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Bias and its Impact on Grammarians' Flawed Understanding of Arabic Grammar Rules

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ABSTRACT: We find in grammar books, since the earliest period of their composition, the recurrent use of words such as "error," "mistake," or "wrong." Rarely does a debate or grammatical discussion between linguists conclude without revealing bias on one side against the other, accusing the opponent of error—some scholars even went so far as to dismiss the works of others as wrong or mistaken outright. This did not arise from nothing; rather, it resulted from the investigation of facts and the pursuit of grammatical rule, which convinced those who pursued the matter of the existence of error in a given point. Despite the multiplicity of causes that led many grammarians into error, whether intentionally or unintentionally, bias stood foremost among them. Indeed, bias is what divided the ranks of grammarians and separated their paths on many grammatical issues, giving rise to different doctrines and schools. Since political and intellectual considerations dominated their thinking, it is unreasonable to expect grammar to have remained immune to this bias, being itself a product of that environment—especially given that grammar is the key to understanding many literary and legal texts. Consequently, through their biased understanding, they bent grammatical rules to conform to their beliefs, even where those beliefs were clearly mistaken. This bias obscured the truth for a significant number of them, burdening our heritage and weighing down the language, and led many students—and even teachers—to turn away from the study of grammar, as students become confused by a range of opinions, some of which are incorrect. The present research therefore aims to address this problem by identifying one of the causes of this flawed understanding: bias.

INTRODUCTION

Bias stands at the forefront of the causes that led to flawed understanding, and this was at times deliberate on the part of some grammarians during the early period in which grammatical works first appeared. The Arab environment was characterized by an intense temperament of loyalty to the beliefs held by its people, and historical sources have conveyed to us their zealous adherence to their beliefs, customs, and even tribal traditions. Despite the advent of Islam and its efforts to curb this widespread phenomenon, it did not eliminate it entirely, for the deeply entrenched roots of partisanship within them were difficult to uproot completely. Tribal, customary, or sectarian affiliation compelled them toward bias for one side or another, and they were unable to free themselves from it. What concerns us here is that grammar, being a product of this environment, was inevitably influenced by it, and the ills of its environment inevitably permeated it.

The emergence of the grammatical schools was, from the outset, driven by a political motive, for two cities were engaged in political rivalry: Basra and Kufa. This rivalry later extended into sectarian and juristic disputes, until it ultimately manifested as grammatical contention and disagreement over numerous issues, which grammar books addressed and to which dedicated works were devoted — perhaps the most famous being *al-Inṣāf fī Masā'il al-Khilāf* [Fair Judgment on Points of Dispute] between the Basrans and the Kufans, by Ibn al-Anbari.

According to what is found in scholarly works, bias may be divided into two categories: political, and sectarian or juristic. Both categories cast their shadow over the language and its rulings, causing grammatical judgments to vary accordingly, since the

language was not spared the effects of this bias in any of its forms. In order for the present research to clearly identify one of the causes of flawed understanding — namely, bias — it was necessary to survey historical sources and examine the causes and motives that contributed to its emergence on the grammatical scene of that time, addressing each type separately.

FIRST: POLITICAL BIAS

¹ As for the companions who settled in Basra, they included Anas ibn Malik and 'Utbah ibn Ghazwan.

² to which al-Jahiz responded in kind in his book *al-Buldān* [The Countries], listing the notable figures of Basra.³

⁴ declaring, in essence, that those seeking knowledge of grammar should mourn the loss of Abu 'Amr and Hammad, for al-Kisa'i, unlike them, offered nothing of lasting value in grammar — his teaching being, to the uninitiated, as illusory and unsatisfying as a mirage is to a thirsty traveler in the desert.

⁵ Tha'lab responded by reciting a verse attributed to Abu 'Amr ibn al-'Ala', in which the poet states that when a lowly slave insults him, he preserves his own dignity by ignoring the insult, since he does not deign to answer one beneath him — just as one does not answer a dog for biting.

