

Review Articles

Muhammad Al-Sharkawi's review of my book *Syntaxe de l'arabe classique*: a review

I just read Muhammad Al-Sharkawi's review of my book, *Syntaxe de l'arabe classique* (*Syntax of Classical Arabic*), published in the latest issue of *Folia Orientalia*.¹ I did not recognize the book I wrote: Al-Sharkawi makes me say what I do not say and do not make me say what I say. I wondered why. The reason quickly appeared to me. The book is written in French. I'm afraid Al-Sharkawi does not understand French perfectly. I will limit myself to pointing out the factual errors and shortcomings of Al-Sharkawi, rectifying some and filling others.

1. Plan of the work

Syntaxe de l'arabe classique is a detailed but simple sketch of the phrase structure of Classical Arabic, different types of phrases and phrase groups from a discourse point of view. (...) In the book, Larcher draws the structural map of Arabic discourse as built from simple phrases, which can be expanded into complex phrases, to form complexes of phrases with different semantic functions in what the author tagged Classical Arabic.

For a linguist, the French *phrase* and the English *phrase* are “false friends”: the French *phrase* is the English *sentence* and the English *phrase* is the French *syntagme* (e.g. noun phrase and verb phrase = *syntagme nominal* and *syntagme verbal* in French). By simply reproducing the French term *phrase* in English, Al-Sharkawi creates a useless equivocation that must be dispelled; the book is divided into three parts: simple sentences, complex sentences and complexes of sentences.

¹ *Folia Orientalia*, vol. LV, 2018, pp. 437–439.

2. Origin of the work

The bulk of the material used to build the chapters of the book come from linguistic and grammatical classes the author taught in the past five years in addition to a group of articles he published in the meantime.

If it is true that the book is a synthesis of many articles I wrote in the field of syntax, where does the author take that it results from my teaching “in the past five years”? I sought. I found. The book was published in 2017. At the beginning of the introduction, it is stated that the three universities of Aix-Marseille merged in 2012. $2017 - 2012 = 5!$ But I write that the book comes from two courses I have taught for many years (“de longues années”): in fact since my arrival in Aix-en-Provence in 1993, that is to say for more than twenty years!

3. Definition of Classical Arabic

Larcher defines Classical Arabic not as an etymological historical stage of the language, which may or may not have structural differences with contemporary and otherwise varieties of the Arabic language. He defines it more like a construct that stands for the language of the higher classes and the socially accepted variety for written communication. To Larcher, studying this variety is both advantageous and an inconvenience. The advantage is that it is a permanent system that helps guide us in the study and use of the Arabic language. It is an inconvenient situation as the grammar of Arabic freezes at a historical stage.

Indeed, the introduction presents two conceptions of Classical Arabic, as a stage of Arabic, or as a construct, but nowhere is it written that this construct “stands for the language of the higher classes”. This is a “classist” conception of Classical Arabic, in accordance with the Latin etymology of *classicus* (“which belongs to the first class of citizens”), but not with the two usual meanings of the term: “of first class” and “taught in classrooms”. For me Classical Arabic is not a class language, but that of scholars’ caste. It is the product of the work of standardization and normation undertaken by grammarians from the 2nd/8th century, being at the same time a variety of prestige and a school standard.

4. Two conceptions of syntax: the one I criticize

After these simple introductory remarks, the author describes his outlook on the syntax of phrases in Arabic. He divides the Arabic phrase into simple phrases and complex phrases. A simple phrase is the one that coincides with

a proposition. A complex phrase is the one which contains more than one proposition. The author then moves on to state that a complex phrase becomes so by coordination and subordination. In a complex phrase by coordination, there are two phrases; the first is an independent one while the second depends on the first structurally and semantically. The two component phrases are linked by a logical relationship such as cause and effect. There are also two types of subordination in a complex phrase depending on the conjunction of subordination. In addition to the juxtaposition of simple and complex phrases, the author recognizes a third type, the complex of phrases. A complex of phrases is formed from the collection of simple and complex phrases.

This paragraph does not describe *my* conception of the syntax of Classical Arabic, but on the contrary that which I criticize! Grammars, both traditional and modern, do distinguish between simple sentences and complex sentences; they do consider that a simple sentence coincides with a proposition and that a complex sentence has at least two propositions, and they distinguish, among the complex sentences, between the complex ones by subordination and the complex ones by coordination.

For me, on the contrary, *no* sentence of Classical Arabic coincides with a proposition, in the sense of classical logic, that is, a subject-predicate structure: I will come back later to this crucial point, totally neglected by Al-Sharkawi.

