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Traditions Blending in: Contributions to the Arabic Linguistic Thinking

Abstract The ‘Greek hypothesis’ has been a controversial topic ever since Merx attempted to demonstrate the dependence of the Arabic linguistic discourse on the Greek thinking in the late 19th century. In this paper, we re-examine this discussion and suggest that a possible influence on the methodological framework deserves further investigation. After examining three representative examples from recent research, we discuss the problems that arise from researching the Greek influence in the borrowing of individual notions. We finally conclude that this influence could be rather assessed by considering the general methodological framework that may have been acquired through Greek educational models in the Byzantine provinces.

Keywords Arabic linguistic tradition, Arabic, Greek, Byzantine, educational models, knowledge circulation

1 Introduction

The origin and development of the Arabic linguistic disciplines have long been discussed upon. With Arabs being much exposed to foreign erudition,¹ the impact of other traditions, first and foremost the Greek and the Syriac, remains historically noticeable.

Merx suggests that six notions were borrowed from Greek logic (Merx 1889: 141–148; 2023: 238–245; Versteegh 1993: 22ff.); these had been initially received by Arabic grammarians and successively integrated in the linguistic tradition, boosted by their Greek equivalents. Rundgren (1976) further argues that some Arabic grammatical terms (e.g., *naḥw*, *ṣarf*, and *qiyās*) are either direct translations of or are inspired by Greek notions.

¹ See Gutas (1998 and later editions).



The present contribution advances in the wake of the hypothesis that the Greek tradition might well have influenced the early formation of the early Arabic linguistic discourse. The working hypothesis presented here is that the Greek influence on the early stages of the Arabic linguistic tradition might have been exercised through the acquisition of a methodological framework.

In the following, we will discuss the general framework of our working hypothesis, presenting possible influences on the Arabic metalanguage through the lens of the Greek hypothesis. The focus will be on the extra- and metalinguistic factors that we suggest are external contributions to the Arabic linguistic thinking.² After examining three representative examples from recent scholarship, we remark that the influence of the Greek tradition on the Arabic should not be researched in the borrowing of the single notions. It should rather be assessed considering the general methodological framework, potentially acquired via the Greek educational models in the Byzantine provinces.

2 The Arabic linguistic disciplines

The question as to how Arabic linguistic disciplines emerged has been discussed from different perspectives. Michael Carter presents the influences from other Arab-Islamic sciences, with a special focus on the legal studies (*fiqh*).³ Kees Versteegh discusses possible external influences,⁴ distinguishing between (i) a direct influence, namely via the translations of the Greek scholarship of the 3rd/9th and 4th/10th centuries; and (ii) an indirect influence, exercised through the everyday contact in the Byzantine provinces from the dawn of the Arab-Islamic empire.

Amongst others, the methodology of these and further studies accounts for the occurrence and comparison in usage of the linguistic specialized lexicon. Scholars have examined the lexicon in the context of the Arabic linguistic disciplines and compared it with equivalent instances in either other Islamic sciences or disciplines from neighboring⁵ traditions. With regard to the latter, a similar approach was adopted in the 19th century by Merx (1889).⁶

² The research further deals with the framework for knowledge circulation. I presented the preliminary results at the Journée d'étude HTL-LabEx EFL 'Grammaires étendues' *La connexion abbasside : circulation des théories linguistiques entre les savants grecs, syriaques et arabes du VIIIe au Xe siècle*, organized by Lionel Dumarty and Margherita Farina and held at the Université Paris Cité, Paris, 8 December 2022 (Olivieri 2024).

³ See in particular Carter (2016); see also Carter (1972; 2001; 2017).

⁴ Versteegh (1977; 1993). The conclusions in support of the Greek hypothesis described in the 1977 publication are significantly tempered in his later publication of 1993.

⁵ Greek and Syriac in particular.

⁶ An English translation of *Historia Artis Grammaticae apud Syros* by Daniel King was recently published under the title *A History of the Study of Grammar among the Syrians* (2023).

The two theses are not mutually exclusive; the hypothesis of an internal origin and that of an external influence do not rule each other out. The emerging Arab-Islamic disciplines, including linguistic ones, arose from local concerns and were deeply rooted in the specific, Arab-Islamic cultural environment. As such, the Arabic linguistic tradition certainly cannot be configured as part of the extended Greek or any other grammar, notwithstanding the formulations that may resound Greek or Greek-inspired.

As of today, the scholarship has not been able to confirm whether there has been any direct connection across the traditions from the region. Apart from a number of hypotheses on the paths of concept transmission (Merx 1889; Rundgren 1976; Versteegh 1977), the reconstruction of points of convergence between the Arabic and the neighboring traditions has failed to reach a general conclusion. With researchers having explored the pre- and early Islamic periods, the investigation produced results for the Greek-Syriac connection, with Syriac authors translating and quoting their Greek sources explicitly.⁷ As far as Arabic is concerned, the search for patterns consistent with Greek models has not yielded indisputable results, also due to the absence of evident borrowings especially in the earliest stages of the tradition.

When examining the Greek hypothesis, a significant obstacle in tracing possible paths of knowledge transmission from Greek to early Arabic scholarship is the issue of chronology. The foundation for Arabic language studies was laid down in the first century of the Islamic era (7th and 8th centuries CE), while the translation movements peaked in the 9th and 10th centuries CE. These translations predominantly focused on medicine and astronomy initially, with philosophy and logic introduced later. Consequently, there is a notable difficulty in finding solid evidence of Arabic grammarians' access to, or knowledge of, Greek sources prior to the translation movements. Although there is evidence of a general interest in Greek works dating back to the early Islamic period, pinpointing direct access by Arabic grammarians to these sources, or their knowledge thereof, during the formative stages of the linguistic tradition remains challenging.

However, while recognizing that translations were a primary means of transmission, here we aim to consider other channels, building on the concept of *voie diffuse*, which refers to the indirect influence exerted through everyday interactions between Arabic and Greek cultures (Thillet 1958; see also Versteegh 1977). The introduction of this concept opened up the possibility of describing alternative pathways of knowledge transmission. Our research thus aims to explore how Arabic scholars, who lived before the translation movements, might have been influenced by the Greek tradition, researching possible influence on scholarship starting from Arabs' profound interest in knowledge acquisition and considering the broader framework of their being part of a multicultural environment.

