

AL-SIRĀFĪ'S STAIRWAYS TO WISDOM: A STUDY ON THE  
EVALUATION CRITERIA IN THE 10TH CENTURY ARABIC  
GRAMMAR TRADITION

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“While we profit from knowledge by transmitting it, from the language we can profit only by speaking in it”.

Al-Sirāfī<sup>1</sup>

We profit from language upon speaking it, but its beauty is not our own creation. On the authority of the forty-fifth āyah of sūrah *Al-Nūr*, Al-Sirāfī identifies Classical Arabic language as the ultimate blessing of the Almighty to mankind: “Allah has created from water every living creature: of them there are some that creep upon their bellies, some that walk on two legs, and yet some that walk on four; Allah creates what He pleases; surely Allah has power over everything”<sup>2</sup>. Horses, mules and donkeys are exempted both from joys of life and the access to the unlimited knowledge potential which can be obtained through studies of Arabic grammar (Al-Sirāfī, 2008:70). In the eyes of Al-Sirāfī, knowledge ultimately gives birth to wisdom and the familiarity with rules and regulations of Classical Arabic language can under no circumstances be considered as an exemption. The knowledge of

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<sup>1</sup> Al-Sirāfī. *Sharḥ Kitāb Sibawayh* I, 9.

<sup>2</sup> See: Al-Sirāfī. *Sharḥ Kitāb Sibawayh* I, 9; and Qur’an, 24: 45.

Classical Arabic language arises as one of the most important prerequisites of all intellectual and artistic strivings in the grammatical opus of Al-Sirāfī. In accordance with the early ḥadīth tradition, Al-Sirāfī asserts that the proficiency in Classical Arabic language can ultimately strengthen the intellectual capacities of an individual and increase the nobility and virtue (*muruwwa*) of a soul<sup>3</sup>. For an individual wishing to obtain and utilize the knowledge of Classical Arabic language in its full potential, Al-Sirāfī sets a single, absolute prerequisite: to use the language in a grammatically correct way (Al-Sirāfī, 2008:216).

### **Methodology approach and the research scope in the surviving grammatical opus of Al-Sirāfī**

Despite having their souls ennobled by the gift of an ultimate language, not all Arabs speak in a grammatically correct way due to their unfamiliarity with the rules and regulations of Classical Arabic language (Al-Sirāfī, 2008:124, 375). According to Al-Sirāfī, the development of Arabic grammar, as the scientific discipline in its own right, was finalized by the mid-9<sup>th</sup> century A.D; thus reaching the peak of its glory through the scientific opus of Al-Jarmī and Al-Māzinī<sup>4</sup>. Through his treatise '*Akbar al-naḥwiyīn al-basriyīn*, Al-Sirāfī has attempted to establish the unbroken chain of Arabic grammar tradition which reaches three centuries into the past, to the life and works of 'Abū Al-'Aswad al-Du'alī, "who is considered by most people to be the first [Arab] grammarian<sup>5</sup>". On the authority of Al-Du'alī, Al-Sirāfī

<sup>3</sup> For the further references on the perception of Classical Arabic language in the ḥadīth tradition see: (Ms. Zāhirīya, Majmū' no. 87, 5; Bayhaqī, Shu'ab 2/257; Mutaqī 3/no. 9037, 29355.

<sup>4</sup> Al-Sirāfī. '*Akbar al-naḥwiyīn al-basriyīn*, 82.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 10.

identifies the desire to make possible for people to benefit from the wisdom of their imāms and the Holy Qur'an as the main duty of a professional grammarian (Al-Sirāfi, 1955:12). According to Al-Sirāfi, every aspiration towards the ultimate wisdom reflected in the surahs of the Qur'an cannot be fulfilled without the prior knowledge of a language in which the Holy book was revealed (Al-Sirāfi, 2008:7, 444). Through his treatise *Sharḥ Kitāb Sibawayh*, Al-Sirāfi establishes a definition of Arabic language as the language of the Qur'an first and foremost; thus irreversibly binding the message transmitted through the Qur'anic revelation to the language it was revealed in<sup>6</sup>. In addition, *Sharḥ Kitāb Sibawayh* divides Classical Arabic language into three distinct categories: (1) everyday spoken language, (2) language of the Qur'an and (3) the language of poetry. In the ideal case, a professional grammarian will be able to illustrate his theories through the language of the Qur'an, everyday spoken language of Arabs and the poetic verses as well. However, in the case when a certain linguistic feature cannot be asserted through any of the three categories from above, it is without a fail to be deemed as artificial - and thus as incorrect as well (Al-Sirāfi, 2008:11). Al-Sirāfi's notions of language and grammar will have a profound influence on his methodology approach; thus ultimately

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<sup>6</sup> By the mid-10<sup>th</sup> century A.D, 'ulamā has already established the knowledge of Classical Arabic language as the collective obligation (*farḍ kifāya*) of the Muslim community and the personal obligation (*farḍ 'ayn*) of any scholar wishing to specialize in the legal sciences (Yasir, 2003:44; Al-Tufi, 1997:248). By the time Al-Sirāfi began his work on *Sharḥ Kitāb Sibawayh*, it was generally perceived that "Qur'an has four aspects: exegesis, which is known to the scholars; Arabic language, which is known by the Arabs; allowed and forbidden things, which people cannot afford to ignore; and interpretation, which is only known to God Almighty." (Muqātil, 1979:26-7). In addition, Prophet Muhammad and Ghalib al-Qaṭṭān of the hadīth collections will establish the familiarity of an individual with the rules and regulations of Classical Arabic and Arab genealogies as *sine qua non* for the proper understanding of scriptures (Ms. Zāhirīya, Majmū' no. 40, 307; and Bayhaqī, Shu'ab 2/275).

