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The politics of language standardization and the nature of Classical Arabic*

Abstract

This article approaches the nature of Classical Arabic from the ideological discourse about it. More specifically, it investigates the controversy about "pure" and "Arabized" Arabs which was raised during the Umayyad period. The paper claims that underlying this controversy was an attempt by northern and southern Arabians to appropriate the symbolic capital of the sacred language. The tribal genealogies developed during the same period are also claimed to reflect political alliances. A third claim made in this connection is that Basran and Kufan grammarians were probably also involved indirectly by selecting data on which they based their linguistic analyses.

Keywords

Classical Arabic, tribal genealogy, pure and Arabized Arabs, Basra; Kufa.

Introduction

There is wide divergence between Arabists as to the sociolinguistic situation in pre-Islamic Arabia and, more particularly, about the status of Classical Arabic within this situation. Two major opinions can be identified in this respect: one defends the hypothesis that the language of pre-Islamic poetry and the Qur'an was a poetic koiné distinct from the varieties used for everyday communication; the other, popular among Arab scholars, but also among some Western Arabists, supports the idea that Classical Arabic was based largely on the language spoken natively by the tribes of Arabia (cf. Owens, 2006; Versteegh, 1997, 2008, among

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others, for a review). Thus, while holders of the first opinion consider that Arabic diglossia is as old as we can tell, the second group argues that it started only during the early stages of Islam, mainly because of rapid linguistic change triggered by contact with non-native speakers.

Supporters of both opinions have drawn largely on data provided by Arabic sources. These data, however, are often ambiguous and can be interpreted in different ways. In this paper, I propose to consider the ideological discourse about the Arabic language which developed along the process of language standardization around the end of the first and the beginning of the second centuries A.H. More specifically, I will analyze the controversy concerning the "pure" Arabs and who was first to speak Arabic. The point behind such an endeavor is that, although the controversy was about the language as a global entity rather than about individual linguistic features, it could help shed some light on the nature of Classical Arabic. I will also argue that the grammarians of Basra and Kufa probably had ideological commitments which explained much of their discord. Finally, I will consider the points of disagreement between the Basran and the Kufan schools in search for a possible discord concerning corpus and /or status planning.

1. The "ʿĀriba" and the "mustaʿriba" Arabs

The ideological controversy about the Arabic language is entangled with the issue of genealogy, and one can only be understood in the light of the other. Both, however, seem to be reflections of a deeper political and cultural competition between the two major factions of the Umayyad period: southern (i.e. Yemenite) and northern (i.e. ʿAdnāni) Arabians.

The conflict between the two factions became explicit first during the second civil war (680/61–692/73), but its origins were probably much older (cf. Crone, 1980, 1994). The Yemenites, in particular, emerged as a distinct group early in Islamic history. During the first civil war, most of them allied with Ali; and even those who were stationed in Syria and Palestine and, therefore, were under the influence of Muʿāwiyya, kept secret contacts with Ali's Yemenite allies in order to avoid blood-shedding among themselves. According to some sources (cf. Al-Madʿaj, 1988), Muʿāwiyya did use these contacts to convince the Yemenites to leave Ali and, thus, weaken his opponent's position. But it was during the second and the third civil wars that the conflict gained momentum under the banners of "Yaman" and "Qays" or similar ones. The banners were not restricted to the Yemenite and the Qays tribes in the strict sense, but ultimately included all the tribes of Arabia, as each party expanded its alliances to become more powerful. Scholars tend to believe that this political tension was the major factor behind the creation of the Qaḥtān and the ʿAdnān genealogies, which

divide Arabs into two distinct groups: one originating from Yemen and the other from northern Arabia (cf. Crone, 1994). The two groups, however, were rather heterogeneous and there is some evidence that some tribes shifted alliances. The group of Quḍāʿa, for example, which lived in Syria, was considered first as part of Mudar/ʿAdnān before it turned to Qaḥtān[1]. Although this division began in the circles of the Umayyad dynasty, it was soon embraced wholeheartedly everywhere in the Islamic empire, and similar factional wars were waged as far east as Khurāsān, and as far west as North Africa and Al-Andalus (cf. Mu'nis, 1956).

It should be pointed out, however, that not all the constituents of Qaḥtān and ʿAdnān were equally involved in ideological controversies or propaganda. Quḍāʿa, for example, did not claim much glory for itself although it played a crucial role on the political and the military levels. In Syria as well as in Al-Andalus, it was the Kalb tribe that was most prominent among the Qaḥtān group, but the Yemeni propagandists appropriated the military achievements of Kalb for themselves on the ground that Quḍāʿa (and Kalb belonged to it) were descendents of a Yemeni patriarch. The same remark holds also for the Azd of Oman in Iraq and Khurāsān. Among the Maʿadd/ʿAdnān group, it was Qays[2] that emerged as the most influential constituent both at the military and the ideological levels while Ilyās (Khindif)[3] and Rabīʿa, the other major constituents of the faction, were much less active in propaganda. It is not clear why some groups were very much involved in ideological wars whereas others contented themselves with immediate gains such as wealth or office. In the case of the Yemenites, we can speculate that their long history contributed to their interest in writing about it and in exploiting it as a symbolic capital for all sorts of intents and purposes. As to Qays, their history could not rival that of Yemen in anything except for the fact that they were part of the Lakhmid kingdom of Hīra, which served as a buffer state for the Persians. But even that was taken from them by the Yemenites' claim that Lakhm was of Qaḥtāni origin. As to Quraysh, they tended to remain neutral, preferring to take winners for allies, whoever they were. This opportunistic behavior seems to have been encouraged by the fact that they were the Prophet's people and, in a sense, their relationship should be claimed by all Muslim parties.

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[1] Cf. Ibn ʿAbd Al-Barr's *Inbāh* on this particular point; he reports a lot of anecdotes and verses of poetry related to Quḍāʿa's shift of allegiance. Another example of such shift concerns the tribe of Bajīla, which was initially classified with Mudar (cf. Tījān) but later on joined the Yemenites. It seems that the Mudari origins were initially appealing but, for some unclear reasons, became unwanted.

[2] This is not a single tribe but a confederation of tribes who claim to be descendents of Qays ʿAylān b. Mudar b. Nizār b. Maʿadd b. ʿAdnān. Among the largest and the most influential constituents of the confederation are Ghaṭafān and Hawāzin.