⁷ E.g., the *Téchne Grammatiké*. This aspect will be discussed further in the paper.

In fact, the complexity of the social fabric of the emerging Arab-Islamic empire and the cultural legacy of the communities that merged therein are relevant aspects of the intricate environment in which the Arab-Islamic sciences originated. The communities that became part of the empire did actively contribute to shaping it by bringing in their heritage. Some of the educational models in place in the provinces of the empire drew on this heritage. For the sake of our discussion, the Greek-based educational models developed in the Byzantine provinces⁸ are of utmost relevance. Although the educational models drew on scholarship and methods other than Arabic-Islamic, these were clearly grounded in the local environment and adjusted to meet the needs of the ‘Muslim lands’ (Mavroudi 2014: 327). An example of this is the teaching of Greek language and grammar, which was of interest to Arabs for various reasons ranging from scholarly work to administration (Mavroudi 2014).

The discussion on the role played by scholarship and educational models in shaping the Arabic linguistic thinking does not imply that the specific traits of its Arab-Islamic identity are left aside. Such an approach is rather meant to describe an intellectual endeavor grounded in local needs and concerns, which, at the same time, might have drawn inspiration from neighboring traditions.⁹ In fact, the similarities in linguistic descriptions suggest that scholars working on the Arabic language may have been familiar with knowledge produced also outside of their closest circles and prior to these.¹⁰

⁸ See Mavroudi (2014).

⁹ With regard to this, there remains the open issue of Arabic grammarians not overtly acknowledging influences other than, e. g., their teachers’ or direct peers’. All the more, none of the early grammatical treatises do mention scholarship belonging to circles other than the local ones. However, the names of who was actually part of these local circles and—perhaps more importantly—what their background was is still a mystery to an extent. We do know who the teachers of Sibawayhi (d. ca. 180/796) were; on the other hand, the intellectual scene prior to Sibawayhi is not clearly defined. As Talmon remarks (1982; 2003), the intellectual circles of the early stages of the Arabic linguistic tradition witnessed the contribution of grammarians that we are not yet able to fully identify, but whose influence has surely played a role in shaping the linguistic approach of early grammarians such as Sibawayhi and al-Ḥalīl (d. ca. 175/791). With regard to the scholars acknowledged in early Arabic sources, see Talmon (1982) and Carter (2004). For the scholarly circles active in Sibawayhian and pre-Sibawayhian times, see Talmon (1982; 1985; 2003).

¹⁰ The theory on the governing operator(s) in nominal sentences is an example of this; for a presentation of the subject, see the *Kitāb al-ʿInṣāf* by Ibn al-ʿAnbārī (d. 577/1187) (*ʿInṣāf*, 21–26). The Baṣran scholarship attributes the governing functions to the abstract governor *ibtidāʿ*; on the other hand, the Kūfan approach is that the nominative case of topic (*mubtadaʿ*) and comment (*ḥabar*) is due to a mutual case attribution (*tarāfu*). Talmon shows that the mutual attribution of the nominative case is presented as the core of the government theory already in the teachings of the old Iraqi school (Talmon 2003: 40), way ahead of the Kūfan times. An interesting aspect of this story, though, is that the old Iraqi teaching emerges in al-Ḥalīl’s work. In the *Kitāb al-ʿAyn*, in

Assessing the extra- and metalinguistic factors that influenced the Arabic scholarship—whether internal, external, or somewhere in between—is crucial to understanding how knowledge circulated in the first centuries of the Islamic era. In this, we aim to outline a process of influence on the metalinguistic discourse, alongside a process of ‘Arabicization’ of what was borrowed from or inspired by other traditions. Our thesis is that the knowledge from other linguistic traditions might have contributed to the methodology of Arabic scholars and inspired their description of the Arabic language. This knowledge would have been conveyed to the Arabs by means of the scholarship in translation and the Greek-based educational models. This should therefore not be regarded as a process of reduplication, but rather as reception and adaptation.

3 Current state of scholarship

In his 1889 publication, Merx presented his theory concerning the connection between the Arabic and the Greek linguistic traditions. According to him, six notions of the Greek scholarship were received by Arabic scholars, who then systematized them in the Arabic linguistic thinking drawing on their Greek equivalents.¹¹ Merx’s arguments build primarily on terminological similarities and conceptual connections between the technical terms in question. For these, he traces the Arabic grammarians’ formulations back to Aristotle, assuming that the analyses they set forth do not appear to be entirely new. De Boer (1901) presented a similar argument, suggesting that the Arabic linguistic tradition was suffused with a ‘Greek spirit’.¹² Along the same lines, Rundgren (1976) argued that other grammatical terms (e.g., *naḥw*, *ṣarf*, and *qiyās*) are either direct translations of or are inspired by Greek notions.

The premise of these studies is that Greek knowledge circulated widely in Arabic scholarly circles already at an early stage of the linguistic tradition. Con-

fact, al-Ḥalil describes that the nominative of *fawquka* in *fawquka ra’suka* (‘the upper part of you [i.e., of your body] is your head’) should be explained in terms of mutual attribution, since ‘each of the two is in the nominative because of the other’ (*Kitāb al-ʿAyn*, V:22). On this, see Talmon (1997). For a discussion on governors in nominal sentences, see Olivieri (2024).

¹¹ ‘The following are the areas in which the Arabic grammarians made direct use of Aristotelian theories [...]’ (Merx 2023: 238). The six elements discussed are (i) the classification of the three parts of speech; (ii) the *ʾiʿrāb* (as connected to the notion of *hellēnismós*); (iii) the notion of gender; (iv) the adverb (*ṣarf*); (v) the notion of *ḥāl*; (vi) the notion of predicate (*ḥabar*) (Merx 1889: 141–148; 2023: 238–245; Versteegh 1993: 22ff.).

