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Introduction 1

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The debate between logic and grammar

[On the request of the vizier Ibn al-Furāt the grammarian 'Abū Sa'id as-Sīrāfī takes it upon himself to refute the opinions of 'Abū Bishr Mattā ibn Yūnus, the logician, who had claimed that the only way to distinguish truth from falsity was by the science of logic. As-Sīrāfī says to Mattā:] “Tell me what you mean by logic! For when we understand what you mean by it, our discussion with you about which parts of it may be accepted as correct, and which parts have to be rejected because they are false, will take place in a satisfying manner and by an acknowledged method.” Mattā answered: “I mean by ‘logic’ a linguistic tool by which correct speech can be distinguished from incorrect, and false meaning from true, like a balance. With its help I distinguish between what weighs more and what weighs less, between what is superior and what is inferior.” ‘Abū Sa'id said: “You are wrong, because correct speech is distinguished from wrong speech by the ordering of its composition and by the correctness of its declension, when it is Arabic we are speaking. False meaning is recognized by reason, when it is by reason that we are investigating. . . . Besides, since logic has been established by a Greek in the language of his people, according to their convention and their agreement on its rules and forms, why do the Turks and Indians and Persians and Arabs need to study it and adopt it as their judge and arbiter, accepting everything it asserts and rejecting everything it denies?” Mattā retorted: “They need to do that because logic investigates those intentions that can be understood and those meanings that can be grasped, by studying the impulses of the mind and the motions of the soul. In the intelligible things all people are alike. Don’t you see that ‘four plus four equals eight’ and similar statements are alike for all nations?”

[As-Sīrāfī objects to the use of such facile examples in the discussion and asserts that the only way to reach the intelligibles is through language. He says:] “This means that you do not invite us to study logic, but to learn Greek, while you yourself do not know the language of the Greeks. So why do you invite us to study a language you do not know yourself, since it has disappeared a long time ago, its speakers have perished, and the people who communicated in it and used it in their daily intercourse have become extinct? Besides, you transmit it through Syriac. What can you say about meanings that have been distorted by the translation from one language, Greek, into another language, Syriac, and from that into yet another language, Arabic?”

Mattā stresses the special achievements of the Greeks in philosophy and wisdom, but as-Sīrāfī rejects this claim: knowledge and wisdom are distributed equally among all nations. It would be better for Mattā to learn to speak Arabic correctly, since that is the language he uses, or attempts to use, in the debate. Perhaps then he would realize that he had no need for the language and meanings of the Greeks. As a final test he asks him about the meanings, i.e., functions, of the Arabic word wa- “and”. To this challenge Mattā answers:] “That is grammar, and grammar is something I have not studied, because a logician does not need it, whereas the grammarian needs logic very much: logic investigates the meaning, and grammar investigates the expression. If the logician comes across the expression, it is by accident, and if the grammarian stumbles upon the meaning, that too is by accident. Meaning is nobler than expression and expression is humbler than meaning.”

[This is the central statement of the entire discussion. As-Sīrāfī rises to the challenge by turning it completely around:] “Grammar is logic, but isolated from the Arabic language, and logic is grammar, but understood within language. The only difference between expression and meaning is that the expression is natural, whereas the meaning is rational.”

[He continues by stressing the fact that the Greek language has disappeared completely, and that Mattā is in need of Arabic words in order to express the meanings he wishes to express:] “This is why the expression disappears with time, since time effaces the traces of nature and replaces them with other traces. This is also why the meaning is permanent in time, because the
receptacle of meaning is the mind, and the mind is divine: the matter of the expression is earthly, and all earthly things wither away.”

[Mattâ answers that the only thing he needs to know about Arabic is that it consists of noun, verb, and particle, which lays him wide open to further scorn by as-Sîrâfî, who says:] “You are more in need of knowledge of the Arabic language than knowledge of the Greek meanings! Meanings are not Greek or Indian, but languages are Persian or Arabic or Turkic. Yet, you claim that the meanings occur by reason, investigation and reflection; the only thing that remains to learn are the rules of the language. Why then do you revile the Arabic language, while you explain the books of Aristotle in that language, although you ignore its essence?”