If I distinguish between two types of subordination, it is only to show that it is a *heterogeneous* category, in fact confusing two situations which are syntactically and semantically very different from each other.

In one case (let's call it subordination 1), one sentence is embedded in another. The result is a complex sentence, since there are two sentences at first, but whose general structure remains that of a simple sentence. For example, in the sentence '*alimtu 'anna Zaydan qā'imun*' one can recognize the sentence *Zaydun qā'imun*, but the whole sentence has the structure V[erb] '*alim-* S[ubject] *-tu* O[bject] '*anna Zaydan qā'imun*: I will come back later on how *Zaydun qā'imun* is embedded in '*alimtu 'anna Zaydan qā'imun*.

In the other case (let's call it subordination 2), we can not say that one sentence is embedded in the other: we must rather say that there is a set of two sentences, one of which, the first, serves as a framework for the enunciation of the other, as, for example, in '*in qāma Zaydun qāma 'Amrun*.

If the traditional concept of subordination is excessively heterogeneous, the no less traditional concept of coordination is excessively homogeneous: it is not only limited to syntactic coordination, that is to say to the situation where two sentences *p* and *q* are coordinated through a "conjunction of coordination", but the list of these conjunctions is strictly limited. However, there can be semantic coordination, without syntactic coordination, by simple juxtaposition: for example, in French, "il faisait beau: je suis sorti" (the weather was fine,

I went out) has exactly the same meaning as “il faisait beau, donc je suis sorti” and “il faisait beau, aussi suis-je sorti” (the weather was fine, so I went out), though *donc* is one of the “conjunctions of coordination”, while *aussi* is not!

5. Two conceptions of syntax: *my* conception

In the class of simple phrases, Larcher recognizes the related simple phrase which is a verbal phrase and the segmental simple phrase which is a nominal phrase. The same division also works for complex phrases. However, the internal structure of the phrase does not play a categorization role in the book, but it serves as an underlying concept that binds the topics of each of chapters. The book is structured accordingly in three major parts: simple phrases, complex phrases and complexes of phrases.

A reader who has not read the book will wonder what a “related phrase” and a “segmented phrase” may be and how they apply not only to simple verbal and nominal sentences, but also to complex sentences. This is certainly where the most striking informational gap in Al-Sharkawi’s review lies in: “related phrase” and “segmented phrase” (badly) translate the concepts of “phrase liée” (“bound sentence”) and “phrase segmentée” (“segmented sentence”). These two concepts, as well as a third, that of “phrases coordonnées” (“coordinated sentences”) are explicitly borrowed from the Swiss linguist Charles Bally (1865–1947), whom Al-Sharkawi does not even mention! I suppose he does not know him, and therefore he does not exist for him. A conscientious reviewer would have looked for who he was. For a historian of linguistics, he’s not just anyone. He is a pupil of another Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), of whom he published, with Albert Secheyaye (1870–1946), the *Cours de linguistique générale* (*General Linguistics Course*) (1916). In other words, without Bally, the *Course* would not have had the impact it had in general linguistics (and not only in the French-speaking world). But Bally is also the author of several books, including at least one – *Linguistique générale et linguistique française* (*General Linguistics and French Linguistics*) (1st edition 1932)² – which continues to be read, especially for one of its chapters “Théorie générale de l’énonciation” (General Theory of the enunciation).

It is in this chapter that Bally distinguishes between three types of enunciation that he calls respectively bound sentence, segmented sentence and coordinated sentences. The bound sentence is a subject-predicate structure that can be uttered in one breath without pause between its constituents; the segmented sentence is a topic-comment structure, the segmentation between the topic and the

² *Linguistique générale et linguistique française*, 4^e édition revue et corrigée, Berne, Francke, 1965 [2^e édition entièrement refondue, Berne, Francke, 1944].

comment being orally marked by a pause, and by a comma in writing; finally, the coordinated sentences are two sentences, in the same semantic relationship topic-comment as the segmented sentence, but which can be syntactically either coordinated or juxtaposed.

It is because Al-Sharkawi does not inquire that he can not inform the reader, his faulty information appearing in the rest of the paragraph quoted above. Al-Sharkawi does not understand – and does not seek to understand – how the two distinctions are articulated, mine (which structures the book in three parts) and Bally's. The thing is however clearly explained in the introduction: the three-part division of the work results from the *crossing*, on the one hand, of the traditional distinction in grammar, which I criticize as descriptively inadequate between simple and complex sentences and, among the latter, by subordination and by coordination and, on the other hand, the distinction of Bally; this crossing generates a new concept, that of “complex of sentences”. But, for all that, the two distinctions (that of Bally and mine) do not coincide: they only overlap. And since Al-Sharkawi does not, let's get into the details of this overlap.