[3] Khindif is claimed to be Ilyās's wife and her children came to be known by her name. During the faction wars, the name was used as a banner for this faction, which included Asad, Tamīm, Hudhayl, besides Kināna to which Quraysh belonged (cf. Mu'nis, 1956).

Some reference to factional conflict in Islamic history can be found in early Arabic sources. Wahb b. Munabbih (d. 114 A.H.), for example, is reported to have said:

> Kaʿb Al-ʾAḥbār informed me that he had heard those with knowledge of old writings and ancient history saying that Himyar were lamps in a dark night; people want them like this (and he lowered his hand), but God wants them like this (and he raised his hand). (*Tījān*, p. 73)[4]

This passage can be interpreted as expressing a high esteem of Himyar, the people of Yemen, but at the same time, a deep concern about their status in the Islamic state. The same overtone can be found in the writings ascribed to ʿAbīd b. Shariyya, also included in the Tījān of Ibn Hishām. Wahb b. Munabbih and Ibn Shariyya and other Yemeni propagandists draw on memories of pre-Islamic history of Yemen to achieve two major goals, among others. The first was to glorify the past achievements, most of which were imaginary, of the Yemeni people. The second was to reinterpret that history in the light of Islamic and Arabic culture. Thus, Yemeni kings were portrayed as Muslim predecessors who used to visit Mecca and to sanctify the Kaʿba. They also composed poetry in Classical Arabic, a point we will return to later in the following section. Evidently, in the course of recounting the Yemeni conquests, the propagandists mentioned the subjugation of Qays, Kināna, Thaqīf and other north Arabian tribes (cf. *Tījān*, pp. 453–5).

It was probably in these circumstances characterized by political tension that genealogists developed trees of descent which were fixed later on in Ibn Kalbi's *Jamhara*. The outline of this descent seems to have achieved some consensus at an early period. Work attributed to Wahb b. Munabbih advances that peoples of Arabia belong to two distinct groups. The same idea is also found in the chronicles attributed to Ibn Shariyya and in the *Sīra* of Ibn Isḥāq (d. 151 A.H.). This seems to reflect a general acceptance of the social and the cultural division between Southern and Northern Arabians. But it is not clear whether this division was so deep as to make of the two groups different nations or they were basically of a political nature. In other words, the Qaḥtān/ʿAdnān dichotomy could be interpreted as evidence that the two groups constituted at least separate ethnicities or else be viewed as a mere side-effect of the conflict generated by the Umayyad management of political affairs. The fact that some Northern tribes such as those of Medina or even the Quḍāʿa of Syria joined the Yemeni camp might suggest that the alliance was basically political. But, on the other hand, the intellectual effort invested in legitimizing the division between the two groups seems to transcend the circumstantial factors of the Umayyad period.

[4] All the translations are mine except if indicated otherwise.

In particular, the search in Hebrew Scriptures for different ancient patriarchs claimed by each group could hardly be explained by mere conflicts of interests which did not last long. Besides, the Qaḥtān/ʿAdnān classification lasted in the Arabic literate culture long after it lost all political significance.

To be sure, the genealogies do not come in a single version. Ibn ʿAbd Al-Barr (368–463 A.H.) claims that there is consensus among Arab genealogists that Northern Arabs (i.e. ʿAdnān) descend from Ismāʿīl (Hebrew: Ishmael), but he points out that there is a lot of disagreement as to the descent of the Southerners (i.e. Qaḥtān) (*Inbāh*, p. 29). He cites no less than nine opinions in this regard, but for our purposes, we will discuss only two of these opinions. According to a group of genealogists, Qaḥtān descends from Iram, son of Sam, son of Noah. Given that Ismāʿīl descends ultimately from Arpakshad, a brother of Iram[5], it is obvious that holders of this opinion wanted to separate Southerners from Northerners at a very early point in history. This position was held mostly by non-Yemenites. As to the Yemeni genealogists, Ibn ʿAbd Al-Barr (*Inbāh*, p. 27) claims that most of them believe that Qaḥtān is son of Hūd, son of Shālikh, son of Arpakshad. Another group of genealogists, however, hold that Qaḥtān, like ʿAdnān, also descends from Ismāʿīl. Although Ibn ʿabd Al-Barr is not explicit about these last genealogists, it is clear that they were a minority who probably wanted to urge Northern and Southern Arabs toward unification. (From other sources, we get the idea that this group included Al-Sharqī b. Al-Qutāmī – from the tribe of ʿudhra – Ibn Kalbī and Ibn Isḥāq; cf. *Muzhir I*). The Yemenites, however, did not seem to hold in high esteem the descent from Ismāʿīl and claimed, instead, that their nation was much more ancient than Abraham, Ismāʿīl's father (cf. *Inbāh*, p. 28). Indeed, Wahb b. Munabbih and Ibn Shariyya express the view that the genealogies of North and South Arabians separate after ʿābir, father of Hūd, the ancestor of the Yemenites, and Fāligh, the ancestor of the ʿAdnānites (cf. *Tījān*, p. 107). Since Hūd was a prophet acknowledged by the Qur'an, the Yemenites could boast a history of prophethood that is more ancient than that of the ʿAdnānites or the Hebrews, for that matter.

The consensus on the ʿAdnānites' genealogy seems to have arisen from a global conception of Islam in relation with Judaism. There are verses in the Qur'an which state that Abraham and his son Ismāʿīl built "al-bayt" (the house), and in some of these verses, it can be understood from context that the house in question was the Kaʿba. But apart from that, there is no explicit indication that the Arabs or the Qurayshites are descendents of Ismāʿīl. Even in the Hadīth tradition, there is no indication that the Prophet claimed this descent explicitly. Some claim that he did while others report that he used to stop at ʾUdad, ʿAdnān's father, and qualify genealogists who went beyond that to be liars (cf. Balādhuri's *ʾAnsāb I*; *Inbāh*). In any case, the idea that Arabs were Ismāʿīlites achieved wide

[5] Cf. Tabarī's *Tārīkh* Ibn; ʿAbd Al-Barr's *Inbāh* and *Al-Qsd wa al-ʾumam*, among others.

acceptance among Muslim scholars very early. Judging from the rich details provided, these scholars must have been acquainted with Hebrew Scriptures in which it was stated that Ishmael was the father of the Qedarites, interpreted as referring to Northern Arabs. It seems that the adoption of this idea encouraged the interpretation of some difficult passages in the Qur'an, especially those referring to ancient events, in the light of the Old Testament and other Hebrew texts, as can be noticed in the Tafsīr literature (cf. Tabari's *Tafsīr*).

