The *ism* in the Arabic Grammatical Tradition: Reflections on Its Origin and Meanings

SIMONA OLIVIERI (University of Helsinki)

Abstract
This article aims to present an overall reconstruction of the debate on the definition and etymology of Arabic *ism* (‘noun’, ‘substantive’), by discussing and comparing texts from the Arabic linguistic tradition. The first part deals with the definition of the grammatical element and its functions, while the second is fully dedicated to the examination of the etymological issues, focusing on the two assumed roots of derivation for *ism* (namely s-m-w and w-s-m). The arguments are presented through the collation of the opinions of the relevant Arabic grammarians, examining both the wider debate between the early grammatical schools of Başra and Küfa (2nd/8th–3rd/9th centuries), and the reports of the arguments as described by later scholars.

Key words: Arabic linguistic tradition, Arabic grammar, Arab grammarians, Root, Philosophy of language

1. The parts of speech

It is common agreement, within the Arabic linguistic tradition, that language consists of three parts of speech (*ʾaqsām al-kalām*), namely nouns, verbs, and particles. The delineation of the tripartite vision is usually ascribed to Sibawayhi (d. 180/796) who opens the *Kitāb* by defining the *partes orationis*: “words are noun, verb, and particle.”

Each category presents differences in status and characteristics, as pointed out also by later grammarians, with distinctions mainly based on the role played within an utterance. Among the three, the noun (*ism*, pl. *ʾasmāʾ*) meets those criteria that make it a superior category, being an element “able to both operate as and receive a predicate” (*mā yuḥbara bihi wa-yuḥbaraʾ anhu*) as in ‘Muḥammad is our Prophet.’ In this example, nouns function as both predicate and predicator, acting as *mubtadaʿ* and *ḥabar* in the noun clause.

Conversely, verbs (ʾifʿ, pl. *ʿafāʾil*) and particles (ḥarf, pl. ḥurūf) do not share the same features: the verb “can be used as a predicate but cannot receive one” (*mā yuḥbara bihi wa-lā yuḥbaraʾ anhu*), while the particles “cannot be predicates nor receive a predicate” (*mā lā yuḥbara bihi wa-lā yuḥbaraʾ anhu*).

In addition to this, major distinctions rely on the fact that nouns—as well as verbs—have a well-defined morphology and range of meanings, while particles are meaningful words in themselves but have no strict forms.

---

1 *faʾl-kalim* *ism* wa-ʾifʿ wa-ḥarf. *Kitāb*, i: 1.1
2 This also relates to the difficult interpretation of Sibawayhi’s definition of the ḥarf, described as what “comes for a meaning that is neither noun nor verb” (*gāʾa li-maʿan laysa bi-sm wa-lā ʾifʿ*). *Kitāb*, i:
1.1 Definition

Sibawayhi does not provide clear definitions of the ism in the Kitāb, but—relying on a common linguistic practice—reduces his explanations to a tamīl,7 providing few examples of what may be considered a ‘noun’, as for instance ‘man’, ‘horse’, and ‘wall’ (fa’il-ism raḡul wa-faras wa-hā’īf).8

This represents the starting point from which grammarians of later periods drew inspiration to formulate their own definitions, examining the ism according to its intrinsic features and grammatical peculiarities.

The formulation of linguistic theories is framed within the conventional grammarians debate as part of the ’īgmāʾ (‘consensus’) tradition. Being a fundamental element of the whole Arabic culture and usually widely exercised in juridical discussions,5 the ’īgmāʾ plays a key role also in grammatical disputes,6 where unanimity is the main criterion to state the correctness of an argument. Ibn Ğinnī (d. 392/1002) in the Ḥasāʾis9—and with regard to a strictly linguistic framework—calls it ’īgmāʾ ‘ahl al-baladayn’ and by doing so he circumscribes the practice to the agreement among the Baṣrī and the Kūfī grammarians.

However, as in other fields, the explicit agreement is not the only possibility to determine a concurrence of ideas, which may also be reached with either an implicit agreement or lack of explicit disagreement.9 This might be the case of the tripartite division of the parts of speech that has never been challenged after being stated in the first place. As a matter of fact, the lack of a clear definition in the Kitāb left room to a profound discussion on the subject, so that grammarians after Sibawayhi could define the nature of the category and focus on providing further details to delineate the characteristics of the noun.