6. Part one: simple sentences

Part one deals with simple phrases. It is by far the longest and most well detailed part of the book with its ten chapters. Some of the chapters deal with particular types of simple phrases (jussive phrases in chapter five, interrogative phrases in chapter six and exclamatory phrases in chapter seven).

Other chapters deal with formative and transformative rules/processes (such as the expansion of the noun phrase in chapter two and the verb complementizes in chapter three). Chapter one is a sketch of the basic traditional and modern grammatical concepts that pertain to phrase structure. Chapter one explains the main concepts of phrase formation in Classical Arabic (gumla and Kalam) and the basic phrase morphology (verbal and nominal phrases). Although the author does not state it, these concepts are the bases on which the book is structured. Gumla is the basic grouping of words to form proposition, which in turn group to form Kalama ‘discourse’. Based on the kernel structure of the basic phrase, verbal or nominal, the author continues, different possibilities of extension and rules of formation exist.

In general, the chapters of part one are designed as verbal descriptions of the structures in question followed by examples from modern standard Arabic. Even in chapter one, when the author lays out the basic concepts of the phrase structure, most examples are not from medieval sources. The author does not state from where the examples used come.

Note on the first paragraph: part one is 109 pages long and is divided into ten chapters. Part two is 72 pages long and is divided into four chapters,

but chapter 3 is divided into four sections. Part three is 100 pages long and is divided into 11 chapters, chapter 4 being divided into 3 sections. Part three is thus almost as long as the first and each part, including the second, is as detailed as the other. If the second is shorter, it is because it deals only with a part of what grammars generally call complex sentences, the other part being treated in what I call “complexes of sentences”.

Note on the last paragraph: the last paragraph even shows that Al-Sharkawi did not read the introduction to the end. If he did, he would have seen that *all* the examples in the book are referenced, the reference being quoted in parentheses: where there is simply a page number, it refers to the main element of the corpus that Al-Sharkawi does not mention, the *'ayyuhā al-walad* by Al-Ġazālī (d. 505/1111).³ As a result, he does not mention the three reasons that led to the choice of this book: its brevity, which allowed a complete counting; its genre, the *naṣīḥa* (advice), which explains the presence of many quotations from the Qur'an and hadith (both belonging to pre-classical Arabic); its place in the chronology: it belongs to the post-classical period; there are already evolutions attributed to Modern Standard Arabic. It is completed by other corpora: upstream, the corpus of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry of which I am the translator in French; downstream, a corpus of Arabic press; between the two, medieval literature including technical. Thus, contrary to what al-Sharkawi asserts, *most* of the examples are medieval: the few examples taken from modern Arabic are only to confirm the tendencies in which medieval Arabic was already going!

If I start from the concepts of Arabic grammatical tradition (*kalām* and *ġumla*, *'isnād*, *musnad* and *musnad 'ilayhi*, *ġumla ismiyya* and *ġumla fi 'liyya*), it is actually to revisit them! I have already said that for me no sentence of Classical Arabic coincided with a proposition. Indeed, even the simplest nominal sentence of Classical Arabic, the NN structure, like *Zaydun qā'imun*, is not a subject-predicate bound sentence, but a topic-comment segmented sentence. To the arguments given in chapter 1 of the part one, we can add one of the examples of *kaškaša* given by Sībawayhi (d. 176/780?):⁴ *'innaki dāhibatun* → *'innaš dāhibah* since the *kaškaša* consists in transforming the pronoun *-ki* into *-š* at the pause...

Nor is the verbal sentence of Classical Arabic a proposition in the sense of classical logic. But it has the very form that modern logic gives to the proposition, that of a verbal predicate asserted of all its arguments (subject and complements), as had already been glimpsed by the grammarian Raḍī al-dīn al-'Astarābādī (d. *circa* 688/1289).⁵ It is a bound sentence, which can be uttered in one breath without pause between its constituents, as shown by

³ *Lettre au disciple ('ayyuhā l-walad)*, ed. and. trans. Sabbagh, 3th ed., Beirut, 1969.

⁴ *Kitāb*, ed. Hārūn, Beirut, 'Ālam al-kutub, n.d., Part 4, p. 199.