This conception of the Arabs as an offshoot of the Peoples of the Book could have united all Arabians, but it did not. The Yemenites, in particular, tended to be too proud of their own history to look for an alternative one. It was in this intellectual and political atmosphere that the division between the "pure" and the "Arabized" Arabs appeared first. There is no mention of "ʿĀriba" and "Mustaʿriba" in the work attributed to Wahb b. Munabbih, but Ibn Shariyya does mention the two concepts (cf. *Tījān*, p. 327). According to this bi-partition, the "pure" Arabs were the Qaḥtānites whereas the ʿAdnānites were descendents of the Hebrews who became Arabized after their migration to Mecca (i.e. Ismāʿīl's offspring). In a sense, this idea was more in favor of the Qaḥtānites: the ʿAdnānites gained a history of prophethood but lost their Arabness while the Qaḥtānites maintained their history and appropriated Arabness. That is why we find in the Arabic sources a different tripartite classification according to which the "pure" Arabs include only the extinct tribes of ʿĀd, Thamūd, Tasm and Jadīs (cf. Ibn Ḥazm's *Jamhara*). Those who adopt this classification treat the Qaḥtanites and the ʿAdnānites as separate groups without any reference as to which of them were the "pure" Arabs. The argument behind such a classification was that the Qur'an stated that no trace was left of these tribes. But to cancel the effect of such an argument, Yemeni scholars made use of Jurhum, a mysterious tribe which allegedly was of Qaḥtāni origin and which used to live in Mecca when Ismāʿīl settled there. They even claimed that Ismāʿīl married a woman from this tribe. It should be pointed out that although Jurhum was also extinct, it was not mentioned in the Qur'an among the tribes which left no trace.

As was pointed out earlier, the polemics about genealogy was closely related to the controversy about the Arabic language. In fact, the whole issue about "pure" Arabs revolved around one major objective which was the appropriation of Arabic. Since this controversy started early, probably during the Umayyad period, we must conclude that Arabic had already become of great symbolic value at that time. This should come as no surprise since the Qur'an was considered as a masterpiece of eloquence during the life of the Prophet, and some of its verses state explicitly that it was miraculous[6]. It is not hard to imagine how the focus shifted from the Qur'an to the language in which it was revealed

[6] The Prophet did challenge his opponents to come up with a sūrah like the sūrahs of the Qurʾan; viz. verses 2:23, 10:38, and 11:13.

and, thereby, the evaluation of the latter in terms of the former. In other words, since the Qur'an was miraculous, its language came also to be extraordinary. As a consequence, some scholars even advanced that Arabic was the language of Heaven (cf. *Muzhir I*, p. 30). We will return to this point in the following section.

In order to appropriate the symbolic capital of Arabic, the Yemenites tried to turn in their favor the ʿAdnanites' claimed origins. More specifically, since the ʿAdnanites claimed to be descendents of Ismāʿīl, who was a Hebrew, they must have learned Arabic from the original speakers of the language, viz. the "pure" Arabs. As mentioned earlier, the Yemenites relinquished any claim to Hebrew origins and advanced, instead, that they descend from a different and much more ancient patriarch named Qaḥtān. Thus, it was much easier for them to argue that the Arabic language was revealed to one of the ancient figures in their genealogical tree. But when the *Tījān* of Ibn Hishām is examined closely, some inconsistencies can be identified which point to the possibility that the Yemeni version developed over time until it took its final form to be found in later sources. Wahb b. Munabbih asserts first that Yaʿrub b. Hūd b. ʿĀbir was the first to speak Arabic (*Tījān*, p. 37), but in a later passage (p. 106), he states even more explicitly that it was Yaʿrub's grand-father ʿĀbir who had that privilege. In the same passage, it is also stated that other peoples (e.g. descendents of Iram) learned the language from him but not his brother Fāligh. Fāligh was no other than the patriarch of the ʿAdnanites. He was claimed first to have spoken Syriac (p. 37), but in another passage, his tongue was said to be Persian (p. 107). Ibn Munabbih does not provide any explanation why two brothers should speak two different languages except God's will (viz. *wa lam yatakallam bihā maʿahu Fāligh li lladhī ʾrāda llāh*, p. 107). No such inconsistencies can be found in Ibn Shariyya's version. For Ibn Shariyya, it was Yaʿrub b. Qaḥtān who was blessed first with the faculty to speak the sacred language (p. 328) and Arabs were named after him. This was the version to be popular among later scholars who adopted the Yemeni point of view.

On the other hand, an opposite view claimed that Ismāʿīl was the first to be inspired Arabic. Al-Jumaḥi (*Tabaqāt*, p. 28) quotes Younes b. Habib, one of the early grammarians, as saying that the first person to have shifted from his father's tongue to Arabic was Ismāʿīl. The claim is immediately followed by another claim according to which all Arabs are descendents of Ismāʿīl except Himyar and offshoots of Jurhum (*Tabaqāt*, p. 28). Al-Jumaḥi quotes next the grammarian Abū ʿAmr b. Al-ʿAlāʾ saying that the language of Himyar and the confines of Yemen was distinct from that of Northern Arabs (ibid, p. 29). On a first reading, the three arguments may seem unrelated, but in fact, they all form a response to the Yemenites' attempt to appropriate Arabic as one of the bedrocks of the Arabo-Islamic culture. Accordingly, we can deduce from this counterattack that the Yemenites were the first to initiate the debate about Arabic, and that the Northerners were only retaliating in defense of their position.

Both parties tried to have recourse to sayings of the Prophet, no matter how shaky was the chain of reporters who handed down those sayings (cf. *Muzhir I* for some of these sayings). In view of the contradictory claims made by the ʿAdnānites and the Qaḥtānites, some authors argued that there was a difference between the Arabic of the Qur'an (Al-ʿArabiyya al-maḥḍa) and other Arabic varieties. Accordingly, the Yemenites may claim that Yaʿrub was the first to speak Arabic, but that was a different variety than the Arabic of the Qur'an (*wa tilka ʿarabiyyatun ʾuxrā ghayru kalāminā hādhā*) (cf. *Muzhir I*, p. 33). This point suggests that the Arabic of the Qur'an was perceived to be distinct from the varieties spoken in Yemen at that time.