⁶ It is also related that there was estrangement between al-Farra' and al-Ahmar, occasioned by al-Ahmar having borrowed ten thousand dirhams from al-Farra' and repaid it in installments, which caused a rift between them; yet when news of al-Ahmar's death reached his family, al-Farra' expressed grief and praised him as truthful, generous, and intelligent. When asked why he now praised a man he had previously avoided, al-Farra' replied that nothing that had passed between them would prevent him from speaking the truth about him. His contemporaries remarked that he mentioned al-Ahmar not out of affection, but in order to claim superiority for the people of Kufa over the people of Basra.⁷

A survey of these historical incidents, and of the sectarian bias that prevailed among the scholars of the two cities, allows us to grasp clearly the nature of grammatical scholarship at the time, and the disputes, debates, and assemblies that inevitably led, in the end, to accusing one's opponent of error, mocking him, asserting positions contrary to his, inclining toward one's own school, and championing its adherents. Bias indeed overcame the reason and thought of many grammarians; yet this cannot be generalized to all of them, nor can bias be regarded as the defining characteristic of grammar at that time. In fairness, it must be said that there were positions taken on both sides marked by moderation and by the exercise of reason free from bias — Tha'lab, for instance, was at times fair to the Basrans, siding with the Basran view whenever he found it convincing and consistent with logical reasoning — whereas in other cases bias led some scholars to accuse their opponents of error unfairly, without regard for moderation or objectivity. Returning to certain grammatical issues makes this clear, including the following:

1. The Fronting of the Predicate-Complement of the Negating Particle (*mā*) Before It
2. The Fronting of the Complement of a Restricted Verb Before Its Agent
3. The Case-Ending of (*ayyuhum*)

⁸ Sibawayh based this view on that of his teacher al-Khalil, who, when asked about the expression “strike whichever of them is superior,” replied that the expected grammatical rule would require the accusative case, as in “strike the one who is superior,”

¹al-Buldān: 202.

²See: Mu'jam al-Udabā' – Irshād al-Arīb [Dictionary of Literary Men – Guidance for the Discerning]: 19/310.

³See: Inbāh al-Ruwāh [Informing the Transmitters]: 1/283.

⁴Akhbār al-Naḥwiyyīn al-Baṣriyyīn [Reports of the Basran Grammarians]: 32–33.

⁵See: Bughyat al-Wu'āh fī Ṭabaqāt al-Lughawīyyīn wa-l-Nuḥāh [The Aspiration of the Learned Concerning the Generations of Linguists and Grammarians]: 1/397.

⁶See: Mu'jam al-Udabā' – Irshād al-Arīb: 1/206.

⁷See: *ibid.*: 4/1672.

⁸al-Kitāb [The Book]: 2/400.

since (ayyan), outside conditional and interrogative contexts, functions like (alladhī, “the one who/which”), just as (man) does likewise outside such contexts.⁹

4. Words Placed in the Accusative for Emphasis or Glorification

¹⁰ He compared this accusative-of-emphasis construction to a line of poetry by al-Khirniq, who praises her kinsmen as a scourge upon their enemies and a bane to raiders, who confront every skirmish and remain true to their pledges of honor — noting that the nominative reading of al-ṭayyibūn (“the honorable ones”) parallels that of al-mu'tūn (“those who give”).

¹¹ Abu Ja'far al-Nahhas declared this a clear error: placing al-ṣābirīn in the accusative and conjoining it with dhawī al-qurbā would place it within the relative clause introduced by man, meaning one would be conjoining with man before the relative clause was even complete — thereby separating the relative clause from its antecedent by means of the conjoined element.¹² He held instead that al-mūfūn and al-ṣābirīn are conjoined with dhawī al-qurbā in an emphatic, laudatory sense.

SECOND: JURISTIC BIAS

After concluding the discussion of sectarian bias between the two cities — whose principal cause, as we have seen, was political disagreement — we now turn to another type of bias, whose principal cause was juristic (fiqh-related) disagreement.

The juristic opinions of scholars varied according to their sectarian affiliation, such that their grammatical and semantic orientation became a preliminary step toward reinforcing a viewpoint already settled in their minds beforehand. Likewise, their occasional preference for one grammatical reading over another was often based on whatever was favored within their own juristic school.

