

## THE STUDIES OF ARABIC LANGUAGE DURING THE CLASSICAL PERIOD OF ISLAMIC EDUCATION

St. Noer Farida Laila  
*STAIN Tulungagung, Jawa Timur*

**Abstract:** The studies of Arabic language had taken place since the early classical age of Islam. The studies were influenced much by the interests of Moslems in understanding and articulating the message of the Qur'an and hadith. Historically, for many centuries the Arabic language had an important role in uniting the different ethnic groups, nations, and even religions under one Islamic empire. However, while the conversions of the subdued inhabitants to Islam required a longer period, the acceptance of Arabic as the common language took even longer, and still some groups clung to their native language. Besides, the ulama always sought to subordinate the study of Arabic grammar to the Islamic religious sciences and to limit to influence of grammarians over young men. They feared that grammar which relied on Greek logic as a methodology could lead to fascination with other Greek intellectual sciences.

**Key words:** Arabic studies, classical Islamic education

We have revealed the Qur'an in the Arabic tongue that you may grasp its meaning. It is a transcript of Our eternal book, sublime and full of wisdom. (Q.S 43: 2-3)

The above verses show us that in Islamic faith the Qur'an is accepted as the uncreated Word of God and contains all wisdom. As it was revealed in Arabic, Moslems believed Arabic to be the language of God, and those desiring to know God must learn Arabic. The Qur'an was not translated into other languages during the early centuries, and those converts who wished to accept and become practicing Moslems were inspired to learn Arabic fluently. In addition, non-Moslems who served the state to learn Arabic, which by the end of Umayyad dynasty (744) became the language of government, diplomacy and intellectualism throughout the vast Islamic empire. The sharing of a common language throughout such a great landmass encouraged transmission of learning from one end of the empire to the other.

According to Stanton (1990:8-9), the pressure to learn Arabic placed on subjugated people, however, met with much resistance from certain non-Arab ethnic groups. While the conversions of the subdued inhabitants

to Islam required a longer period, the acceptance of Arabic as the common language took even longer, and still some groups clung to their native language. Persians, for example, became devout Moslems while retaining the use of Fars, even though Persian scholars and administrators used Arabic in their administrative and intellectual professions. On the contrary, Jews and Christians adopted Arabic as their language while rejecting Islam as their religion.

These evidences show us that for many centuries Arabic language had an important role in uniting the different ethnic groups, nations, and even religions under one Islamic empire. It is also supported by the fact that, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries as the empire disintegrated, one of the elements that contributed to the decline of scholarship was the return of many groups to their native language and the loss of a common intellectual language in some parts of the empire.

The scientific role of the Arabic language in classical Islam is very interesting. This present paper, therefore, tries to elaborate the development of the Arabic studies during the classical period of Islamic education.

#### **THE DEVELOPMENT OF ARABIC STUDIES IN CLASICAL ISLAM**

Arabic, as a structured language, appeared primarily in poetry before the time of Prophet Muhammad. As a desert people, the Arabs transmitted their traditions and glorification of their life in oral poetry, passed on from generation to generation. The beginning of Arabic as a written language are clouded in antiquity, but by the time of Prophet Muhammad a growing body of literary works were being preserved in this medium. This transformation originated with an attempt on the part of the followers of Prophet Muhammad to understand the meaning of the Qur'an and the requirements of faith in a world much more complex and diverse than the confines of Mecca and Medina.

According to Ahmed (1968:32), understanding and articulating the message of the Qur'an and hadith provided the first impetus for the emergence of Arabic as a rich scholarly language. The interest of the Moslems in the Qur'an led them to the study of Arabic language. The Qur'an was in fact the first book ever compiled in Arabic. Its vocabulary has been derived mainly from the vernacular of *al-Quraysh*. The words of other dialects and even of foreign origin have found their way into it. So, for the first time in the history of Arabia, the study and research of the Arabic language began. The scholars spent many years with the Bedouins in *al-Badiya* (desert) in order to learn their vernacular. The books they compiled as a result of this research gave birth to the science of Arabic philology or lexicography. The study of the science was later compulsory for every student irrespective of the purpose and the line of his studies

During the Umayyad caliphate attempts were made to rationalize the Arabic script and to systematize the grammatical rules of the language. According to Tibawi (1954: 423), even those who acted as scribes to the Prophet made serious mistakes in spelling words in the holy text. For the Arabic alphabet, before vowel signs and diacritical points were introduced, made possible more than one reading of the same text often with harmful results. Not only ordinary people but also some of the Umayyad princes spoke Arabic ungrammatically, and '*lahn*' occurred even in official correspondence. Both evils provide strong incentive to reform. But the need for this was also evident from the difficulty of teaching the Qur'an to foreign converts, and from the danger to the sacred book of defective knowledge of the language by the Arabs themselves.