In brief, there is no doubt that language constituted a major issue in the political conflict between the Yemenites and the Northern Arabs. Each of the two parties tried to appropriate the Arabic language by claiming that one of their patriarchs was the first to have been inspired to speak it. That this was a political rather than a mere intellectual debate can easily be deduced from the tribal origins of those who expressed views in this regard. Some of these are listed in the following table:

Table 1. Opinions about the first speaker of Arabic

Authors who claimed that Yaʿrub spoke Arabic first	Tribal origin (Qaḥtān)	Source
Wahb b. Munabbih	Yemen	Tījān
Ibn Shariyya	Yemen	Tījān
Ibn Diḥya	Kalb	Muzhir I
Ibn Kalbi	Kalb	Tabaqāt Ibn Saʿd
Azraqī	Ghassān	ʾaxbār makka
Ibn Durayd	Azd	Muzhir I
Nashwān	Yemen	Mulūk Hāimyar
Authors who claimed that Ismāʿīl spoke Arabic first	**Tribal origin (ʿAdnān)**	**Source**
Younes b. Ħabib	Dabba	Tabaqāt fuḥūl al-shuʿarāʾ
Abū ʿAmr b. Al-ʿAlāʾ	Tamīm	Tabaqāt fuḥūl al-shuʿarāʾ
Al-Jumaḥi	Quraysh	Tabaqāt fuḥūl al-shuʿarāʾ
Muhammed Al-Bāqir	Quraysh	Muzhir I; Tabaqāt Ibn Saʿd

It is no coincidence that the tribal affiliation of these scholars tallies well with their opinions, a fact which indicates that these scholars were deeply involved in the ideological conflict between the Qaḥtānites and the ʿAdnānites. What remains to be considered is what this conflict can reveal about the nature of the language being disputed, and this will be discussed in the next section.

2. The nature of Classical Arabic

Generally, those involved in a controversy question some points, but also assume the validity of other points. Now that we have dealt with the points of disagreement between Northern and Southern Arabians, we will consider some of the assumptions underlying the debate concerning Arabic which might shed some light on the nature of this language. The discussion will be based mainly on work attributed to Wahb b. Munabbih and ʿAbīd b. Shariyya since these are among our earliest sources on the topic.

In the *Tījān* of Ibn Hishām, at least three elements can be identified the status of which stands in the background unquestioned. These are Islam, theźArabic language and Arabic poetry. Concerning Islam, both Ibn Munabbih and Ibn Shariyya relate legends of ancient Yemeni kings who acknowledged the sanctity of the Kaʿba and claim that these figures used to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca and all sorts of rituals expressing their deepest respect for the would-be holy city of Islam. Some of them are even claimed to have had the knowledge that Mohamed would one day proclaim himself God's last messenger! Since one can hardly doubt the fabricated character of these legends, we must conclude that the fabricators, as well as the audience to whom the legends were aimed, did not question Islam as a religion. In other words, the authors did not intend to use the legends as instruments of proselytizing their readers. This should come as no surprise since the whole of Arabia had already been converted to Islam when Wahb b. Munabbih, for example, was born (viz. 34 A.H.), and by the end of the century, Islam had reached as far as Spain in the west and India in the east.

What is of more relevance to us, however, is the status of Arabic in Ibn Munabbih's and Ibn Shariyya's discourse. Earlier in the section on "pure" and "Arabized" Arabs, we pointed out that the whole objective behind the controversy between Southern and Northern Arabs was to appropriate the Arabic language. The controversy rests on a tacit consensus that the language had high prestige and, consequently, became the subject of strong competition between the two parties. Where did it acquire that prestige from? For those who hold the opinion that there was a poetic koiné in the pre-Islamic period, it is possible to argue that the koiné was already prestigious in virtue of its use in poetry composition and that its status was boosted by the Qur'an. From this point of view, the high prestige of Arabic and its political symbolism did not rise from a vacuum after the coming of Islam but, in fact, these aspects were merely reinterpreted in the light of, and adapted to, the new Islamic culture. The problem with this view is that it has to assume that the poetic koiné was not popular among Northern tribes only, but was also so in Yemen where probably other languages were more in use than varieties of Arabic. This scenario, however, can hardly be defended, for what could possibly make a people proud of its culture and its

political institutions, such as the Yemenites, shift or, at least, esteem the language of politically unorganized tribes? It seems that, although it is possible to grant the existence of a pre-Islamic koiné, there is no reason why that koiné should be assumed to have been in use outside north and central Arabia. Therefore, the ideological debate about the Arabic language must have risen within the Islamic empire in response to its internal politics, and that the Yemenites could not have indulged in it had it not been for the special status of Arabic in Islamic culture. This point will be elaborated further later in this and the next section.

The third element taken for granted in the discourse on the Arabic language is Arabic poetry. The idea that the ancient lore of the Arabs is to be found in their poetry is assumed throughout the *Tījān*, and a few verses or even a single one is often used to settle an argument or to prove the veracity of some information. It was undoubtedly the assumed cogency of this argumentation which justified the fabrication of poetry in many Arabic sources since the early period of Arabo-Islamic culture. It was reported that Omar I, the second Caliph of Islam, urged Arabs to preserve their poetry because it was claimed to be a record of Arab history (*al-shiʿr dīwān al-ʿarab*). Irrespective of its authenticity, this report indicates that the idea was widely accepted. In his *Tabaqāt*, Al-Jumaḥi accuses Ibn Isḥāq (85–150/159? A.H) of being the chief fabricator, but it seems that Ibn Isḥāq was drawing on an earlier tradition in which Wahb b. Munabbih was a prominent figure. The tradition ascribed long poems to Adam and other biblical figures. Ibn Munabbih and Ibn Shariyya did similarly with Yemeni kings and legendary figures. What is of interest to us here is the language of the fabricated poetry because its assumed character points to the emergence of a standard variety at an early stage in which the poems were fabricated.