In 932 a debate took place in the ‘Abbâsid capital of Baghdad that epitomized the discussions that were raging between representatives of conventional Arabic scholarship and supporters of the innovations introduced by the ‘ulâm yûnâniyya “Greek sciences”. The participants in the debate were the aged Mattâ ibn Yûnus (d. 940), an enthusiastic partizan of Greek logic and philosophy, and the young ‘Abû Sa‘îd as-Sîrâfî (d. 979), a paragon of all the Arab virtues, a connoisseur of Arabic poetry and grammar, and an accomplished debater in the style of the Arabic majâlis, public discussions between scholars. Mattâ was a Syrian Christian, whereas as-Sîrâfî claimed to be defending Islam. Although as-Sîrâfî was no more than forty years old at the time of the debate, he had already made himself a name with his commentatorial work on the Kitâb Sibawayhi; his commentary was regarded for centuries as the best way to study the Kitâb. He had studied with the grammarian Ibn as-Sarrâj (d. 928), and among his pupils was at-Tawhîdî, the author of the report from which we have quoted above. Before we go into the altercation itself we shall sketch the changes that were taking place in Arabo-Islamic society as the result of the translation of Greek writings.

After the Arab conquests of the seventh century the Arab tribes were faced with the necessity of administering an empire that stretched from Islamic Spain in the West to Transoxania in the East. The civilizations in this empire had long traditions of scholarship and learning and in the beginning they viewed the uncouth barbarians that were their new masters with disdain. The Arab armies had to rely on administrators from the conquered peoples to keep the records of the tax registers and to do most of their writing, in Greek, Syriac, Coptic or Persian. Syria, Persia, and Egypt had been parts of a large Hellenistic cultural area, and especially in Syria there had been a long tradition of education in schools and universities.

The Arabs’ feeling of military and religious superiority helped them impose their language and religion on the conquered peoples in a relatively short period of time, yet they were forced to acknowledge the superior knowledge and experience of the Syrians and Copts in disciplines they knew nothing about, particularly in the practical sciences of medicine and astrology/astronomy. During the dynasty of the Umayyads, who reigned as the successors of the first caliphs in the capital of Damascus from 661 to 750, the first translations of Persian and Greek writings were made at the request of the court. Some of the Umayyad caliphs commissioned translations of astronomical and medical books and established court libraries, where such translations were deposited.

Most of the translators were Christians and Jews, often speakers of Syriac, whose second language became Arabic. They acted as intermediaries between the two cultures. Most works were first translated from Greek into Syriac, after which other translators took care of the translation from Syriac into Arabic. Only a few of the early translations have survived; later generations of translators judged these early efforts to be incompetent, inasmuch as they aimed at a word-by-word transposition of the Greek text into Syriac and Arabic, so that the result was often incomprehensible. The early translators simply transliterated Greek technical terms, which increased the obscurity of these texts. Probably knowledge about the Greek sciences remained limited to a very small group of people at court, and there was no public domain for these disciplines, let alone an educational system in which they could be taught.

The breakthrough of Greek knowledge took place in the reign of the early ‘Abbâsid caliphs who came to power in 750 and reigned the vast Islamic empire from the newly founded capital of Baghdad. The Caliph al-Ma’mûn, who reigned from 813 to 833, was
one of the chief patrons of the work of the translators and a warm advocate of Greek science. According to the Arabic tradition the immediate cause of the introduction of Greek writings was a dream in which al-Ma'mūn saw an old man sitting on his own throne:

Al-Ma'mūn said: I saw in a dream an old man sitting on the throne in my own audience chamber. I wondered about him and paid him my respect. When I asked people about him, they told me he was Aristotle. I said, let me ask him something and I asked him: "What is the good?" He said: "What reason regards as good". I said: "What else?" He said: "What the people regard as good". I said: "What else?" He said: "What the law regards as good". I said: "What else?" He said: "Nothing else!" This dream was the direct cause for bringing out the books.

(Ibn 'Abi 'Uṣaybi'a, 'Uyun al-‘anbā', ed. by August Müller, repr. Westmead, 1972, pp. 186-7)

The implication of the story of this dream is that Greek knowledge ("the books") implies a rational approach to science: the first criterion for all knowledge is reason. Such an approach, applied in this anecdote to ethical issues, fitted in perfectly well with the development of Islamic theology at this period of time. Al-Ma'mūn was sympathetic towards the movement of the Mu'tazilite theologians, who proclaimed the primacy of reason before revelation and demanded the establishment of the truth of the Qur'an by rational means first, since the act of belief has to be preceded by the force of reason. The accumulated knowledge of Greek philosophy and the tools of Greek logic were welcomed by these theologians, who used these to build up their own philosophical system (cf. below, chapter 8 and chapter 10 on the role of the Mu'tazila in linguistics). Since al-Ma'mūn sympathized with the theologians of the Mu'tazilite school, it is not surprising that he enthusiastically endorsed the translation of the Greek writings.