resulting in his renowned hierarchy of authorities in the Arabic grammar studies. Serving as his personal contribution to Sibawayh's study on the evaluation criteria of the rules and regulations of the Arabic grammar, Al-Sirāfī's methodology approach was set to arise as the landmark of the 10<sup>th</sup> century grammar studies. Through his *Sharḥ Kitāb Sibawayh*, Al-Sirāfī reveals four main criteria for asserting dubious grammatical and linguistic features of Classical Arabic language: (1) the language of the Qur'an, (2) the everyday spoken language, (3) language of the poetry and (4) the personal judgement of professional grammarians.

Within the grammatical opus of Al-Sirāfī, the Holy Qur'an arises as the protector of Classical Arabic language and the ultimate example of its renowned beauty – for had it not been preserved within the sūrah's of the Qur'an, Arabic grammar, as the ultimate blessing of Almighty to mankind, would certainly perish into oblivion due to the frail nature of a human soul and memory<sup>7</sup>. As the book consisting solely of the "speech of Allah, the Exalted one" the language of the Qur'an is thus entitled to serve as the ultimate authority on dubious linguistic features; as the foundation on which scientific theories can be based upon – and as the crown argument to be used in research and cognitive processes. Within the surviving works of Al-Sirāfī, the language of the Qur'an arises as the alpha and omega of all linguistic discussions. But regardless of the ultimate perfection of the Qur'anic language, through the course of his career Al-Sirāfī will nevertheless be forced to admit that the Holy Book didn't manage to capture Classical Arabic language in the fullness of its

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<sup>7</sup> See: Al-Sirāfī. *Sharḥ Kitāb Sibawayh* I, 366. Al-Sirāfī's ultimate stand on this matter was most probably influenced by his teacher and mentor Ibn Sarrāj, who assumed that by the beginning of 10<sup>th</sup> century, the knowledge of Classical Arabic has already become pale and frail. Preservice of this wisdom was furthermore defined by Ibn Sarrāj as one of the main tasks of a professional grammarian (Ibn Sarrāj, 1996:56).

vocabulary and grammatical features. Al-Sirāfi's ultimate stand on the domain of influence of the language of the Qur'an in the Arabic grammar studies was nicely summarized in the biographical entry which he has composed on the life and works of the renowned Basran grammarian Aysī ibn 'Amr:

„ One day he [Aysī] was asked:

'Elucidate us on a certain matter, for we are wondering if the Arabic language as a whole is comprised in it?'

And he said: 'No'.

And they remarked: 'In the case of discord between the way Arabs speak and the way it is spoken in it, can we deem that it [the text of the *Qur'an*] contains a mistake?'

And he said: 'No.'" (Al-Sirāfi, 1955:26).

In the case when a certain linguistic feature can neither be confirmed nor refuted through the language of the Qur'an, Al-Sirāfi advises a professional grammarian to turn to the everyday spoken language of Arabs – for as long as it doesn't contradict the authority of the Qur'anic revelation<sup>8</sup>. The hierarchy of evaluation criteria which was established within the scientific opus of Al-Sirāfi is by no means flat - and through the course of his career as a professional grammarian Al-Sirāfi will insist that the criteria of the widespread usage is without a fail to be subjected to the authority of the Qur'anic revelation if the two authorities stand in opposition (Al-Sirāfi, 2008: 259). Upon attempting to determine the position of an everyday spoken language within Al-Sirāfi's hierarchy of evaluation criteria in the Arabic grammar studies, it is however worth noting that the scientific opus of Al-Sirāfi ultimately

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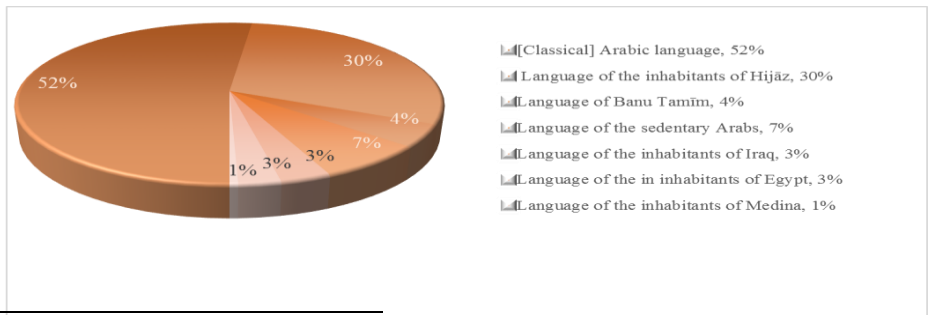
<sup>8</sup> Unlike Al-Sirāfi, the early Arab grammarians didn't hesitate to correct the language of the Qur'an if its authority stood in opposition to the everyday spoken language, for "the mushaf itself contains errors, but the Arabs will correct them"! (A-Farrā', 1988:183).

fails to establish the clear-cut distinction between the ethnic Arabs and other native speakers of Classical Arabic language:

“The opinions on this matter differ. And while some say that Arabs are descendants of ‘Ismā’īl and that all others who do not share this lineage cannot rightfully call themselves Arabs; at the same time Jews and some others do not hesitate to revere ‘Ismā’īl in their prayers and memories.”(Al-Sirāfi, 2008:6).