Due to the absence of grammatical rules and regulations, it was difficult to master it. On the face of this situation, with the help of the Qur'an and the pre-Islamic poetry which was being compiled in those days, and possibly with some knowledge of Greek grammar, Abu al-Aswad al-Duali (d.69/688-89) and others formulated the rules of Arabic grammar. This initially occurred in Basrah, a Mesopotamian city that served as a bridge between the Arabian Peninsula, Syria and Persia. (Ahmed, 1968:33)

In relation with the Arabic script, it was al-Hajjaj who had a great contribution to crippling difficulties of the script and the language. (Shalabi, 1988:83) Al-Hajjaj was a famous general of two Umayyad caliphs, Abdul Malik and al-Walid I. When the caliph Abdul al-Malik adopted Arabic instead of Greek and Persian in government records, it made a sudden call for a large number of literate Arabs who could act at least as clerks and accountants. It was also al-Hajjaj, who is accredited with initiating and patronizing projects to remedy the situation. In this way both religious and secular motives combined to produce what naturally made the work of teacher and pupil easier and more enduring.

The labors of linguists and others under Umayyad were continued and intensified under the Abbasid Dynasty. Philologists dived deep into pre-Islamic poetry and legend and in their output all but finalized the rules of prosody and grammar. According to Tibawi (1954: 428), after a period of research, the results of the labors can be seen from the unofficial curriculum of educational pursuits. They were; first the auxiliary subjects of Arabic philology, grammar and lexicography, and then the main subjects of exegesis and traditions were systematized. Of these labors grew important off-shoots notably genealogy, literary history and rhetoric on the one hand, and theology, jurisprudence, and Qur'anic criticism on the other.

From the above discussions it can be concluded that the Arabic language and all its aspects are the first science developed by Moslem

scholars during the classical period. The development of the language as the Qur'anic language contributed to the growth and systematization of religious sciences derived from the Qur'an and hadith.

### ARABIC LANGUAGE WITHIN THE CLASSIFICATION OF MOSLEMS' STUDIES

In general, since the ninth century Moslem scholars classified sciences into three; Islamic/religious sciences, foreign sciences, and ancillary sciences. Islamic sciences mainly consisted of all sciences derived from the two scriptures; the al-Qur'an and hadith, such as theology, law, Qur'anic exegesis, the principles of religion, etc. Foreign sciences mainly comprised of all sciences developed from Greek and Persian cultures, such as medicine, mathematics, philosophy, geometry, astronomy, etc. The ancillary sciences were those of Arabic language. These, according to al-Anbari (d.577/1181) were *nahw*/grammar; *lugha*/lexicology; *tashrif*/morphology; *'arudh*/metrics; *qawafi*/rymes; *sunah ash shi'ir*/prosody; *akhbar al 'arab*/arab tribal history; and *anshab*/arab tribal genealogy. Anbari then said that to these eight fields of *'ulum al-'adab*/literary arts, he added two others which he originated, namely: 1). *'ilm al-jadl fi-n-nahw*/the science of dialectic for grammar, and 2). *'ilm ushul an-nahw*/the science of grammatical theory and methodology. (Makdisi,1981:76-79)

Even though Moslem scholars placed Arabic as an ancillary subject, they were different in the position of the language whether it was subordinate to either religious or foreign sciences, or subordinate to both sciences. The physician Ibn Butlan (d.460/1068) listed three major divisions of the sciences that had developed in Islam by the middle of the third/ninth century; the Islamic sciences, the philosophical and natural sciences, and the literary arts. The inter-relationship of these three divisions may be best represented by a triangle turned upside down, with the first two divisions at either end of the upturned base, and the third division at the base of the triangle's down turned up. (Makdisi,1981:76) In this description, it is clear that Ibn Butlan placed the literary arts as the subordinate of the Islamic sciences as well as philosophical and natural sciences, because they are at the lower subordinate angle with its two sides leading up to the two other sciences.

