

# History of Arabic

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## Before the Beginning:

The year is 656 and Uthman ibn Affaan has just been assassinated. Ali ibn Abi Talib succeeds him and rises to the caliphate as the fourth caliph and the leader of the growing Islamic empire.

During his reign, Ali would deliver a total of more than 800 sermons, epistles and short sayings. These writings were considered at the peak of Arabic eloquence... and they would be compiled half a century after Ali's death into an anthology known as Nahj al-Balagha.



Figure 1: Page from old copy of Nahj Al-Balagha

Sprouting at the birth pangs of the Islamic and Arabic golden age at the beginning of the 8th century, the Nahj al-Balagha would prove to be the fundamental groundwork for that gigantic and jaw-dropping giga-empire we know as The Arabic Language.

## The Birth of Arabic Linguistics:

One of Ali's most promising companions was a man named Abul Aswad Ad-Duwali (died 688). During Abul Aswad's time, many non-Arabs had already entered the fold of Islam of course, but they were unversed in the Arabic language and their tongues were not adept to the dialect. They often made silly mistakes in reading the Qur'anic text, upon which many Arabs would poke fun.

Abul Aswad noticed a gaping hole in the very fabric of the society; the lack of education of the divine language.

In an effort to remedy this, Abul Aswad would be the first ever to put dots on Arabic letters. Under the instruction of Ziyad Ibn Abeeh, the wali of Mu'cawwiya I, he devised a system of dots to differentiate similar pairs of consonants and to help identify the unwritten vowels. Prior to these dots, certain pairs of Arabic consonants were indistinguishable, even for Arabs.

Abul Aswad would also be the first to write in grammar, the first to treat it as a subject of academia and the first to teach it as a science. Naturally, Arabic grammar is attributed to Abul Aswad Ad-Duwali.

## Arabic in its Infancy:

Among his students was Mu'cadh bin Musallam Al-Harra. Harra would continue Aswad's work and expand on it. He was the first to distinguish the science of etymology and morphology and speak of them as entities distinct from grammar. It was during this period that Imam Nu'maan bin Thaabit, or Abu Hanifa, authored the very first book of Arabic morphology.

Harra would go on to give tutelage to Abdul Malik ibn Marwaan, the fifth caliph of the Umayyad dynasty. Abdul Malik, it may be noted, decreed that Arabic be the official state language across the entire Islamic empire.

And it's Abdul Malik's Iraqi governor, Hajjaaj bin Yusuf, who is attributed with substantially reforming Abul Aswad's diacritical system. He maintained the dots that differentiated letters with similar bodies, but modified and simplified the system of vowelization, replacing dots with strokes.

Abul Aswad had five main successors that carried on the works of grammar, writing and teaching on this subject. His most eloquent student 'Ansi-bat Al-Feel, the r'sul Nahwe'een Meimoon Al-Aqran, the famous Abu Suleiman Yahya bin Ya'mar Al-Udwaani, and finally, Aswad's own two sons Abul Haarith and 'Ata.

It was 'Ata, after the death of his father, who helped classify the science of grammar into its various chapters. Ata was the first to apply abstraction (or Qiyas) to expand the science from its basic rules to more abstract formulae.

In the mid to late 700's, these five were succeeded by another group of grammarians - grammarians whose names are well known among scholars of classical Arabic, whose foundational works in the sciences of the Arabic language are legendary, and whose legacies echo through time.

Abdullah ibn Abi Ishaq Al-Hadrami, one of the first to write on the science of orthography.

Abu Amr Isa Ibn Umar Al-Thaqafi, the wali of Khalid bin Walid. He authored the book Al-Jami Fi An-Nahw.

And Abu Amr ibn Ula, one of the seven Qur'anic Reciters.

But despite the magnificent position these three grammarians held, they were nothing compared to the likes of the legends that were soon to take center stage. Legends whose works would rattle the foundations of Arabic and its pedagogy, causing it to skyrocket into the Golden Age.

### ***Rise to the Golden Age:***

The fathers of Arabic grammar, Abu Abdurahman Al-Khaleel ibn Ahmad Al-Farahidi and Abu Bishr Amr ibn Uthman ibn Qambar Al-Bishri Sibawayh.

Khaleel would finish Hajjaj bin Yusuf's work and give the Arabic script the form we know today. He would author the very first dictionary, known as Kitaabul Ein. And he would be one of the first to write on the science of poetic metre and rhyme in his book, Al-Uroodu Wash-Shawaahid. His work is venerated to this day. He died in 786.