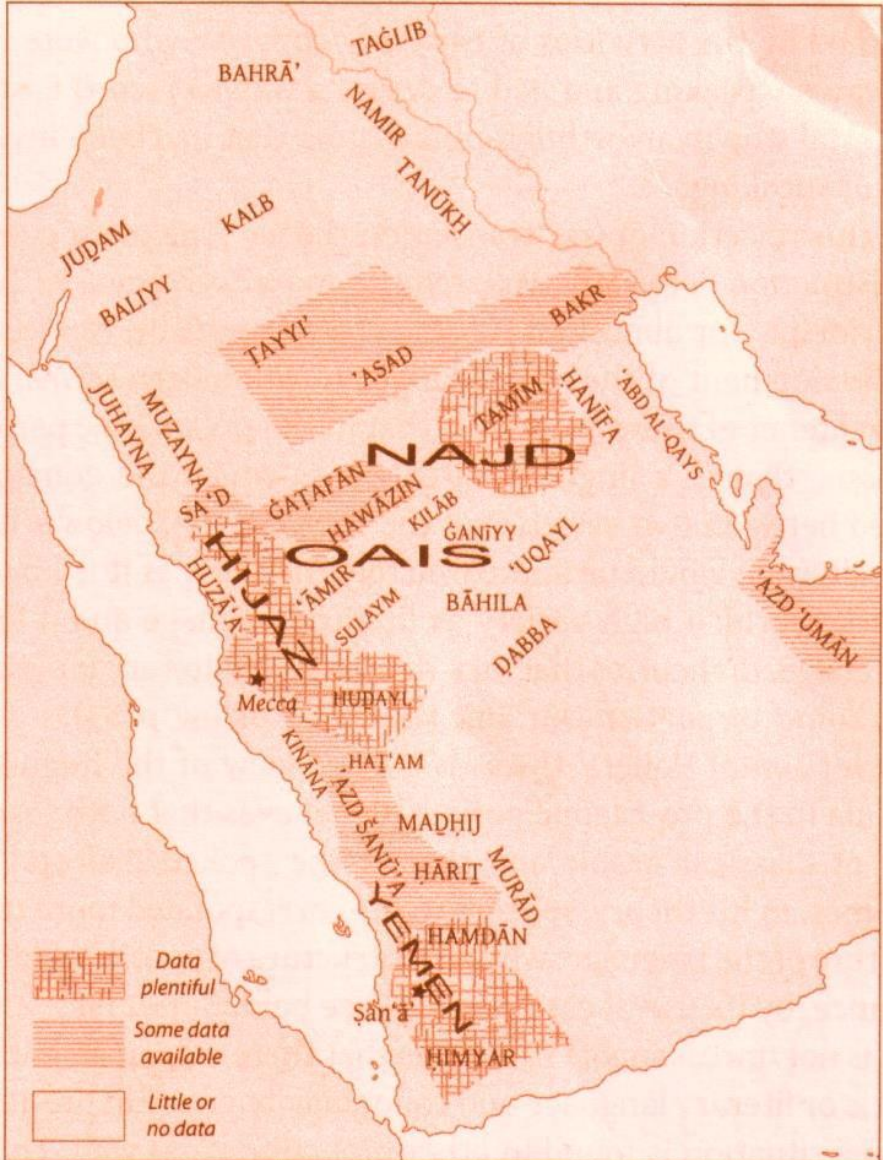
The quoted paragraph faithfully reflects Al-Sirāfi’s uncertainty regarding the wide-spread assumption that all Arabs ultimately descend from the prophet (*nabi*) ‘Ismā’īl, son of ‘Ibrāhīm by his second wife Hājar (Goldziher, 1967: 98). As such, Al-Sirāfi’s stand on this matter seems to be the closest to the one of expressed by the Prophet Muhammad within the early ḥadīth tradition: “O people, God is one, father is one and Arabic is neither your father nor mother but a language, so whoever speaks Arabic is Arab”<sup>9</sup>. Through the course of analyses of Al-Sirāfi’s *Sharḥ Kitāb Sibawayh* and ‘*Akbar al-naḥwiyīn al-basriyīn* it can be concluded that the main research focus of Al-Sirāfi’s studies on spoken language pivots on the grammatical patterns and properties of the everyday speech of the inhabitants of Hijāz and the sedentary Arabs in general.

Fig.1. Arabic language varieties in the scientific opus of Al-Sirāfi



<sup>9</sup> See: Ms. Zāhirīya, Majmū’ no. 118, 6; Ibn ‘Asākir 3/464).

Fig. 2. The availability of data on the early Bedouin dialects (Rabin, 1951: 132)