⁵ *Šarḥ al-Kāfiya*, Istanbul, Maṭba'at al-šīḥāfa al-'uṡmāniyya, 1310H, p. 8.

the two examples given by Raḍī al-dīn al-'Astarābādī: *ḍaraba Zaydun 'Amran 'amāmaka yawma l-ḡumu'ati ḍarbatan* and *ḍuriba Zaydun yawma l-ḡumu'ati 'amāmaka ḍarbatan*. Note that Al-Sharkawi does not even mention the name of this grammarian, which I often quote: a page from *Šarḥ al-Kāfiya*, in the Delhi edition of 1282/1866 that belonged to Mortimer Sloper Howell (1841–1925), adorns the book cover...

But for me there is a third type of simple sentence, which Al-Sharkawi does not even mention: it is the *ḡumla zarfiyya* of Arabic grammatical tradition (in the sense of the sentence beginning with a “circumstance” or a Prepositional Phrase (PP), like *'indī* or *fī l-dāri raḡulun*);⁶ it is the locative sentence of English-speaking linguistics; it is more generally the existential sentence: the PP is not necessarily a locator (e.g. *lī mālun* to me / money = I have money). It is also a segmented sentence: the “circumstance” or the PP is the topic, that is to say the framework where the utterance of the comment is made, consisting in posing the existence of an object *x* in that framework. I categorically reject the school analysis of this type of sentence as *ḥabar muqaddam / mubtada' mu'ahḥar!*

These are the three types of simple minimal sentences – one bound, two segmented – presented in chapter 1 part one. Chapter 2 deals with the expansions of the NP, chapter 3 with the complements of the verb. Chapter 4 deals with the transformations of the simple sentence. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 deal, as Al-Sharkawi notes, with jussive, interrogative and exclamatory sentences. But chapter 8 deals with exceptive and restrictive sentences; chapter 9 with verbal negations (so many in Classical Arabic: *lā, lam, lammā, lan, mā...*) and chapter 10 with elliptical and holophrastic structures (vocative, interjections...).

7. Part two: complex sentences

Part two, complex phrases, is comprised of four chapters: an introduction, one chapter deals with reference, one deals with connection and conjunction and another one deals with direct and indirect speech. In chapter one, structural and discursive additions made to the simple phrase to make it a complex phrase are discussed in very general terms by means of exemplification only. The examples provided in this rather short chapter are a mere prelude to the topic of the three following chapters. As one can assume from chapter one in part one and from the topics of part two, complex phrases are extensions of simple phrases. The internal structure of the chapters in part two is identical to that of part one.

This paragraph does not describe at all the organization of this part. Chapter 1 introduces three ways of embedding one sentence into another. It is this

⁶ Ibn Hišām al-'Anšārī (d. 761/1360), *Muḡnī al-labīb*, ed. Mubārak, Ḥamd Allah and 'Aḡḡānī, Beirut, Dār al-Fikr, 1969, Part 2, pp. 420–421.

concept which is at the foundation of that of “complex sentence”. Al-Sharkawi does not even mention it. Nor does he mention the source of inspiration of this chapter, without having here the excuse of the language: it is the distributional and transformational grammar, especially that of Zellig S. Harris (1909–1992).⁷ Chapter 2 does not deal with reference, but with coreference, which is, with the anaphora, one of the two modes of indirect embedding of one sentence into another: it concerns the sentence being itself comment of a nominal sentence (like *Zaydun 'abūhu qā'imun / qāma 'abūhu*); the *ḡumla ḥāliyya* (like *ḡā'anī Zaydun yarkabu*); the qualificative sentence (*ḡumla šifa* like *ḡā'a raḡulun yaḥmalu kitāban*). Chapter 3 does not deal with “connection and conjunction”, but with the second mode of indirect embedding of one sentence into another, by means of an operator. It is subdivided into four sections dealing with each of the listed operators: *'anna*, *'an*, *mā* and relatives. Finally, chapter 4 does not deal with “direct and indirect speech”, but with the direct embedding of one sentence into another, which for me is the case of: 1) “quoted” sentences (*ḡumla maḥkiyya*), 2) indirect interrogatives; and 3) sentences in the scope of a “circumstance” (e.g. *'idā*) or a noun functioning as such (e.g. *ḥīna*). Complex sentences can be bound (those resulting from an embedding by an operator) or segmented (those resulting from an embedding by anaphora / coreference). The complex sentences of the type *p 'idā / ḥīna q* are bound, if we do not mark a pause between *p* and *'idā / ḥīna q*, but segmented in the opposite case: in this case, they become “complexes of sentences”.