¹² ‘Nicht indischer Phantasie, sondern griechischen Geistes bedurfte es dazu, das Nachdenken auf die Erkenntnis des Wirklichen zu richten. [...] Überall, wo es sich nicht um bloßes Aufzählen oder zufälliges Zusammenreihen handelt, sondern nach sachlichen oder logischen Gesichtspunkten eine Anordnung des Mannigfaltigen versucht wird, darf mit Wahrscheinlichkeit auf griechischen Einfluss geschlossen werden’ (de Boer 1901: 17).

sidering the historical and socio-political context in which early Arabic scholars operated, such an assumption is surely plausible, also thanks to the circulation of the Greek scholarship made available in Arabic by those translators who were proficient in Greek (Peters 1968; Mavroudi 2017). Translators may thus have acted as channels of the ‘Greek linguistic methods, terminology, and categories’ by which their works were likely dominated (Versteegh 1977: 4).

Historically, there is a difference between the translators operating in the fourth century¹³ and the early interpreters in the early Islamic empire. The translators of the fourth century were more engaged in translating philosophical and grammatical treatises, contributing to a systematic understanding of Greek grammar. On the other hand, the early interpreters in the Islamic empire had a different role. They did not engage in translating such scholarly works. Instead, their primary function was to act as intermediaries between the Arab conquerors and the indigenous populations they encountered. While it is true that some knowledge might have been transmitted through these interactions, there is no evidence that this was part of any systematic effort to convey Greek grammatical knowledge. The role of these interpreters was more practical, focused on facilitating communication and administration rather than scholarly translation. The result of this process did not amount to a comprehensive survey of Greek grammar or philosophy.

However, the—perhaps even incidental—transfer of knowledge resulting from this is something that deserves to be highlighted. In *Greek Elements in Arabic Linguistic Thinking* (1977), Versteegh pictured a complex framework in which the Greek knowledge could have been transmitted to the Arabs, even at an early stage of the tradition and provided instances of the Arabic linguistic discourse that can be traced back to a Greek foundation, be it conceptual or methodological. Among these are ‘the terminology of articulated sound and of phonetic change; the term *ḥaraka* (vowel); the definitions of noun and verb; the paradigms for noun and verb; the theory of the parts of speech; the notion *i‘rāb*; the verbal tenses; the theories concerning the infinitive; the concept of transitivity; the system of the *uṣūl an-naḥw*’ (Versteegh 1977: 12).

Further to these, the scholarly production investigating similar instances has dealt with a number of grammatical notions that are presented in the Arabic tradition with similar formulations and/or contents as in the Greek.¹⁴ To provide an overview of the basis for our discussion of why and how we could rethink the framework of the Greek hypothesis, in the following we will briefly introduce three of these examples.¹⁵

¹³ On this, see Peters (1968).

¹⁴ See also Sartori (2019).

¹⁵ With regard to the Syriac connection, and especially with regard to the terminology of vowels and cases, see Posegay (2021).

3.1 Parts of speech: Nouns

Merx identifies in the Aristotelian production the source of the Greek influence on the Arabic thinking. Although Aristotle is not the only source of influence on the Arabic thinking,¹⁶ in the case of the parts of speech¹⁷ it is the most plausible. A summary of the description(s) provided by Arabic grammarians for the category of nouns is outlined by Ibn Fāris (d. 395/1004):

As for the noun, Sibawayhi says: ‘The noun is for instance *man* and *horse*.’ [...] And states al-Mubarrad that according to Sibawayhi’s view: ‘The noun is what can be a subject.’ [...] And states al-Kisāʿī: ‘The noun is what an attribute can be referred to.’ And says al-Farrāʾ: ‘The noun is what can exhibit a *tanwīn*, and be in construct state or annexed to the definite article.’ And says al-ʿAḥfaš: ‘You know that you are dealing with a noun when a verb or an attribute can be referred to it, as for instance in *zayd qāma* (Zayd stood) or in *zayd qāʾim* (Zayd is standing), when can be in the dual form or take the plural, as *al-zaydāni* (the two Zayd(s)) and *al-zaydūna* (the Zayd(s)), and when exhibits a triptotic inflection.’ (*al-Šāḥibī*, 49)

Ibn Fāris further presents one definition that has entered the traditional, mainly Baṣran, grammar. This was first introduced by al-Zajjājī (d. 339/949), and his definition of nouns reads similarly to the wording in Aristotle’s *Poetica*:

[The noun is] an articulated and comprehensible sound that expresses a meaning but has no implications of time and space. (al-Zajjājī, quoted by Ibn Fāris in *al-Šāḥibī*, 51)

A noun is a composite sound with a meaning, not indicative of time, no part of which has a meaning by itself; for in compounds, we do not use each part as having a meaning of its own. (*Poetica*, I: 457a)¹⁸

The Arabic reception of the *Poetica*, alongside its relevance to Arabic sources also of earlier stages, was stressed by Fischer in the 1960s. Fischer argued that Aristotle’s *Poetica* was circulating more than we assume ‘in the eastern part of

¹⁶ Merx does not consider other sources than Aristotle. However, other sources, such as the Stoic tradition, have had an impact on the Arabic thinking as well. On the Stoic influence, see e.g., Versteegh (1977: 178–190).

¹⁷ For further discussion, see Olivieri (2021).

¹⁸ Greek texts have been accessed via the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* (TLG, available at <http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/>); translations of the Greek sources have been consulted on the portal of the Perseus Digital Library (perseus.tufts.edu/hopper) accessible via the TLG. When consulted, the online Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon (LSJ) was also accessed via the TLG portal. References to the editions of the Greek texts consulted are available in the bibliography.

the Mediterranean' (Fischer 1962: 3) and that scholars were familiar with the contents and approaches described therein.

In support, Fischer gives examples of formulations calquing Aristotle's and differing from others. He then concludes that 'whatever variations of the text may have confronted the Syriac and Arab translators, they considered it the final Aristotelian formulation, without any concern about the later, post-Aristotelian, developments in Greek grammatical science' (Fischer 1963: 133).

3.2 *ʿIrāb*

Another element discussed by Merx is the connection between the terms *ʿirāb*¹⁹ and *hellēnismós*²⁰ (Merx 1889: 143).

