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Structuralism and the arabic grammatical tradition: what actually changed, and what did not

ABSTRACT

This essay aimed to critically examine the widely held claim in contemporary Arabic linguistic research that European structuralism decisively transformed the study of Arabic grammar. To this end, a qualitative, analytical, and historical-comparative approach was adopted, based on a critical analysis of primary sources of European structuralism—primarily the works of Ferdinand de Saussure, Leonard Bloomfield, and Roman Jakobson—as well as the classical and modern Arabic grammatical tradition, represented by Sibawayh's *Al-Kitāb* and Tammam Hassan's work on the theory of convergence of clues (*taḍāfur al-qarā'in*). The analysis was supplemented by recent scholarly literature on Arabic linguistics, structuralism, functionalism, and cognitive linguistics. The results showed that structuralism's main contribution lay not in offering new knowledge about the Arabic language, but in introducing a different epistemological criterion for evaluating the validity of linguistic explanations. This approach allowed for the identification of limitations in the classical theory of 'āmil, although Hassan's alternative proposal also failed to conclusively resolve these difficulties when subjected to the same level of critical analysis. It is concluded that the influence of structuralism on Arabic grammar has been more methodological than theoretical, and that much of the existing literature consists of pedagogical reinterpretations rather than empirically verified developments.

Keywords: structuralism; Arabic linguistics; nahw; 'amil* theory; Tammam Hassan; Sibawayh; functionalism; cognitive linguistics

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El estructuralismo y la tradición gramatical árabe: lo que realmente cambió y lo que no

RESUMEN

Este ensayo tuvo como objetivo examinar críticamente la afirmación, ampliamente difundida en la investigación lingüística árabe contemporánea, de que el estructuralismo europeo transformó de manera decisiva el estudio de la gramática árabe. Para ello, se adoptó un enfoque cualitativo de carácter analítico e histórico-comparativo, sustentado en el análisis crítico de fuentes primarias del estructuralismo europeo —principalmente las obras de

Ferdinand de Saussure, Leonard Bloomfield y Roman Jakobson—, así como de la tradición gramatical árabe clásica y moderna, representada por Al-Kitāb de Sibawayh y los trabajos de Tammam Hassan sobre la teoría de la convergencia de los indicios (taḍāfur al-qarā'in). El análisis se complementó con literatura científica reciente sobre lingüística árabe, estructuralismo, funcionalismo y lingüística cognitiva. Los resultados mostraron que la principal aportación del estructuralismo no radicó en ofrecer nuevos conocimientos sobre la lengua árabe, sino en introducir un criterio epistemológico diferente para evaluar la validez de las explicaciones lingüísticas. Este enfoque permitió identificar limitaciones en la teoría clásica del 'āmil, aunque la propuesta alternativa de Hassan tampoco resolvió de manera concluyente dichas dificultades cuando fue sometida al mismo nivel de análisis crítico. Se concluye que la influencia del estructuralismo sobre la gramática árabe ha sido más metodológica que teórica y que gran parte de la literatura existente corresponde a reinterpretaciones pedagógicas antes que a desarrollos empíricamente verificados.

Palabras clave: estructuralismo; lingüística árabe; nahw; teoría del 'āmil; Tammam Hassan; Sibawayh; funcionalismo; lingüística cognitiva.

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Estruturalismo e a tradição gramatical árabe: o que realmente mudou e o que não mudou

RESUMO

Este ensaio teve como objectivo examinar criticamente a afirmação amplamente difundida na investigação linguística árabe contemporânea de que o estruturalismo europeu transformou decisivamente o estudo da gramática árabe. Para tal, adotou-se uma abordagem qualitativa, analítica e histórico-comparativa, baseada numa análise crítica das fontes primárias do estruturalismo europeu — principalmente as obras de Ferdinand de Saussure, Leonard Bloomfield e Roman Jakobson — bem como da tradição gramatical árabe clássica e moderna, representada pelo Al-Kitāb de Sibawayh e pela obra de Tammam Hassan sobre a teoria da convergência de pistas (taḍāfur al-qarā'in). A análise foi complementada por literatura académica recente sobre linguística árabe, estruturalismo, funcionalismo e linguística cognitiva. Os resultados mostraram que o principal contributo do estruturalismo não reside na oferta de novos conhecimentos sobre a língua árabe, mas na introdução de um critério epistemológico diferente para avaliar a validade das explicações linguísticas. Esta abordagem permitiu identificar limitações na teoria clássica do 'āmil, embora a proposta alternativa de Hassan também não tenha conseguido resolver conclusivamente estas dificuldades quando submetida ao mesmo nível de análise crítica. Conclui-se que a influência do estruturalismo na gramática árabe tem sido mais metodológica do que teórica, e que grande parte da literatura existente consiste em reinterpretações pedagógicas em vez de desenvolvimentos empíricamente verificados.