8. Part three: complexes of sentences

Part three deals with what the author calls complex of phrases, or discourse. This part consists of eleven chapters. Like in part two above, part three starts with an introductory chapter in which structural distinctions between complex phrases and complexes of phrase are introduced. Chapters two and three deal with circumstantial discourse and circumstantial discourse with a conditional component, while chapter four deals solely with conditional discourse. Chapters five and six discuss reactive and confirmatory discourse. Chapters seven and eight introduce causative and comparative discourse, respectively. Chapters nine and ten discuss contrastive and exceptive complexes of phrase. Chapter eleven, finally, deals with the discourse of alternatives. It seems to me that what the author calls complexes of phrases is traditionally called by Arab grammarians *uslub* ‘style’, as the discursive function intended does not require syntactic alteration or otherwise impose syntactic conditions.

⁷ *Mathematical Structures of Language*, New York, Wiley & Sons, 1968.

This paragraph shows that Al-Sharkawī does not really understand what “complexes of sentences” are. Considering that they are synonymous with “discourse” amounts to confusing the reader: the complexes of sentences are only “discursive entities”. Comparing them to what Arab grammarians would call *'ushub* (“style”) leaves a historian of Arabic grammatical tradition perplexed. Al-Sharkawī gives no reference. For my part, I have been reading Arab grammarians for nearly half a century, and I do not remember ever having met the word *'ushub* used in the sense of “style” in any of them (it seems to me that this meaning belongs to the lexicon of Modern Standard Arabic, not of Classical Arabic). On the other hand, I found in post-classical rhetoricians a chapter called *al-waṣl wa-l-faṣl* (“junction and disjunction”) and justified by the fact that “any sentence connected to another is either coordinated to it or not” (*wa-kull ḡumla qurīnat bi-'uḥrā 'immā ma'ṭūfa 'alayhā 'aw ḡayr ma'ṭūfa*):⁸ these two modes of connection (Al-Sharkawī prefers the Greek term of *synapsis*) correspond exactly to what I have called above syntactic coordination and semantic coordination.

For the rest Al-Sharkawī is content to enumerate the eleven chapters of this part, but chapters 5 and 6 certainly do not deal with “reactive and confirmatory discourse”: they actually deal with adversative and concessive complexes of sentences, resulting from the application of connectors such as *lākin(na)* and *bal* on the one hand, *ma'a 'anna*, *'alā 'anna*, *raḡma 'anna* on the other hand.

Complexes of sentences are always either segmented or coordinated: they combine both Bally's segmented complex sentences and coordinated sentences. The reason for this grouping is twofold: they share the same topic-comment structure; Classical Arabic has a true segmentator, the particle *fa-*, which is found both between two sentences (*p fa-q*) and between what would be considered by traditional grammar as the subordinate and main clauses of a complex sentence (e.g. *'in p fa-q*).

We can therefore propose the following table, summarizing the overlap of the two distinctions (that of Bally and mine):

sentences	bound	segmented	coordinated
simple	+	+	-
complex	+	+	-
complexes of -	-	+	+

⁸ Al-Qazwīnī (d. 739/1338), *Talḥīṣ al-Miftāḥ*, ed. Barqūqī, Cairo, al-maktaba al-tiḡāriyya al-kubrā, n.d., p. 38.

Conclusion

In general, despite the overall pedagogical tone of the book the number of examples for every concept is minimal. There is a single example for every aspect the author discusses. Verbal explanation of the examples are very clear and compensate for the lack of examples. However, there does not seem to be an obvious particular reason for the choice of these examples from different periods in the history of Arabic and from different genera. In addition, the sources for the illustrations are not stated. It is a useful book for an elementary discussion of Arabic phrase syntax.

It is a pedagogical book, coming from a course and published in the collection “Handbooks” at the Press of the university where this course was delivered. Nonetheless, it is the work of a linguist, proposing a *systematic* exposition of the syntax of Classical Arabic, based on very many examples (744 in total), all referenced!

From a strictly informative point of view, Al-Sharkawi’s review is not one. It does not reflect the actual content of the book. It does not understand or omits all the innovations of the book. It does not mention any of the sources of inspiration for the book. It does not mention the main element of the corpus on which he relies. It is even plainly in the misinformation regarding the examples!

That is why I was forced to make this correction. And to do it in English: indeed, if in the Middle Ages, one said *graecum est, non legitur*, at the beginning of the 21st century, one will say: *gallicum est, non legitur...*

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