

## Arab Pioneering in Applied Linguistics and Arabic Language Teaching an Expanded Reading of Its Heritage Foundations and Modern Extensions

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### Abstract

This article explores the heritage foundations of applied linguistics in classical Arabic linguistic thought and examines their relationship to modern linguistic theories. Adopting an inductive-analytical approach, the study investigates the contributions of Arab scholars to language teaching, language acquisition, pragmatics, psycholinguistics, and lexicography. It argues that Arabic linguistic scholarship emerged from a fundamentally practical concern: the preservation, regulation, and effective transmission of language. At the same time, the article advocates a balanced perspective that acknowledges the richness of the Arabic linguistic heritage without collapsing historical differences or claiming that premodern scholars formulated modern theories in identical terms. Such a perspective opens the way for a rigorous scholarly dialogue between heritage and modernity.

**Keywords:** applied linguistics, Arabic language teaching, linguistic heritage, linguistic competence, psycholinguistics.

### 1. Introduction

Historically, the rise of sustained concern for the Arabic language was closely tied to the emergence of Islam and the territorial expansion of the Islamic polity. Arabic was transformed from a relatively circumscribed ethnic language into the language of religion, civilization, scholarship, and administration. As a result, preserving its integrity and developing effective methods for its transmission became at once an epistemic, religious, and social necessity. As Islamic conquests expanded and Arabs came into contact with other peoples, phenomena such as grammatical error, foreign accent, and shifts in phonological and syntactic structure began to spread more rapidly. Scholars became acutely aware of the danger that such developments posed to the integrity of Arabic, especially as it was the language of the Qur'an, the Prophetic hadith, and the primary medium through which the Islamic sciences were accessed (Azouz, 2014, p. 62).

This early civilizational awareness is clearly reflected in al-Zubaydi's well-known statement describing the motives behind the linguistic enterprise: "The fear of the spread and predominance of such corruption [of language] became so great that concern over the loss of their language and the corruption of their speech led them to devise the means to preserve it for those from whom it had slipped away, and to refine it for those who had strayed from it" (al-Zubaydi, n.d., p. 11). This statement makes clear that the codification of Arabic was not

motivated by purely abstract theorization or intellectual ornamentation; rather, it arose as a direct practical response to an urgent linguistic problem, namely the corruption of language and instability in linguistic performance.

From this perspective, one may advance the following central hypothesis: Arabic linguistic scholarship did not emerge as a purely descriptive or formal enterprise, but was, from its earliest stages, characterized by a distinctly applied orientation. It developed in response to the pressing need to preserve language, discipline usage, teach Arabic to both Arabs and non-Arabs, and enable people to understand authoritative texts. Accordingly, many of the concerns that are now classified under the rubric of applied linguistics were already present, in substantive if not terminologically identical form, within classical Arabic linguistic thought.

## **2. Heritage Foundations and the Emergence of Arabic Language Pedagogy**

Arabic language pedagogy emerged within a broader civilizational project whose principal aim was to protect fusha from corruption and instability. The orientalist Johann Fück pointed to this functional and pedagogical dimension when he observed: “In their circles, reactions against the corruption of language began, and from this there arose in the late first Hijri century (the seventh century CE) the principle of language purification, which carried the banner of preserving the purity of Arabic” (Fück, 1951, p. 36). This testimony indicates that teaching and codification in the Arabic tradition were inseparable from linguistic refinement, normativity, and the effective correction of language use.

Arabic grammar constituted the earliest and most prominent scholarly manifestation of this endeavor. Scholars established it in order to preserve the syntactic structure of Arabic and to equip learners to use it correctly and avoid error. According to the well-known accounts, Abu al-Aswad al-Du’ali was the first to formulate the basic principles of grammar, reportedly under the guidance of ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib. His efforts were subsequently developed by Nasr ibn ‘Asim, ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn Hurmuz, and others, who elaborated its chapters, principles, and subfields (al-Afghani, 1963, p. 8). Al-Zubaydi describes Abu al-Aswad’s contribution as possessing “the merit of precedence and the honor of priority” (al-Zubaydi, n.d., p. 11), a formulation that underscores the foundational nature of his work.

