Landmarks in Linguistic Thought I:
The Western Tradition from Socrates to Saussure
Roy Harris and Talbot J. Taylor

Landmarks in Linguistic Thought II:
The Western Tradition in the 20th century
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My purpose in this book is to eliminate from grammar that what the grammarian can do without, and to draw attention to the common errors they make. One instance of this is their claim that the accusative, the genitive, and the jussive always occur with an overt governor, whereas the nominative occurs both with an overt and a covert governor. They speculate that in the sentence ḏaraḥā ṣaydān ʿāmrān “Zayd hit ‘Amr” the nominative in ṣaydān and the accusative in ʿāmrān are produced by ḏaraḥā. Don’t you see that Sibawayhi – may he rest in peace! – says at the beginning of his book “The reason I call them eight endings is to distinguish between, on the one hand, those words that receive one member of these four pairs because it is produced by a governor; those endings are never permanent with the word; and, on the other hand, those words whose last consonant has a permanent ending that never disappears as the result of the action of another word?” The obvious implication is that the governor causes the declension, and this is manifestly wrong.

‘Abū l-Faṭḥ Ibn Jinnī and others propose a different explanation. After an exposition on the overt and covert governors ‘Abū l-Faṭḥ says in his Khaṣṣāʾī: “In reality and in actual speech the government of the nominative, accusative, genitive, and jussive is exercised by the speaker himself, not by anything else”. He emphasizes the role of the speaker himself in order to eliminate any ambiguity. Then he further emphasizes this by adding “not by anything else”. This is Muʿtazilite talk. The orthodox point of view is that these sounds can be only the work of God Almighty. They are attributed only to man like the rest of his voluntary actions.

Concerning the statement that words produce each other, this is false on both rational and religious grounds. Nobody in his right mind says such things, for different reasons. It would take too much time to mention all of them, since we aim at conciseness. One of these reasons is that the agent must necessarily exist when he performs his action. But declension is not produced until after the governor has disappeared: ṣaydān is not put in the accusative after ʾinna in the phrase ʾinna ṣaydān “indeed, Zayd” until after the disappearance of ʾinna.

Someone might ask: “How can we refute those who believe that it is the meanings of these expressions that govern?” The answer is as follows: “According to their theory agents act either by will, like the animals, or by nature, like the burning of fire and the cooling of water. But according to the orthodox believers there is no agent but God. The acts of human beings and animals are an act of God Almighty, and likewise those of fire and water and all other acts. This has been demonstrated elsewhere. No person in his right mind would maintain that linguistic governors can govern, either by their form or by their meaning, because they cannot act by will, nor can they act by nature.”

Someone might object: “But they use these expressions only metaphorically and as an approximation. When the words to which they attribute the governing action disappear, the declen- sional endings that are attributed to them disappear as well, and when they are present, the declension is present as well. This is what some theories call the active causes.” The answer is: “If their theory of governors did not lead them to alter the speech of the Arabs, to pull it down from the heights of eloquence to the depths of stammering, to claim the defectiveness of what is perfect, and to distort the real purpose of meanings, they would be perfectly free to do so. But since their belief in the function of words as governors leads to just such things, it is not allowed to follow them in this.”

(Ibn Maḏāʾ, Kitāb ar-radd ʿalā n-nuḥāt, ed. by Shawqī Ǧayf, Cairo, 1982, pp. 76–8)

It is clear that the author of the above lines did not have much sympathy for grammarians as a breed. From the title of his book, The Book on the Refutation of the Grammarians, we may deduce
that he was not enthusiastic about their theories, either. His full name was ʿAbū l-ʿAbbās ʿAḥmad ibn ʿAbd ar-Raḥmān Ibn Maḍāʾ, a grammarian from Cordova in Islamic Spain, whose fame rests mainly on this small book – no more than seventy pages in the printed edition – in which he sets out to destroy the entire building of linguistic theory as it had been practised from the days of Sibawayhi. Not much is known about Ibn Maḍāʾ’s life. He was born in 1119 in Cordova and died in 1195 in Seville. At an early age he left his native city and travelled to other places in Islamic Spain and North Africa in his search for knowledge; according to his biographers he was well-versed in grammar, medicine, theology, geometry, and Islamic law. Because of his adherence to the principles of the Zāhirite school of theology he was appointed chief judge by the Almohad emir Yūsuf ibn ʿAbd al-Muʿmin and in this position, which he held until his death, he assisted the authorities in banning the writings of all other theological schools.

