

## The *ism* in the Arabic Grammatical Tradition: Reflections on Its Origin and Meanings

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### Abstract

This article aims to present an overall reconstruction of the debate on the definition and etymology of Arabic *ism* ('noun', 'substantive'), by discussing and comparing texts from the Arabic linguistic tradition. The first part deals with the definition of the grammatical element and its functions, while the second is fully dedicated to the examination of the etymological issues, focusing on the two assumed roots of derivation for *ism* (namely *s-m-w* and *w-s-m*). The arguments are presented through the collation of the opinions of the relevant Arabic grammarians, examining both the wider debate between the early grammatical schools of Baṣra and Kūfa (2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> centuries), and the reports of the arguments as described by later scholars.

*Key words:* Arabic linguistic tradition, Arabic grammar, Arab grammarians, Root, Philosophy of language

### 1. The parts of speech

It is common agreement, within the Arabic linguistic tradition, that language consists of three parts of speech (*ʿaqsām al-kalām*), namely nouns, verbs, and particles. The delineation of the tripartite vision is usually ascribed to Sībawayhi (d. 180/796) who opens the *Kitāb* by defining the *partes orationis*: “words are noun, verb, and particle.”<sup>1</sup>

Each category presents differences in status and characteristics, as pointed out also by later grammarians, with distinctions mainly based on the role played within an utterance. Among the three, the noun (*ism*, pl. *ʾasmāʾ*) meets those criteria that make it a superior category, being an element “able to both operate as and receive a predicate” (*mā yuḥbaru bihī wa-yuḥbaru ʾanhu*) as in ‘Muḥammad is our Prophet.’ In this example, nouns function as both predicate and predicator, acting as *mubtadaʾ* and *ḥabar* in the noun clause.

Conversely, verbs (*fiʿl*, pl. *ʾafʿāl*) and particles (*ḥarf*, pl. *ḥurūf*) do not share the same features: the verb “can be used as a predicate but cannot receive one” (*mā yuḥbaru bihī wa-lā yuḥbaru ʾanhu*), while the particles “cannot be predicates nor receive a predicate” (*mā lā yuḥbaru bihī wa-lā yuḥbaru ʾanhu*).

In addition to this, major distinctions rely on the fact that nouns—as well as verbs—have a well-defined morphology and range of meanings, while particles are meaningful words in themselves but have no strict forms.<sup>2</sup>

1 *faʿl-kalim ism wa-fiʿl wa-ḥarf. Kitāb*, i: 1.1

2 This also relates to the difficult interpretation of Sībawayhi’s definition of the *ḥarf*, described as what “comes for a meaning that is neither noun nor verb” (*ḡāʾa li-maʿnan laysa bi-sm wa-lā fiʿl. Kitāb*, i:

### 1.1 Definition

Sībawayhi does not provide clear definitions of the *ism* in the *Kitāb*, but—relying on a common linguistic practice—reduces his explanations to a *tamṭīl*,<sup>3</sup> providing few examples of what may be considered a ‘noun’, as for instance ‘man’, ‘horse’, and ‘wall’ (*fa’l-ism rağul wa-faras wa-ḥā’it*).<sup>4</sup>

This represents the starting point from which grammarians of later periods drew inspiration to formulate their own definitions, examining the *ism* according to its intrinsic features and grammatical peculiarities.

The formulation of linguistic theories is framed within the conventional grammarians debate as part of the *’iğmā’* (‘consensus’) tradition. Being a fundamental element of the whole Arabic culture and usually widely exercised in juridical discussions,<sup>5</sup> the *’iğmā’* plays a key role also in grammatical disputes,<sup>6</sup> where unanimity is the main criterion to state the correctness of an argument. Ibn Ğinnī (d. 392/1002) in the *Ḥaṣā’iṣ*<sup>7</sup>—and with regard to a strictly linguistic framework—calls it *’iğmā’ ahl al-baladāy*<sup>8</sup> and by doing so he circumscribes the practice to the agreement among the Baṣran and the Kūfan grammarians.

However, as in other fields, the explicit agreement is not the only possibility to determine a concurrence of ideas, which may also be reached with either an implicit agreement or lack of explicit disagreement.<sup>9</sup> This might be the case of the tripartite division of the parts of speech that has never been challenged after being stated in the first place. As a matter of fact, the lack of a clear definition in the *Kitāb* left room to a profound discussion on the subject, so that grammarians after Sībawayhi could define the nature of the category and focus on providing further details to delineate the characteristics of the noun.