Whatever the historical foundation for the story of al-Ma'mūn's dream, it is true that in his reign the translation movement started to flourish as it had never before. Al-Ma'mūn founded a special academy for translators, called the Bayt al-Ḥikma "House of Wisdom", and engaged dozens of translators to translate all the Greek and Syriac manuscripts he had acquired from the Byzantine area. For the Arabs there was a large difference between the contemporary Byzantine empire, their arch-enemy, and the Classical Greek culture, even in the names they gave them. The Byzantines were called ar-Rūm, i.e., the Rhomaeans, the successors of the Roman empire, a name the Byzantines themselves also used, and the Classical Greeks were called al-Yūnān, i.e., the Ionians. Whereas the Arabs freely admired the knowledge and experience of the Classical Greeks whose writings they translated and learned to love, they despised the Byzantines, whom they regarded as a debased form of Greeks, who had no proper respect for their own heritage. The Arabs felt that the burden and responsibility to preserve this heritage had fallen on their own shoulders, since the Byzantines could no longer be trusted to take care of it.

The first writings to be translated were mostly medical writings by Galen and Hippocrates. But because of the intimate connection between philosophy and medicine in Greek antiquity, very soon introductory treatises on philosophy were translated as well, soon to be followed by the most important Aristotelian writings as well as commentaries by Peripatetic philosophers such as Ammonios. One of the most famous translators, Ḥunayn ibn 'Isḥaq (d. 873), has left us a list of the more than a hundred treatises he personally translated. He must have been a remarkable scholar, with a profound knowledge of Greek, Syriac, Persian, and Arabic. In his list he laid down the rules for editing and translating Greek manuscripts. About Galen's Book on the medical schools he explains, for instance, that he first collected all surviving Greek manuscripts and then collated them in order to obtain a correct text; he then translated this text into Syriac and compared it with the existing Syriac translation before translating it into Arabic; he concludes by saying that this is the way he always works. Although the Arabic tradition did not elaborate a formal theory of translation, later sources praise Ḥunayn's innovating approach to translating, which concentrated on the meaning of the text rather than providing a word-by-word paraphrase.

The influx of Greek writings thoroughly affected Islamic society. We have already mentioned that the Mu'tazilite theologians needed Greek logic and philosophy in order to carry out their programme of rationalist theology. But in other disciplines, too, the exigencies of modern scholarship made themselves felt. Very soon, no respectable scholar could fail to use at least some superficial notions of philosophy and logic in his work, for instance by properly defining the notions with which they operated, by carefully circumscribing their own scientific domain, by classifying the subject matter of their writings according to logical rules, and
by providing their treatises with an introduction in which they presented their material in an orderly fashion. Commentators of Sibawayhi’s Kitāb, such as Mattā’s opponent as-Sirāfi, were embarrassed by what they felt to be Sibawayhi’s insufficient definitions of the basic notions of linguistics. In the first pages of the Kitāb (cf. above, p. 36) Sibawayhi “defines” the noun by giving two examples of nouns, and the verb by providing an ambiguous description that could be applied to physical actions as well as to grammatical verbs (both are called in Arabic fi’t). The commentators hastened to explain why Sibawayhi had neglected this important aspect of scholarly discourse; one of the reasons given by az-Zajjājī was that he regarded the definitions as self-evident and therefore omitted them.

Since even as-Sirāfi was fully convinced of the need to use logical notions in analysing language, his manifest irritation vis-à-vis the representatives of the new science, as shown in the debate with Mattā, was not directed against logic per se, but must have a different background. The immediate cause of the debate was Mattā’s claim about the function of logic as a tool to distinguish between truth and falsity. The implication of this claim was that the logician was more qualified to judge about the correctness of meanings than the grammarian, who should occupy himself solely with the correct expression of those meanings in a particular language. If such a claim were to be accepted by the Islamic community, it was feared by many scholars, this would mean the total submission to the representatives of a foreign, heathen culture. It was, therefore, imperative, for as-Sirāfi to demonstrate the inherent falsity of Mattā’s claims and those of his colleagues.

The simple scheme of Mattā, as reproduced in the text of the debate, was that expressions belong to the level of speech and are accidental, whereas the meanings belong to a higher level. They are universal for all nations, only the languages of the nations differ in their surface rules for the expression of the meanings. “Meanings” (ma’ānī) in this context refers to the logical operations of the mind (as in Mattā’s example of the arithmetic truth of a simple addition) and may be equated with “concepts” as far as the simple meanings are concerned, and with “propositions” as far as the compound meanings are concerned. For the grammarians, however, “meaning” referred to an inherently linguistic entity, the semantic aspect of a phonetic expression. According to as-Sirāfi meaning in this sense is not universal at all: each language has its own meanings (in one passage he says that meanings are the same for all people, but there he is making a hypothetical statement for the sake of argument). In this use of the word “meaning” as-Sirāfi is simply following the current linguistic usage of this term. Most grammarians (cf. above, p. 50) use ma’ānī in one of three meanings: the lexical meaning of words (as discussed by the lexicographers); the intention of the speaker (as discussed by the exegetes); and the meaning or function of a word, which is what the grammarians are concerned with.