Contrary to the spoken language of Bedouin Arabs, the everyday speech of sedentary Arabs will be branded by Al-Sirāfī as careless, full of solecism and grammatical omissions in general<sup>10</sup>. It is however worth noting that Al-Sirāfī ultimately refrains from identifying the fallacy of the every-day spoken language of sedentary Arabs with the influx of foreign words and linguistic elements in it. The process of natural growth and evolution of language was generally viewed as favourable development within the grammatical opus of Al-Sirāfī. In his *Sharḥ Kitāb Sibawayh*, Al-Sirāfī identifies human soul as the birth place of a spoken language. Similarly to Ibn Khaldūn two centuries later, Al-Sirāfī points out that it is within the power of a physical perception to enable a human being to transcend the boundaries of his individual-self; thus establishing a connection with its surroundings on the physical and rational level (Ibn Khaldūn, 1967: 412, 425; Al-Sirāfī, 2008: 151). The surviving scientific opus of Al-Sirāfī thus ultimately defines the richness and diversity in the spoken language as the direct consequence of the fact that the language we speak in is shaped and defined by what we hear and experience through the course of our daily lives. One man cannot go on living by himself - and our existence is shaped and defined through the course of daily associations with our fellow men. Thus in Iraq, people use word “burra” for wheat, while Arabs of Medina used word “ḥinṭa” - and “ḳamḥ” in Egypt. When in Medina, Iraqi and Egyptian merchants will use the word “ḥinṭa” in order to be understood by locals - and according to Al-Sirāfī, in this way the language grows and enriches itself (Al-Sirāfī, 2008:178). In the eyes of Al-Sirāfī, such

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<sup>10</sup> Al-Sirāfī was furthermore known to have expressed his awe and wonder in the light of the fact that Sibawayh was successful in providing his readers with the known examples of grammatically correct speech of sedentary Arabs; which is, as such, worth of serious analytical effort and the role of a scientific authority in the Arabic grammar studies (Al-Sirāfī, 2008: 161, 386).



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linguistic variations are in most cases limited to synonyms and differences in accents and pronunciations. Due to the fact that they hold little to no influence on the language as a whole, the language variations “made by some foolish Arabs”<sup>11</sup> were branded by Al-Sirāfi as insignificant, but worth recording overall. However, in addition to the modern-day studies on the Arabic language varieties (Gouttenoire, 2010; Versteeg, 1997; Rosenhouse, 1984), Al-Sirāfi’s personal research on the declination of cardinal numbers in Classical Arabic language paradoxically suggests that the variations used in everyday speech of the 10<sup>th</sup> century Arabs might have been far greater than synonyms and homonyms - as Al-Sirāfi would apparently like us to believe. In addition, *Sharḥ Kitāb Sibawayh* cites various differences between the spoken language of the inhabitants of Hijaz and Najd, which are, according to Al-Sirāfi, most evident in the use of interrogatory particles “hel” and “amā”; and “mā” and “leysa” (Al-Sirāfi, 2008:4, 324, 306, 353, 371). Interestingly enough, upon being encountered with the language diversity in the spoken language of inhabitants of Hijaz and Banū Tamīm of Najd, Al-Sirāfi chooses to list both variations as equally right possibilities; without stressing further judgements. Language diversity in the speech of the Banū Tamīm and inhabitants of Hijāz Al-Sirāfi compares to poetry; where the same glorious event from the times past can be made eternal through many different poetic interpretations. In his *Sharḥ Kitāb Sibawayh*, Al-Sirāfi compares the attempts of the professional grammarians to select the best option between the multiple language variations of Classical Arabic language to the hypothetical canonization of a single poem as the sole “proper” poetic interpretation of a certain event in the history of mankind. Al-Sirāfi insisted that if similar limitations were to be imposed on the poetic imagination; it

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<sup>11</sup> See: Al-Sirāfi. *Sharḥ Kitāb Sibawayh* I, 78.

would most certainly result in the impoverishment of the cultural heritage of Arab world – and for this reason any similar attempt of a professional grammarian to “correct” the grammatical features of local Bedouin tribes is to be deemed both as ignorant and irrelevant as well (Al-Sirāfī, 2008:101).

Through the course of his career of a professional grammarian, Al-Sirāfī has strived to establish the strict distinction between the professional grammarians, as The People of Grammar (*'ahl al-naḥw*), and the native speakers of Classical Arabic as The People of the Language (*'ahl al-luḡha*). Possibly influenced by the life and works of his teacher and mentor Abī Bakr Muhammad b. Sahl Ibn al-Sarrāj<sup>12</sup>, the personal judgements of professional grammarians met with sharp criticism within the scientific opus of Al-Sirāfī. In exactly the same way in which the authority of the language of the Qur'an precedes the authority of a spoken language, the scientific opus of Al-Sirāfī exalts the everyday spoken language above the personal judgements of a professional grammarian. In the eyes of Al-Sirāfī, grammarians who “invent” new rules and regulations in the attempt to rationalize Arabic language are worthy only of scorn due to the fact that their efforts can solely result in further decay and corruption of the ultimate perfection of Classical Arabic language: “For the language they [professional grammarians] praise is repulsive due to the fact that Arabs do not speak in it” (Al-Sirāfī, 2008:124). According to Al-Sirāfī, it is under no circumstance a duty of a professional grammarian to judge between the rights and wrongs in the vast diversity of the local dialects of Bedouin Arabs; for the linguistic feature which was praised by native speakers of one dialect can be deemed as bashful in another. Upon being presented with the couple of different approaches to a certain linguistic feature, a true

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<sup>12</sup> See: Ibn Sarrāj. Kitāb el-usūl fī el-naḥw I, 1.

grammarians will assume the role of a scribe; thus providing his readers with the faithful and elaborated record of all peculiarities of the Bedouin dialects that he has encountered through the course of his research. According to Al-Sirāfi, the proposed methodological approach is to be applied without an exception – and even when it comes to dealing with the influx of foreign linguistic elements in the Classical Arabic language.