In the fourth/tenth century, Ikhwan al-Safa (the Pure Brethren) said that there were three kinds of knowledge that must be studied procedurally: 1). preliminary, 2). religious or positive, and 3). philosophical or factual. Ikhwan al-Safa placed Arabic language within the preliminary sciences that consisted of writing, reading, language, arithmetic, poetry and prosody, knowledge of omens and magic, crafts and professions. As a preliminary science, Arabic must be studied before the

other two sciences. (Tritton, 1957:132-133) This means that the Arabic is the ancillary to religious and philosophical sciences and becomes the prerequisite of studying them.

Despite the importance of Arabic for both religious and foreign sciences, the linguists or grammarians of the ninth century were not proud of the science they studied about compared to religious sciences. In general, the ulama' accepted the supposition that grammar relied on Greek logic as a methodology. However, they feared that too great an emphasis on grammar could lead to fascination with other Greek intellectual sciences. Thus they always sought to subordinate the study of grammar to the Islamic religious sciences and to limit to influence of grammarians over young men. (Stanton, 1990:42-43)

Besides, there was an anecdote that the grammarian Tha'lab (d.291/904) was addressing complain to the famous scholar of the Qur'an Abu Bakr b. Mujahid (d.324/916) about his field of knowledge that had no future in Hereafter. Abu Bakar then said that he had seen a dream in which the Prophet Muhammad appeared to him, charging him to tell Tha'lab that his science of grammar is one of which all other fields are in need. (Makdisi, 1981:77) This anecdote also brings out two interesting points. In Arabic the scriptures, the Qur'an and hadith, depended their understanding on a throughout knowledge of grammar. The other point is that the Qur'an, hadith and law were the most important subjects. Grammar, a term used to encompass the literary arts including poetry, was an indispensable aid to understanding the language of the Qur'an and hadith, though subordinate to them, and to the law as a subject of the curriculum.

In the eleventh century, Al-Ghazali, a famous orthodox and mystical scholar, proposed another classification of sciences. Al-Ghazali classified sciences into two; important and not important. As a mystical scholar, al-Ghazali included philosophy and foreign sciences into not important subjects and considered them as harmful, while religious knowledge was important, incumbent on all or only on some. The religious knowledge had four categories; 1).primary, 2).derived, 3).introductory, and 4).complementary. Arabic language in all its aspects was categorized into the introductory subjects. (Tritton, 1957:133) This means that the Arabic language was the ancillary and prerequisite subject only for religious knowledge. It was an important aid in studying the knowledge.

As a famous scholar, al-Ghazali influenced much the educational thought of later scholars. An Egyptian syafi'ite scholar, Ibn Jama'ah (1241-1333), for example, classified the religious knowledge and linguistic into the basic knowledge that must be mastered first. In an systematic order, the basic knowledge is: Qur'an, tradition, interpretation of the Qur'an, interpretation of tradition, principles of religion, principles of law,

the special school of law, and the last was language including poetry and prosody as the ancillary to religious knowledge.(Nata,2003:120)

From the above discussion, it can be concluded then that during the early classical period, the Arabic language became the auxiliary subject to both religious and foreign sciences. It was an important aid in studying and understanding both sciences. However, during the latter classical period, as the study of philosophy and foreign sciences declined, the Arabic became the auxiliary to religious knowledge only.

### **ARABIC LANGUAGE WITHIN THE CURRICULUM OF EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS**

In the early classical Islam, Moslem continued the tradition of their Arab culture by sending their sons to the desert to be taught specifically in the skill of swimming, horsemanship and the memorization of famous proverbs and heroic poetry. In the desert, young men first encountered the richness of Arabic language, especially through poetry. It is a fact that among the conquering Arabs-no matter where they might be stationed or might emigrate-the attitude persisted that Bedouin Arabic remained the purist language for the followers of Prophet Muhammad. (Shalabi,1954:42-43) The Arabs took great pride in the purity of their language and ridiculed those who did not speak its standard form. Although the language had few written manifestation until the early Islamic period, the structure and syntax of poetry gave it a recognized grammatical format.