Seen from this perspective it is obvious that as-Sirāfi could never accept Mattā’s statements and did not challenge him purely for the sake of argument. Anyone wishing to explain Aristotle’s thoughts in Arabic should first of all obtain a thorough knowledge of the language. Otherwise one risks losing sight of the specific properties of each language and the differences between languages, thereby obscuring what one wishes to explain. The example of the conjunction wa- “and” and, at a later stage of the discussion, that of the preposition fi “in” demonstrate the need for native-like command of the language before one dare even think of saying something in Arabic. Concerning fi as-Sirāfi quotes the logicians against themselves:

I have heard you say that the grammarians do not know the proper constructions of fi, because they only say that it is used for contents, just as they say that bi- is used to express companionship. Fi [you claim] is used for several things, since one can say “something is in a container”, “the container is in a place”, “the leader is in leadership”, “leadership is in the leader”. But all this dissection stems from the minds of the Greeks on the basis of their language, and it cannot be understood by the minds of Indians, Turks, or Arabs.

(‘Immār, p. 117)

At this point in the discussion the vizier asks as-Sirāfi to enlighten the audience concerning the true meanings of fi and wa-, which he does with great expertise and brilliance. The rest of the “dialogue” consists in as-Sirāfi’s heaping scorn on Mattā and bombarding him with questions to which he either does not know the answer or, when he tries to answer, he is immediately shut up by the victorious grammarian. An easy butt for his attacks are the terms commonly used by the logicians, such as the many abstract substantives that are loan translations from Greek (e.g., kayfiyya...
“quality”, *laysiyya* “not-being”, *‘ayniyya* “locality”) and their use of incomprehensible formulas such as “there is no A in B, C is in some B; therefore A is not in C”.

In view of the composition of the audience during this debate it is not surprising that the logician stood no chance and was thoroughly defeated. All spectators were Arab intellectuals, who rejoiced in the humiliation of an exponent of the foreign sciences at the hands of a young grammarian playing to the public for all his worth and correcting Mattâ’s mistakes against Arabic grammar whenever given a chance. Besides, the account we have of the debate was made by an admirer and pupil of as-Sîràfi’s, at-Tawhîdi. But it was not just a matter of xenophobic mistrust of anything foreign. The essence of Arabic culture and grammar was at stake. The propagandists of Greek science claimed a universal validity for logic that undermined the uniqueness of Arabic culture. If, as Mattâ claimed, the meaning of Arabic and Greek words was the same, then it could easily be defended that these meanings fell under the competence of the logicians. In that case the grammarian would become a simple schoolmaster whose only job was to teach children how the meaning established by the logician was represented in a particular language by a particular word. To counter such preposterous claims the grammarians defended the view that meanings were language-specific, and since the only meanings Arabic grammarians were interested in belonged to the Arabic language, their position was that all meanings fell within the domain of Arabic grammar.

Fortunately, the grammarians are not our only source on this controversy. A Christian philosopher, Yahyâ ibn ‘Adî (d. 974), wrote a small treatise in which he summarized the issue of the difference between logic and grammar. Yahyâ was a pupil of Mattâ and al-Fârâbî (cf. below, chapter 6); he translated a number of Aristotelian writings and wrote on logic, physics, and mathematics, as well as on Christian theological issues such as the trinity and the nature of Christ. The treatise, entitled *Tabyîn al-faṣl bayna šiṅâ’atay al-mantîq al-falsafî wa-n-nahw al-‘arabî* “Explanation of the difference between the arts of philosophical logic and Arabic grammar”, presents the issue in a dispassionate way, outside the heated atmosphere of the debate between as-Sîràfi and Mattâ.

Yahyâ begins by unambiguously declaring that both grammar and logic are an art (*šiṅâ’a*), i.e., a science in their own right. This means that each must have its own specific subject and aim, and it is in these respects that they differ from each other. Apparently he believes that by applying neat logical distinctions the matter may be solved to everyone’s satisfaction. It is obvious what the subject of grammar is:

When the subject of an art is that on which it acts, the subject of the art of grammar must be that on which grammar acts. Clearly, its action consists in providing words with an ending /u/, /al/, or /il/, or in general, in inserting vowels or omitting them in accordance with what the Arabs do. Since the action of grammar consists in inserting or omitting vowels, and since this takes place in words, these must be the subject of grammar.