Ibn Maḍāʾ’s theological opinions are not known in detail, but we do know from his career that he fanatically supported the Zāhiriyah. This school had been established in Islamic Spain by the famous theologian Ibn Ḥazm of Cordova (d. 1064). According to Ibn Ḥazm the basis of theological knowledge is what God Himself has told us in the revelation. This in itself is, of course, not very remarkable since most Muslims would agree that the Qurʾān constitutes the basis of Islam. But, as we have seen in chapter 1, there was an old tradition of interpreting the Qurʾān in order to elucidate the intention of the speaker. Most commentators attempted to reconstruct the “actual” meaning of the text in order to find out what God had meant with His instructions. In the study of Islamic law (fiqh) an entire methodological apparatus had been set up for the construction of a legal system on the basis of the instructions in the Qurʾān. The most important, and at the same time the most controversial, instrument to extrapolate from the Qurʾānic commands and regulations to general laws for all aspects of Islamic society was the qiyāṣ, the analogical reasoning that was also invoked frequently by grammarians in their explanations of grammatical phenomena (cf. above, chapter 3, p. 47). It is this instrument that Ibn Ḥazm attacks most fiercely, since in his view it represents the worst instance of human arrogance of God’s power.

In his critique of analogy Ibn Ḥazm frequently touches on questions that are connected with language, for instance in the classification of things in genus and species. Most people believe that we know that things belong to a certain species because they resemble each other: when we find out that one individual belongs to a species, we deduce on the basis of our knowledge and sensory information that other individuals that resemble it belong to this species too. This is what could be called “analogy by resemblance”. For Ibn Ḥazm even such a use of analogical reasoning is excluded because only God knows which things are really alike. The only conclusion one can draw is that those things belong to one species that are called by the same name; we possess this knowledge by virtue of our being native speakers of the language. Thus, when the Qurʾān forbids the eating of pork or the drinking of wine, this applies to all objects that in our experience are called by this name.

It is even worse when people introduce the principle of “cause” (ʿilla) to their arguments. According to Ibn Ḥazm what we call causes, exist in nature because God has created them there: fire, for instance, always burns, and there are no instances where fire does not burn, nor are there instances of burning without fire. This means that God has created a natural law (or rather, a “habit of nature”), which may be observed by human beings. There is nothing within the fire that causes it to burn. For, were we to draw this conclusion, we would also be forced to admit that in the things that God forbids there is something which makes them forbidden by themselves, independently from God’s judgment. This is tantamount to positing the existence of another eternal principle next to God.

It is not in our power, either, to find out why God forbids certain things and permits other things. The only thing we can do is take to the letter the instructions in the Qurʾān that we as native speakers can understand by virtue of our knowledge of the language. For instance, when God determines that it is forbidden to drink wine (khamr), the manifest meaning is that we are not allowed to drink any object to which the name of khamr is applied. This is the only correct way of obeying God’s commands. It would be wrong to apply our rational arguments to the text and reason that we are not allowed to drink khamr because it is intoxicating and that therefore all intoxicating beverages are forbidden. It would be equally wrong to attribute the cause of the prohibition of the drinking of khamr to some property of the wine, for instance, the fact that it is made from grapes, so that every beverage that is not made of grapes would become admissible even though it was
called khamr. In both cases we arrogate God's power and meddle in things that are not within our human domain.

