

## **Sibawayhi**

*Michael G. Carter*

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In the “Foreword,” Michael Carter states that his book is aimed at the general reader who is interested in the history of Arabic grammar and, in particular, in the achievement of Sibawayhi, the discipline’s architect and origina-

tor. This much-needed and long-awaited effort is a welcome addition to the field of Arabic grammatical theory, for it contextualizes Sibawayhi's grammatical ideas, as set forth in his *Al-Kitab*, by giving a short account of his background and life (p. vii). The reader, whether advanced or novice, will appreciate how accessible the material has been made. To be sure, reducing Sibawayhi's complex and profound observations to 145 pages runs the risk of making it even harder to understand. But the author avoids such pitfalls with ease and grace. In fact, a knowledge of Arabic is not essential; but, as the author says, "given the nature of the topic it will certainly be useful" (p. vii). All examples are transliterated and translated, and technical terms and basic concepts are explained as often as possible.

Despite the complex subject matter, Carter does a brilliant job describing the *Kitab's* place within the Arabo-Islamic system and the historical context in which it was written. It is useful to spend some time on Sibawayhi's life, even though little is actually known about it, and so chapter 1, "Sibawayhi the Person," explores his importance through portraits in biographies as well as from the contents of his own work. It has been convincingly argued that the earliest form of Sibawayhi's name (Amr ibn `Uthman Sibawayhi) is probably authentic (p. 9). That Sibawayhi was by origin a Persian who ended up in Basra seems to be beyond contention, although neither the date nor the place of his birth can be confirmed. All biographies agree that he came to Basra to study religious law, either Hadith (traditions of the Prophet) or basic principles of *fiqh* (jurisprudence), which were just beginning to take form. The details of his death are just as vague as those of his birth and personal history. Carter presents his readers with a short account of this problem, with which even the classical biographers had to wrestle (see pp. 15-16).

Through the discussion on Sibawayhi's principal teachers (Yunus ibn Habib and al-Halil ibn Ahmad; pp. 25-32) and the question of his originality, Carter shows how the *Kitab* documents the evolution of Sibawayhi's grammar by illuminating the latter's attitude both to the subject matter and to his masters, for the *Kitab* contains reports of real conversations and debates. This is significant, as Carter points out, for the fact that Sibawayhi does not shy away from disagreeing with their positions or data is unmistakable proof of his "intellectual rigor and commitment to truth" (p. 25). Sibawayhi did show the utmost respect, especially to his master al-Halil, whose presence in the *Kitab* is ubiquitous (p. 29). Even by its sheer size, notes Carter at the beginning of chapter 2, "The *Kitab*: Composition, Data, and Terminology," the *Kitab* is conspicuously different. Sibawayhi's work is more than 900

pages long in the nineteenth-century printed editions! In this respect, it outshines the literary products of its time period, although what is more bizarre, according to Carter, is that it arrives on the scene as a complete work when there were very few works to compare with or imitate.

Chapters 2 and 3 bring to light four of the key characteristics of the *Kitab*. The first one is that the wholesale transfer of a juridical model to a linguistic system is probably Sibawayhi's greatest and most vital innovation. As Carter points out, the structure of his grammatical theory is identical with the ethico-legal style of thinking that was just evolving during his lifetime. Indeed, the *Kitab's* methodological terminology is overwhelmingly legalistic. Carter highlights its notions of speech as behavior, the ethically inspired criteria of correctness, and the ubiquity of analogy (especially, *a fortiori* arguments), all of which are prominent in legal reasoning (p. 51). In chapter 4, which deals with syntax, Carter expands on Sibawayhi's use of analogy, the controlling principle, and states that he recognized it as the most "potent controlling force" in language. As a result, the *Kitab* contains several terms for it, all of which denote some kind of similarity but each with a technical reference (see p. 82 ff).

The second key characteristic, which Carter appropriately ties to the first, is that the *Kitab's* purpose is to describe the Bedouins' speech in a way that will enable others to imitate it. Sibawayhi regarded "speech" (*kalam*) as a "social activity carried out in a context of speaker and listener and guided by the same ethical principles as all other human behavior" (p. 56). The *Kitab's* third important characteristic is its author's application of a consistent and uniform terminology at all linguistic levels, which culminates in a complete methodical coherence. The fourth and final key characteristic has to do with the notion that "the speaker's competence is non-linear, a bundle of simultaneous processes that cannot be described directly in the linear style of scientific discourse" (p. 145). Carter revisits this notion throughout the book, leaving the reader with a better understanding of Sibawayhi's complex theory of language. The latter two characteristics are further discussed in subsequent chapters on syntax, morphology, and phonology. Syntactically, the *Kitab* classifies speech elements into two groups: word classes (e.g., nouns, adjectives, and verbs) and positions in which the word classes can appear (e.g., subject and predicate). In addition, it presents meaning as the product of the root and pattern system.

Carter ends his book with chapter 7, "The Legacy of the *Kitab*," appropriately closing with mentioning Sibawayhi's death. As his death was unexpected, in all likelihood the *Kitab* was in a kind of indeterminate state. It was

preserved only by al-Ahfash al-Awsat (d. 215/830), who not only acquired “a license” for his copy from Sibawayhi’s teacher Yunus ibn Habib, but who also taught the *Kitab*’s contents to his own students. Ultimately, this knowledge was passed on to al-Mubarrad (d. 285/898), who, in turn, raised the *Kitab* to its proper position as the founding text of Arabic grammatical science. It is still known, even in our own time, as the “Qur’an of grammar.” This book does exactly what it sets out to achieve: It outlines Sibawayhi’s ideas and marks out the *Kitab* as an outstandingly original achievement. Carter leaves the reader with little uncertainty that in intellectual terms, it stands alone at the zenith of Arabic grammatical thought.

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