

About Sibawayh, A Representative of The Basra School

Rasulova Gulchehra Nazimjonovna

Arabic Language Teacher, Yangi Asr University, Uzbekistan

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*Correspondence: Rasulova Gulchehra
Nazimjonovna

Email: rasulova.g@mail.ru

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Abstract: This study explores the contributions of Sibawayh, a prominent representative of the Basra school, to the development of Arabic grammar. The research aims to analyze his scholarly journey, his primary work al-Kitab, and his influence on Arabic linguistics. The study employs a historical and analytical methodology, examining primary sources and historical accounts to understand Sibawayh's linguistic theories and their impact on subsequent scholars. The findings highlight Sibawayh's pivotal role in systematizing Arabic grammar, the theoretical foundations of al-Kitab, and his influence on linguistic debates. Despite his non-Arab origin, his dedication to the Arabic language shaped the field of Arabic grammar, solidifying his status as one of the most influential grammarians in history.

Keywords: Arabic Language, Linguistics, Nahw, Basra School, Al-Kitab

Introduction

Data from Arabic linguistics indicate that since the emergence of oral and written sources, they have developed proportionally. This, of course, has been an important factor in the development of both oral and written speech. This cultural and literary relationship and mutual relations can be understood from oral and written monuments, sources. Such written sources exist not only in many world languages, but also in Arabic. These sources provide a great deal of information about the grammar, history, and literature of the Arabic language (Tall, 2023).

Methodology

Sibawayh (148/760-180/797), one of the founders of Arabic grammar and a member of the Basra school, is known in history more by his nickname than his given name. His full name was Abu Bishr Amr ibn Uthman ibn Qanbar al-Farsi al-Basri. He was born in the city of Bayda, located 800 farsakhs from Shiraz, a city in southern Iran (Druel, 2020).

Sibawayh, a Persian by origin with a deep love for the Arabic language, authored Kitāb al-Sibawayh ("The Book of Sibawayh") on Arabic grammar during his short life. Despite being of non-Arab descent, his passion was so strong that he became one of the most

prominent scholars in the fields of Arabic syntax (*naḥw*) and morphology (*ṣarf*). He was a man of good character, pure, and handsome. His mother affectionately called him "Sibawayh," which in Persian means "the scent of an apple or a sweet scent." Some sources say that his mother called him this because his cheeks were as red as two apples (Hussein, 2022).

Sibawayh is a very famous name among Arabs, and if Arabs want to say that someone is very knowledgeable, especially in Arabic grammar, they say, even jokingly, "You have become a Sibawayh."

In his youth, he moved with his family to the city of Basra, which was a center of knowledge and a platform for learning, and he grew up there. Young Sibawayh, with the aim of acquiring knowledge, attended various scholarly gatherings, and later began to attend the gatherings of Hammad ibn Salama ibn Dinar al-Basri (167 AH), who was one of the great teachers of hadith science at that time. From this teacher, he began to master the sciences of the Arabic language, hadith, jurisprudence, and grammar. One day, while Sibawayh was reciting a hadith, he read the phrase ليس من أصحابي أحد إلا ولو شئت لأخذت عليه ليس أبا (نصب), i.e., mansub, instead of the nominative case (رفع), i.e., marfu', which is "أبو الدرداء" (Abu al-Darda').

The hadith meant that there was no one among the Companions about whom I could mention a fault or deficiency, except for Abu al-Darda', about whom I have no criticism. This was a hadith about the virtues of Abu al-Darda'. The reason why Sibawayh read the word "أبا الدرداء" (Abu al-Darda') as "أبو الدرداء" (Abu al-Darda') at the end of the hadith was due to his knowledge of the Arabic language, according to which the word "ليس" (laysa - there is not) should put the following name in the nominative case (marfu'). However, unaware that in some cases the word "ليس" can come in the meaning of the word "إلا" (illa - except), his teacher corrected him, saying, "O Persian, read correctly!" This correction, aimed at rectifying the error, deeply affected Sibawayh, and he blamed himself, saying, "I made a mistake in reading the hadith because I am not an Arab." After this incident, Sibawayh set himself the goal of "I will thoroughly learn the Arabic language to a level where I will never make a mistake, and I will create a program that will prevent others from making mistakes," and directed his efforts towards studying the sciences of *naḥw* (syntax) and *ṣarf* (morphology).

At the age of 32, he moved to Basra and learned Arabic from Khalil ibn Ahmad al-Farahidi. Since Sibawayh was of Persian origin, spoken Arabic was considerably more difficult for him than the written language. He dedicated himself to systematizing the grammar of the Arabic language. Due to his love of knowledge, he quickly became one of the scholar's most prominent students (Al-Kubeisi, 2023). He paid so much attention to learning that he reached the point where he could correct the mistakes of some of his teachers, and some teachers were forced to distance themselves from him. Even during his student years, he began to lay the foundation for many rules. After Khalil's death, he moved to Baghdad and held a debate with al-Kisa'i, a representative of the Kufa school of linguistics (Zyegintsev, 1958).

Sibawayh did not limit himself to just one teacher, but also took lessons from Abul Khattab, known as al-Ahfash al-Akbar (d. 177 AH), Isa ibn Amr al-Thaqafi (d. 149 AH), Yunus ibn Habib, and Abu Zayd al-Ansari al-Nahwi. As a result, he reached the level of a connoisseur of the Arabic language. Anyone who had difficulty with Arabic grammar would ask him questions. His fame spread far and wide, so that the scientific debates he held were crowded with people. Sibawayh's immersion in the pursuit of knowledge can be seen in several incidents that happened to him. One day, Sibawayh saw one of his employees whose rope had become entangled around a donkey, and rushing to him to report this, he said to him, "The rope has covered the donkey's neck." Sibawayh said, "Say, 'The rope is entangled around the donkey's neck.'" The employee replied, "It's okay, master, as long as you get there before the donkey dies." Sibawayh replied to him, "For me, the death of the donkey is better than the death of the Arabic language." Sibawayh considered the death of his donkey even better than his employee making a mistake in an Arabic word (Sara, 2019).