But before we consider a few examples of this poetry, we need to make some general remarks about language standardization. In modern times, the emergence of standard languages is usually associated with the rise of nations (cf. Haugen, 1966; Kloss, 1967). That is to say, in a new nation, the ruling elite tend to impose their language variety on state institutions and, ultimately, the prestige it acquires through its association with such institutions will make of it the language of literate and high culture. But when the power of the ruling class is contested, other groups will also attempt to use their varieties in high domains, and it usually takes some time before a unified standard emerges[7]. With these remarks in mind, we can ask what kind of Arabic southern and northern Arabs were competing for. If both groups spoke different varieties of the same language, and if they were following the same model of language standardization as witnessed in modern times, we should expect to find the fabricated poetry to be in different varieties of Arabic. But if that poetry is composed in more or

[7] For a good example of language standardization, see Lodge, 1993 on the standardization of French and Leith, 1983 on the standardization of English.

less the same variety, a different interpretation must be sought of the whole issue of "pure" Arabs and the original speakers of Arabic. One thing we are certain about is that people in Arabia up to the inception of Islam could not have spoken one single variety of Arabic. Homogeneous languages simply do not exist, and in medieval Arabia where contact between small groups of inhabitants was not frequent, linguistic variation must have been wide to the extent of hindering mutual intelligibility between distant tribes or villages. Some reference to this variation can be found in grammar, lexicography and history sources. In the light of these remarks, we can now turn to the corpus of the fabricated poetry.

The most striking aspect of this poetry is the language in which it was composed. This language can hardly be distinguished from the Classical Arabic of the Umayyad/ Abbasid period, or even Modern Standard Arabic, for that matter. Although some poems are ascribed to Adam or Yaʿrub or other ancient figures, modern readers of Arabic find them much more accessible than the Muʿallaqāt or even some poems of the early Islamic period. The fabricated poems cited in the *Tījān* give the impression that their composers not only lacked talent, but they also lacked the mastery of the linguistic devices which poets used to learn through long training (cf. Zwettler, 1978). What seems to have been of primary importance for these uninitiated poets were the form of the verse and the rhyme. They also show a conscientious use of grammar rules, although these rules are transgressed from time to time. These facts may be indicators that the composers were emulating a variety which was not their native tongue.

A few examples should illustrate these points. In Classical Arabic poetry, the verse is often an independent grammatical and semantic unit (i.e. complete sentence). Cases in which a sentence spans over more than one verse were very rare, and later literary critics considered the device (called 'taḍmīn') not particularly poetic and should be avoided. In consequence, it was not very difficult for poets and their audience to infer the function of nouns within a sentence on the basis of their grammatical case. But when the distance between a noun and its case assigner was long, it was not unusual for the noun to be assigned a wrong case. In the *Tījān*, a poem is attributed to a Himyarite poet who bemoaned the death of Queen Balqīs. In the poem, a long sentence spans over four verses, and it is surprising that the poet does not err in assigning the accusative to nouns in the second, the third or the fourth verses although the verb "ʾarsalti" (sent.you.fem), to which these nouns serve as complements, occurs right at the beginning of the sentence in the first verse (p. 185). It seems that that the writer was conscious of the grammar rules of case and that he was trying to observe them as carefully as he could. This is supported by reports according to which even an eloquent Arabic speaker such as Al-Ḥajjāj b. Yousef made mistakes in similar contexts when reading the Qur'an (cf. Jumaḥi, *Tabaqāt*, p. 30). Besides, although the Arabic script is not always explicit about which case the poet intended for each noun in the four verses, there are clues

indicating that, at least, one mistake was made in the fourth verse. The first part of the verse is constituted of three coordinated nouns (lujayn; ʿāj; durr) which are not assigned the accusative although it is obvious that these nouns are verb complements, while the modifier (muṭbaqan) in the second part of the verse takes the accusative. These inconsistencies suggest that the writer did not master the case system of Arabic[8].

This is not the only occasion in which the poems cited in the *Tījān* do not observe the rules of Classical Arabic. On page 119, we find the phrase "*ʾalfayn ʿāman*" (two thousand years), in which the nūn of "ʾalfayn" is not deleted although the noun is in the construct state. The same remark can be made about another sentence on page 106 which runs as follows*: lā budda mimmā ʾan yarbaḥūn* (they must win). In Classical Arabic, the verb must be in the jussive after the particle "ʾan", which in this case would normally be indicated by the deletion of the nūn of "yarbaḥūn". The use of "mimmā" in this example is also not in accord with the standard usage. In other cases, the structure of the sentence itself is awkward, as in "*dharūnī ʾaqul min qabl yabdaʾ qāʾil*" (let me speak before anybody else). In standard usage, the clause following "qabl" (before) is always headed by the particle "ʾan", which does not show up in this example. In such cases, it is not clear whether the writer transgressed grammar rules or he was following the rules of some other Arabic variety that was discarded during the process of language standardization.

There are other cases, however, about which we are fairly certain that they belonged to certain Arabic varieties. One of these concerns the agreement of the verb with its subject in number in VS sentences. In Classical Arabic, the verb is always singular in such structures, irrespective of the number of the subject. But grammarians did mention the existence of varieties in which the verb agrees with its subject in number. Grammarians referred to these varieties collectively (and derogatively) as "*lughat ʾakalūnī l-barāghīth*" (the variety of "the fleas bit me"). In the *Tījān*, some instances can be found of such structures. On page 183, for example, a verse ends with "*wa laysa yadīnūna l-ʿibādu bilā qahri*" (people do not surrender without force). In another example (p. 202), we read "*lā yaʿlamūna l-nās*" (people do not know). A third example (p. 212) says "*ḥīna fāraqūnī l-ladhdhāt*" (when pleasures abandoned me). In all these examples, the verb takes the plural marker in agreement with its plural subject. Since this linguistic feature was ascribed to Yemeni dialects, among others (cf. Al-Sharqawi, 2008), it is plausible to relate it to the origin of the writer (in this case, Wahb b. Munabbih).

But is it possible to claim that Wahb b. Munabbih or Ibn Shariyya were using a Yemeni variety of Arabic to express some sort of linguistic nationalism?

[8] It is noticeable that Ibn Shariyya's chronicles contain more grammatical mistakes than the text attributed to Ibn Munabbih.