## 2. What is a ‘noun’?

Lane’s Lexicon describes the *ism* as:

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1.1). The impossibility to clearly define what the grammarian meant leaves room for further and opposite interpretations. Hence, some later grammarians interpreted the element as something that—not having a meaning of its own—needs to be in combination with either a verb or a noun, while others acknowledged an inherent meaning.

3 Lit. ‘quotation of examples’, ‘representation’.

4 *Kitāb*, i: 1.1.

5 For an extensive discussion on the topic, see KAMALI 2009.

6 The close relationship between the juridical and the linguistic sciences has been extensively investigated, as by Carter who states: “The two sciences are united by a common purpose, to control linguistic and general behaviour respectively, and they share a common methodology, namely the inductive derivation of rules from a linguistic corpus and the deductive application of these universal rules to particular acts of the Muslim.” CARTER 2007: 25.

7 The chapter *bāb al-qawl ‘alā ’iğmā’ ahl al-‘arabiyya matā yakūn ḥuğğa* is fully dedicated to this topic. (Cf. *al-Ḥaṣā’iṣ*, i: 189-193).

8 *al-Ḥaṣā’iṣ*, i: 189.

9 SULEIMAN 1999: 15-16.

[...][The name of a thing; i.e.] a sign [such as maybe uttered or written] conveying knowledge of a thing [...] and a word applied to denote a substance or an accident or attribute, for the purpose of distinction [...] [or a substantive in the proper sense of this term, i.e. a real substantive; and a substance in a tropical sense of this term, i.e. an ideal substantive [...] is that which denotes a meaning in itself unconnected with any of the three times [past and present and future]: the pl. is أسماء [a pl. of *pauc.*] and اسماءات the latter said by Lh̄ to be a pl. of اسم but it is rather a pl. of أسماء, for otherwise there is no way of accounting for it [...].<sup>10</sup>

This definition mostly relies on those provided by Arabic grammarians,<sup>11</sup> for whom a noun is a word<sup>12</sup> which expresses a meaning but ‘is neither connected with a time’ (*ḡayr muqtarin bi-zamān*) nor is ‘time part of it’ (*wa-laysa az-zamān ḡuz’an minhā*). Besides, it may be defined as a word indicating something ‘perceptible’ (*ṣay’ maḥsūs*) or ‘non-perceptible’ (*ḡayr maḥsūs*) which is a means of rising into notice the thing denoted thereby, yet never referring to time. The discussion on what a ‘noun’ should be is rather extensive,<sup>13</sup> and grammarians themselves record the proposition of a quantity of different positions and statements.<sup>14</sup>

Part of the discussion is related to the additional features of the noun, which may:<sup>15</sup>

1. exhibit the genitive case;
2. have the nunation;
3. be used as a vocative;
4. be marked as either defined or undefined;
5. be used as the subject of a sentence (*mubtada’*);
6. have a predicate (*musnad ’ilayhi*).

Despite the different propositions, grammarians generally agree on the fundamentals of the category. Some of them add additional features or sub-categories, as al-Suyūfī (d. 911/

<sup>10</sup> LANE 1863, iv: 1435.

<sup>11</sup> WEHR’s definition lists several possible types of nouns, providing a full range of grammatical information. Nonetheless, for the purpose of this research it is of less interest, since it does not provide information on the debate on etymology.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Word’ is here meant as the translation of Arabic *kalima*, but also of *lafz*, ‘sound’, ‘expression’. For an extensive discussion on the rendering of *word*, see LEVIN 1986 and LANCIONI & BETTINI 2011.

<sup>13</sup> For more arguments on this, see al-DAHDAH 1992 and ḤASAN 2004.

<sup>14</sup> ḤASAN 2004: 26. Also al-ANBĀRĪ (d. 577/1181) acknowledges the proposition of circa 70 definitions. Finally, the definition that is usually considered as most general among those provided by the Arabic grammarians is the one declared by al-SĪRĀFĪ (d. 368/978): “Everything that is the expression of what indicates a meaning not referring to a specific temporality, both past and other, is a noun” (*kull ṣay’ dalla lafzuhū ’alā ma’nan ḡayr muqtarin bi-zamān muḥaṣṣal min muḍiyy ’aw ḡayrihī fa-huwa ism*). *Šarḥ*, i: 53.