Yet grammar alone, despite its central importance, was insufficient to sustain a comprehensive pedagogical project. Alongside it, and often in parallel, other disciplines developed, including phonetics, morphology, lexicography, semantics, and rhetoric. This cumulative body of scholarship made it possible to conceptualize language as an integrated system, in which phonological, morphological, and syntactic units are understood in relation to the larger linguistic structure to which they belong (Salih, 1988, pp. 15–16). Teaching Arabic thus became more than the transmission of isolated grammatical rules; it evolved into the teaching of a multidimensional and internally coherent linguistic system.

If grammar safeguarded the formal structure of Arabic, later didactic manuals and pedagogical summaries helped facilitate its acquisition and dissemination. Over time, scholars recognized that long and encyclopedic theoretical works did not always serve the needs of beginner and intermediate learners. They therefore turned increasingly toward concise and accessible compositions that reflected pedagogical sequencing, economy of expression, and sensitivity to learner needs. This tendency is clearly exemplified in later instructional texts such as Ibn

Ajurrum's al-Ajurrumiyah. In this regard, al-Hajj Salih notes that scholars "tended to compose concise grammatical treatises free from excessive theoretical detail and doctrinal complexity" (al-Hajj Salih, 2007, p. 19). This shift reflects an explicitly pedagogical and applied orientation.

### **3. The Concept of Applied Linguistics and Its Modern Interdisciplinary Character**

In its contemporary academic formulation, applied linguistics is concerned with the use of linguistic knowledge to address real-world problems involving language. These include language teaching, language testing, translation, lexicography, treatment of speech disorders, and language planning. Al-Rajihi defines it broadly as "the discipline that studies linguistic activity within the framework of the various human sciences, or the point at which these sciences intersect" (al-Rajihi, 2004, p. 17). This definition suggests that language is not approached merely as an abstract formal system, but as a vital human activity situated at the intersection of education, psychology, and sociology.

A similar view is advanced by Sampson, who regards the field as a composite of interrelated disciplines united by their concern with language in the service of educational and social ends (Sampson, 2006, p. 22). Corder defines its core as the systematic use of linguistic knowledge to solve practical language-related problems, especially in the areas of language teaching and acquisition (Corder, 1973, p. 10). Cook further emphasizes its pragmatic orientation, arguing that applied linguistics is centrally concerned with language problems as they arise in the real world, rather than with abstract theorizing detached from lived linguistic practice (Cook, 2003, p. 5).

Over time, the field has expanded to encompass first-language education, foreign language teaching, educational linguistics, language testing, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, computational linguistics, lexicography, translation, and related domains (al-'Usayli, 2006, pp. 18–19). What most distinguishes applied linguistics is that it does not stop at describing linguistic phenomena; rather, it seeks to mobilize such descriptions in order to design effective curricula, develop pedagogical materials, assess performance, and improve methods of instruction. For this reason, al-Rajihi rightly insists that applied linguistics should not be understood merely as the application of pre-existing linguistic theories, but as an autonomous field of inquiry with its own methods and tools (al-Rajihi, 2004, p. 24).

### **4. Heritage and Modern Approaches: Continuity and Development in Linguistic Research**

Modern linguistic research has undergone major shifts that moved language teaching beyond a narrow preoccupation with rigid grammatical rules toward a broader concern with communication skills, social context, and the learner's cognitive and psychological dimensions. The emergence of psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, and communication theory contributed significantly to broadening the scope of language pedagogy. The learner came to be seen not as a passive recipient of fixed rules to be memorized, but as an active participant in communicative practice, where meaning, skill, and context interact dynamically ('Abd al-Tawwab, 1994, p. 239).