If the answer is positive, Yemeni Arabic would have been only minimally distinct from Classical Arabic. The problem, however, is that the poems in the *Tījān* were not written consistently in any single variety. If we take the verb-subject agreement, for example, it turns out that the majority of the cases follow the Classical Arabic norm, and that the instances we cited in the preceding paragraph are exceptions. In fact, most of the cases registered exhibit all the complexities of the Classical Arabic agreement system. Variation also includes the gender of some nouns which are treated sometimes as feminine and sometimes as masculine (e.g. *bayt* "house", pp. 186, 187). It is not clear whether these variations were integral parts of the variety spoken by the writer or some variants were mere errors. In any case, the language of the fabricated poetry of the *Tījān* was not totally consistent with the rules of Classical Arabic as described by the grammarians, although this variety may have been the target of the composer(s) of that poetry.

There is another remark about the fabricated poetry of the *Tījān* which concerns the avoidance of linguistic stereotypes of Yemeni varieties. Among these stereotypes, Arabic sources cite the definite article "m-" instead of Classical Arabic "l-", the suffixal "-k" of the 1st and the 2nd persons in the perfect form of the verb instead of CA "-t", the invariant demonstrative post-nominal "dhī"[9], the relative pronoun "dhī", etc. (cf. Rabin, 1951; Al-Sharqawi, 2008 for further details). It was probably for these and other local features that Yemeni Arabic[10] earned the stigma of "ṭumṭumāniyya" (unintelligibility). The fact that these stereotypes were avoided by Yemeni writers is a good indication that the standardization of CA had achieved a lot of progress well before the Abbasid period. (Ibn Munabbih died in 110/114? A.H). This unofficial standardization may have been based on a pre-Islamic poetic koiné, but it may also have resulted from the dynamics of dialect contact in early Islam, especially in the garrison cities of Basra and Kūfa. We will return to this point later.

In the light of what has been said so far, how should we interpret the Yemenites' attempt to appropriate Arabic by claiming that this language was first spoken by their ancestor Yaʿrub? If the Yemenites did not compose poetry in their own dialects, this can only mean that their varieties of Arabic were stigmatized right from the outset. It is probable that these varieties were even excluded from the Arabic language (viz. Ibn Al-ʿAlāʾ's statement to this effect cited earlier). It is true that the Yemenites viewed themselves as part of a large group of Arabians, some of whom lived in central Arabia (e.g. Tayyʾ) and northern Arabia (e.g. Ghassān and Quḍāʿa), but the legendary poets mentioned

[9] Actually, there are a few cases of this post-nominal demonstrative in Ibn Shariyya's chronicles. For example, on page 333, a verse reads "*lammā raʾaytu al-dahra dha taghayyar*" (when I saw that these times have changed).

[10] Some scholars advance that what traditional Arab grammarians identify as Yemeni Arabic was not spoken in Yemen but in its northern borders with central Arabia; cf. Rabin (1951).

in the *Tījān* were mostly Himyarites. In fact, one can hardly find in the book any reference to the glories of Kinda, Azd, Lakhm, Ghassān or other alleged Qaḥtanite tribes. Therefore, the only plausible conclusion we can make is that the Yemeni propagandists were not using their language to express their ethnic or national identity on the political scene of the Islamic Empire. Rather, they wanted to appropriate a language variety which was not connected to them. This may seem irrational, but so is their attempt to appropriate Islam by claiming anachronistically that Yemeni kings were Muslims.

In the last section, further support to the above conclusion will be sought in the rivalry between the grammarians of Basra and Kūfa. The claim underlying this endeavor is that these two cities represented the two main political factions of northern and southern Arabians, respectively. I hope to demonstrate that their grammarians were also involved in the ideological conflict between the two factions.

3. Basra vs. Kūfa

Classical Arabic was codified initially by the grammarians of Basra and Kūfa. Since codification presupposes a selection of the varieties regarded as the best representative of the language, and since there are no objective criteria on the basis of which such a selection could be made, the grammarians of Basra and Kūfa must have chosen their corpora on ideological grounds. We believe that the investigation of these ideological grounds will contribute to the understanding of the nature of Classical Arabic.

But ideology tends, by its very nature, to be tacit and to lie beneath the explicit rationalizations advanced by the language codifiers. Since the inception of the discourse on Arabic, the concept of "*faṣāḥa*" (eloquence) embodied, through its fluidity, the social and the political stakes of different parties. The term was used by grammarians, lexicographers, literati and others, but there was no consensus as to who was the most eloquent among the Arabs. Apart from the assumption that the Bedouin spoke purer Arabic than city-dwellers, there was little explicit reference to who those Bedouin were[11]. Thus, we find Sībawayh using expressions like "fuṣaḥāʾ al-ʿarab" (eloquent Arabs), "man nathiqu bi-ʿarabiyyatih" (reliable source of Arabic) and similar ones, but rarely being explicit about who these expressions referred to. In the same way, he qualified some varieties as "ḍaʿīfa" (weak) or "radīʾa" (bad) without mentioning them by

[11] There is some disagreement in the later sources on which varieties served as a basis for the ʿArabiyya. While Al-Farabi in his "kitāb al-ḥurūf" (p. 147) claims that CA was based essentially on the dialects of Qays, Tamīm, Asad, Tayyʾ and Hudhayl, Ibn Faris argues in his "Al-ṣāḥibī" (p. 7) that the dialect of Quraysh was the best of all dialects and that it was elected to be the standard norm for that reason (cf. Ech-Charfi, 2017).

name. When we bear in mind that such qualifications had social and political repercussions, we can understand why Sībawayh and other language codifiers did not feel free to cite names of the tribes associated with those varieties.

In relation with this remark, we should ask whether the grammarians of Basra and Kūfa were describing different varieties and whether they were involved in the tribal politics of the time. Basra and Kūfa were founded in relatively the same period: Basra in 14 A.H. and Kūfa in 17 A.H. (cf. Tabari's *Tārīkh*, vol. 1). Historical sources are quite informative about the population of these garrison towns. They record that during the wilāya (governorship) of Ziyād (50–3 A.H), Basra was inhabited mostly by a Qaysi group (ʾahl al-ʿālya), Tamīm, Bakr, ʿAbd al-Qīs (the last two from Rabīʿa), and a fifth group (khumus) from the Azd of Oman (cf. Djait, 1976). Apart from the Azd, who sided ideologically with Yemen, all the other constituents were northern tribes. By contrast, Kūfa developed slowly into a predominantly Yemeni center. Although there were groups from Tamīm, Asad and Rabīʿa in Kūfa, these were largely outnumbered by core Yemenites such as Hamdān/Himyar, Madhḥij, Kinda, Ashʿarūn, Hadramawt, and their allies from Quḍāʿa, Bajīla, Azd, Ansār and others (cf. Djait, 1976; Massignon, 1935). Besides, although Yemenites had representative groups in Syria and North Africa, they did not develop a cultural center of their own in the same way they did in Kūfa. It was mainly in this city that their intellectuals contributed significantly to Arabo-Islamic culture as well as to the politics of the early Islamic empire.