Beyond its strictly syntactic functions, the grammatical case is considered fundamental to ensure clarity when conveying a message. The pair grammatical case-clarity of the message is highlighted also in traditions other than the Arabic (Versteegh 1977: 63–64). For example, Dionysius Thrax states that '[it should be known] that the five cases are a matter of meaning, not of sound' (*Scholia Dionysius Thrax*, 230:34–35). Similarly, al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209) couples *ʿirāb* with 'explanation' (*bayān*)²¹ and clarity (*Mafātīḥ al-Ġayb*, 1:48).²²

According to Merx, the meaning intrinsic to the verb *hellēnizein* 'to speak Greek, to make Greek, to become Greek, hellenize', from Ancient Greek *hellēn* 'Greek' (LSJ: 536), is to be related to its Arabic counterpart *ʿaraba*, 'to make Arabic, to arabize'. Derived from the verb *hellēnizein* is the noun *hellēnismós*, which carries the meaning of 'imitation of the Greeks, Hellenism', and also that of 'use of a pure Greek style and idiom' (LSJ: 536).

Merx argues that especially the latter interpretation, relating to 'proper speech construction', is to be traced back to its use in Aristotle's *Rhetorica*. The occurrences of *hellēnizein* are two in *Rhetorica* (1407a; 1413b); one further reference is to be found in *Sophistici elenchi* (182a). Of the two occurrences in *Rhetorica*, the first translates as 'the foundation of style', and the second as 'knowledge of good Greek'. Merx's work addresses in particular the first occurrence, in which the five rules that regulate the purity of the speech, that is the foundation of the style, are presented (*Rhetorica*, 1407a).

Based on these occurrences, Merx establishes a connection between *hellēnizein* and *ʿaraba*, and between *hellēnismós* and *ʿirāb*; a relation which the terms clearly hold in terms of both form and meaning, although with varying extent. The verbs

¹⁹ 'Grammatical case, desinential inflection'.

²⁰ 'Imitation of the Greeks, Hellenism'. Also, 'use of a pure Greek style and idiom'.

²¹ See also *ʿIḏāḥ*, 91.

²² The correlation is further supported by the definition in the Qur'ān of 'clear Arabic language' (*lisān ʿarabi mubīn*), as per its own account in XVI:103 and XXVI:195.

hellēnizein ('to speak Greek, to make Greek') and *'a'raba* ('to Arabicize, to make Arabic') hold a relation in the form as well as in the meaning. As far as the nouns are concerned, on the other hand, *hellēnismós* ('Hellenism', 'use of a pure Greek style and idiom') and *'i'rāb* ('grammatical case', 'desinential inflection') hold a relation in the form (causatives with the same lexical derivation), but not in the meaning.

Now, if we considered Merx's argument that the notion of *'i'rāb* was borrowed by Arabic grammarians from Aristotle's definition of *hellēnismós* and re-examined it through the lens of the textual evidence that we have very briefly presented here, we would immediately notice an evident discrepancy.

Generally speaking, the Greek notion of *hellēnismós* covers a broader spectrum of meaning than the Arabic *'i'rāb*, also mostly pertaining to style. More importantly, it does not include the notion of grammatical case in the Aristotelian production.

A presentation of the notion of correct use of grammatical cases in the wider concept of correctness of speech is outlined in *Vitae Philosophorum* by Diogenes Laertius, where the author reports how the Stoic tradition described the notion of *hellēnismós*. In the chapter on Zeno of Citium, founder of the Stoic school of philosophy, we read:

There are five excellences of speech—pure Greek, lucidity, conciseness, appropriateness, distinction. [...] By good Greek is meant language faultless in point of grammar and free from careless vulgarity. (*Vitae Philosophorum*, 7.59)

The Greek word *adiáptotos* translates as 'faultless', especially of the writers, indicating the importance of the clarity of the style. In the Stoic notion of 'faultless Greek', we read a connection with grammatical case, also for the inclusion of *ptōsis* ('case', 'mode or modification of a word') and the interpretation in the sources.²³

Via this connection, and 'considering the conceptual relation that holds between *hellēnizein* and *'a'raba*, the technical meaning of *'i'rāb* could be a calque of the Greek *hellēnismós*, but as per its Stoic interpretation' (Olivieri 2020: 22).²⁴

3.3 Transitivity

In 2021 Jean-Patrick Guillaume published *L'« hypothèse grecque » et le débat sur les origines de la tradition grammaticale arabe*. In this paper Guillaume addresses the complexity of the debate on the topic of the Greek influence on the origins of the Arabic grammatical disciplines, concluding that the Greek hypothesis, although

²³ On this, see Olivieri (2020).

²⁴ On the use of *hellēnismós* and *hellēnizein* in the Greek grammatical literature, see Siebenborn (1976). On the use of *'i'rāb* in the early Qur'ānic commentaries, see Versteegh (1993: 127–129).

plausible, is impossible to prove as things stand now.²⁵ This statement concludes Guillaume's presentation of the scholarly debate on the subject and of a number of examples of Greek-inspired notions from the Arabic tradition.

A particularly interesting example presented by Guillaume is the notion of transitivity (2021: 67–69).²⁶ The two traditions express the notion with equivalent terms, *diábasis* or *metábasis* in Greek, *ta'addi* in Arabic. The terms share the metaphorical meaning of 'to cross, to cross a boundary'. The relation that the terms hold in both function and meaning could hint at a connection between the two. However, Guillaume raises the question of whether the metaphor has the same interpretation in both traditions, which would be foundational for comparison.

In his paper, Guillaume (2021: 67) discusses that for Apollonius Dyscolus the notion entails the 'transitivity of the persons', with 'person' meaning 'agent' (Lallot 1997: I:197–198 and fn. 234). Here, the transitivity is agent-driven: prototypical transitive clauses have an agent which causes the event to initiate (Luthala 1990; Meneghel 2020).