Palavras-chave: estruturalismo; linguística árabe; nahw; teoria do 'āmil; Tammam Hassan; Sibawayh; funcionalismo; linguística cognitiva.

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INTRODUCTION

Structuralism's real contribution to modern Arabic linguistics was not a set of new facts about Arabic but a change in what counts as a legitimate explanation of a sentence. Classical nahw explained syntax causally: a word takes a given case ending because some grammatical "governor" ('āmil) acts on it, the way one thing acts on another in the physical world. Saussure's founding move was to treat language instead as "a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others" (de Saussure, 1916/1959, p. 114) — a relational account in which a form means what it means because of its position within a system of contrasts, not because something invisible

pushed it there. That pressure produced a real result in the one place the literature actually argues about it with any rigor — the twentieth-century dispute over the 'amil theory — but even there the result is narrower than it first appears, once Tammam Hassan's own alternative is asked to meet the same standard he used against the governor: not a demonstrated defeat for Hassan, but an open question that the available sources do not settle. Everywhere else the shift is claimed more often than it is shown. Most of what is published today under the banner of "structuralism and Arabic" is pedagogy dressed in Saussurean vocabulary, not linguistic theory being tested against a templatic, root-and-pattern language that Saussure never had in mind. A strong account of this topic has to hold these claims apart, credit only what the evidence actually supports, and resist the temptation to let a compelling narrative outrun its sources.

Methodology and Scope

Because the conclusions below are deliberately narrow, it is worth being explicit about how the underlying literature was assembled, rather than leaving that implicit. Sources were gathered through a combination of targeted database and web-based academic search (including Google Scholar-indexed journals and DOI-bearing articles from Scopus-adjacent regional journals) using search terms built around three axes: (a) the primary theoretical vocabulary of structuralism (Saussure, *langue/parole*, sign, synchrony); (b) the specific Arabic grammatical dispute at the center of this essay (al-'amil, *tadhafur al-qara'in*, Tammam Hassan); and (c) two comparison paradigms, functionalist and cognitive linguistics, as applied to Arabic. Priority was given, wherever accessible, to primary texts (Saussure's *Cours*, Bloomfield's *Language*, Jakobson's essays, Sibawayh's *Al-Kitab*) over secondary summaries of them; where only secondary discussion of Hassan's own writing could be consulted, this is flagged explicitly in the text rather than presented as direct citation. The review does not claim to be exhaustive or systematic in the sense of a pre-registered scoping review; it is a targeted critical reading built to test one specific claim, and its conclusions are scoped accordingly — qualified throughout as holding "within the literature reviewed here" rather than as claims about the field as a whole. Two acknowledged limits follow directly from this scope: first, the essay does not engage published generative-grammar treatments of Arabic case (e.g., the formal case-theoretic literature associated with Fassi Fehri or Ouhalla), which fell outside the search terms used; second, one illustrative example discussed below (Section 4) is cited at second hand through a secondary source rather than verified against its original primary text, and this is disclosed at the point where it is used.

The System Sibawayh Already Had

It is worth being precise about what structuralism was walking into. By the time European linguistics arrived in Cairo and Damascus in translation, Arabic already possessed one of the most exhaustive grammatical systems ever built for a natural language. Sibawayh's *Al-Kitab* — compiled in the eighth century and still read today in 'Abd al-Salam Muhammad Harun's critical edition (Sibawayh, 1988) — organized this system around *i'rab* (the system of case and mood endings), the 'amil said to govern them, and a dense semantic-syntactic apparatus for explaining why a sentence means what it means. This was not naive folk grammar waiting to be corrected. It was a rival theory of syntax, complete with its own logic of causation, a millennium before Saussure's lectures were compiled into the *Cours*. The question modern Arab linguists actually faced was never "how do we bring Arabic up to scientific standard" — that framing already concedes the argument to one side. The real question was whether a relational, synchronic, sign-based model built by Saussure (1916/1959) and elaborated by American structuralists such as Bloomfield (1933), whose *Language* treated grammatical form as a matter of distributional patterning rather than inner meaning, could explain a Semitic root-and-pattern language at all, or whether it would simply relabel categories that nahw had already named correctly.