It is not very clear why Basrans and Kūfans got involved in their famous rivalry. Yāqūt (cf. *Muʿjam al-Buldān*) and Ibn Al-Faqīh (cf. *Kitāb al-Buldān*) report that even at the time of the Abbasids, the Caliphs used to organize *majālis* in which Basran and Kūfan orators debated the merits and the glories of their people. In the field of grammar, the debate between Sībawayh from Basra and Al-Kisāʾī from Kūfa on the "masʾala zunbūriyya" is perhaps the most famous of all those debates. But as Yāqūt and Ibn Al-Faqīh testify, the disputes were not limited to issues of grammar and lexicography, but involved all domains that were culturally significant at that time. No two other cities of the Islamic world were known for their rivalry as Basra and Kūfa were, and it is of utmost importance for historians of Arabic grammar to elucidate this conflict of which linguistic issues were only one aspect.

There are indications that the conflict between Basra and Kūfa started to develop since the first civil war. Basra tended to rally behind ʿUthmān, while Kūfans supported his opponents. Later on, Basra stood with ʿĀʾisha, the Prophet's widow, against ʿAli, who was backed by Kūfa, his capital city. Ibn Al-Faqīh reports that, when ʿAli attacked Basra (i.e. the battle of the camel) in 36 A.H, the Yemeni poet, ʾAʿshā Hamdān, composed a poem in which Basrans and Kūfans were treated as different groups, although not all Kūfans sided with ʿAli, nor were all Basrans against him. The tone of the poem is reminiscent of

later rivalries between the two groups. Within Kūfa itself, some reorganization of tribes into factions started to emerge. Tribes were initially organized into "ʾasbāʿ" (seven neighborhoods) where Yemeni and non-Yemeni populations lived side by side. But sources report the movement of some Muḍari tribes towards the eastern part and the city, ultimately, became divided into a Muḍari east side and a Yemeni west side. The division seems to indicate a cleavage in tribal relations and, probably, the beginning of the polarization of Arabia in political discourse into north and south. When Ziyad assumed the governorship of Irak, he reorganized Kūfa into four parts (ʾarbāʿ) and, in each part, he put Yemeni and Muḍari tribes together with the intention to divide and rule. Thus, we find in this period Madhḥij and Asad in one "rubʿ", Kinda and Rabīʿa in another, and Hamdān and Rabīʿa in a third one, while the Ansārs of Medina occupied a "rubʿ" of their own (cf. Djait, 1976). In political matters, Massignon (1935) points out that the Kūfan northerners, especially Tamīm and Asad, were pro-Umayyads, just like most Basrans, whereas their Yemeni compatriots supported ʿAli's cause massively and passionately. They contributed significantly to the development of Shiʿism. It is possible that the debate between Northerners and Southerners in Kūfa developed gradually into ideological positions in various domains, including the domain of language, as discussed in Section 1 above.

Assuming that the antagonism between Basra and Kūfa reflected the antagonism between Northerners and Southerners, what can we deduce from the debate between Basran and Kūfan grammarians? Apart from differences in linguistic analysis, which are basically theoretical or terminological, the grammarians of the two schools also diverged on the corpus of data they were analyzing. Historians of Arabic grammar converge on the point that the Basrans were much more selective than the Kūfans, who tended to be rather liberal in their selection of informants. Some modern scholars consider the Basrans to be the Arabic equivalents of Greek analogists and the Kūfans as the Arabic version of anomalists (cf. Goldziher, 1994). As to modern Arab scholars, some blame Kūfan grammarians for being too permissive with the data (Daif, 1968), whereas others blame the Basrans for being too restrictive, thus eliminating from CA a number of varieties attested in poetry and in Qurʾanic readings (cf, Al-Gendi, 1983). For us, this disagreement about data might have been ideologically motivated. More precisely, while the Basrans narrowed the circle of speakers of "standard" Arabic, the Kūfans preferred to broaden the circle and, consequently, included varieties excluded by the Basrans. As was pointed out above, since selection of a norm is an ideological decision, the dispute as to what constituted "pure" Arabic must also have been ideological. The controversy was probably motivated by the conflict between Northern and Southern Arabians discussed earlier.

A few examples should illustrate the point. In his *Inṣāf*, Ibn Al-ʾAnbārī cites the disagreement concerning the use of color terms in exclamations (e.g. *mā*

ʾabyaḍa "how white..!"). While the Kūfans accepted the construction as well-formed, the Basrans ruled it out. In his attempt to arbitrate between the two parties, Ibn Al-ʾAnbārī took the Basran side and judged that the data on which the Kūfans based their position was not acceptable (*shādh fa lā yuʾxadhu bih*). The term "shudhūdh", just like "faṣāḥa", is fluid, although it is often interpreted as "not widely attested". Another object of dispute between the two schools concerns the coordination of the topic (xabar) of the particle "ʾinna", as in "ʾinnaka wa Zaydun qāʾimān" (you and Zayd are standing). While the Kūfans ruled the construction in, the Basrans ruled it out. Once again, Ibn Al-ʾAnbārī sides with the second party on the ground that Sībawayh considered the example as a performance error. Obviously, what is at issue here is not only coordination, but also the nominative case assigned to the second element of coordination (viz. Zayd-un). The Basrans assumed that the norm for "ʾ*inna*" and its sisters was to assign the accusative to their topic. In many points of controversy cited in the *Inṣāf*, Kūfans generally accept variation while Basrans do not.