As further discussed in the paper, Sībawayhi's definition is that the transitivity is a property inherent of the verb as a formal category and inseparable from the '*amal*' ('government'). The verb, after having acted on the subject (*fā'il*) assigning it the nominative mark, transits from the subject to the object (*maf'ūl*) and produces the accusative mark. For Sībawayhi the transitivity is a property of the verb (Sībawayhi 1881: I:11), thus differing from the Greek interpretation. The property is independent from the nature of the process it signifies and of the agent it involves.

The assumption that the two notions could be related is invalidated by the profoundly different interpretations that the grammatical traditions have of the term, and therefore of the notion.

Guillaume thus points at another interpretation of the concept of transitivity that is part of the Kūfan tradition. The existence of two diverging conceptions was earlier discussed by Kouloughli (2016). He describes the traditional Baṣran view part of the standard doctrine (i.e., a verb is transitive if it admits an object), but also a less known interpretation, attributed to the Kūfan school. The Kūfan interpretation of transitivity

considers as transitive those verbs which signify a process originated by the subject and oriented towards an external entity, be it affected by this process (e.g. *ḍaraba*, 'to hit') or created by it (e.g. *banā*, 'to build') On the other hand, are classified as intransitive (*lāzīm*) those verbs which denote a process which remains within the bounds of the subject. (Kouloughli 2016: 13)

²⁵ 'Elle a toutefois l'inconvénient d'être à peu près impossible à démontrer' (Guillaume 2021: 68).

²⁶ On this, see also Versteegh (1977) esp. pp. 82–83.

Guillaume's conclusion is to read the Kūfan interpretation of the notion of transitivity, *ta'addī*, as having the same 'materialist' conception of transitivity as in Apollonius.²⁷

4 Discussion

In the previous sections, we have shortly presented three instances of metalanguage that we may deem to be Greek-inspired. As briefly mentioned above, others as well may be regarded as such.²⁸

These examples may be read as a process of adaptation of linguistic descriptions to the Arabic case, rather than a direct borrowing. The Greek instances would have been received and later integrated into a local, and clearly Arabic-driven, approach to (meta)linguistic matters.

In terms of contents, Arabic grammarians' approach to the description of the linguistic system of classical Arabic is in fact to address local circumstances, whether arising from the current usage of the language and its inevitable corruption, or from the study of primary sources. With their work, they ultimately contributed to defining methods and approaches of the linguistic disciplines; perhaps they drew on the methodology of other Islamic sciences or other traditions, but without manifest commitment to either. Even the formulations that we assume are Greek-inspired are evidently not acritical copies of the scholarship. There are no overt transcripts of the Greek sources, and anyone reading even only a few excerpts of the Arabic production may yet find similarities but will also be able to confirm as much.

Two major, closely related questions arise from these premises. The first relates to the framework in which this influence on the metalinguistic realm might have taken place. The second concerns the evidence that grammarians had access to this knowledge, and thus pertains to the very foundations of the Greek hypothesis.

With regard to the framework, we argue that the influence on the metalinguistic aspects of Arabic formulations suggests an impact on the methodological approach. The empirical basis of Arabic linguistic disciplines speaks to a culture-based approach to language description. Concurrently, some descriptions point to a potentially different methodological basis of the metalinguistic usage, which is neither inconsistent nor detrimental with respect to the empirical status of grammar-making. Arabic grammarians would not acritically adopt definitions

²⁷ 'Nous retrouvons bien ici la même conception « matérialiste » – si l'on peut dire – de la transitivité que chez Apollonius' (Guillaume 2021: 68).

²⁸ E.g., the specialized lexicon indicating articulated sound and phonetic change, the verbal tenses, the system of the *ʾuṣūl an-naḥw*, and so forth. See Versteegh (1977: 12).

from another sciences or traditions, but would use scholarship as a starting point for their processing rather than as a result of their work.

The second point is more problematic in terms of historiographic evidence. Tracing the path that channeled the transmission of Greek scholarship directly to Arabic grammarians is in fact not yet supported by textual evidence. As far as the pre- and early Islamic periods are concerned, the tracing of the transmission has been fruitful for the Greek-Syriac connection. Syriac authors translate Greek sources and quote them explicitly. On the contrary, the connection of Arabic sources to Greek models has not produced unequivocal results. Clear and direct borrowings in the earliest stages of Arabic linguistic tradition are not attested, neither do Arabic grammarians quote any Greek scholarship or translations thereof.

In the following, we will present a perspective that may be considered in order to tackle these criticalities.

4.1 Individual notions and metalinguistic framework

Focusing on single examples to picture possible pathways of knowledge reception poses the risk to assess complex systems by looking only at their small components. Even when it is proved that one piece is the result of borrowing or influence, general conclusions cannot be generated from the specific results. Individual pieces of a linguistic system are only parts of a mechanism that functions well by having all its components work together; their co-operation ensures the functioning of the system.

Consequently, if the individual items of a system were to be understood as having certain functions because of their concurring to the system together with the other elements that belong to it, it would be implausible to have one of them wandering out of the native system and being imported in another without its original context (Weiß 1910; see also Versteegh 1977: 12).

The objection is surely on point.²⁹ Although in actual situations popular borrowings often involve taking bits of knowledge and integrating them into a local system, clearly no discussion concerning potential borrowings could overlook the fact that a linguistic system represents a whole and is complex on several levels.³⁰

²⁹ The discussion on the complexity of the interactions is indeed interesting and relevant. However, it concerns the core of this research only sideways, as we discuss further in this section. For further discussion on this subject, we suggest referring to other studies that have discussed and demonstrated that single elements may be borrowed independently. Among others, see Barwick (1922; 1957), also cited by Versteegh (1977: 12 1993: 25); Sluiter (1990).

³⁰ On this particular matter, I wish to thank Michael Carter, Ramzi Baalbaki, and Jean Druel for their invaluable remarks.

In our examination of the Greek-into-Arabic case we thus aim to suggest a different perspective that may be of answer to this objection.

Our argument is that in exploring the Greek hypothesis, we should examine the chain of knowledge transmission, considering neither the individual borrowings nor their linguistic function(s) in isolation. On the contrary, the hypothesis should be investigated accounting for the metalinguistic framework, in which the borrowing does not target the categories themselves but their description. This approach allows for a better understanding of the broader context and nuances involved in the process of cultural and linguistic exchange, with Arabic descriptions do not necessarily stemming from direct borrowings, but rather being the results of the application of acquired knowledge and methods that are based on Greek models.