2. What is a ‘noun’?

Lane’s Lexicon describes the ism as:

---

1.1). The impossibility to clearly define what the grammarian meant leaves room for further and opposite interpretations. Hence, some later grammarians interpreted the element as something that—not having a meaning of its own—needs to be in combination with either a verb or a noun, while others acknowledged an inherent meaning.

3 Lit. ‘quotation of examples’, ‘representation’.

4 Kitāb, i: 1.1.

5 For an extensive discussion on the topic, see Kamali 2009.

6 The close relationship between the juridical and the linguistic sciences has been extensively investigated, as by Carter who states: “The two sciences are united by a common purpose, to control linguistic and general behaviour respectively, and they share a common methodology, namely the inductive derivation of rules from a linguistic corpus and the deductive application of these universal rules to particular acts of the Muslim.” Carter 2007: 25.

7 The chapter bāb al-qawl ‘adā ‘īgmāʾ ‘ahl al-ʿarabiyya matā yakūn ḥuǧga is fully dedicated to this topic. (Cf. al-Ḥasāʾis, i: 189-193).

8 al-Ḥasāʾis, i: 189.

9 Suleyman 1999: 15-16.
[...][The name of a thing; i.e.] a sign [such as maybe uttered or written] conveying knowledge of a thing [...] and a word applied to denote a substance or an accident or attribute, for the purpose of distinction [...] [or a substantive in the proper sense of this term, i.e. a real substantive; and a substance in a tropical sense of this term, i.e. an ideal substantive [...] is that which denotes a meaning in itself unconnected with any of the three times [past and present and future]: the pl. is أَحْمَاء [a pl. of pauc.] and the latter said by Lh to be a pl. of إِسْمُ [isim] but it is rather a pl. of أَحْمَاء, for otherwise there is no way of accounting for it [...].

This definition mostly relies on those provided by Arabic grammarians, for whom a noun is a word which expresses a meaning but ‘is neither connected with a time’ (gayr muqta‘in bi-zaman) nor is ‘time part of it’ (wa-laysa az-zaman guz’an minha‘). Besides, it may be defined as a word indicating something ‘perceptible’ (say’ maḥsūs) or ‘non-perceptible’ (gayr maḥsūs) which is a means of rising into notice the thing denoted thereby, yet never referring to time. The discussion on what a ‘noun’ should be is rather extensive, and grammarians themselves record the proposition of a quantity of different positions and statements.

Part of the discussion is related to the additional features of the noun, which may:

1. exhibit the genitive case;
2. have the nunciation;
3. be used as a vocative;
4. be marked as either defined or undefined;
5. be used as the subject of a sentence (mubtada‘);
6. have a predicate (musnad ‘ilayhi).

Despite the different propositions, grammarians generally agree on the fundamentals of the category. Some of them add additional features or sub-categories, as al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/

---

10 Lane 1863, iv: 1435.
11 Wehr’s definition lists several possible types of nouns, providing a full range of grammatical information. Nonetheless, for the purpose of this research it is of less interest, since it does not provide information on the debate on etymology.
12 ‘Word’ is here meant as the translation of Arabic kalima, but also of lafs, ‘sound’, ‘expression’. For an extensive discussion on the rendering of word, see Levin 1986 and Lancioni & Bettini 2011.
13 For more arguments on this, see al-Dāhīdah 1992 and Hasān 2004.
14 Hasān 2004: 26. Also al-Anbārī (d. 577/1181) acknowledges the propositions of circa 70 definitions. Finally, the definition that is usually considered as most general among those provided by the Arabic grammarians is the one declared by al-Sīrājī (d. 368/978): “Everything that is the expression of what indicates a meaning not referring to a specific temporality, both past and other, is a noun” (kall say‘ dal-la lafẓuhā ‘alā ma‘nān gayr muqta‘in bi-zaman mahuṣyāl min mudīyy ‘aw gayrīhi fa-huwa ism). Sarh, i: 53.
15 Several works deal with the presentation of the inherent features of the ism. For a general but accurate presentation, see especially Eall, ii: 424–29 by Bernard and Etf, iv: 179–182 by Fleisch, both s.v. “Ism”.