Sibawayh, the second of the two legends, was in fact Khaleel's student. If Arabic grammar should be attributed to one, and only one person in history, it should be attributed to Sibawayh.

Sibawayh was a brilliant student of the Islamic sciences, taking particular interest in Hadith. He studied with the well known scholar Hammaad in Basra. It was during one of these lessons with Sheikh Hammaad that Sibawayh made a simple grammatical error in reciting a Hadith, where he interpreted a word as being the Ism of Leysa instead of Mustathna as it

ought to be interpreted. Hammaad corrected the young Sibawayh, whereupon Sibawayh remarked, "I will learn grammar such that no one would ever be able to dispute with me!"

Upon this, Sibawayh took to travelling Basra learning from the greats such as Khaleel and Akhfaash. It was during this time that Sibawayh, the father of Arabic grammar, authored a book which, to this day, is considered the Big Bang of Arabic grammar. A book known simply as... Al-Kitab. It made Sibawayh the first non-Arab to write on the subject of the Arabic language.

Although compiled and published after Sibawayh's death by one of his students, Al-Kitaab was to become the most authoritative book on grammar. Called "the Quran of grammar," it would set the stage for ALL further development of the Arabic language.

### ***The Golden Age of Arabic:***

The golden age of Arabic began with Ali (RA). Its foundations had been laid over the course of 150 years, ending with Sibawayh. Sibawayh died young in the year 797 at the age of 34. His life may have been short, but the legacy he left behind would be responsible for ALL further work on Arabic grammar done throughout the rest of the Arabic golden age, a period of over five centuries. All scholars of the Arabic language from the 9th century to the 14th century would call themselves Students of Sibawayh.

During Sibawayh's times, rifts were becoming obvious between different grammatical camps. Differing opinions were forming regarding certain grammatical principles and rulings. Over the next 200 years after Sibawayh's death, these rifts would divide grammarians into distinct camps.

Two of these camps became especially influential: the camp of Basra and the camp of Kufa. Scholars would be referred to as being either Basri or Kufi.

The divide between these two camps became fierce and rivalries grew strong. In fact, so much animosity began to ensue that one camp would deliver a grammatical verdict simply to oppose the other camp.

This continued until the 10th century. At this time, about half way through the Arabic golden age, the camp of Basra became victorious. Although Kufa had its loyalists, Basra was clearly the superior camp. In fact, most grammatical theory taught in Islamic schools nowadays is based on the Basran school.

The Arabic golden age would continue to stretch until the 14th century. Most of the books we read today and the methodologies we use are from this golden era.

### Development of the Arabic Sciences:

The science of orthography and lexicography (or more simply, writing and vocabulary).

In this science, the 11th century saw Ali ibn Sidah who authored the dictionary *Al-Muhkam wal-Muheet* in the same style as the very first dictionary written by Khaleel, *Kitabul Ein*.

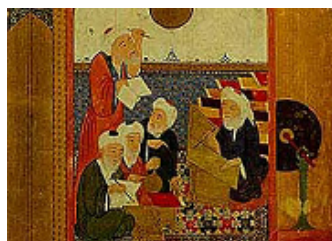


Figure 3: Medieval Arabic education

The 12th century saw Mubaarak b. al-Atheer who authored *al-Nihayah fi Gharib al-Hadith*, an explanation of Hadith vocabulary. And Ahmad al-Jawaliqi who authored *Kitab al-Mu<sup>c</sup>arrab min al-Kalam*, a compilation of all borrowed words.

The 13th century saw Ibn Manzoor who authored the famous dictionary *Lisan Al-Arab* with over 60,000 root words in 18 volumes. It is considered the most authoritative dictionary in the language.

The following century saw al-Fairuzabadi who authored *Al-Qamoos Al-Muheet* which was based on *Lisan Al-Arab*. A commentary was written on

*Al-Qamoos* in the 18th century by Murtada al-Zabidi. It is famously titled *TaaJul Aroos* and comes in 20 volumes.