Through the scope of his research on *‘Akbar al-nahwiyīn al-basriyīn*, Al-Sirāfi asserts that the influence of foreign linguistic elements can be traced ever since the life and times of ‘Abū Al-‘Aswad al-Du‘alī in the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. (Al-Sirāfi, 1955:13). In this aspect, the scientific opus of Al-Sirāfi might have been affected by echoes of the legendary encounter between the Caliph Ali and Al-Du‘ali, through the course of which Caliph identified the occurrence of solecism in Classical Arabic language as the direct consequence of the linguistic contacts between Arabs and Muslims of non-Arabic origin (Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih, 1928: 18; Ibn Jinnī, 1952: 12, 31). In order to fully back his claims, Al-Sirāfi asserts that it was solely due to the established foreign elements in Classical Arabic language that Sibawayh decided to describe his famous *Al-Kitāb* as a book dedicated to “the wisdom of Arabic language” rather than simply as a “book of wisdom”<sup>13</sup>.

“In the speech of Arabs I have noticed certain nouns, which have caught my attention due to their specific formulae, which we don’t encounter in the language of Arabs otherwise. [Such is] the word “kanahbal”, whose formula is “fana’allu” and “hundal’”, whose formula is “fun’alil”. As it was pointed out by Sibawayh, he was unable to detect any word which is similar or equal to the ‘ibl; which must have arrived in [everyday] speech of Arabs [from elsewhere] (...). However, up to my

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<sup>13</sup>See: Al-Sirāfi. *Sharḥ Kitāb Sibawayh* I, 13.

best knowledge, words like 'Ibrāhim, 'Ismā'il, 'Ishāk (...), pharaoh and other similar nouns also do not originate from our language – despite they have long ago ceased being a mere foreign element within it.” (Al-Sirāfi, 2008:5-6).

### **Criteria of the perfection and the structure of language**

Regardless of his acknowledgment of foreign words as the essential part of the everyday spoken language of Bedouin and sedentary Arabs alike, Al-Sirāfi will nevertheless insist that nouns, verbs and particles of pure Arabic origin show stark contrast to foreign words due to the fact that they are endowed with greater beauty and stronger potential to describe objects and ideas in the most minuscule details. In addition, Al-Sirāfi asserts that Classical Arabic language is to be singled out above all others language on the basis of its vocal system. On the authority of Sibawayh, Al-Sirāfi points out that upon being pronounced, letters of Arabic alphabet by no means resemble the vocal system of any other known language. Despite the outward similarities, voices “ḥā” and “mīm” from Classical Arabic language have no equals in any foreign language and the situation is similar with alif, “yā”, “wāw” and “sīn”. In the eyes of Al-Sirāfi, vocal system of Classical Arabic arises as the main foundation of its renowned beauty - for it is to be perceived both as the foundation of language and bricks that three main elements of Classical Arabic language were built upon (Al-Sirāfi, 2008:28-33). Similarly to Sibawayh before him, Al-Sirāfi defines the language as the union of nouns, verbs and particles. Throughout the scientific opus of Al-Sirāfi, everyday spoken language can thus be defined as the recapitulation and summarization of verbs, nouns and particles which carry within themselves a potential to convey certain meanings. Nevertheless, in the eyes of Al-Sirāfi, the union of three elements of

Classical Arabic language doesn't represent an obligatory prerequisite for a correct speech. On the authority of Sibawayh, Al-Sirāfi asserts that:

„It is known that the union of plurals of all nouns [of Classical Arabic language] doesn't necessarily make an harmonious sentence – just like the union of all maṣḍars will not provide us with the [exact knowledge] of deeds, intellectual strivings, dreams and [written book] chapters.”(Al-Sirāfi, 2008:359).

Among the three elements of Classical Arabic language, verbs represent the most widespread one – but nevertheless, in the eyes of Al-Sirāfi, their precedence over nouns and verbs cannot be established on this fact. According to Al-Sirāfi, on the condition that it carries potential to convey a meaning, even a single noun or particle uttered in reply during conversation can be considered as an example of grammatically correct speech. Regardless of the fact that they cannot be regarded as full sentences, phases and expressions like “na'am”, “anzur”, “lam” or “Zayd” often play an important role through the course of daily communications and our everyday lives (Al-Sirāfi, 2008:12-17). In addition, particle “an” in Classical Arabic language often plays a crucial role with all verbs which express knowledge, certainty and familiarity with something – and a single “alif” followed by one “wāw” can often prove to be of crucial importance for those hoping to penetrate the hidden depths of Qur'anic revelation (Al-Sirāfi, 2008: 7, 402, 444).

On the authority of Sibawayh's *Al-Kitāb*, Al-Sirāfi asserts that only grammatically correct speech can be deemed as good and beautiful<sup>14</sup>. As the result, Al-Sirāfi's *Sharḥ Kitāb Sibawayh* firmly renounces any pretensions of poetry of the ultimate perfection of an expression. In his *Sharḥ Kitāb Sibawayh*, Al-Sirāfi defines the nature of poetry as the rhymed text first and foremost. As a consequence, by abiding the laws of

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 23, 185-186.

their very nature, poetry and rhymed prose rarely hesitate to sacrifice the clarity of meaning and the laws of grammar for the sake of questionable beauty standards of metric systems and lively rhythm (Al-Sirāfī, 2008:189). In addition, Al-Sirāfī accuses poets for (1) changing the structure of words and sentences by randomly adding additional vowels whenever they deem it fit - for Al-Sirāfī doesn't look favourable on poetic freedom which, for the sake of achieving better rhythm and metric structure, changes "dirham" into "darahīm", "ṣajf" into "ṣajārīf", "masjid" into "masājīd" etc; (2) Slurred speech and odd sentence construction (3) Incorrect or improper use of adjectives; (4) Improper use of waṣla, 'alif maqṣūra and determining particle and (5) for the improper conjugation of weak verbs<sup>15</sup>. Based on the tendency of poetry to sacrifice the grammatical rules and regulations of Classical Arabic language, Al-Sirāfī concludes that no refinement and elegance of poetic expression can be compared to the superb beauty of Qur'an - as the purest and the most exalted example of the renowned beauty of Classical Arabic language.