Yahyâ then explains that the vowel endings occur in accordance with the meanings of the words, but this does not mean that the grammarians have any competence in the study of meanings. His argumentation betrays the subtle semantic shift the term *ma’dâni* “meanings” has undergone: in the quotation above the term is used for the functions a word has within the sentence, e.g., agent or object. But when Yahyâ says that the *ma’dâni* cannot be the subject or the aim of the discipline of grammar, he has in mind the objects that are signified by the words. About these objects he can safely say that they are not affected by the vowel endings provided by the grammarians: even when a sentence is pronounced without declensional endings, its meaning is quite clear, and conversely, when a sentence is ambiguous, it does not help to supply the correct declensional endings.

Yahyâ’s conclusion is identical to Mattâ’s, although it is formulated a bit more cleverly. The study of meanings is the monopoly of the logician. When grammarians occupy themselves with the meaning of an expression, they do so not as grammarians but as ordinary native speakers who wish to express their thoughts. The discipline of logic, on the other hand, deals with the subject of signifying expressions, rather than with expressions *per se*, and only with those expressions that signify universal matters, rather than particular matters. Its aim is to combine these expressions in such a way that they correspond to the truth (or to reality). The aim of grammar is then to provide these true expressions with the correct vowel endings according to the rules of the Arabic
language. As we can see from this conclusion, in spite of his moderate formulation substantially Yahyā draws the same lines between the two disciplines as Mattā did.

After the uneasy start of the relationship between logic and grammar some kind of truce was reached. Logical methods were incorporated in linguistics; even those grammarians who like as-Sīrāfī resisted these claims had no objections to the introduction of new notions and definitions in their own discipline. In his commentary on the Kitāb as-Sīrāfī himself put logical terminology to good use, not by borrowing it wholesale but by carefully selecting the notions he needed for his linguistic analysis. He does not criticize the Kitāb’s lack of formal definitions, but simply remarks that Sibawayhi did not feel the need to define, for instance, the noun (cf. above, p. 58), and then adds his own definition:

With respect to the noun, Sibawayhi did not give a definition to set it apart from other words and to distinguish it from the verb and the particle, but simply said “The noun is rajul and faras”. . . . If someone asks about the definition of the noun, the answer is: “Any word whose form signifies a meaning that is not connected with an accidental time is a noun”.

(as-Sīrāfī, Sharh Kitāb Sibawayhi, ed. by Ramādān ʿAbd at-Tawwāb and Maḥmūd Fahnī ʿHīgāzī, Cairo, 1986, I, p. 53)

In this definition the notion of “connection with time”, which distinguishes the verb from the noun, is borrowed from logical writings, as it is in the various definitions that are discussed by az-Zajjājī in his ʿIdāh (d. 949; cf. below, chapter 5). Az-Zajjājī demonstrates his intimate acquaintance with logical definitions, while carefully differentiating between the aims of the two disciplines of logic and grammar. Almost all grammarians of this period acted in the same way: many of them belonged to the Muʿtazila and had no problems with Greek logical methods, as long as they could use them for their own purposes without being swallowed by them. Some grammarians apparently went too far for the taste of most grammarians in their attempt to change the discipline of linguistics by organizing it according to logical standards. Such an approach could lead to an accusation of mixing the two disciplines, as happened to ar-Rummānī (d. 994), a Muʿtazilite grammarian who had studied with Ibn as-Sarrāj (cf. below, p. 70). Of him the biographer says: “He used to mix his speech with logic so that ʿAbū ʿAlī al-Fārisi said: “If grammar is the way ʿAbū l-Ḥasan ar-Rummānī talks, we have no part in it; but if it is the way we talk, he has no part in it!”” (Ibn al-ʿAnbārī, Nuzha, ed. by Attia Amer, Stockholm, 1963, p. 189).

At the logicians’ end, after things had calmed down, scholars quietly went on with the synthesis of foreign and Islamic elements. This is the approach we find in al-Fārābī (d. 950; cf. below, chapter 6) and later on in al-Ghazzālī (d. 1111), who completed the edifice of what we have come to know as Islamic philosophy. The ultimate effect in grammar was slight. In most cases the influence of logic made itself felt solely in the form of the presentation. Grammatical treatises no longer started in medias res, but took care of presenting each new notion in the form of a definition. Some of the definitions of the verb and the noun have unmistakably been borrowed from Arabic translations of Aristotelian writings, but at the end of the day Arabic grammar remained what it had been before, an Arabo-Islamic discipline without foreign influence.