This interpretation transcends the individual borrowings and suggests that Arabic scholars might have been aware of contents and methods of the Greek scholarship and tailored a similar metalinguistic methodology to their studies on the Arabic language. In this, there is clearly no claim for any dependence that Arabic would have on Greek categories. It is rather the approach to the meta-language used to describe the notions that is to be considered, insofar as similarities in the reception indicate contact in the definition and description of the equivalent Greek categories. We should then not consider a borrowability that is structure-oriented, but rather its metalinguistic aspects, connected to scholarly, social, and communicative motivations for the system mixing. Consequently, it is not due to lack of categories or notions that a borrowing might have taken place, but due to the lack of formal descriptions thereof.

4.2 Scholarship and translations

The Abbasid Caliphate (132/750–656/1258) fostered an intense line of Graeco-Arabic studies from the very beginning of their ruling. Pre-Abbasid translation activities—on the other hand—were less methodical.

A number of factors contributed to igniting the translation movements.³¹ One of these is the flourishing of the Arab-Islamic sciences and cultural activities:

it was the development of an Arabic scientific and philosophical tradition that generated the wholesale demand for translations from the Greek (and Syriac and Pahlavi), not, as is commonly assumed, the translations which gave rise to science and philosophy. (Gutas 1998: 137)

³¹ Dimitri Gutas has devoted a great part of his research to the Greek-Arabic knowledge circulation, producing seminal works. On Greek translations into Arabic, see in particular *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture* (Gutas 1998 and later editions). On translations, see also Mavroudi (2017).

At the time when the Arab-Islamic disciplines emerged, boosted by the local cultural fervor, the form and substance of the ‘Arabic styles’ were initially so poor that the inputs received through the translations of the Greek scholarship contributed significantly to their improvement. As the translation movements progressed, there was ‘a corresponding development in the quality of the translations both in style and substance’ (Gutas 1998: 138). The ‘substance’ can be interpreted more broadly in terms of knowledge acquisition with regard to both subjects and methods. It was not only the Arabic style that benefitted from the Greek scholarship in translation, but also the insights in the scholarly subjects, and the approaches thereof, that scholars acquired by familiarizing themselves with Greek sources.

The seek for contents is also indicated by the larger demands for translations registered in the sources. Early scholars relied on translators who were tasked with translating Greek works into Arabic. They had the pre- and early Islamic Graeco-Syriac translations to fall back on as models; however, these were of limited use, due to the limited range of topics they covered. In fact, these early translations did not address all the subjects now demanded to keep pace with the advancement of the Arabic-Islamic disciplines. To meet the current demands, translators had to improve their knowledge of Greek in order to be able to engage with a greater variety of sources (Gutas 1998: 138).

Textual testimonies show that Greek texts received in Arabic were transmitted not only through a Syriac but also via a Byzantine hermeneutical tradition. In such cases, the contemporary Byzantines may be the authority of what Arabic sources interpret as the wisdom of the ancient Greeks, e.g.,

as in the eyewitness narrative of Yūsuf ibn Ibrāhīm on Ḥunayn ibn Isḥāq’s return to Baghdad with the ability to recite Homer, called ‘the greatest poet of the Byzantines’ (*yunshidu shi‘ran bi-l-rūmiya li-’ūmirus ra’is shu‘arā’ al-rūm*), and the long hairstyle of a Byzantine *scholastikos*. (Mavroudi 2014: 332)³²

More specifically on the (meta)linguistic contents, another reason for assuming a channel of transmission that does not go through the Syriac local reception of Greek scholarship is the discrepancy between what is received from the Greek tradition in the Syriac grammatical tradition and what is received from the Greek in the Arabic. Thus, while it is certainly true that Syriac-speaking scholars³³ did play a role in the process of knowledge transmission because of their being actively engaged in translating and transmitting Greek works to the Arabs, what of Greek scholarship was integrated in the Syriac tradition does not seem to have mediated the Arabic reception.

³² See also Strohmaier (1980: 196), cited in Mavroudi (2014: 332).

³³ Perhaps from a Christian background, who mastered Syriac and Greek.

A major example of this is the *Téchne Grammatiké* attributed to Dionysius Thrax (d. 90 BCE).³⁴ The *Téchne Grammatiké* looms large in the Syriac grammatical tradition;³⁵ on the other hand, it is basically unknown to the Arabic tradition if we exclude later scholars such as al-Fārābī (d. 339/950).³⁶ King remarks how the Syriac version of the *Téchne*, most probably from the sixth century,³⁷ was adapted so as to teach about Syriac rather than Greek and that the text was simply the first work on Syriac grammar (King 2013: 108). Even at later stages,³⁸ the Greek origin of several notions described in the Syriac grammatical tradition may be traced back to the *Téchne*.³⁹

The discussion on all the Greek notions received into the Syriac tradition is far beyond the scope of this paper, but there is one relevant aspect connected to this that we want to remark on here. Even though the Arabic and Syriac traditions have intersected, there is a significant discrepancy in what has been adopted and systematized from Greek scholarship into the two traditions.

The Arabic reception does not appear to be at a stage following the Syriac reception of the Greek texts, but rather independent of the Syriac thinking. The direct influence of Syriac grammarians on Arabic scholars bears no evidence. With the Syriac linguistic literature being profoundly dissimilar to the Arabic, '[the] evidence for the influence [...] rather took the form of a shared educational milieu, in which the very notion of the scientific study of a holy tongue developed from the exegetical and reading traditions' (King 2013: 102).⁴⁰

We may notice how also here the possible channel of the Greek influence is described as to encompass the scholarly, methodological framework rather than being oriented toward the individual sources or linguistic items, perhaps via a Syriac intermediary.

³⁴ On the question of authorship, see Di Benedetto (1958; 1959).

³⁵ On this, see Contini (1998); Farina (2008); King (2013); Butts (2019: 235–237).

³⁶ See Gätje (1971).