---

17 (2017): 332-344
The *ism in the Arabic grammatical tradition

1505) who mentions a fourth category *ḥālīfa*, and al-Farābī (d. 339/950), who proposes the category *ḥawālīf* among others.

As a consequence of the stigmatization of the approach, grammarians were forced to frame several elements within a rather strict scheme and find a way to make their subdivisions fit the rules set for the tripartition.

Thus, elements differing from each other have been classified under the label ‘noun’, along with a set of sub-categories to indicate less obvious cases. The elements acknowledged as fully matching the definition of *ism* are: the common noun (*ism al-ğins*), the proper noun (*ism al-‘alâm*), the concrete noun (*ism al-‘ayn*), the abstract noun (*ism al-ma‘ānî*), and the active and passive participles (*ism al-fā’il* and *ism al-maf‘īl*). Likewise, are associated to the same category the adjectives (sifā), the infinitives (masdar), the nouns referring to space and time (*ism al-zamān wa-l-makān*), the pronouns (*maqṣūr*), and the numerals (*ism al-‘adaθ*).

Summaries of the debate on what may or may not be a noun are available in works such as Ibn Fāris’ (d. 395/1004) al-Sāhibī: As for the noun, Sībawayhi says: “The noun is for instance man and horse” […]., and Abū l-‘Abbās Muḥammad b. Zayd al-Mubarrad states that, according to Sībawayhi’s view, “The noun is what can be a subject,” […] and al-Kisā’i states: “The noun is what an attribute can be referred to;” al-Farārī says: “The noun is what can exhibit a tanwîn, be in construct state or annexed to the definite article;” al-‘Aḥfāṣ says: “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 qâ’il* (Zayd is standing), when it can be in the dual form or take the plural, as al-zaydānī (the two Zayds) and al-zaydiṭīna (the Zayds), and when it exhibits a trip-totic inflection.” (fa‘-āmmā ‘l-ism fa-qāla Sībawayhi: “al-ism nāḥw rağul wa-ṭarās” […] ‘Abū l-‘Abbās Muḥammad b. Zayd al-Mubarrad yaqīlū maqāhab Sībawayhi ‘annā “al-ism mā šalāha ‘an yakīna fā‘īlan” […] wa-qāla al-Kisā’i: “al-ism mā wusfīfa” […] wa-kānā al-Farārī yaqīlū: “al-ism mā ‘ḥtamala al-tanwīn ‘aw al-’idāfa ‘aw al-’alif ‘aw l-‘alām” […] wa-kānā al-‘Aḥfāṣ yaqīlū: “‘idā wāqadāt šay‘an yahṣūn lahu ‘l-fīl wa-s-sīfa nahwa zayd qāma wa-zayd qâ’il wa-mūma wāqadātahu yuṣnâ wa-yuṣnâ nahwa qawilik al-zaydān wa-l-zaydiṭīn wa-mūma wāqadātahu ‘annahu yamantānī” min-a ‘l-taṣrīf fa‘-lam ‘ānnahu ism*).21

16 Al-Ṣāhibī, iii: 2.
17 Further information concerning the lexical category *ḥālīfa* can be inferred from the studies of ʿAlīmd Makkī al-Anṣārī who investigates the role of al-Farārī (d. 207/822) in the Arabic linguistic tradition as the leading figure of the grammatical school of Kūfah. The author states that al-Farārī was the first who investigated and proposed a fourth lexical category between the noun and the verb. Hence, seems that the Kūfah grammarian anticipated the modern studies on the topic, proposing a four-category division of the parts of speech, and overcoming the tripartition proposed by Sībawayhi. (Cf. al-Anṣārī 1964)
18 Zimmerman translates *ḥawālīf* (plural of *ḥālīfa*) with ‘substitute’, adding that it is used by al-Farābī as the equivalent of ‘pronoun’. (Cf. Zimmerman 1981).
19 See also Wehr and Cowan 1994, s.v. ‘اسم’.
20 For some grammarians, the interrogatives such as *kayf* ‘how’, *‘ayna* ‘where’, and so forth, are to be included, too. Same for the *‘asmā* ‘al-‘af‘īl ‘verbal nouns’, often labelled as nouns when meant as interrogations or exclamation locations, other than onomatopoeic.
21 Al-Ṣāhibī: 49.
Yet, oftentimes these reports are rather partial, as in the case of al-Mubarrad (d. 286/900) who, in the *al-Muqaddab*, declares a longer version than the one reported above, and also partly different. After defining the noun as *ism mutamakkin*,\(^{22}\) the grammarian proceeds by stating that:

> A noun is everything that can be preceded by a preposition, and if it is not possible then it is not a noun. (*kullu mā dāḥala ʿalayhi ḥarf mīn ḥurūf al-ġarr fa-huwa ism, wa-ʿin-i ʿmtanāʾa dālika fa-laysa bi-ʿsm*)\(^{23}\)

Another significant definition is provided by al-Zaqqāq (d. 311/923) and quoted by Ibn Fāris:

> [The noun is] an articulated and comprehensible sound that expresses\(^{24}\) a meaning but has no implications\(^{25}\) of time and space (*ṣawt muqatṭaʾa maḥfūm dāl ʿalā māʾan gāyr dāl ʿalā zamān wa-lā makān*).\(^{26}\)

Here the argument evolves from logic\(^{27}\) and concludes with a definition of the noun clearly influenced by the Greek tradition.\(^{28}\) The importance of his contribution lies in the different approach to the topic, more oriented towards the concept of the meaning of the noun.

### 3. *ism*: the discussion on etymology

#### 3.1 The preliminary debate

Being the definition of the category controversial also in the eyes of the Arabic grammarians themselves,\(^{29}\) semantics and etymology contribute to defining what *ism* is meant for.

Excerpts of the arguments and a summary of the theoretical development are reported in several grammatical works, such as al-Bāqillānī’s (d. 403/1013), al-ʿUkbarī’s (d. 616/1219) and al-Anbārī’s. The latter presents the issue on the etymology of *ism* in two major works, *ʿArār al-ʿArabiyya*\(^{30}\) and the *Kitāb al-ʿInsāf*.\(^{31}\)

---

\(^{22}\) According to the *Kitāb*, the category of the "mutamakkin" nouns refers to those elements that present peculiar features, may occur in various syntactic constructions or have syntactic functions themselves, and may be reflected both in the determinate and in undetermined state. (*Kitāb*, ii:53; ii:40)

\(^{23}\) *al-Muqaddab*, i: 141.

\(^{24}\) Lit. ‘it indicates’.

\(^{25}\) Lit. ‘it does not indicate’.

\(^{26}\) al-Ṣāhibī: 51.

\(^{27}\) For an extensive and accurate study of the Greek influence on Arabic linguistic thinking, see Versteegh 1977.

\(^{28}\) As already examined by FLEISCH, it is clearly recognizable here the influence of Greek logic in the way the definition is articulated. The effects of the influence are so massive that we can also state that there is an almost sharp division between grammarians pre- and post al-Zaqqāq. Cf. FLEISCH, s.v. "Ism", *El*, iv: 181-82.

\(^{29}\) *ḥuwa fa-ʾn-nās fi ʾl-ism wa-mīmmā ʿtiqāqāhū, “People disagree on the *ism* and from what it is derived.”* al-Bāqillānī 1957: 255.

\(^{30}\) *ʿArār*, 3-17.
The ism in the Arabic grammatical tradition

The debate is presented through the examination of two hypothesized roots, namely s-m-w and w-s-m, whose inherent meanings should be intended as practical explanations of the term and refer to the function attributed by the Arabic grammarians to the ism:

The Kufan grammarians argue that the ism derives from wasm, which indicates the ‘mark’, while the Basran grammarians argue that it derives from simuw, which indicates the ‘elevation’ (glabha l-kāfiyyūn ‘ilā ‘anna ‘l-ism muštaqq min-a ‘l-wasm wa-huwa ‘l-‘alāma wa-‘labha ‘l-baṣriyyūn ‘ilā ‘annahū muštaqq min-a ‘s-simuw wa-huwa ‘l-‘alaww).

According to these propositions, simuw—meaning ‘elevation’, ‘height’—is coincident with the function of a ism identified with the signifier, whose role is to stay on a higher level than the signified below (al-musammayāt tabtahā). Conversely, Kufan grammarians analyze the ism as derived from wasm (used as a synonym of ‘alāma, ‘mark’), and sima ‘sign’.