Another similar incident greatly affected Sibawayh, which prompted the writing of his only work on grammar. Sibawayh had a maid, and due to his preoccupation with knowledge, he did not pay attention to this maid. As a result, while Sibawayh was away from home, the maid burned all the information he had collected and written down in manuscript form (Abbas, 2023). Upon his return, after seeing that the written information he had collected over the years had been burned to ashes, he fell into a state of depression for a while. Then he regained his composure and realized that they were only papers, and that the real knowledge was within him, and he quickly began writing his only work. Since the author did not give a specific name to this book, it was named "al-Kitab" ("The Book"). This book, written in the 8th century, became so famous among the people that they called it "The Qur'an of Grammar."

Sibawayh's work has been the focus of scholars' attention from the time it was written until today. They have used the knowledge he left behind in their own works and have expressed many opinions and reflections on the importance of his work in linguistics. The famous Arab grammarian al-Mubarrad (825-898) presents his opinion about him in A.M. Harun's book al-'Isnad, Volume I. It states that: "A book like Sibawayh's al-Kitab has not yet been created in any science, and the reason for this is that for any book written in any field, one needs another book to understand its essence. As for Sibawayh's "al-Kitab", it fully reveals the science of grammar (Al-Mansuri, 2019).

The renowned Islamic scholar and historian Ibn Kathir (1301-1373) wrote about Sibawayh: "He composed a book on the science of nahw (grammar). The imams of grammar after him could not reach its end or its explanation. They were immersed in the whirlpool of its sea and gathered from its pearls, but they have not yet reached its bottom."

Abd al-Wahid ibn Ali al-Halabi (d. 305 AH) in his Maratib al-Nahwiyyin (The Ranks of Grammarians) described Sibawayh, saying, "Sibawayh is the most knowledgeable in Arabic grammar after Khalil. He wrote a book that people call 'The Qur'an of Arabic Grammar.'".

The renowned scholar and founder of Arabic prose literature, al-Jahiz (776-868), said the following about Sibawayh's work: "People have not written a book like this in nahw (grammar). All other books are dependent upon it.

The above descriptions indicate that Sibawayh's al-Kitab was written comprehensively, and all subsequent books on nahw (syntax) and sarf (morphology) were interpreted based on his work (Yahya, 2022b).

Result and Discussion

Undoubtedly, Sibawayh is the founder of the Basra school. His work served as a unique source of knowledge on Arabic grammar during the formative and subsequent flourishing period of Arabic linguistics in the 8th-15th centuries. His book has been the most widely discussed linguistic work, resulting in hundreds of commentaries written on it over several centuries. This book has been extensively used in finding solutions to certain issues, including the interpretation of Quranic verses, understanding the meanings of hadiths, clarifying matters of Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), and in many other fields (Yahya, 2022a).

The end of Sibawayh's life was tragic. During the reign of Caliph Harun al-Rashid he had a debate in Baghdad with Imam Kisa'i (d. 189/805), who was one of the prominent linguists of that time [Frolov D.V. Sibawayh Abu Bishr. Moscow. VKH ,P. 9]. Kisa'i was also a student of Sibawayh's teacher, Khalil ibn Ahmad al-Farahidi – and later became the founder of the Kufa school. Kisa'i challenged Sibawayh to a debate and posed a question. That famous question was this

كنت أظن العقرب أشد لسعة من الزنبور فإذا هو هي أو فإذا هو إياها

The end of this discussion is, "Will it be 'هي' (hiya) or 'إياها' (iyyaha)?" - he asks. Sibawayh answers, "It will be 'فإذا هو هي' (fa'idha huwa hiya)." Kisa'i says, "It will be 'فإذا هو إياها' (fa'idha huwa iyyaha)" and, as proof, brings witnesses from some Arab tribes. Although Sibawayh prevailed in the debate with Kisa'i, the discussion ended with his defeat. There are various opinions regarding his defeat, with some attributing it to Sibawayh's lack of eloquence, while another group claims that Kisa'i cheated, that is, he conspired with the tribal representatives beforehand. Whatever the case, this defeat deeply saddened Sibawayh, and for this reason, he tried to return to Bayda, where his umbilical cord was cut.

There are three different hypotheses regarding Sibawayh's death:

- The first of these is that Sibawayh left Baghdad, came to the city of Ahvaz in Iran, and died there.
- The second hypothesis is that Sibawayh set out from Baghdad towards Khorasan, but fell ill and died in the city of Sawa (a city located between Ray and Khorasan).

According to the third hypothesis, Sibawayh died in Shiraz in the year 180/796, at the age of between 32 and 40 years. His grave is also located there (Kahan, 2021).

The perfection of al-Kitab has been recognized by scholars from that time to the present day. He was honored as "the non-Arab teacher who taught the Arabic language to the Arabs." Sibawayh has a famous saying: "I myself am non-Arab, but I love the Arabic language more than my own life, what can I do?"

Conclusion

Thus, Sibawayh's contribution to Arabic grammar is very significant, both theoretically and practically. As one of the important representatives of the Basra school, he developed the basic rules of Arabic grammar and defined them accurately and scientifically (Ali, 2019). His scientific legacy, helping to thoroughly and accurately understand the Arabic language, also influenced the development of the Arabic language after his time (Al-Khrissat, 2024).

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