³⁷ The Syriac version of the *Téchne* includes witnesses which attribute the translation to Joseph Huzaya (d. 580). Huzaya belonged to the school of Nisibis in the sixth century. On the debate on the authorship of the translation, see Merx (1889) who doubts about the attribution, and Contini (1998) who supports it.

³⁸ Later, a first systematic grammar of Syriac language was produced by Jacob of Edessa (d. 708), only fragments of which survived. On Jacob of Edessa and his work as grammarian, see in particular Talmon (2008); see also Haar Romeny (2008). An edition of the fragments was published by Wright in 1871.

³⁹ One example of these is described by Farina (2008): 'In the first part of his treatise, the author lists the categories of affixes (*naḫpān*) of the various parts of speech, in line with the tradition of the *Téchne*: third question: which are the affixes (attaching) to each one of the parts of speech? answer: and we say that to the noun attach: genders (*gensē*), species (*ād'sē*), schemes (*eskîmē*), numbers (*menyānē*), *diatheseis* (lit. 'quality' *aynāywātā*), cases (*mappeltē*). Diathesis is therefore introduced as a quality of the noun, as was already found in Huzaya's translation (and in the *Téchne* itself). Each of the categories is then explained in more detail' (Farina 2008: 188).

⁴⁰ On this, see also King (2012). On 'shared educational milieu', see Posegay (2021).

4.3 Scholarship, translations, and educational models

With the contemporary Byzantines potentially serving as the authoritative source of what Arabic scholars interpreted as the wisdom of the ancient Greeks,⁴¹ Byzantine educational models played a crucial role in transmitting Greek knowledge to the Arabs. However, there are notable chronological and geographical challenges to be acknowledged. The earliest Arabic linguistic works were produced by scholars active in regions far from the Byzantine provinces. Furthermore, most translational endeavors occurred at a later stage and were centered in Baghdad. Time and place thus represent significant criticalities.

However, sources indicate that Arabs' interest in Greek production was widespread also in areas not close to the Byzantine provinces themselves. Connections were established between the caliphate and these provinces and Arabs engaged with Greek scholarship already ahead of the major translation movements. For instance, in the *Fihrist*, Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 385/995 or 388/998) reports that Ḥālid ibn Yazīd ibn Mu'āwiya (d. 64/683) promoted the translation of Greek texts into Arabic. These were considered by the author the first translations made under Islam, when a group of Greek scholars based in Egypt translated from Greek (and Coptic) for Ḥālid ibn Yazīd, who was described as 'the philosopher of the family of Marwān who was a lover of the sciences' (Mackensen 1937: 52; *Fihrist*, 242; see also Versteegh 1977: 117, fn. 18).⁴²

During the Umayyad period, there was a keen interest in Byzantine knowledge despite the primarily bellicose attitude of the Umayyads towards the Byzantines 'and because, more importantly, they had available among their local populations in Syria and Palestine sufficient numbers of Greek-speaking Byzantines [...] with whom they could interact culturally without the need to travel to Constantinople' (Gutas, Kaldellis, and Long 2017: 82–83). Moreover, eighth-century Byzantium had a sufficient number of manuscripts of ancient Greek and Byzantine authors, some of which made their way to the caliphate (Mavroudi 2014: 322). Translators thus had access to contemporary Byzantine scholarship, which was clearly especially true for Syriac-speaking scholars.

Furthermore, Greek held an important official role in the early stages of the Arab-Islamic empire and was especially notable during the Umayyad era. Arabic-speaking communities needed to familiarize themselves with the Greek language to access certain areas of the administrative infrastructure. Education in the Greek language was thus in high demand in the first centuries of the Islamic era, for Greek was needed for several purposes. Equally, the studies on the language were widely cultivated. Language acquisition and a functional mastery of

⁴¹ Mavroudi 2014: 332.

⁴² In addition, there are recounts of library visits and scholarship acquisition during Umayyad times that are documented, e.g., in the works by Mackenses (1936; 1937b; 1937a).

the language were not the only interest, and the (meta)linguistic aspects of Greek attracted equivalent attentions. In fact,

[Greek grammar] was also taught in late antique and medieval schools in Greek, Syriac, and Arabic, both in Byzantium and the Muslim world. Greek grammar seems intensively cultivated by a number of authors writing in Muslim lands during the eighth and ninth centuries [...] Greek grammar must have been popular because it constituted the introduction to studying literary Greek, something deemed useful for various purposes (Muslim administration, Greek-into-Arabic translation, Christian church administration) within the caliphate throughout the eighth and ninth centuries. (Mavroudi 2014: 327–328)

The conquest of the Byzantine provinces as early as in the seventh century (e.g., Syria, Egypt, and Palestine) and the evolution of the political entity of the Caliphate contributed decisively to promotion of the study of ancient Greek (Mavroudi 2014: 296).

Versteegh points out that ‘the Arabs became acquainted with Hellenistic culture and scholarship in a watered down version as it was taught in the schools all over the Byzantine Empire’ (1993: 25). He further argues that via this teaching Arabs were able to borrow some of the elements of the Greek grammatical model, without committing to the entire system.

As we have seen above, the interest in the subject, alongside other related factors (Gutas 1998: 11ff.), ignited the translation movements of the Greek scholarship into Arabic. These were conducted in a way that reflects how the interest in the subject was not a prerogative of ‘a few eccentric individuals’ but was rather indicative of ‘a social attitude and the public culture’.⁴³ The interest in Greek was thus not limited to Syriac-speaking scholars who would engage in translating the Greek scholarship out of a sense of social responsibility to have the society advance.⁴⁴ On the contrary, the interest in the language and its grammar circulated more widely, and surely not only at the scholarly level.

Lexical evidence indicates that Arabic-speaking individuals engaged with Greek also at the oral level.⁴⁵ Although this cannot be taken as evidence that interest in Greek culture equals studying Greek scholarship in detail, it still in-

⁴³ [The translation movement] was eventually conducted with rigorous scholarly methodology and strict philological exactitude—by the famous Ḥunayn ibn Iṣḥāq and his associates—on the basis of a sustained program that spanned generations and which reflects, in the final analysis, a social attitude and the public culture of early ‘Abbāsīd society; it was not the result of the haphazard and random research interests of a few eccentric individuals who, in any age or time, might indulge in arcane philological and textual pursuits that in historical terms are proven irrelevant’ (Gutas 1998: 2).