<sup>15</sup> Several works deal with the presentation of the inherent features of the *ism*. For a general but accurate presentation, see especially EALL, ii: 424–29 by BERNARDS and *Et*<sup>2</sup>, iv: 179–182 by FLEISCH, both s.v. “*Ism*”.

1505) who mentions<sup>16</sup> a fourth category *ḥālifa*,<sup>17</sup> and al-Farābī (d. 339/950), who proposes the category *ḥawālif*<sup>18</sup> among others.

As a consequence of the stigmatization of the approach, grammarians were forced to frame several elements within a rather strict scheme and find a way to make their subdivisions fit the rules set for the tripartition.

Thus, elements differing from each other have been classified under the label ‘noun’, along with a set of sub-categories to indicate less obvious cases. The elements acknowledged as fully matching the definition of *ism* are:<sup>19</sup> the common noun (*ism al-ḡins*), the proper noun (*ism al-‘alam*), the concrete noun (*ism al-‘ayn*), the abstract noun (*ism al-ma‘nā*), and the active and passive participles (*ism al-fā‘il* and *ism al-maf‘ūl*). Likewise, are associated to the same category the adjectives (*ṣifa*), the infinitives (*maṣdar*), the nouns referring to space and time (*ism al-zamān wa’l-makān*), the pronouns (*muḍmar*), and the numerals (*ism al-‘adad*).<sup>20</sup>

Summaries of the debate on what may or may not be a noun are available in works such as Ibn Fāris’ (d. 395/1004) *al-Ṣāḥibī*:

As for the noun, Sībawayhi says: “The noun is for instance *man* and *horse*” [...], and Abū l-‘Abbās Muḥammad b. Zayd al-Mubarrad states that, according to Sībawayhi’s view, “The noun is what can be a subject,” [...] and al-Kisā‘ī states: “The noun is what an attribute can be referred to;” al-Farrā’ says: “The noun is what can exhibit a *tanwīn*, be in construct state or annexed to the definite article;” al-Aḥfaš says: “You know that you are dealing with a noun when a verb or an attribute can be referred to it, as for instance in *zayd qāma* (Zayd stood) or in *zayd qā’im* (Zayd is standing), when it can be in the dual form or take the plural, as *al-zaydāni* (the two Zayds) and *al-zaydūna* (the Zayds), and when it exhibits a tripartite inflection.” (*fa-‘ammā ’l-ism fa-qāla Sībawayhi: “al-ism naḥw raḡul wa-faras” [...] ’Abū ’l-‘Abbās Muḥammad bin Zayd al-Mubarrad yaqūlu maḏhab Sībawayhi ’anna “al-ism mā ṣalaḥa ’an yakūna fā’ilan” [...] wa-qāla al-Kisā’ī: “al-ism mā wuṣifa” [...] wa-kāna al-Farrā’ yaqūlu: “al-ism mā ’htamala al-tanwīn ’aw al-’idāfa ’aw al-’alif wa’l-lām” [...] wa-kāna al-Aḥfaš yaqūlu: “’idā waḡadta ṣay’an yaḥsunu lahu ’l-fi’l wa’ṣ-ṣifa naḥwa zayd qāma wa-zayd qā’im ṭumma waḡadtahu yuṭnā wa-yuḡma’ naḥwa qawlik al-zaydān wa’l-zaydūn ṭumma waḡadta ’annahu yamtani’ min-a ’l-taṣrīf fa-’lam ’annahu ism”).<sup>21</sup>*

16 *’Aṣbāḥ*, iii: 2.

17 Further information concerning the lexical category *ḥālifa* can be inferred from by the studies of Aḥmad Makkī al-Anṣārī who investigates the role of al-Farrā’ (d. 207/822) in the Arabic linguistic tradition as the leading figure of the grammatical school of Kūfa. The author states that al-Farrā’ was the first who investigated and proposed a fourth lexical category between the noun and the verb. Hence, seems that the Kūfan grammarian anticipated the modern studies on the topic, proposing a four-category division of the parts of speech, and overcoming the tripartition proposed by Sībawayhi. (Cf. al-ANṢĀRĪ 1964)

18 Zimmerman translates *ḥawālif* (plural of *ḥālifa*) with ‘substitute’, adding that it is used by al-Farābī as the equivalent of ‘pronoun’. (Cf. ZIMMERMAN 1981).