According to Al-Sirāfī, ugliness and the corruption of speech are represented in language irregularities and solecisms; which may appear in the form of grammatical omissions or as the oddity of the expression itself. Ultimately, the corruption of speech may arise as the union of solecisms and meaninglessness of expression, as it is the case in a sentence: "I will drink sea water yesterday." (Al-Sirāfī, 2008: 187). By its nature, the proper use of grammar ultimately serves to ensure the clarity of meaning of a sentence. In addition, Al-Sirāfī singles out case system

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<sup>15</sup> The criteria of the accuracy of a speech didn't represent an important criteria for the evaluation of the poetic verses in the early Arabic grammar studies. In the case of a poetry, it was generally perceived that accepted that invention (takhyīl) is acceptable (Hoyland, 2006: 17). For the sake of the further references, see Al-Sirāfī's refutation of the language of poetry at: Al-Sirāfī. Sharḥ Kitāb Sibawayh I, 188-205.

(*i'rāb*) as the essential feature of conveying both meaning and intention in Classical Arabic language. Lack of the case endings can result in grammar mistakes at best – or in ambiguity and confusion regarding the meaning of oral and/or written expression at worst<sup>16</sup>. In the sentence “*Ḍaraba Zaydan* Abdulah”, it is the case ending “an” that clarifies the difference between the subject and object of sentence – and perfection of the sentence itself is thus ensured by the fact that no further elements and/or additional explanations are required to make its meaning clear. However, regardless of the fact that case endings serve to ensure the clarity of meaning and the correctness of grammar - omitting them or allowing them to remain unwritten doesn't mean that grammar laws cease to exist. We profit from language upon speaking it - but its wisdom is not our own creation. Unobstructed by carelessness and ignorance expressed in everyday spoken and written language, the laws of grammar stand firm: permanent and unchangeable. And just like every action is shaped in our mind in the form of intention before the event itself takes place, laws of grammar are present in our soul even before we express them through our everyday speech. Regardless of the amount of solecisms made by progenitors of Classical Arabic language, laws of grammar remain untouched; like the whirlpools swirling under the surface of water. In order to further illustrate his claim, Al-Sirāfi asserts that case endings in sentences can never be truly omitted due to the permanence of law that governs them. Regardless of the fact if we omit case endings or not, it is not within our power to completely eradicate them – and their presence and our solecism remain clearly visible for any knowledgeable individual engaged in the analyse of our

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<sup>16</sup> On the authority of Al-Māzinī, Al-Sirafi doesn't refrain from criticizing even the spoken language of Sibawayh himself, who apparently used to make mistakes in daily conversations by using improper case endings (Al-Sirāfi, 2008:21).

written and/or oral expression (Al-Sirāfī, 2008: 23-24, 46). In the certain cases however, even a grammatically correct speech can be deemed as ugly and corrupt. In order to illustrate his assertion, Al-Sirāfī chose to rely on the analysis of the sentence: "Zaydun ɗarabtu". Regardless of the fact that the sentence used in the mentioned example is grammatically correct, Al-Sirāfī deems the quoted expression as odd due to the fact that Zayd is intended to represent the subject of a sentence. According to Al-Sirāfī, the sentence from the quoted example can be understood - but due to the oddity of the expression itself it will, as such, without a fail irritate the ear of an educated listener; regardless of the fact that it is otherwise grammatically correct (Al-Sirāfī, 2008:379). In addition, *Sharḥ Kitāb Sibawayh* asserts that the ugliness of speech may arise from its obscene or improper content and/or strange sentence construction as well. In the eyes of Al-Sirāfī, every sentence that requires further clarifications cannot rightfully lay any pretensions to perfection. Once the perfect sentence has been uttered, a listener will be familiar not just with the meaning of the sentence, its actors and actions they undertook – but also with the potential hints and hidden meanings which the author of a sentence was trying to convey (Al-Sirāfī, 2008: 409). Al-Sirāfī defines the meaning of a sentence as the union of physical perception and personal knowledge in the form of wisdom or conviction.

In his *Sharḥ Kitāb Sibawayh*, Al-Sirāfī identifies two doctrines which govern the human heart: doctrine of physical perception and doctrine in the form of knowledge. Within the human heart, as the main cognitive centre of an individual human being, rational knowledge and physical perception unite to shape speech: thus giving birth to a spoken language. As such, Al-Sirāfī's theory of nature of knowledge and physical perception was first and foremost established upon analysis of sūrahs Ṣād and Al-Ma'ārij: "Indeed they see it [as] distant, but we see it



[as] near (*Qur'an*: 6-7). Further observations will be additionally established through the course of Al-Sirāfi's meditations on the thirty-eight ayah of sūrah Šād: "wajadnāhu šābiran" (*Qur'an*: 38:44). According to Al-Sirāfi, it is not within the power of the five senses of our physical body to find someone steadfast and patient<sup>17</sup>. Similarly, despite their dazzling potential to convey colours of dusk, twilight and brightness of midday, nouns like "saḥar", "ghudwa" and "ḍaḥwa" cannot convey with absolute certainty the indication of past, present and future tense (Al-Sirāfi, 2008: 119-120). Since wisdom of human heart cannot be grasped by mere physical perception, Al-Sirāfi identifies three tools which can help grammarian to obtain it: knowledge (*ilm*), sharp perception (*zanna*), suspicious mind (*shakka*) and careful dedication to his goal (*mubālāt*).