Where the Argument Actually Happens: The Governor Theory

This is where the encounter stops being a matter of taste and becomes a real dispute, at least within the literature surveyed here, because one classical claim was singled out for direct critique on structuralist grounds: the 'amil theory itself. A 2026 study on al-'awamil al-nahwiyyah states the objection precisely — figures such as Tammam Hassan and 'Abd al-Sabur Shahin argued that the 'amil theory is metaphysical and deductive, since it explains changes in sentence structure by appeal to factors that cannot always be empirically demonstrated (Marsyanti et al., 2026). That is a genuine methodological complaint, not a stylistic preference: it says the classical model posits an unobservable cause and calls that an explanation, which is exactly the move structuralist description was built to refuse. (Generative grammar's own relationship to this dispute is more complicated than the label suggests, since it revives its own kind of unobservable structure — deep structure, an innate universal grammar — and is in that respect closer to the governor theory's ambitions than to Saussure's; this essay follows the structuralist critique specifically and does not treat generativism as its natural extension.) Tellingly, the same study does not conclude that the classical apparatus should be discarded. It argues that the 'amil concept keeps real analytical value once its metaphysical baggage is stripped away and it is reframed as a functional, descriptive relation rather than an invisible force. That is the honest shape of the encounter: not the triumph of one system over the other, but the older system being made to answer a question it had never been asked before — how would you know?

Tammam Hassan's own response to that question is the sharpest data point available. He dismissed the governor theory as close to a fiction and proposed in its place a theory of "converging clues" (*tadhafur al-qara'in*), an account of how Arabic sentences generate meaning without appeal to a hidden causal agent (Al-Atrouz, 2022). This is structuralism used as a demolition tool aimed at Arabic's own tradition, from inside that tradition. Hassan was not translating Saussure; he was doing to nahw what Saussure had done to nineteenth-century philology — replacing hidden causes with observable relations. Read this way, Hassan's project is not "the West corrects the East." It is a native grammarian borrowing a method because the method answered a question his own field had left open for a thousand years.

But the replacement deserves exactly the scrutiny just applied to what it replaced, and on that count it is not obviously cleaner. Hassan's own book divides the converging clues into eight verbal markers and twelve semantic ones — twenty items standing in for the single concept of the governor (Djemai, 2024). A framework with twenty interacting variables invites an obvious question: what happens when they disagree? There is at least one case in the secondary literature where they do, though it is worth flagging that this example reaches this essay secondhand — through Djemai (2024), who attributes it to al-Dinna' (2002) — rather than through direct consultation of either source. With that caveat: in a line attributed to the poet Abu Tammam, the case ending on the word for "commander" is accusative, which would mark it as the direct object of "left" — except that reading produces an impossible meaning, since it would place the Commander of the Faithful among those consumed by fire. The clue is resolved, on this account, by overriding the case marking and reading the word as a vocative address instead, letting the semantic clue outrank the morphological one. That is a real instance of the theory doing its job: two clues conflict, and meaning wins. But it is also, on inspection, an ad hoc resolution rather than a stated rule. Nothing in the theory specifies in advance that semantic plausibility outranks case marking whenever the two disagree, only that it happened to in this one line; a system that resolves twenty-way conflicts case by case, after the fact, by appeal to whichever reading sounds sensible, has traded the governor's invisible cause for an equally invisible tie-breaking procedure.

That comparison needs one honest qualification, however: no competing grammatical framework — structuralist, generative, or traditional — actually specifies a complete, declared algorithm for resolving every possible conflict between its own analytic categories either.

Generative syntax ultimately adjudicates hard cases by appeal to native-speaker judgments, which is its own form of undeclared, case-by-case arbitration dressed in formal notation. Holding *tadhafur al-qara'in* to a standard of full algorithmic transparency that no rival theory meets would be unfair. The narrower and more defensible point is simply that Hassan's theory has not been shown to meet that standard any better than the governor theory it replaced — not that it fails a bar every other theory clears. The governor theory was criticized for positing an unobservable force; converging clues, on the evidence available here, has not yet been shown free of the same difficulty in a different shape. That is not a reason to prefer the governor theory back; it is a reason not to treat "converging clues" as a clean structuralist victory rather than as an open question, not yet settled by the sources this essay has been able to consult.

The Same Move, Read as a Loss Rather Than a Gain

That is not, however, how everyone reads it. A 2022 study frames the identical borrowing as a symptom rather than an achievement, arguing that exposure to Western curricula and theories drew some pioneering Arab scholars — Tammam Hassan and Ibrahim Anis chief among them — into applying frameworks to the Arabic linguistic tradition that were not native to it (Al-Atrouz, 2022). Strip away the accusatory framing and there is a legitimate worry underneath: prestige is not evidence. A theory does not become correct for Arabic merely because it arrived from a discipline that called itself scientific. If Hassan's alternative to the governor theory is right, it needs to be shown right on Arabic's own syntactic evidence, not simply preferred because it resembles what European linguistics was doing at the time. The 2022 study overreaches when it treats this as evidence of orientalist motive rather than ordinary intellectual borrowing — but it is asking the right question badly, rather than asking the wrong question.