19 See also WEHR and COWAN 1994, s.v. اسم.

20 For some grammarians, the interrogatives such as *kayfa* ‘how’, *’ayna* ‘where’, and so forth, are to be included, too. Same for the *’asmā’ al-’af’āl* ‘verbal nouns’, often labelled as nouns when meant as interjections or exclamation locutions, other than onomatopoeic.

21 al-ṢĀḤIBĪ: 49.

Yet, oftenthesereports are rather partial, as in the case of al-Mubarrad (d. 286/900) who, in the *al-Muqtaḍab*, declares a longer version than the one reported above, and also partly different. After defining the noun as *ism mutamakkin*,<sup>22</sup> the grammarian proceeds by stating that:

A noun is everything that can be preceded by a preposition, and if it is not possible then it is not a noun. (*kullu mā daḥala ‘alayhi ḥarf min ḥurūf al-ḡarr fa-huwa ism, wa-’in-i ’mtana’a dālīka fa-laysa bi-’sm*)<sup>23</sup>

Another significant definition is provided by al-Zaḡḡāḡ (d. 311/923) and quoted by Ibn Fāris:

[The noun is] an articulated and comprehensible sound that expresses<sup>24</sup> a meaning but has no implications<sup>25</sup> of time and space (*ṣawt muqatta‘ mafhūm dāll ‘alā ma‘nan ḡayr dāll ‘alā zamān wa-lā makān*).<sup>26</sup>

Here the argument evolves from logic<sup>27</sup> and concludes with a definition of the noun clearly influenced by the Greek tradition.<sup>28</sup> The importance of his contribution lies in the different approach to the topic, more oriented towards the concept of the meaning of the noun.

### 3. *Ism*: the discussion on etymology

#### 3.1 The preliminary debate

Being the definition of the category controversial also in the eyes of the Arabic grammarians themselves,<sup>29</sup> semantics and etymology contribute to defining what *ism* is meant for.

Excerpts of the arguments and a summary of the theoretical development are reported in several grammatical works, such as al-Bāqillānī’s (d. 403/1013), al-‘Ukbarī’s (d. 616/1219) and al-Anbārī’s. The latter presents the issue on the etymology of *ism* in two major works, *‘Asrār al-‘Arabiyya*<sup>30</sup> and the *Kitāb al-’Inṣāf*.<sup>31</sup>

22 According to the *Kitāb*, the category of the “*mutamakkin*” nouns refers to those elements that present peculiar features, may occur in various syntactic constrictions or have syntactic functions themselves, and may be inflected both in the determinate and in undetermined state. (*Kitāb*, ii:33; ii:40)

23 *al-Muqtaḍab*, i: 141.

24 Lit. ‘it indicates’.

25 Lit. ‘it does not indicate’.

26 al-ŠĀHIBĪ: 51.

27 For an extensive and accurate study of the Greek influence on Arabic linguistic thinking, see Versteegh 1977.

28 As already examined by FLEISCH, it is clearly recognizable here the influence of Greek logic in the way the definition is articulated. The effects of the influence are so massive that we can also state that there is an almost sharp division between grammarians pre- and post al-Zaḡḡāḡ. Cf. FLEISCH, s.v. “Ism”, *EF*<sup>2</sup>, iv: 181-82.

29 *iḥṭalafa ‘n-nās fī ‘l-ism wa-mimmā ‘štiqāquhū*, “People disagree on the *ism* and from what it is derived.” al-BAQILLĀNĪ 1957: 255.

30 *‘Asrār*, 3-17.

The debate is presented through the examination of two hypothesized roots, namely *s-m-w* and *w-s-m*,<sup>32</sup> whose inherent meanings should be intended as practical explanations of the term and refer to the function attributed by the Arabic grammarians to the *ism*:

The Kūfan grammarians argue that the *ism* derives from *wasm*, which indicates the ‘mark’, while the Baṣran grammarians argue that it derives from *simuww*,<sup>33</sup> which indicates the ‘elevation’<sup>34</sup> (*ḍahaba ’l-kūfīyyūn ’ilā ’anna ’l-ism muštaqq min-a ’l-wasm wa-huwa ’l-’alāma wa-ḍahaba ’l-baṣriyyūn ’ilā ’annahū muštaqq min-a ’s-simuww wa-huwa ’l-’uluww*).<sup>35</sup>