The Kufan grammatical school presents a reasoning related to the markedness theory:

[ism] derives from wasm because in the language [of the Arabs] it indicates the mark, and a noun is a definition mark distinct from the symbol that identifies it [...]. For this reason, we assert that ism derives from wasm, and the same has been stated by Tā‘lāb who argues that the noun indicates the sign that has been established for

31 Insāf, 1-6.
32 The passages quoted below shall show that Arabic grammarians do not refer to roots when discussing the process of derivation (istiqaq), but rather refer to words. As described by Larcher: “Dériver, ce n’est donc pas tirer un mot d’une racine, mais un mot d’un autre. Pour autant, les grammariens arabes n’ignorent ni la racine ni la forme (ou schème). Si la forme est appelée ici d’un mot (ṣīja) qui en est un correspondant exact, il en va tout autrement de la racine, appelée ici tarkib, c’est-à-dire « combinaison [de consonnes] ». [...] Enfin, troisième et dernière différence: tout en dérivant d’une base concrète, les grammariens n’ignorent pas, on l’a vu, le concept de racine, ni celui, corollaire, de forme. Par suite, la racine n’étant pas première, elle n’a pas de sens en elle-même, mais seulement comme trace de la base dans le dérivé.” LARCHER 2008: 87, 90.
33 The Lisān al-ʿArab also registers the variant as-sumuww. Cf. Lisān al-ʿArab, xix: 121-128., s.v. samā (root s-m-w).
34 He is not mentioned in the text, but the latter proposition seems to be shared also by al-Zaḡūḏ. (Cf. al-Ṣāhibī, 57).
35 Insāf, 1.
36 Also ‘mark’, ‘stigma’.
37 Mark is used here to recall the markedness theory, where the marks are grammatical elements (gender, number and case) and not lexical. According to this theory, the noun is not a mark. But, for the purpose of the translation, the word has been adopted under a generic—and not technical—profile.
38 The kalām al-ʿarab is usually one of the main sources for grammatical observations. The reference is to the Arabic variety spoken by the Bedouins of the Arabic peninsula. The Arabs, whose unconscious knowledge of the language prescription is a manifest concept for every grammarian, are presented by early scholars as having an innate wisdom (ḥikma) which makes them choose the correct forms without being really aware of the grammatical reasons.
39 ṭūḏ, from wāf, indicating the creation of a name: “The phrase wāf al-baṭa which may be translated as the foundation of language, represents a concept that is central to classical Muslim scholarly thinking
To prove the inherent meaning of ‘height’, ‘elevation’, semantics comes to adduce evidence: *sumuw* is an attested result inferred from the verb *samā*, *yasmū*, *sumuw*, whose meaning is ‘to be elevated’:

The term derives from *sumuw*, because in the Arabic lexicon it indicates the elevation: when something is elevated you say *samā*, *yasmū*, *sumuw*. From this the sky has been called *samā* because it is in the height, and [likewise] the noun stands above the signified and shows what is below, as far as the meaning is concerned (*’innamā qulnā *innahū muštaqq min-a* ‘l-wasm li-'anna ‘l-wasm fī ‘l- luğa huwa ‘l-’alāma wa’l-ism wasm ‘alā ‘l-musammā wa-’alāma łahū yu’raf bihā [...]. fa-lī-hādī qulnā ‘innahū muštaqq min-a ‘l-wasm wa-li-ğallika qala ‘Abū ‘l-’Abbās ‘Aḥmad bin Yaḥyā Ṭa’lab al-ism sima tūda ‘alā šay’ yu’raf bihā).21

Also, according to al-Mubarrad:

The noun refers to the nominatum below, but this argument is sufficient for the etymology, but it is not for the meaning. And since the noun is raised above the nominatum and stands above its meaning, this means that it is derived from *sumuw* and not from wasm (al-ism mā dalla ‘alā ‘l-musammā tahtahū, wa-hādī ‘l-qavl kāfīn fī ‘l-istiqaq lā fī ‘l-tahdīd fa-lammā samā ‘l-ism ‘alā musammāhu wa-‘alā ‘alā mā tahtahū min ma’nāhu dalla ‘alā ‘annahū muštaqq min-a ‘l-sumuw lā min-a ‘l-wasm).22

3.2 Grammatical observations on etymology

Despite the evident logic behind the reasoning, it is evident that the opposition between *s*- *m-* and *w*- *s*- *m* is merely speculative and part of a rather theoretical discussion.