According to Tibawi (1979:26-27), during the first development of the elementary school-called *kuttab*- in the first century, formal instruction consisted of basic instruction in reading and writing using Arabic poetry text while religious training centered about the proclamation of the Qur'an and its meaning in sermons at local mosque. Not for some time did teachers combine the basic skills of reading and writing with religious education. Later with the availability of the copies of the Qur'an, the study of religion became a major subject of elementary education. For the most part, however, from the eight century onward the elementary school curriculum contained reading, writing, arithmetic, and the Qur'an as a primary text. In such a system, the Arabic language as it appeared in the Qur'an became the standard language of the adherents of Islam and the most accepted form of spoken Arabic. With the greater availability of written volumes of the Qur'an and poetry, the study of grammar took precedence within the elementary curriculum. Methods of instruction primarily emphasized memorization and recitation of passages of the Qur'an and traditional poetry.

Shalabi (1954:16-18) further stated that in subjugated lands, where Arabic was not the native tongue, the establishment of *kuttab* as a

grammar school emerged as a primary goal and responsibility of the caliphs and local governors. In these lands, local custom in the establishment of schools prevailed, and many Islamic *kuttabs* took their form from the existing Christian and Jewish schools. The necessity of mastering Arabic in order to accommodate to the new civil order and prosper in an Arabic speaking world offered a powerful motivation for non-believers as well as converts to Islam to attend *kuttabs*.

In the institutions of higher learning control over the curriculum lay primarily with the *ulama*-the body of men learned and accepted as the authority on religious and legal matters. Following the rejection of Greek-inspired philosophic movements- particularly after the time of al-Ghazali- the curriculum in mosque colleges and *madrasah* were dominated by religious sciences.

According to Stanton (1990:42-43), during the classical period students of higher learning, in preparation for the study of religious sciences and jurisprudence, engaged in the study of Arabic grammar, which included the study of both syntax and composition as well as an introduction to prose and poetry. Such studies could be attained in the *madrasah* and mosque college but through private tutors or by attending the study circles of a grammarian. Islamic educators accepted the Greek notion that the ability to think logically and clearly had a direct correlation to one's ability to speak and write properly. Accordingly, tutors placed great emphasis on exercises that fostered facility with the language.

However, it happened that *adab*-belles letters-forfeited its place in the study of grammar as presented in mosques and *madrasahs* and survived only in private study circles located in residences or libraries. *Adab* would comprise an important element in the curriculum of informal structures of higher learning. It is because grammar that relied on Greek logic as a methodology made the *ulama* feared that too great an emphasis on grammar could lead to fascination with other Greek intellectual sciences.

It is clear then that the elementary school called *kuttab* was the first institution that provided young men with the study of Arabic language. As the development of higher learning such as mosque college and *madrasah*, the Arabic language became a part of their curriculum. However, the *ulama* classified the language only as an ancillary subject to religious knowledge that became the main curriculum of the higher institutions.

## CONCLUSION

The studies of Arabic language during the classical period of Islamic education were influenced much by the interests of Moslems in

understanding and articulating the message of the Qur'an and hadith. Their interests provided the first impetus for the emergence of Arabic as a rich scholarly language. Therefore, the Arabic language and all its aspects became the first science developed by Moslem scholars.

During the early classical period, Moslem scholars classified the Arabic language as an auxiliary subject to both religious and foreign sciences. It was an important aid in studying and understanding both sciences. However, during the latter classical period, as the study of philosophy and foreign sciences declined, the Arabic became the auxiliary to religious knowledge only. It is because grammar that relied on Greek logic as a methodology made the ulama feared that too great an emphasis on grammar could lead to fascination with other Greek intellectual sciences. Thus they always sought to subordinate the study of grammar to the Islamic religious sciences and to limit to influence of grammarians over young men.

The studies of Arabic within the classical educational institutions firstly took place in the elementary school called *kuttab*. As higher learning developed and spread widely, such as mosque college and *madrasah*, the Arabic language became a part of their curriculum. However, the ulama classified the language only as an ancillary subject to religious knowledge that became the main curriculum of the higher institutions.

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