¹³ This necessitated their thorough reliance on the Arabic language in issuing juristic rulings, for the connection between the linguistic sciences and the sciences of Islamic law in general, and the Qur'anic sciences in particular, is evident — indeed, grammatical terminology is often found in juristic studies, and vice versa. A student of the Qur'anic sciences must study Arabic in its various branches, since case-endings have a pronounced effect on many juristic rulings. As Mazin al-Mubarak observes, abandoning case-inflection in a language that relies on it to express grammatical meaning “demolishes it and kills its flexibility, and the omission of case-endings clothes many sentences and expressions in ambiguity and obscurity... Many sentences lose their meaning when their case-endings are lost, and who can read without case-endings and still understand, for example, God's words 'Only those fear God, among His servants, who have knowledge,' or our saying 'What excellent [character] Zayd has?'”¹⁴

It is important to note here that these meanings, with their multiple grammatical possibilities, give rise to multiple ways of understanding a single Qur'anic verse — some affecting the strength or weakness of the meaning conveyed, and others leading to differing juristic rulings, which God Almighty ordained for His creation in His Book.

In light of the foregoing, the researcher considers it necessary to examine a number of examples illustrating the disagreement, divergence, misapprehension, or bias that occurred among grammarians, so that the reader or researcher may recognize this as one of the causes of flawed understanding.

First: God Almighty says: “...wash your faces and your forearms to the elbows, and wipe over your heads and [wash] your feet to the ankles...” [al-Mā'idah: 6]

¹⁵ Ibn al-Sarraḡ followed Sibawayh's view, stating: “As for (ilā), it denotes the terminal point; one says 'I traveled to such-and-such place,' [meaning] that place is the terminus of your journey.”¹⁶ Ibn Jinni followed him without elaboration, saying: “We

⁹See: *ibid.*: 2/398.

¹⁰See: *al-Kitāb*: 2/64.

¹¹See: *I'rāb al-Qur'ān*: 1/91.

¹²See: *ibid.*: 1/92.

¹³*al-Mufaṣṣal fī Ṣan'at al-I'rāb* [The Detailed Work on the Craft of Grammatical Inflection]: 18.

¹⁴*Naḥw Wa'y Lughawī* [Toward Linguistic Awareness]: 77.

¹⁵*al-Kitāb*: 4/231.

¹⁶*al-Uṣūl fī al-Naḥw* [The Foundations of Grammar]: 1/411.

say 'I went out from Kufa to Baghdad,' meaning I began my journey from Kufa and ended it in Baghdad.”¹⁷ And Ibn Ya'ish states: “Know that (ilā) denotes the terminus of an extent, just as (min) denotes its starting point; the two are thus opposites.”¹⁸

In light of these divergent grammatical views regarding the meaning of (ilā), juristic bias exploited the divergence to construct its own rulings: some scholars held that the elbow and ankle are not included in the washing [of ablution], while others held that they are included — each basing his grammatical orientation on whatever was closest to his own juristic school. Bias thus played a role in establishing mistaken conceptions, not for any inherent reason, but merely to uphold one juristic school at the expense of another.

¹⁹ Ibn 'Ashur (d. 1393 AH), by contrast, bases his juristic view on his own grammatical understanding, holding that a delimiting boundary marks not the terminus as external to what is delimited, but rather what is included within it: “the more evident view is that [the elbow] is to be washed, since the general principle regarding the boundary of an extent is that it is included within what is delimited.”²⁰

²¹ notes that (al-bā') is a genitive particle specific to nouns, invariably governing the genitive case, and is of two types: redundant and non-redundant. Grammarians identify thirteen possible meanings for the non-redundant type. The first is attachment (ilṣāq) — the only meaning Sibawayh assigns it, stating that it denotes attachment and mixing, as in the expressions 'I went out with Zayd,' 'I entered with him,' and 'I struck him with the whip' — attaching your act of striking to him by means of the whip.²² The second meaning is transitivity, functioning in place of the transitivity hamzah.