The grammatical interpretation posing in contrast the two elements may be or may not be acceptable as a reasoning.44 but for the etymology there are many proofs showing that the Kūfan interpretation is erroneous. Medieval Arabic grammarians pointed out the

about language. Language in that thinking was entirely invented. That is to say, it owed its existence to a process of deliberate assignment of patterned vocal utterances—or components of such utterances—to meanings, of *’aṣfaz* (→ *laṭfaz*) to *mu’āšūn* (→ *ma’ūna*). Weiss, s.v. *Wad* al-Luwaq*, EALL*, iv: 684.

40 This interpretation is also registered in the Lane: “A sign [such as may be uttered or written] conveying knowledge of a thing” – LANE 1863, iv: 1435.

41 *Insāf*: 1-2.

42 *Insāf*: 2.

43 *Insāf*: 2.

44 al-Anbārī himself agrees with the Kūfans on the strictly grammatical interpretation, although he does not agree on the etymology.

17 (2017): 332-344
The uniqueness of the root through a grammar-oriented reasoning, as much as modern comparative studies do.45

Basrans’ conflation of Kufan thesis is articulated in five passages,46 corresponding to the five modalities of mistake observed in their propositions. These arguments, four of which shall be examined in detail in the next paragraphs,47 conclude by demonstrating that despite the logic behind the Kufans’ grammatical reasoning, there is one only possible root ism may be ascribed to: s-m-w.48

3.2.1 The form of the term

The first analysis reported in the Kitāb al-Insāf refers to the form of the term ism and its phonetic realization, which results from the drop of the weak radical in the noun formation.

The Kufans state that the ḥamzā occurring in the first position is dropped and replaced by a hamzā49 which functions as a letter of compensation (ta’wīl). If this phenomenon were productive, then the initial hamzā would be a systematic result whenever a weak radical

---

45 The concept of root is a key element shared all throughout Semitic, and, as pointed out by VOIGT: “All Semitic languages have a verbal form and a nominal form (except for functional words and particles), characteristically consisting of a triradical root and a vocalic pattern which may also require the addition of further consonants” (EALL iv: 173-74). For the case study presented in this paper, other Semitic languages further substantiate the correctness of the arguments in favor of the root s-m-w, for they prove that a root, either bilateral or with a weak radical occurring in final position [s(ṣ)-m or s(ṣ)-m-w/], is attested all throughout Semitic. Hence, given the range of meanings: (1) ‘noun’, ‘name’, ‘substantive’ for Arabic ism, and (2) ‘sky’, ‘heaven(s)’ for Arabic samā’, their cognates in other Semitic languages are, for example: Akk. (1) šumu, (2) šamū; Mehri (1) ham, (2) haytem; Jibbali (1) šem, (2) šutum; Geoz (1) som, (2) sumdy; Old South Arabian (1) sm, (2) šmyn [Sabean], šmh [Minean]; Syriac (1) šomn ṭaʾ ʾāṣā, (2) šmnyyād; Biblical Aramaic (1) šm, (2) šmyn; Biblical Hebrew (1) šem, (2) šmyn. – In addition to those mentioned above, in Mehri and Jibbali are attested also the forms some’ and šīḥā, both clearly Arabisms, and in Soqotri is attested a coraddical form el’ta carrying the same meaning. – As for Hebrew, it is worth mentioning that the Hebrew and English Lexicon (BROWN, DRIVER, and BRIGGS 2010) reports an ‘unknown’ root for the lemma šḥ, and lists among the cognates (and therefore possible related roots) both “Ar. ʾāšā, ʾāšā, ʾāšā, ʾāšā, ʾāšā, ʾāšā, ʾāšā, ʾāšā, name”. – Finally, the Dictionary of Semitic Inscriptions reports also the following attestations: “šm Sing. + suff. 3 s.f. šmh 10/9 - subst. name. šmyn Du. abs. šmyn 7/17, 12/14(*2), ššmy n 8/12, 11/12, 15/14, ššmy n 226; emph. šmy’} 10/2, 17/11/12, + suff. 3 s.m. šmwy 8/12, ššmwy (bšmwy) 16/14 – subst. Du. heavens” (HOFTUZER et al. 1995: 1265).