In this regard, Kharma and Hajjaj argue that the shift from the traditional grammar-based method to the communicative approach brought about a major transformation in applied linguistics, repositioning the learner as a communicative agent rather than a mere memorizer of

rules (Kharma & Hajjaj, 1988, p. 67). Similarly, Rushdi Ahmad Tu‘aymah stresses the importance of cultural and social approaches in language teaching, emphasizing the need to develop the four foundational language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—within natural and meaningful contexts (Tu‘aymah, 1989, p. 45; 2004, p. 78).

This modern methodological development does not diminish the value of the Arabic linguistic heritage. On the contrary, it enables that heritage to be reread through contemporary conceptual lenses, revealing striking points of convergence. Al-Hajj Salih accordingly argues that many modern approaches in applied linguistics have deep roots in the classical Arabic linguistic tradition (al-Hajj Salih, 2007, p. 156). Such a view makes possible a productive scholarly dialogue between heritage and modernity, rather than placing them in an artificial relationship of epistemic rupture.

## **5. The Limits of the Claim of Arab Pioneering in Applied Linguistics**

Arab pioneering in applied linguistics becomes evident when one considers the range of domains in which premodern scholars engaged with remarkable depth: language teaching, language acquisition, linguistic communication, treatment of speech defects, lexicography, sensitivity to learner differences, and the analysis of errors made by non-native speakers of Arabic. These are, in fact, among the central domains of contemporary applied linguistics.

At the same time, scholarly rigor requires that such claims be framed with balance and precision. The point is not to suggest that premodern scholars formulated modern theories using the same concepts (Tahri, 2025, p. 84), terminology, or epistemological frameworks. Such a claim would amount to a problematic historical projection. Rather, the more defensible argument is that they developed profound intuitions, sharp methodological observations, and pioneering practical interventions that converge, in their underlying concerns and objectives, with what later became institutionalized as applied linguistics. This moderate position allows heritage materials to be read productively through a contemporary lens without forcing false equivalences.

### **5.1. A Behavioral Orientation in Classical Psycholinguistic Thought**

Al-‘Usayli defines psycholinguistics as “the discipline concerned with the study of human linguistic behavior and the psychological and cognitive mental processes that occur during language use, through which human beings acquire language” (al-‘Usayli, 2006, p. 27). A similar definition is offered by Ibrahim ‘Abd al-Fattah, who links language acquisition, comprehension, and production to cognitive processes and to the ordinary use of language in daily life (‘Abd al-Fattah, 2002, p. 36).

Among the clearest premodern statements pointing to an awareness of language acquisition mechanisms, and of their connection to habit and practice, is the following passage from Ibn Faris:

Language is acquired through habituation, just as the Arab child hears his parents and others and gradually acquires language from them over time. It is also acquired through direct instruction from a teacher, or through listening to trustworthy transmitters distinguished by honesty and reliability, while avoiding what is doubtful. (Ibn Faris, 1997, p. 34)

This passage demonstrates a precise awareness of the role of listening, repetition, habituation, and the quality of linguistic input in the formation of linguistic competence (Boudenna, 2025, 387). This insight becomes even more refined in Ibn Khaldun's account of language acquisition: The child hears words being used in their meanings and first acquires them; then he hears structures and acquires them as well. He continues to hear this renewed at every moment and from every speaker, and repeated usage continues until the language becomes a firmly rooted faculty and a stable disposition. (Ibn Khaldun, 1984, p. 389)

This account links language acquisition to repeated and intensive exposure to living usage and views linguistic competence as something gradually formed through listening, imitation, and sustained repetition. Such a conception bears a notable resemblance to modern behaviorist approaches, especially Skinner's claim that verbal behavior, like any other form of behavior, is governed by stimulus, response, and reinforcement (Skinner, 1957, p. 45). The emphasis placed by classical scholars on listening also resonates with modern research that treats listening as foundational to language development; al-'Ali, for example, describes it as a mode of communication involving the reception of language, comprehension of what is heard, decoding of its symbols, storage of ideas, and retrieval when needed (al-'Ali, 1989, p. 126).