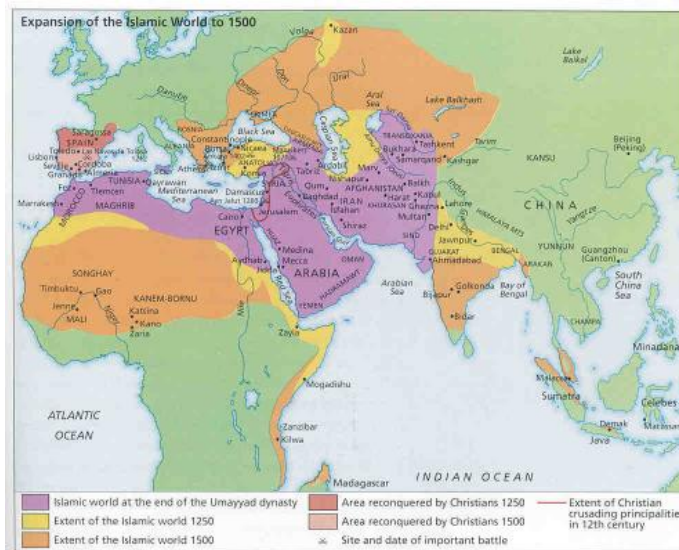


Figure 2: The spread of Arabic during the Islamic empire

The sciences of etymology and morphology (or more simply, conjugation). This small science revolves around the concept of patterns and templates and discusses the internal structure of words. It grew so mature, in fact, that its formulas are considered a testament to human organization.

The 10th century saw the great scholar Zajjaaj who authored *Al-Ishtiqaaq*. And the 13th century saw Ibn Malik who authored the famous poem on morphology, *Laamiyaat Al-Af<sup>c</sup>aal*... to name just two.

The science of grammar and syntax. This primary science revolves around the process of *I<sup>c</sup>raab* at the end of words. Its organization and maturity, like that of morphology, is simply genius.

The 9th century saw Al-Akhfash, Al-Kisa'i who authored *Al-Awsath* in grammar and *Bahr Al-Khabab* in poetic metre, Farraa, and Al-Mazini.

The 10th century saw names like Al-Mubarrad who authored the famous *Al-Muqtadab*, Ibn Durustweyh, Zajjaaj, Ibn Sarraaj and Abu Ali Al-Farisi.

The 13th century saw scholars whose names are recited over and over in both traditional and modern schools of Arabic learning. Names of high calibre, like Ibn Al-Hajib who authored *Al-Kafiya*, and Ibn Malik who authored the thousand couplets *Al-Khulasa*, more popularly known as the *Alfiya*.

Finally, the 14th century saw the legend Ibn Hisham, a grammarian attested by Ibn Khaldun as "Anhaa min Sibawayh" (a bigger grammarian than Si-

bawayh). Ibn Hisham wrote profusely. Among his most famous books are Qatr An-Nada and Mughni Al-Labeeb.

The science of elocution and rhetoric. These sciences are centered around the many ways in which a single idea can be expressed in Arabic.

The 11th century saw Al-Jurjani who authored Ijaz Al-Qur'an and Al-Mughni min Sharh Al-Idah in 30 volumes.

The 12th century saw Zamakhshari who authored Asaas Al-Balagha and the famous tafseer Al-Kashaaf.

And finally, the 14th century saw Sad Ad-Deen At-Taftazaani who wrote profusely and extensively on advanced topics such as rhetoric, logic and others. His works would be the most widely accepted among all other scholars in traditional schools of Arabic learning. Among his works were the famous books Al-Mutawwal, Sharh Miftah Al-Uloom, and Mukhtasar Al-Ma'ani in rhetoric.

### ***The End of the Golden Age:***

The foundational works in these sciences would see their conclusion in the mid-14th century, at the apex of the golden age. The sciences had been carved, their chapters had been finalized, and their fierce debates over the past half a millennium laid to rest.

The immortal legends that are these scholars and the magnificent giga-empire that is their foundational work would serve as the de facto methodology for the next seven centuries until this very day.

No major improvements would be made and all further work on the language would simply be verbatim mimicry of these foundations. The sciences of the language had been organized, systematized and had reached a level of maturity thousands of years ahead of their time, a level of maturity our modern governments can only dream of mimicking.

### ***A Secret Science:***

BUT, in the midst of all this, there was another science. A Science that only grew in the shadows of grammar and rhetoric. A hidden science. A neglected science. A diamond in the ruff.

It was a science that was mentioned only in passing and evaded the radars of major and minor scholars alike. It was highly misunderstood and until this very day it remains hidden behind the veils of secrecy.

It was discovered by Abul Fath Uthmaan Ibn Jinni. What Ibn Jinni discovered was something he would never forget. A science that would bring new meaning to the Arabic language. A science that would open up revolutionary new dimensions of understanding the Qur'an. A science that would challenge our very understanding of the limits of a language and rock their very foundations....