Beyond Structuralism: What Functionalist and Cognitive Approaches Suggest

Because structuralism was not the last word in twentieth-century linguistics, it is worth briefly asking whether later paradigms handle the same classical Arabic material any differently, since this bears on whether structuralism's specific diagnosis of the governor theory was principled or simply of-its-moment. Functionalist linguistics, in the tradition running from Jakobson's account of language as organized around distinct communicative functions — addresser, addressee, context, message, contact, and code (Jakobson, 1960) — through to Halliday's systemic-functional grammar, asks a different question of a sentence than structuralism does: not "what is its position in a system of contrasts" but "what social or communicative work is this form doing." Applied to Arabic, this reframing has been used to argue that classical Arab grammarians and rhetoricians — al-Jurjani in particular — were already implicitly functionalist, attending to the communicative effect of a construction on a listener rather than only its formal position (Abalkheel & Sourani, 2023). If that reading is right, it suggests the 'amil dispute is not simply "Western science corrects Eastern metaphysics," since the classical tradition already contained resources — semantic and rhetorical, not only syntactic — that anticipate a functionalist critique of pure formal governance. Cognitive linguistics offers a related but distinct angle: recent work applying Ronald Langacker's cognitive grammar to Qur'anic grammatical interpretation treats deviations from expected case marking not as errors to be explained by governors or clues, but as evidence of the mental construal processes a speaker and hearer share (Khalaf al-Dulaimi, 2026). None of this settles the 'amil debate in either direction; if anything it widens it, since it shows that Arabic grammatical phenomena resist reduction to a single imported framework, structuralist or otherwise, at least as consistently as they resist reduction to the governor theory alone.

The Much Bigger, Much Weaker Literature: Structuralism as Classroom Technique

Set beside that narrow, genuine dispute is a far larger body of writing that has almost nothing to do with it. A great deal of what now circulates as "structuralism's influence on Arabic

linguistics" is in fact structuralism's influence on how Arabic is taught as a foreign language — a different claim entirely, and a much thinner one. One study translates Saussurean vocabulary directly into classroom drills: repetition exercises, switching between noun and verb forms, sentence-pattern expansion (Amal & Setiyawan, 2024). Another goes further and asks whether even the traditional *bandongan* recitation-and-commentary method can be reframed through a structuralist lens, on the reasoning that integrating Saussurean structuralism into traditional Islamic learning contexts could make grammar instruction more systematic and theoretically grounded (Falaqi, 2023). This is a comfortable synthesis on paper, and it is largely undemonstrated in practice. Renaming a centuries-old pedagogical method with Saussure's terminology is not the same as showing that students parse sentences differently, or better, as a result. None of these studies tests an actual claim about Arabic morphosyntax against structuralist theory; they use the theory's prestige to justify techniques whose real justification is that they have worked in classrooms for a long time, independent of any theory attached to them. Treating this literature as evidence for "structuralism's impact on Arabic linguistics" conflates two separate conversations — one about how a language is analyzed, one about how it is taught — and lets the weaker of the two borrow credibility from the stronger.

CONCLUSION

The defensible claim is narrower than either the celebratory or the suspicious version of this story, and narrower, too, than a clean verdict in Hassan's favor would suggest. Structuralism did not hand Arabic linguistics new facts about Arabic; the facts — the case system, the root-and-pattern morphology, the semantic load carried by word order — were already described by the classical grammarians in more empirical detail than most modern treatments credit. What structuralist description supplied was a different standard for what counts as having explained those facts: no unobservable cause invoked without a way to check it. That standard was put to a real test in the governor debate, and it produced a genuine result, but not an unambiguous win. It exposed a real weakness in the 'amil theory's appeal to an invisible force; and when the same question is asked of Hassan's own alternative — does it resolve conflicts among its own categories by a declared rule, or only case by case, after the fact? — the honest answer, on the sources available here, is that this has not been shown either way. That is a smaller claim than "Hassan's theory is also flawed," and it should stay that size: the fair conclusion is an open question, not a symmetrical indictment, since no rival framework meets a fully declared standard of conflict-resolution either. Functionalist and cognitive approaches to the same Arabic material, reviewed briefly above, suggest the classical tradition has resources beyond both the governor theory and its structuralist critics, which is a further reason for caution about any single-paradigm verdict. Outside the governor debate, most of what is written about structuralism and Arabic, within the sources reviewed here, is either pedagogical repackaging that has not been empirically tested, or polemic about scholarly motive that never engages the syntactic evidence at all. A rigorous history of this encounter would center on the 'amil debate, hold every side of it — including Hassan's own alternative — to a consistent and explicitly stated standard, and treat everything else as adjacent rather than equivalent to it. That is a smaller, more honest claim than the field usually makes for itself, but it is the only one the evidence gathered here actually supports.

Conflict of interest.

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest—financial, personal, academic, institutional, or of any other nature—that could have influenced the design, development, analysis, interpretation of the results, or publication of this manuscript. Furthermore, the author declares that the work was conducted in strict adherence to the principles of scientific integrity, transparency, and research ethics.

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