### **5.2. An Introspective and Mentalist Orientation in Classical Psycholinguistic Thought**

If some premodern texts point toward a behavioral understanding of language acquisition, others indicate a clear awareness of its mental and cognitive dimensions. One of the most striking examples is Ibn Sina's analysis of the relationship between word, meaning, and mind: This means that when the auditory image of a name is impressed upon the imagination, a meaning is impressed upon the soul, and the soul recognizes that this heard sound corresponds to that concept. Whenever the senses present it to the soul, it turns to its meaning. (Ibn Sina, 1970, p. 4)

This passage clearly posits an associative relationship between the auditory image of the word and the mental image or meaning established in the mind. The conception is remarkably close to Saussure's later account of the psychological nature of the sound-image, and it also resonates with modern cognitive approaches, particularly Chomsky's discussion of the innate linguistic capacity of the speaker (de Saussure, 1996; Chomsky, 1965, p. 25). Such parallels suggest that Arabic linguistic and philosophical thought was far from indifferent to the mental nature of language.

### **5.3. Linguistic Communication and the Pragmatic Dimension in the Arabic Heritage**

One of the most significant indicators of Arab pioneering is that classical scholars did not treat language as a collection of structures detached from use. Rather, they understood it as a communicative and social act whose success depends on the state of the addressee, the situational context, and communicative intention. This is evident in Sibawayh's explanation of ellipsis and omission: "They omitted what would otherwise be overtly expressed for the sake of economy, and because the addressee knows what is intended" (Sibawayh, 1988, p. 224). Here, syntactic structure is explicitly linked to shared knowledge between speaker and addressee.

Al-Jahiz developed this pragmatic insight more fully when he wrote: "The speaker ought to know the proportions of meanings and balance them against the capacities of listeners and their circumstances, assigning to each group an appropriate kind of discourse and to each situation a

suitable mode” (al-Jahiz, 1998, p. 138). In his famous definition of bayān, he further emphasizes the communicative and explanatory function of language: “Bayān is a comprehensive term for everything that lifts the veil from meaning and removes the barrier from inner intention until the listener arrives at its reality; whatever achieves understanding and clarifies meaning is bayān in that context” (al-Jahiz, 1998, p. 70).

Ibn Jinni reinforces this functional orientation by relating meaning to social convention and actual usage: “Most of this language depends on figurative usage, and only rarely does it remain purely literal... people understood the speaker’s intentions on the basis of their conventions and habitual usage” (Ibn Jinni, 1988, p. 250). These classical insights align closely with modern pragmatics, in which Austin conceives language not merely as description but as the performance of action (Austin, 1962, p. 32), while Grice highlights the cooperative principles governing conversation (Grice, 1975, p. 45).

#### **5.4. Linguistic Faculty and the Acquisition of Competence**

The concept of malakah is among the most profound concepts developed in the Arabic intellectual tradition for explaining language learning and acquisition. Hazim al-Qartajanni had already linked the acquisition of linguistic mastery to growing up among eloquent speakers, memorizing exemplary discourse, and engaging in repeated practice (al-Qartajanni, 1966, p. 41). Yet the concept reached its fullest theoretical articulation in Ibn Khaldun, who declared that “languages are all faculties resembling crafts” (Ibn Khaldun, 1984, p. 378), and that such a faculty is stabilized only through repetition and extensive practice.

He writes:

They are faculties in the tongue for expressing meanings, and their quality or deficiency depends upon the completeness or incompleteness of that faculty. Repetition continues until the faculty becomes a firmly rooted disposition. (Ibn Khaldun, 1984, p. 376)

He also offers a practical pedagogical method for acquiring it:

The proper method of instruction for one who seeks to acquire this faculty is to become accustomed to memorizing the speech of the early Arabs, until through abundant memorization of their poetry and prose he becomes, as it were, one who has grown up among them. (Ibn Khaldun, 1984, p. 361)

Ibn Khaldun’s conception is methodologically important because it clearly distinguishes between merely knowing a rule and possessing the actual ability to use language effectively. This is strikingly close to the modern distinction between competence and performance in Chomsky’s theory, and perhaps even closer to Hymes’s notion of communicative competence, which extends linguistic knowledge beyond grammatical well-formedness to include appropriate use in social context (Hymes, 1972, p. 277). Al-Hajj Salih is therefore justified in regarding Ibn Khaldun’s notion of malakah as one of the deepest formulations of linguistic competence in the Arabic tradition (al-Hajj Salih, 2007, p. 210).

