sibawaih's 'jiim like kaaf' was a /ǧ/, and if a number of the set 3 sounds were proscribed because they are also found in Farsi loan words (both suggested in Owens 2013), then, adding to Owens (2013) it can be suggested that Sibawaih limited his treatment of *kaškaša* and *kaskasa* (discussion

- above) because allowing /ǧ/ more than a limited morphological value (i.e. variant of – ki) would have been tantamount to allowing a Farsi-like sound into the general repertoire of Arabic.
- 12 Probably *ziraat*. Sibawaih (II: 477) has *širaat* < *siraat*, via emphaticization of /s/. As far as the conditioned, emphatic /t/ goes, it, along with /l/, is described in the later Qiraaʔaat tradition (Al-Dani N.d. 52–53, d. 444/1052).
- 13 A discourse already begun by Sibawaih in his ‘discussions’ with the nahwiyyiyn (Talmon 2003: ix–xiii vs. Carter 1972).

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