## Conclusion

In the eyes of Al-Sirāfi, Beauty without a fail goes hand in hand with perfection. Through the course of his striving towards the ultimate perfection of written and spoken language alike, the scientific opus of Al-Sirāfi sets up the two main criteria: grammatical accuracy and the clarity of speech. And when it comes to the qualities of Classical Arabic, as the most exalted of all languages, those aiming for perfection must take into account that the perfect speech must be eloquent, understandable, with pleasant articulation and clear pronunciation of case endings<sup>18</sup>. Nevertheless, it is not within the power of a beauty of an

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<sup>17</sup> See: Al-Sirafi. *Sharḥ Kitāb Sibawayh* 1, 456.

<sup>18</sup> According to Ouyang, similar criteria were also praised in the intellectual circles of the 10<sup>th</sup> century logicians. In addition, Al-Fārābi and Al-Amīri were particularly known for their respect for eloquence (*bayān*) and clarity of an expression (*faṣāḥa*) due to the fact that they believed that it can ultimately inspire people to commit good deeds (Ouyang, 1997: 31).

expression nor of the proper use of grammar to ensure the perfection of a language *per se*; for in the eyes of Al-Sirāfī the perfection of language ultimately arises as the union of law and beauty<sup>19</sup>. According to Al-Sirāfī, if a confusion arises during the process of analysing of a certain linguistic feature of Arabic language, the first authority that is to be consulted by the one striving towards perfection is the Qur'an itself: as the written word of Almighty and the ultimate example of the perfect language expression. However, in case when a solution cannot be obtained through the analysis of the text of the of Qur'anic revelation, a grammarian is to rely upon the linguistic features of everyday spoken language of Arabs<sup>20</sup> – preferably the language of inhabitants Hijāz; which was identified by Al-Sirāfī as the language in which the Holy Qur'an was originally revealed to mankind (Al-Sirāfī, 2008: 324). Al-Sirāfī will furthermore define the richness and diversity in the everyday speech of Arabs as the direct consequence of the fact that the language we speak is shaped and defined by what we hear and experience through the course of our daily lives. Under the influence of the intra-human relationships, laws of grammar which govern the oral and written expression in Classical Arabic language thus remain without a definite manifestation in the everyday spoken language. Different linguistic and grammatical properties of various dialects of spoken Arabic language Al-Sirāfī explains by asserting that Arabs learn from one another through mutual and friendly encounters and interactions, which shape and influence their language (Al-Sirāfī, 2008:305). In the eyes of Al-Sirāfī, the value of a grammatical treatise is therefore

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<sup>19</sup> Regardless of the fact that the grammatically incorrect speech can occasionally be understood, it will without a fail lacks perfection in the eyes of Al-Sirāfī (Al-Sirāfī, 2008: 23).

<sup>20</sup> According to Ibn Nadīm, Halīl ibn Aḥmad apparently followed the same research methodology (Ibn Nadīm, 1970:95-96).

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established through the faithfulness of its reflection on the grammatical patterns and properties of the everyday spoken language (Al-Sirāfi, 2008:188). What Arabs speak, grammarian is to record - for as long as his records do not contradict the authority of the Qur'anic revelation. When it comes to the poetic verses, as the third proposed criteria in the Arabic grammar studies, Al-Sirāfi insisted that poetry is to be used only with extreme caution - "for what is allowed in poetry doesn't necessarily equal to what is allowed in [spoken] language." (Al-Sirāfi, 2008:188).

In the ideal case however, a professional grammarian will be able to illustrate his assertions with the examples from both the language of Qur'an, spoken language – and the poetic verses as well. Established upon Al-Sirāfi's hierarchy of authorities in Arabic grammar studies, the figure of Sibawayh arises as the ultimate example of a grammarian *par excellence* within the scientific opus of Al-Sirāfi. As such, the reverence bestowed upon Sibawayh by Al-Sirāfi had little to do with Sibawayh's lucid observation and potentially supreme intellectual capacities – for Al-Sirāfi has insisted that the sole quality of Sibawayh's renowned treatise *Al-Kitāb* is reflected in the fact that its teachings stand in harmony with the teachings of the Qur'an (Al-Sirāfi, 2008:56). In addition, Al-Sirāfi asserts that *Al-Kitāb* aimed at grasping the nature of Arabic language as a whole; with the widest possible perspective which aimed to encircle within itself the spoken language of Arabs in the fullness of its richness and regional diversity. Unlike Ibn el-Arābi, Sibawayh tended to describe and capture language as it was, without establishing only one firm and exact solution for a certain linguistic problem – which was the methodological approach that Al-Sirāfi himself will chose to rely on through the course of his career. Sibawayh's neutral stand and assumed objectivity in recording the

language variations of Classical Arabic language Al-Sirāfī finds to be praiseworthy - and through the course of his work on *Sharḥ Kitāb Sibawayh*, Al-Sirāfī will stand to Sibawayh defence in the light of the harsh criticism of his contemporaries, who appear to have been accusing Sibawayh for failing to establish clear distinction between the grammatically correct and incorrect properties of Classical Arabic language<sup>21</sup>. In the eyes of Al-Sirāfī, a true grammarian is never quick to impose a judgement, for his true duty is to listen, research and record; even in light of the fact that the everyday speech of native speakers of Classical Arabic can often reflect ugliness and corruption only (Al-Sirāfī, 2008:124, 375). As a professional grammarian himself, through the course of his career Al-Sirāfī will relentlessly insist that only upon turning his back on his own personal judgement a grammarian may be freed of the limits of his own rational contemplations - thus setting his foot on the path of the ultimate wisdom.