Ibn Ḥazm’s reasoning on the basis of the manifest meaning of the text of the Qur'ān sometimes leads to unexpected conclusions. In some respects his opinions are those of the ultra-orthodox in so far as the strict application of the Qur'ānic rules are concerned. But in other instances he sounds remarkably “liberal”, for instance when he says that there is no reason why Arabic should be regarded as a superior language:

Some people believe that their own language is superior to all other languages. This is meaningless, because the aspects of superiority are known: things are superior either by their work or by selection. But languages do not work, and there is no scriptural testimony about the selection of one language rather than another. God Almighty says: “We have sent each prophet in the language of his community so that he can explain things to them”, and the Almighty also says: “We revealed it only in your language in order that they may remember it”. With these words He informs us that the only reason He revealed the Qur’ān in Arabic was to make the Prophet’s community understand the message. In this respect Galen was mistaken when he said: “The language of the Greek is the most superior language, because the rest of the languages resembles the barking of dogs or the croaking of frogs”. This is absolute nonsense because anyone who hears a language other than his own and does not understand it, regards it in the same way as Galen does other languages.

(Ibn Ḥazm, al-ʾIḥkām fī ʿuṣūl al-ʾakhkām, ed. by ʾAhmad Shākir, Cairo, n.d., I, p. 32)

The contradiction between the two attitudes is, of course, only apparent: Ibn Ḥazm follows the letter of the text, but only when it tells us something explicitly. In the absence of scriptural testimony, it is not allowed to draw any conclusions: specifically, there is no proof that God regarded the Arabic language as superior, hence Ibn Ḥazm’s rejection of a special status for Arabic. Just like any other language it was created by God, without whose divine inspiration human beings are unable to invent anything, be it language or science or art.

Ibn Ḥazm’s rigorous application of ẓāhiri reasoning was followed enthusiastically by Ibn Maḍā’ and applied by him to the writings of the grammarians, with which he had become familiar during his study of the Kitāb of Sibawayhi. The thrust of his argument is directed against three principles that constituted the basis of linguistic theory: that of the governor (ʾāmil); that of ʿidmār “suppression” and the reconstruction by the grammarian (taqđīr); and the theory of grammatical analogy (qiyyūs). We have seen above (especially chapter 3) that these principles represent the basis of linguistic theory in the Arabic tradition and any attack on them is aimed therefore at the very core of the theory.

The first principle of linguistic theory that he attacks is that of government (ʾamal). His criticism of the grammarians’ use of the term ʿawāmil subtly modifies the meaning of this concept as it is used in grammatical reasoning. In the passage he quotes from Sibawayhi’s Kitāb the presence and absence of declensional endings is correlated with the presence and absence of a governing word in the sentence. We have seen above (chapter 3, p. 45) that this was the starting point of Sibawayhi’s distinction between declensional endings and endings without a syntactic function. The correlation of declensional endings and governors in linguistic theory is interpreted by Ibn Maḍā’ in the sense that the grammarians regard the governors as the physical cause of the declensional endings. This is an interpretation the grammarians themselves had already rejected a long time ago. There are, in fact, many texts in which they explain that it is naive to regard the governors as anything else than theoretical constructs. In his Khaṣṣāʾīs Ibn Ḥinnī states quite explicitly that the real cause of the declensional endings is the speaker who pronounces the endings. To be true, such a solution would not have satisfied Ibn Maḍā’, since as a Zāhīrī theologist he did not believe in free will and regarded God as the Creator of all things in this world. But other grammarians, too, who did not have Ibn Ḥinnī’s Muʿtazilite leanings, did their best to explain that ʿamal, the operative force of the governor, is not a physical phenomenon but an abstract notion introduced by the grammarians. Ibn al-ʾAnbārī (d. 1181), for instance, the author of a large collection of controversial questions that were discussed by the Basran and the Kufan grammarians, explains the abstract nature of the principle of ʿamal in the following way. According to most grammarians, in a nominal sentence such as:

muḥammadun nabiyyun
Muḥammad is a prophet
the nominative of the predicate nabiyyun is caused by the governor muḥammadun, which is the topic of the sentence (cf. above, chapter 3). But about the governor of the topic itself scholars disagreed. The theory followed by Ibn al-'Anbārī states that the nominative of the topic is an abstract principle, called ibtidā', i.e., “the being used as topic”, which in his view is the same as saying that there are no overt governors. When people object that the absence of governors cannot be a governor itself he retorts:

The only reason why we say that the governor is the ibtidā', even though the ibtidā' is nothing else than the absence of overt governors, is that governors in this discipline are not physical, effective causes like the burning of fire, the drowning in water or the cutting of a sword, but signs and abstract constructs. Since there is unanimous agreement that they are signs and abstract constructs, they can consist just like all other signs both in the presence and in the absence of something. If you have two cloaks and you wish to distinguish between them, you can dye one of them and leave the other without dye. Then the absence of dye in the one cloak has the same distinctive force as the presence of dye in the other.

(Ibn al-'Anbārī, al-Insāf fi masā'il al-khilāf bayna n-nahwiyiyya l-Baṣrīyyīn wa-l-Kūfīyyīn, ed. by Gotthold Weil, Leiden, 1913, pp. 22–3)

We do not know whether Ibn Maḍā' really believed that grammarians regarded governors as physical causes, or was perfectly aware of such explanations as the one by Ibn al-'Anbārī and simply equated government with physical cause as a polemical trick in his refutation of the grammarians. But his arguments against this straw man were certainly effective.

The second principle that was attacked forcefully by Ibn Maḍā' is that of suppression as an explanatory principle in linguistic theory. From the very beginning grammarians had recourse to an underlying level of language in order to explain the syntactic relations between constituents in the surface sentence. The difference between the two levels was explained by them as a natural tendency on the part of the native speaker to suppress ('idmār) or, as Ibn Maḍā' calls it, delete (ḥadhf) elements in their speech in order to be as concise as possible. The Arabs, as they say, are averse to longwindedness in speaking and therefore take the liberty of leaving out parts of their message. From the point of

view of a Zāhirī grammarian the problem is, of course, that the reconstruction by the grammarian harbours an element of arbitrariness. This is particularly risky when the text of the Qur'ān is involved: it is very tempting for human beings to reconstruct the intention of the text by inserting elements, but in this way they threaten to distort the manifest meaning (zāhir) of the text, which every native speaker recognizes immediately.

In his discussion of suppression Ibn Maḍā' distinguishes between three kinds of deletion of elements from the surface structure. In the first place, there is the suppression of an element, without which the message cannot be understood properly, but which is left out by the speaker because it is obvious to the hearer. This category of deletions includes cases such as zaydan “Zayd [accusative]”, said to someone who is distributing money. In that case the addressed person understands that the complete message is 'aṭī zaydan “give Zayd”. This is a common phenomenon in speech, which occurs in the Qur'ān as well, e.g., Q. 16/30 wa-qila lilādhīna taqaw mādhā 'anzala rabbukum qālā khayran “It was said to those who fear God: what did your Lord reveal? They said: something good”, i.e., “He revealed something good”. The reason such parts of the message may be left out is that the addressed person already knows the omitted parts, and it is more eloquent to be concise in your message.

The second category of suppressions in linguistic theory concerns cases where the element that is supposed to have been suppressed does not add anything to the message. In the sentence:

'a-zaydan ḍarabta-hu
[interrogative article]-zayd [accusative] you hit him
“Zayd, did you hit him?”

the fronted object zaydan has an accusative ending. The grammarians claim that at the underlying level there must be a suppressed verb:

*a-ḍarabta zaydan ḍarabta-hu
“*did you hit Zayd, did you hit him?”

They argue that the accusative of zaydan can be explained only in this way, since the verb in the surface sentence is already “occupied” with an object (-hu “him”), and the accusative still needs a governor. For Ibn Maḍā’ this is a good example of the unwarranted way in which grammarians posit underlying levels,
which are completely unnecessary once one abandons the position that each accusative in the sentence must have a governor. In the example given here the speakers put *zaydan* in the accusative simply because that is the rule in their language, not because they are forced to do so by a hidden governor. Ibn Maḍâ’ cleverly points out that when the verb has a prepositional object as in

marata bi-zaydin
“you passed by Zayd [genitive]”

fronting the object also leads to an accusative:

’a-zaydan marata bi-hi
“Zayd [accusative], did you pass by him?”