#### **5.5. Teaching Arabic to Non-Native Speakers**

Interest in teaching Arabic to non-native speakers emerged in response to an urgent civilizational need created by the spread of Islam and the growing number of non-Arab converts. The objective was not merely educational, but also religious and cultural, since understanding the Qur’an, hadith, and the Islamic sciences presupposed a significant degree of Arabic proficiency. Sibawayh observed the phenomenon of non-native error and analyzed many

of the phonological and syntactic deviations of non-Arab speakers in relation to their native languages. From a contemporary perspective, this work may be read in light of error analysis and contrastive analysis.

Classical concern with sounds that non-Arab learners found difficult to pronounce—such as *dad*, *‘ayn*, and *ha*—reveals an early applied awareness of the importance of phonological training in second-language teaching. The heritage did not merely diagnose these difficulties; it also proposed remedies, including linguistic immersion and a reduced dependence on abstract grammatical explanation. These principles remain central in modern language pedagogy, particularly in approaches such as Krashen’s distinction between subconscious acquisition and conscious learning (Krashen, 1985, p. 2).

### **5.6. Lexicography as an Applied Domain**

Lexicography represents one of the clearest and most successful expressions of Arab pioneering in the applied dimensions of linguistic scholarship. The Arabic dictionary was not merely a historical repository of words, but also an educational, cultural, and functional tool designed to facilitate comprehension, precise usage, translation, and semantic regulation. In his dictionary *al-‘Ayn*, al-Khalil ibn Ahmad al-Farahidi pioneered a methodologically sophisticated phonetic system for the collection and arrangement of lexical items. Al-Jawhari later introduced in *al-Sihah* a more accessible alphabetical system, while comprehensive lexicographical works such as Ibn Manzur’s *Lisan al-‘Arab* testify to the maturity and breadth of the Arabic lexicographical tradition.

The applied value of the Arabic dictionary lies in the fact that it served the learner, the scholar, the reader, and the exegete alike. It contributed to regulating usage, explaining rare or difficult expressions, and clarifying semantic distinctions. If al-‘Usayli rightly includes lexicography among the major branches of modern applied linguistics (al-‘Usayli, 2006, pp. 18–19), then the Arabic heritage offers in this area an early and highly developed model of lexicographical practice whose influence remains significant.

### **Conclusion**

This expanded reading demonstrates that the Arabic linguistic heritage was not the rigidly prescriptive tradition it is sometimes assumed to be in reductive accounts. Rather, it was a dynamic and intellectually fertile tradition that brought together theoretical codification and empirical observation, system and use, normativity and communicative sensitivity. Classical scholars engaged, with considerable sophistication, with questions of language teaching, language acquisition, error analysis, audience awareness, lexicography, linguistic competence, and the relationship between language, mind, and society.

The claim of Arab pioneering in applied linguistics is therefore neither an emotional assertion nor an expression of cultural chauvinism. It is, rather, an argument that can be supported through careful examination of classical texts, methods, and scholarly practices. At the same time, the true value of this heritage lies not merely in celebrating it, but in rereading it through modern scholarly frameworks in ways that recover its strengths and relate them to contemporary developments in Arabic language teaching. Such a rereading must avoid the illusion of exact equivalence between premodern and modern theories. If approached in this balanced way, the Arabic heritage becomes not a museum of memory, but a living epistemic resource—one

capable of enriching contemporary linguistic inquiry with enduring concepts such as malakah, bayān, audience awareness, and habituation, all of which remain highly relevant to the development of a renewed and effective Arabic framework for language teaching and its modern applications.

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