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<sup>21</sup> In his attempt to prove that Sibawayh was not ignorant of the rules and regulations of Arabic grammar, Al-Sirafi cites numerous examples of grammatically correct and corrupt language, which were quoted in Sibawayh's Al-Kitāb. For the sake of further references see: Al-Sirafi. *Sharḥ Kitāb Sibawayh I*, 178, 181-182, 186 etc.

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ԱԼ-ՍԻՐԱՖԻԻ ՃԱՆԱՊԱՐՀԸ ԴԵՊԻ ԻՄԱՍՏՈՒԹՅՈՒՆ. 10-Դ  
ԴԱՐԻ ԱՐԱԲԱԿԱՆ ՔԵՐԱԿԱՆՈՒԹՅԱՆ ԳՆԱՀԱՏՄԱՆ  
ՉԱՓԱՆԻՇՆԵՐԻ ՈՒՍՈՒՄՆԱՍԻՐՈՒԹՅՈՒՆ

Ամփոփում

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Սույն հոդվածի նպատակն է քննադատական վերլուծության ենթարկել Ալ-Սիրաֆիի մոտեցումներն ավանդաբար կատարյալ համարվող դասական արաբերենի նկատմամբ, որը միավորում էր Ղուրանի, բանաստեղծների, քերականագետների և 10-րդ դարի Բաղդադի առօրյա խոսակցական լեզուն: Ալ-Սիրաֆիից մեզ հասած աշխատություններում դասական արաբերենը Բարձրալի մեծագույն օրհնությունն է մարդկությանը: Քերականագետի դերի և արաբերենի բնույթի ու ծագման վերաբերյալ խոհերի միջոցով Ալ-Սիրաֆին սահմանում է մարդկային էության, ֆիզիկական ընկալման յուրահատկությունը և առաջարկում մեթոդաբանական մոտեցում, որը կարող է հնարավորություն տալ նվիրված ուսանողին հասնել իմաստության՝ արտացոլված դասական արաբերենի կանոնների և օրենքների իմացության մեջ: Արաբական քերականական ուսումնասիրությունները վերլուծելու Ալ-Սիրաֆիի առաջարկած մեթոդաբանության միջոցով սույն ուսումնասիրությունը նպատակ ունի ցույց տալ, թե ինչպես է ֆիզիկական ընկալումը միավորում մարդու սիրտը ռացիոնալ գիտելիքի, ֆիզիկական ընկալման և անվերապահ նվիրվածության հետ, որպեսզի ծնունդ տա իմաստությանը:

**AL-SIRĀFĪ'S STAIRWAYS TO WISDOM: A STUDY ON THE  
EVALUATION CRITERIA IN THE 10TH CENTURY ARABIC  
GRAMMAR TRADITION**

Summary

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***Keywords:*** *Al-Sirāfī, Grammar, Grammarians, Arabic*

This paper intends to convey a critical analysis of Al-Sirāfī's meditations on the traditionally assumed perfection of Classical Arabic language which represents the language of the Qur'an, poets, grammarians and daily conversations of the 10th century Baghdad. Within the survived works of Al-Sirāfī, Classical Arabic language emerges as ultimate blessing of the Almighty to mankind. Through the course of his meditations on the role of grammarian and the nature and origins of Arabic language, Al-Sirāfī establishes a genuine definition of human nature, physical perception and a methodology approach which can ultimately lead the dedicated student to the wisdom reflected in the familiarity with the rules and regulations of Classical Arabic language. Through the analysis of Al-Sirāfī's methodology approach in Arabic grammatical studies, the present study intends to show how physical perception unites human heart with rational knowledge, physical perception and strong dedication in order to reach the Wisdom.

**ПУТЬ АЛЬ-СИРАФИ К МУДРОСТИ: ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ  
КРИТЕРИИ ОЦЕНКИ ТРАДИЦИИ АРАБСКОЙ ГРАММАТИКИ  
10-ГО ВЕКА**

Резюме

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*Ключевые слова:* *Аль-Сирафи, грамматика, грамматики, арабский*

Статья посвящена критическому анализу медитаций Аль-Сирафи относительно традиционно принятого мнения о совершенстве классического арабского языка, представленного языком Корана, поэтов, грамматиков и каждодневного общения 10-го века в Багдаде. В сохранившихся произведениях Аль-Сирафи классический арабский язык предстает как конечное благословение Всевышнего человечеству. Посредством размышлений о роли грамматиков, о природе и происхождении арабского языка Аль-Сирафи дает определение человеческой природы, особенностей физического восприятия и предлагает методологию, которая позволила бы посвятившему себя студенту постичь мудрость, содержащуюся в правилах и положениях классического арабского языка. Основываясь на анализе предложенного Аль-Сирафи методологического подхода к исследованию арабской грамматики, исследование имеет целью показать, как физическое восприятие соединяет человеческое сердце с рациональным знанием, физическим восприятием и бесконечной преданностью в стремлении к порождению мудрости.