Nevertheless, while Basrans tended to draw their data from a limited set of Northern varieties, it is not the case that the Kūfans preferred Yemeni or other Qaḥtani varieties. In Sībawayh's *Kitāb*, reference is made to Tamīm (64 times), Hijāz (49 times), and Asad (16 times) more than to any other tribe, a fact which points to the priority given to Tamīmi and Hijāzi varieties[12]. But while we can understand the prestige granted to the Hijāzi variety in view of the political and religious role of Quraysh, the Prophet's tribe, the prestige of Tamīm remains to be explained. It is very likely that this large tribe was very influential in both Basra and Kūfa. For some complex reasons which are still waiting for elucidation, this tribe came to represent the Arab values on which the Arabic culture was based. It is probable that this status was contested by other parties, most of which were the Qaḥtani groups based mainly in Kūfa. Concerning linguistic matters, reference was made earlier to the Kūfan grammarians' use of data drawn from a large pool of varieties. This may be interpreted as a reaction especially against the prestige of the Tamīmi variety. Given the political conflict between Yemeni and Northern groups in Kūfa, and that between Azd and Tamīm in Basra, it is very hard not to postulate some effect of this conflict on grammarians. What is surprising is that the Kūfans did not seem to give any special importance to Yemeni or Qaḥtani dialects, in general. In the well-known "masʾala zunbūriya", it is sometimes reported that the Bedouin arbiters came from tribes whose "eloquence" was contested by Basrans but not by Kūfans. In this case, the debate between Sībawayh and Kisāʾī was about "standard" data rather than linguistic

[12] In Tabari's *Tārīkh*, the same tribes are cited as having contributed significantly to the shaping of the political scene up to the Abbasid period. Tamīm was mentioned 131 times, preceded only by Quraysh, which was cited 186 times. It is not clear why Sībawayh and Arab grammarians in general prefer to refer to Hijāz as a region instead of referring specifically to Quraysh.

analysis. Indeed, the Basran grammarian Al-Riyāshī stated that the main point of controversy between the two schools is that Basrans "elicited the language from dabb hunters and gerbil consumers, but they [i.e. Kūfans] relied on informants from the Sawād who used to consume mustard and yogurt" (*Fihrist*: 92). By this, he meant that the Basrans selected their informants among the Bedouin while the Kūfans relied on sedentary peasants. Therefore, there is no explicit accusation that Kūfan grammarians used data from Qaḥtani varieties.

But this fact does not rule out the possibility that the Kūfans were reacting against the prestige of Tamīm. Instead, this fact suggests that both Basran and Kūfan grammarians agreed that the realm of Arabic was limited to central Arabia. The disagreement between them concerned minor varieties within this area. Kisāʾī himself claimed to have drawn his data from the deserts of Hijāz, Najd and Tihāma (cf. Daif, 1968), thus expressing his conception of the space of "pure" Arabic. But within this geographical and social space, there certainly was a lot of linguistic variation. Even if we grant the existence of a poetic koiné, that koiné must have exhibited variation, as reported by Sībawayh's *Kitāb* itself. It seems that Kisāʾī and his Kūfan colleagues, by overusing data which Basrans considered substandard, were asserting that Arabic cannot be appropriated by a few Arab groups, and that other less prestigious groups were no less Arab. But it is unlikely that these scholars were defending these groups on egalitarian principles; rather, they were contesting the cultural hegemony of a strong opponent on behalf of the Qaḥtanis who, apparently, were excluded from the domain of Arabness. It is from this angle that we should view the opinion attributed to the Kūfan Al-Farrāʾ[13] according to which Quraysh were the speakers of the purest variety of Arabic (ʾafṣaḥ al-ʿarab) (cf. *Muzhir I*: 221). This opinion became popular in later writings but, it seems, for different reasons. For Al-Farrāʾ and his contemporaries, the focus on Quraysh's prestige was probably meant to question the growing influence of eastern dialects and that of Tamīm in particular.

It may be argued that CA was shaped mainly by a corpus of literary texts most important of which were the Qurʾan and pre- and early Islamic poetry. Those who advance the thesis of a poetic koiné use the relative homogeneity of those texts in defense of their argument. But Brustad (2016) has demonstrated that the primary concern of the early Muslim scholars was the restriction of the corpus as well as the fixation of its oral performance. The issue of Qurʾanic readings is too well-known to require any further comment, but Brustad asserts that poetry also underwent the same process. In other words, the relative homogeneity of the language of the Qurʾan and pre-Islamic poetry was the end result of painstaking efforts by scholars such as Sībawayh and his teacher, Al-Khalīl, and others to

[13] A passage in *Muzhir* I, p. 212 ascribes the same claim to Thaʿlab, another influential grammarian and lexicographer from the Kūfan school.

bring some order to what they considered chaotic variation. What we are claiming here, in line with Brustad (2016), is that the scholarly project undertaken by the first generations of Muslim erudites, just like any other project of language standardization, cannot have ignored the power balance in the Muslim society. There were different varieties of Arabic – or different versions of the koiné – but some gained more prestige than others during their contact in the newly-founded cities such as Basra and Kūfa, or even in Mecca and Medina and other urban centers. The grammarians of Basra and Kūfa must have taken this fact into consideration. What we have learnt from the rivalry between the two schools is that the Qaḥtani varieties, though backed by an influential political force, did not manage to leave visible traces in the emergent CA. This can only mean that they were considered divergent from the varieties of central Arabia on which CA was based. This conclusion is in agreement with the assertion ascribed to ʿAmr b. Al-ʿAlāʾ, cited earlier, according to which the language of Himyar and the confines of Yemen was different from Arabic.

Conclusion

The Yemenites' disparate effort to appropriate the Arabic language reveals some aspects of CA. Although the controversy about the first speaker of the language may give the impression that all Arabians spoke varieties of the same language, an analysis of the poetry produced by Yemeni propagandists as well as the rivalry between Kūfan and Basran grammarians indicate that CA was based mainly on varieties of central Arabia. More specifically, the errors detected in the poetry of these propagandists suggest that they were not writing in their own dialects. In the same vein, the Kūfan grammarians, who were probably backed by the Yemenites, did not draw their data from dialects other than those of central Arabia. On the basis of these remarks, we conclude that the claim according to which Arabic was originally spoken by Qaḥtani groups (i.e. ʿarab ʿāriba) was a disparate move made by already acculturated groups who were torn by the memories of their glorious past and their desire to gain a foothold in the new Muslim society.

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