46 The arguments presented hereafter—mainly based on morpho-phonological observations—are meant to recapitulate grammarians’ opinions as presented in al-Anbūrī’s Kitāb al-Insāf (Insāf. 3-6). Similar—if not identical—arguments may be found in other works, too. One example is al-Baqillānī who reports a more concise examination of the issue in the Kitāb al-Tamhīd (al-Baqillānī 1957: 255-257).

47 The fifth wrong argument presented by al-Anbūrī shall not be analyzed here in detail, since it mainly proposes different variants of the term as registered in local Arabic varieties. The text mentions few different realizations of the term: ism, usm, sim and sun (ism bi-kās f-taḥmā, wa-usm bi-danmihā, wa-sim bi-kās as-sīn, wa-sun bi-danmihā. Insāf. 6). So, for instance, usm would be registered as of the tribes Tamīm and Qurayṣ. Besides, al-Anbūrī briefly reports further explanations for some of the variants, as for sun, shaped on the pattern ‘ad from a proposed historical form “sumaw” with a consequential shift of the ḥamzā onto a ‘alif because of the vocalization in fatha of the preceding letter.

48 The arguments presented in §3.3.1–3.3.4 are also briefly mentioned in LANE 1863, iv: 1435.

49 Clearly a hamzat al-waṣf, but it is always referred to as hamzā only by the grammarians.
occurred in the first position. Hence, in cases such as 
\( wa'ada \) the expected realization would be \( *i'd \) (\( wa'ada - *i'd \) as in the pair \( wasama - ism \)).

Yet, the resulting terms reflect a different state of affairs, as the outputs of this type of roots would consist of terms ending with a \( tā' marbūṭa \) (in fact the attested form derived from \( wa'ada \) is \( 'ida \)), as rightly stated by the Baṣrans.

Baṣrans consider the final \( tā' marbūṭa \) as a compensation letter indicating the drop of the first—weak—radical, while the initial \( hamza \) would result from the drop of the last radical. Thus, \( ism \) derives from an underlying form \( *simw \), shaped on the pattern \( fi'll \) where the first radical is vocalized in \( kasra \) and the second is quiescent.\(^{50}\) According to the Baṣran proposition, in that instance the root would suffer from the drop of the third radical and, resulting biliteral, would compensate the elision of the \( wāw \) by appending a \( hamza \) at the beginning of the word, on the paradigm \( if' \).

3.2.2 The past tense
The second Baṣran proposition is about verbal analysis and how verbs are formed out of this type of root, starting with the \( mādī \) of the fourth form. The Baṣrans argue that the underlying form of the verb is \( *asamuwtu \), but the \( wāw \)—which comes to be the third radical of the root and occurs here in the fourth position—undergoes a regular process of transformation, turning into a \( yā' \),\(^{51}\) resulting then in the form \( *asamaytu \). The proposed theoretical form, as well as the resulting one, shows that the weak radical does not occur in first position in the root, which otherwise would result in a fourth verbal form \( *awsamtu \).

The same phenomenon is also attested in the \( muḍāri' \), where the vowel shift is usually very regular due to the vocalization pattern of the form (\( 'af'ala—yauflu \), as in \( yullī, yuddī \), and \( yusmi \), inferred from the underlying forms \( *yu'llīw, *yu'dīw, and *yusmiw \), and where a quiescent \( wāw \) is preceded by a letter vocalized in \( kasra \). The phenomenon is very regular and is recorded whenever a quiescent \( wāw \) comes to occur in a position adjacent to a consonant vocalized in \( kasra \), as for instance in \( miqāt, mi'dd \), and \( miṣān \), whose underlying forms would be \( *miqeqāt, *miqeqād, and *miqeqān \), inferred from \( al-waqt, al-wa'd, and al-wazn \).

3.2.3 The diminutive
Within the debate, also the formation of the diminutive contributes to the definition of the root. Considering the root proposed by the Kūfāns, \( w-s-m \), the diminutive form of \( ism \) would result in the form \( *wusaym \), where the first weak radical is retained. Yet, the variant attested for \( ism \) is \( sumayy \).

The Arabic lexicon does not record a form containing a weak radical occurring at the beginning of the word, whereas it records a form with a last weak radical.