He challenges the grammarians to explain this accusative: they cannot posit a suppressed verb *marata* in this case, since in that case *zayd* would have to be preceded by a preposition *bi-* that would put it in the genitive.

Even worse are the speculations of the grammarians in instances of suppression of the third category, since these change the meaning of the sentence. In Arabic, for instance, the vocative particle *yâ* “O!” is sometimes followed by an accusative as in

yâ ‘abda llâhi
“O servant [accusative] of God”

Many grammarians posit an underlying verb in this construction in order to explain the accusative, for instance:

*yâ ’unâdî ‘abda llâhi
“*O, I call the servant of God”

According to Ibn Maḍâ’ not only is this insertion of a suppressed verb unnecessary, but it also changes the meaning of the surface sentence: instead of a vocative sentence it has become a propositional sentence, which may be true or false.

The third principle for which the grammarians incurred Ibn Maḍâ”s wrath is that of grammatical analogy (*qiyyâs*). We have seen above that Ibn Ḥazm strongly objected to the use of analogical reasoning because it leads to conclusions that human beings are not allowed to draw. In linguistic theory the consequences are perhaps not as dire, but the underlying reasoning implies the same human arrogance vis-à-vis God’s omnipotence. In az-Zajjâjî’s *’Idâh* three different levels of explanations of grammatical phenomena were distinguished (cf. above, chapter 5): the primary causes, which are the rules of grammar as the native speaker knows them; the secondary causes, which operate with the principle of resemblance between elements of the system; finally, the highest level is constituted by the *’ilal nazariyya wa-jadaliyya*, i.e., by causes that may be discovered through speculative thinking. By reasoning rationally the grammarian is able to find out why grammatical phenomena are as they are. From Ibn Maḍâ”s point of view such an approach to God’s creation amounts to blasphemy. Just as human beings have to obey the rules God has laid down in the *Qur’ân* without asking why these rules are as they are, but simply accepting them as God’s commands, the speaker has to accept the rules of grammar, without speculating about the reasons behind these rules:

One of the things that have to be removed from grammar is the theory of the secondary and tertiary causes. An instance of this is when someone wants to know about the word *zaydun* in the expression *qâma zaydun* “Zayd stood up”, why it is in the nominative. The answer is that this is because it is the agent, and agents are always in the nominative. He may then say: “And why is the agent in the nominative?” The correct answer is to say to him: “This is how the Arabs speak, as we know for sure by a continuous transmission from them. There is no difference between such an example and that of someone who knows that something is forbidden by a Qur’ânic text. There is no need to know the reason behind this in order to transfer it to similar cases, and to ask why it is forbidden. A legal expert does not have to answer such a question.”

(Ibn Maḍâ’, *Radd*, p. 130)

This quotation shows the immediate theological relevance of Ibn Maḍâ”s arguments against linguistic theory. He is not against the study of language as such (as a matter of fact, he intersperses his arguments with quotations from grammatical writings in order to show that he knows what he is talking about), but he wishes to rid linguistic theory of harmful elements that are of no use for a better understanding of language and constitute a threat for the orthodox believer.

In his discussion of grammatical argumentation Ibn Maḍâ’ accepts only the primary causes; from his perspective these are not causes at all, but facts which the native speaker may observe.
Once you have noticed that the agent of a sentence is put in the nominative, you know that you have to put every agent in the nominative because this is a rule of the Arabic language. No further explanation is needed beyond this observation, which is based on empirical fact. In one of the last sections of his treatise Ibn Maḍā’ gives examples of useless exercises to which grammarians subject their pupils precisely because they wish to train them in inventing ever more complicated explanations for linguistic phenomena. We know from other sources that grammarians sometimes invented hypothetical forms in order to interrogate their pupils about the phonological rules. In one extreme example a grammarian asks his students what the various derived forms would be for a verb consisting of three glottal stops. On one such exercise Ibn Maḍā’ comments:

They apply all these theories to one single issue, so how will it be if it is applied to many more issues? Disagreement will reign, the tent-ropes of speech will be stretched to no advantage and for no sensible reason. People are unable to memorize the pure Arabic language, so how could they memorize such needless conjectures? What we must remove from grammar is arguments about matters that do not help us to speak correctly.