Of the meanings noted above, the two that concern us here are attachment and transitivity, since the juristic ruling differs according to which meaning is adopted.

c) Conjunction by Proximity

²³ Ibn Jinni followed Sibawayh in rejecting the genitive by proximity, describing it as “an error among the Arabs about which there is no disagreement, one that is not to be relied upon nor treated as a basis for analogy with other cases... In sum, its origin is: 'this is the hole of a lizard, its hole being ruined,' with 'ruined' thus applying descriptively to 'lizard' even though it in truth describes the hole — just as one might say 'I passed by a man whose father was standing,' making 'standing' agree with 'man' even though the standing pertains to the father, on account of the implicit reference involved.”²⁴ Al-Nahhas considered this a grave error, since proximity cannot serve as a basis for grammatical analogy in discourse generally — it is simply a mistake, so that nothing may be grammatically construed by proximity in the Book of God, nor in any other discourse; this usage occurred only in an anomalous, isolated instance.²⁵

²⁶ Al-Akhfash al-Awsat (d. 215 AH) likewise permitted this.²⁷

The Qur'an reciters differed in their vocalization of the word “your feet” in the aforementioned ablution verse, reading it either in the accusative or the genitive case. Na'fī, Ibn 'Amir, and al-Kisa'i read it in the accusative, while Ibn Kathir, Abu 'Amr, and Hamzah read it in the genitive. The effect of this variant reading on grammatical — and consequently juristic — interpretation is clear: those who read it in the accusative made it dependent on the governing verb “wash,” basing their juristic ruling on the obligation to wash, rather than merely wipe, the feet; those who read it in the genitive made it dependent on the particle (bā') in “your heads.”

¹⁷al-Luma' fī al-'Arabiyyah [Brief Notes on Arabic]: 73.

¹⁸Sharḥ al-Mufaṣṣal [Commentary on al-Mufaṣṣal]: 8/28–29.

¹⁹Anwār al-Tanzīl wa-Asrār al-Ta'wīl [The Lights of Revelation and the Secrets of Interpretation]: 2/116.

²⁰al-Taḥrīr wa-l-Tanwīr [Liberation and Enlightenment]: 6/130.

²¹See: al-Janā al-Dānī: 43.

²²See: al-Kitāb: 4/217.

²³al-Kitāb: 1/436.

²⁴al-Khaṣā'iṣ [The Characteristics]: 1/193.

²⁵T'rāb al-Qur'ān: 1/109.

²⁶Majāz al-Qur'ān [The Figurative Usage of the Qur'an]: 72.

²⁷See: Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān [The Meanings of the Qur'an]: 1/277.

²⁸ Al-Baydawi, however, opposed this, stating: “Had it been said 'wipe your heads' [in the same construction as the feet clause], it would be equivalent to saying 'wash your faces' [i.e., an independent command, not one governed by proximity].”²⁹

Second: God Almighty says: “And she certainly determined [to seduce] him, and he would have inclined to her had he not seen the proof of his Lord. And thus [it was] that We should avert from him evil and immorality. Indeed, he was of Our chosen servants” [Yūsuf: 24]

³⁰, as in God's words “and they were determined to do that which they were unable to attain” [al-Tawbah: 74]. Given the established connection of her inclination with the immoral act, a number of exegetes held that Joseph's (peace be upon him) inclination pertained to the same act, since the passage presents both instances in a parallel construction. Among them was al-Baydawi, who states: “She certainly determined [to seduce] him, and he would have inclined to her' — she intended to have relations with him, and he intended to have relations with her; inclination toward a thing means intending it and resolving upon it... The intention here, however, is a natural inclination and the pull of desire, not a deliberate, willed intention.”³¹ Others held that this expression, in the customary usage of the Arabs, refers merely to a person's inner deliberation about engaging in an act, without actually engaging in it.³² Among the exegetes holding this latter view was Sayyid Qutb, who states: “She was determined upon the act itself, while he experienced only an inner inclination of the soul; then his Lord's proof was made manifest to him, and he desisted. This is what appears most consistent to us as we confront the text directly and consider the circumstances, and it accords more closely with human nature and with the sanctity accorded to prophets — for Joseph was, after all, a human being; yes, a chosen human being, and thus his inclination never went beyond a momentary psychological pull.”³³ This view was rejected by a number of exegetes and grammarians on the grounds of the established doctrine of prophetic infallibility, and because rational proofs, unaffected by doubt, probability, or figurative interpretation, indicate that Joseph (peace be upon him) could not have committed, nor even resolved to commit, an indecent act. Each exegete accordingly based his interpretation on whichever grammatical view best suited his own exegetical conclusion.

a) The Omission of the Apodosis of (lawlā, “were it not for...”)