The word is ascribable to an underlying form \( *sumayw \), on the paradigm \( fu'ayl \), but having a \( wāw \) as its last radical it shifts into a \( yā' \); when a \( yā' \) and a \( wāw \) occur together and the first letter is quiescent, then the \( wāw \) turns into \( yā' \), resulting in a geminated form. This

\(^{50}\) On a pattern \( R_1-i-R_2-O-R_3 \).

\(^{51}\) Other examples from the text are \( 'a'lāyu \) and \( 'a'dāyu, from the underlying forms \( 'a'lāwatu \) and \( *'a'dāwatu \).
The paradigm is widely attested and productive, as demonstrated by common terms such as sayyid, qayyid, and mayyit, whose underlying forms would be *sayyid, *qayyid, and *mayyit. yā being easier to articulate.\(^52\) a shift of the wāw onto a yā’ is favored.

### 3.2.4 The plural

The last Bāṣrān proposition concerns to the formation of the plural form of ism, for which two major forms are registered: ‘asmā’ and ‘asāmī. Both are derived from the root s-m-w and cannot be ascribed to w-s-m, from which the resulting forms would be *awāsām and *awāsīm.

Of the two possible plural forms mentioned above ‘asmā’ is more correct because of its major attestation and plausibility. Its underlying form is *’asāmāw, which records a wāw occurring in the final position, and preceded by a ’alif zā’ida. In such cases, the wāw usually shifts into a hamza, as recorded in other examples such as samā’, kasā’, and rağā’ whose underlying forms would be *samāw, *kasāw, and *rağāw.

In addition to this, another proposition argues that the wāw undergoes a process of shift into ’alif, acknowledging the existence of an abstract form where the fatḥa occurring before the ’alif is triggered by a vocalized wāw. The latter, when occurring in a vocalized form and preceded by a letter carrying a vocalization in fatḥa, must necessarily turn into a ’alif.

The conclusion would then be the combination of two ’alif, one added to the root and one deriving from the last radical. But being both quiescent they do not merge; therefore, the second ’alif turns necessarily into a hamza, both hamza and ’alif being two hawā’iyyā\(^53\) letters.

### Conclusions

The aim of this contribution was to present an overall view on how Arabic grammarians dealt with the issue of defining the root from which the Arabic term ism should be derived. It was inferred from the inventory of arguments discussed in early works and here presented through the words of a 12th-century scholar, that ism may be derived from two distinct roots: w-s-m and s-m-w.

The history of the Arabic linguistic tradition shows that the speculative activities of grammarians belonging to the Baghdādi tradition, like al-Anbārī, often reiterate previously discussed arguments with a manifest orientation towards Bāṣrān ones. Nonetheless, it is undoubtedly important that in reetracing the development of Arabic linguistic sciences the debate itself becomes as important as the linguistic issue discussed, because of the methodological approaches proposed. Al-Anbārī’s way to present the debate is a kind of storytelling, where the Bāṣrān predominance is justified by the fact that the method of analysis they propose is better theorized and developed. Thus, strict methodological procedures and

\(^{52}\) ’abuff, lit. ‘lighter’.

\(^{53}\) “al-hāwi <qui comporte un souffle> est un épithète de l’’alif al-garsī: <celui qui produit un son> par opposition à l’’alif support de hamza”. CANTINEAU 1960: 24.
a sophisticated attitude to the reasoning show a clear superiority of the Başran group over its counterpart, as in the case study presented in this paper.

In fact, as discussed in paragraphs 3.2.1 through 3.2.4, it is evident how the discussion led by Kufan grammarians—despite its logic—does not have very solid foundations, but rather presents a more speculative approach. Not considering the propositions on semantics, common to both groups and ascribable to a higher level of linguistic abstraction, Başrans’ arguments on morphological phenomena are more well-grounded, and properly explain why the term ism cannot be derived from the root w-s-m, contrary to what Kufans argue. Furthermore, cognates evidence that also in other Semitic languages the root is either biliteral or has a weak letter as its last radical, thus adding an additional proof on a comparative level.

References


The īsm in the Arabic grammatical tradition


Simona Olivieri


© Simona Oliveri, University of Helsinki / Finland  
 simolivieri@gmail.com