(Radd, p. 140)

In the Classical period of Islam not many grammarians showed any interest in the Kitāb ar-radd. This is hardly surprising, since accepting the point of departure of the treatise would have been tantamount to abandoning most of the things grammarians held dear. But when the manuscript was rediscovered in the twentieth century, it went through a curious renaissance. Its edition by the Egyptian scholar Shawqī Dayf in 1947 caused a minor shockwave. The book had been unknown for a long time in the Arab world and its publication came at the height of a debate about education in general and linguistic education in particular in the Arab world. Many people were dissatisfied with the way the Arabic language was taught in the schools: the curriculum consisted largely of the old grammatical texts, such as the 'Alfiyya of Ibn Mālik (d. 1273), an elementary treatise on grammar in one thousand verses, which served as an introduction to grammar. During the Classical period scores of commentaries had been written on this treatise, which was one of the most popular textbooks of grammar all over the Islamic world. As a result the material was obsolete and the standards of teaching were very low. As in most diglossic societies almost nobody was able to talk freely in the high variety of the language and schoolchildren generally hated the rigour of grammar training in Classical Arabic which was felt to be nothing more than learning by rote and lacking any practical use.

Some people attributed the lack of success of the school system to the language itself and demanded a simplification of the language (tabṣīt al-lugha), for instance, by abolishing categories that were no longer current in Modern Standard Arabic but were still repeated by all grammar books, such as the category of the dual and various constructions with the verbal noun. Others felt that the grammatical system was at fault and called for a reform of grammar (tabṣīt an-nahw). To the proponents of a reform of the school system, and in particular the methods of language teaching, Ibn Maḍā’‘s ideas were a gift from heaven, since they amply demonstrated what was wrong in grammatical education, even in modern times. As an example Dayf quotes the distinction between words with decensional endings and those with permanent endings. The two groups are identical in form; the only reason why the grammarians distinguish between them is that they are forced to work within the framework of government. It is much easier, he asserts, simply to concentrate on the form of the word without bothering with the identification of governors.

Significantly, such a plea for reform needed a medieval alibi to be acceptable. Shawqī Dayf constantly repeats that the reforms he has in mind (‘a new approach to grammar’) do not constitute a threat to the structure of Arabic and he quotes Ibn Maḍā’‘s respect for the native speaker as the best possible approach to the study of Arabic. Grammarians, he says, have made things unnecessarily difficult in order to make themselves indispensable. In connection with this he quotes an anecdote about al-Jāḥīz who complained to the grammarian al-‘Akhfash about the fact that for the average reader his books were only partly comprehensible; to which al-‘Akhfash responded by pointing out that this was his way of earning money; if people always understood grammar books, they would not need a grammarian to explain them, and he would be out of a job. With this anecdote Shawqī Dayf no doubt hinted at the approach of some of his fellow professors at the University of Cairo and the Azhar University, who made a livelihood out of the instruction in a grammatical system they themselves had complicated needlessly. No doubt the rediscovery of Ibn Maḍā’‘s
book was a great help to linguists such as Shawqi Dayf, who could refer to this venerable example when people reproached them with their attack on the old-fashioned methods of grammar. In the book he published jointly with another proponent of the reform movement in Arabic linguistics, Ibrāhīm Muṣṭafā, Tahrīr an-nāḥw al-‘arabī “Liberating Arabic grammar” (Cairo, 1958), the new ideas were put into practice: among other things all references to government were abolished from grammar. This publication, which was sponsored by the Egyptian Ministry of Education, caused such an outcry that no attempts were made to introduce the new concepts in the curriculum.