³⁴ Among the exegetes holding this view was Abu al-Su'ud, who states: “He would have inclined to her' — that is, he was drawn toward her by virtue of natural human disposition and the desire of youth, a natural inclination that scarcely falls under the scope of religious obligation, not that he deliberately, willfully intended it. The apodosis of (lawlā) is omitted, its content being indicated by the discourse itself — namely, 'had he not witnessed his Lord's proof regarding the matter of illicit relations, he would have acted according to his natural inclination; but since he had already witnessed it beforehand, he remained steadfast in accordance with that proof.' The benefit of this conditional construction is to clarify that his (peace be upon him) restraint was not due to any lack of natural capacity, but purely to his chastity and integrity.”³⁵

b) The Permissibility of Fronting the Apodosis of (lawlā)

³⁶ — following the Kufan principle permitting such fronting. On this reading, the word for 'inclination' carries its literal sense, and the meaning becomes: 'had he not witnessed his Lord's proof, he would have inclined toward her just as she inclined toward him.’³⁷

The interpretation of Qur'anic texts, according to the position of each faction, necessarily rests upon a grammatical interpretation reinforcing the view to which that faction subscribes; otherwise it could not be accepted under any circumstances, amounting instead to a baseless conjecture of no value. Each faction therefore sought to bend the grammatical rule to conform

²⁸Jāmi' al-Bayān fī Ta'wīl al-Qur'ān [The Comprehensive Exposition on the Interpretation of the Qur'an]: 1/436.

²⁹Anwār al-Tanzīl wa-Asrār al-Ta'wīl: 2/117.

³⁰See: al-Taḥrīr wa-l-Tanwīr: 12/252–253.

³¹Anwār al-Tanzīl wa-Asrār al-Ta'wīl: 3:160.

³²See: Jāmi' al-Bayān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān: 16/34.

³³Fī Zīlāl al-Qur'ān [In the Shade of the Qur'an]: 4/1981–1982.

³⁴See: Irtishāf al-Ḍarab: 1906.

³⁵Tafsīr Abī al-Su'ūd: 4/265–266.

³⁶See: Irtishāf al-Ḍarab: 1906.

³⁷Tafsīr Abī al-Su'ūd: 4/265–266.

to its own orientation, and it was through this process that error began to creep into grammatical rules. It is unreasonable to suppose that all these views are mistaken, or that all of them are correct; logic dictates that some are valid and others invalid. It is not, however, the aim of this research to determine which of them was correct and which mistaken, so much as to convey to the reader the idea that there exist religious texts whose grammatical construction was, of necessity, bent and forced to conform, so as to become evidence for whatever interpretation was advanced — an interpretation leading to a particular religious ruling, or even simply conforming to their belief in a particular transmitted report.

CONCLUSION

Every piece of research must conclude with a conclusion setting out its most significant findings and the observations reached in the course of the study. The findings of this research may be summarized as follows:

1. Political disagreement had a pronounced effect on the emergence of bias among the early grammarians, which was in turn negatively reflected in their grammatical writings.
2. Juristic disagreement was no less significant than political disagreement as a factor motivating bias among grammarians; it, too, was a driving force behind such bias.
3. The effect of both forms of bias was clearly evident in the emergence of Arabic grammar and the formulation of its rules; many rules were composed in accordance with the bias of the two schools, and freeing oneself from this inherited legacy has become impossible, since it is difficult for either side to relinquish what it regards as established principle.
4. Bias led grammarians away from correctness in formulating many grammatical rules — rules that, to this day, continue to be relied upon in the works of grammarians by modern scholars.

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