⁴⁴ On this, see Landron (1986).

⁴⁵ See Endress and Gutas (1992–) and Ullmann (2002).

dicates a level of interaction that points to the Byzantine context. Testimony of these is how Greek terms and proper names were transliterated into Arabic. The transliterations did not follow the written form as in ancient Greek sources, neither followed their Syriac transliterations. On the contrary, the transliterations were ‘according to how they would have been pronounced in the living Greek of the Byzantine period; and the mistakes committed in comprehending the ancient Greek text are frequently those that a Byzantine (speaking a different register of the same language) would have made’ (Mavroudi 2014: 331).⁴⁶

Such testimonies emphasize once again the centrality of Greek literature from the Byzantine tradition. Further to this, they indicate that Greek language studies not only reached more recipients, but also that linguistic scholarship, including its subjects and methods, circulated widely and was of interest. Especially in the Byzantine provinces, the educational models developed were functional to the dissemination of such scholarly studies. Via these, the Greek-based models were made available; especially thanks to the interest in Greek grammar, the knowledge of which was necessary to access the literary language. Consequently, the reception of Greek language studies may have been favored by the wider dissemination outreaching the educational channels.

5 Conclusion

The interactions among the Greek, Syriac, and Arabic traditions account for a framework of knowledge transmission that encompasses several, intertwined levels. The translation movements proved substantial in the transmission of Greek scholarship to the Arabs. At the same time, as far as the origin and formation of the Arabic linguistic disciplines are concerned, the direct influence of the Greek scholarship on the Arabic bears no evidence.

Based on Arabic scholarship, we may find a number of similarities between some of the metalinguistic aspects therein and their Greek equivalents. However, there is no textual evidence of Arabic grammarians knowing of or having accessed Greek sources in the earliest stages of the Arabic linguistic tradition. This represents a noticeable obstacle in proving a direct chain of transmission from Greek to Arabic sources. With regard to this, the Syriac medium, here intended in terms of linguistic literature and not as Syriac-speaking translators, does not seem to have played a major role. In fact, the Greek scholarship received in the Syriac does not seem to be received in the Arabic tradition. At the same time, Syriac-speaking scholars were crucial figures in the process of Greek-to-Arabic

⁴⁶ Mavroudi indicates a number of examples of these. Among others are the suppression of the *spiritus asper* and the abundance of iotacisms (Mavroudi 2014: 331 fn. 159 and 160). The author further refers to the examples described in Gutas (2011).

knowledge transmission because of their being actively engaged in translating and transmitting Greek works.

The complex cultural situation of the region in the first centuries of the Arab-Islamic empire speaks to a certain degree of knowledge circulation. Mastery of the Greek language and interest in Greek grammar were noticeably cultivated in scholarly as well as non-scholarly circles. In particular, the educational models in the Byzantine provinces favored the circulation of the Greek scholarship via the Byzantine hermeneutical tradition. In addition, these centers fostered the transmission of Greek-based approaches to linguistic subjects.

While early Arabic texts lack clear definitions of linguistic notions, discussions on linguistic matters incorporate formulations that we may consider Greek-inspired, but in all instances adapted to fit the Arabic context. These discussions draw upon existing linguistic arguments from various sources, such as from the Aristotelian or Stoic traditions, which serve as a foundation to be adjusted within the culturally specific Arabic framework. The primary connections lie in how these notions are related and expressed, placing them within a metalinguistic rather than strictly linguistic domain. Similarly, the methods and approaches to this metalinguistic framework, while showing similarities to Greek scholarship, were customized to suit the Arabic linguistic framework driven by local perspectives. Therefore, the influence extends beyond the individual notions that may or may not be borrowed; it encompasses the methodological basis of Arabic grammarians' approach to metalinguistic matters.

Given the chronological challenges of relying on the translations of Greek works, which peaked later than the formative stages of the Arabic linguistic tradition and in its early stages focused on subjects indicating a specific scholarly interest rather than widespread public engagement, the suggested perspective highlights the importance of considering additional extralinguistic and metalinguistic factors that do not pertain to the specificities of the linguistic items, but rather to the reception of the methods. These are crucial not only for tracing the pathways of Greek knowledge transmission into early Arabic scholarship but also for assessing the extent of the Greek-inspired instances we find therein.

A possible pathway is the Greek-based educational models developed in the empire, and especially in the Byzantine provinces.⁴⁷ In fact, Byzantine provinces did play a crucial role in the transmission. On the one hand, the Byzantines seem to be the authority of what Arabs interpreted as the wisdom of the ancient Greeks; on the other hand, the Byzantine hermeneutical tradition was one of the channels of transmission of Greek scholarship to the Arabs. In addition to this, the Byzantine educational models based on the Greek system favored a structured access to the Greek scholarship and cultivated the study of the Greek language with the support of the same scholarship in translation.

⁴⁷ For an account of these, see Mavroudi (2014).

The principles of the Greek thinking and language were thus transmitted also via channels parallel to the translations of the scholarship itself, which were also contexts in which the translations were needed because they were functional to conveying messages. Although the access to this knowledge would be limited to elite circles ‘for specific reasons rooted in the elevated social and professional status of their members within the lands of the Muslims’ (Mavroudi 2014: 332), the scenario qualifies Arabic scholars as potential recipients of this knowledge.

The educational models in Byzantine provinces, facilitated by translated texts, significantly aided in transmitting Greek scholarship through a Byzantine interpretive lens to Arabic-speaking scholarly circles. The transmission of the Greek knowledge to individuals who were interested in the language and in its grammatical aspects may be the key to understanding how the methodological framework of the metalinguistic subjects circulated among Arabic scholarly circles. This, in fact, would have been impossible without recourse to speakers of Greek trained in the Byzantine educational curriculum and Greek books that reflected a Byzantine selection and interpretation of texts, such as it was pursued within the Byzantine empire at exactly the same time.

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