According to these propositions, *simuww*—meaning ‘elevation’, ‘height’—is coincident with the function of a *ism* identified with the signifier, whose role is to stay on a higher level than the signified below (*al-musammayāt tahtahā*). Conversely, Kūfan grammarians analyze the *ism* as derived from *wasm* (used as a synonym of ‘*alāma*, ‘mark’), and *simuww* ‘sign’.<sup>36</sup>

The Kūfan grammatical school presents a reasoning related to the markedness theory:<sup>37</sup>

[*ism*] derives from *wasm* because in the language [of the Arabs]<sup>38</sup> it indicates the mark, and a noun is a definition mark distinct from the symbol that identifies it [...]. For this reason, we assert that *ism* derives from *wasm*, and the same has been stated by Ta’lab who argues that the noun indicates the sign that has been established<sup>39</sup> for

31 *’Inṣāf*, 1-6.

32 The passages quoted below shall show that Arabic grammarians do not refer to *roots* when discussing the process of derivation (*ištiqāq*), but rather refer to *words*. As described by Larcher: “Dériver, ce n’est donc pas tirer un mot d’une racine, mais un mot d’un autre. Pour autant, les grammairiens arabes n’ignorent ni la racine ni la forme (ou schème). Si la forme est appelée ici d’un mot (*ṣīga*) qui en est un correspondant exact, il en va tout autrement de la racine, appelée ici *tarkīb*, c’est-à-dire «combinaison [de consonnes]». [...] Enfin, troisième et dernière différence: tout en dérivant d’une base concrète, les grammairiens n’ignorent pas, on l’a vu, le concept de racine, ni celui, corollaire, de forme. Par suite, la racine n’étant pas première, elle n’a pas de sens en elle-même, mais seulement comme trace de la base dans le dérivé.” LARCHER 2008: 87, 90.

33 The *Lisān al-’Arab* also registers the variant *as-sumuww*. Cf. *Lisān al-’Arab*, xix: 121-128., s.v. *samā* (root *s-m-w*).

34 He is not mentioned in the text, but the latter proposition seems to be shared also by al-ZAĞĞĀĞ. (Cf. *al-Ṣāhibī*: 57).

35 *’Inṣāf*, 1.

36 Also ‘mark’, ‘stigma’.

37 Mark is used here to recall the markedness theory, where the marks are grammatical elements (gender, number and case) and not lexical. According to this theory, the noun is not a mark. But, for the purpose of the translation, the word has been adopted under a generic—and not technical—profile.

38 The *kalām al-’Arab* is usually one of the main sources for grammatical observations. The reference is to the Arabic variety spoken by the Bedouins of the Arabic peninsula. The Arabs, whose unconscious knowledge of the language prescription is a manifest concept for every grammarian, are presented by early scholars as having an innate wisdom (*ḥikma*) which makes them choose the correct forms without being really aware of the grammatical reasons.

39 *tūda*, from *wad*, indicating the creation of a name: “The phrase *wad* *al-luġa* which may be translated as the foundation of language, represents a concept that is central to classical Muslim scholarly thinking

what conveys a meaning<sup>40</sup> (*'ammā 'l-kūfīyyūn fa-'htağğū bi-'an qālū 'innamā qulnā 'innahū muštaqq min-a 'l-wasm li-'anna 'l-wasm fī 'l-luğa huwa 'l-'alāma wa'l-ism wasm 'alā 'l-musammā wa-'alāma lahū yu'raf bihī [...]. fa-li-hādā qulnā 'innahu muštaqq min-a 'l-wasm wa-li-dālika qāla 'Abū 'l-'Abbās 'Aḥmad bin Yaḥyà Ta'lab al-ism sima tūda' 'alā šay' yu'raf bihā*).<sup>41</sup>

To prove the inherent meaning of 'height', 'elevation', semantics comes to adduce evidence: *sumuww* is an attested result inferred from the verb *samā*, *yasmū*, *sumuww*, whose meaning is 'to be elevated':

The term derives from *sumuww*, because in the Arabic lexicon it indicates the elevation: when something is elevated you say *samā*, *yasmū*, *sumuww*. From this the sky has been called *samā*' because it is in the height, and [likewise] the noun stands above the signified and shows what is below, as far as the meaning is concerned (*'innamā qulnā 'innahū muštaqq min-a 's-sumuww li-'anna 's-sumuww fī 'l-luğa huwa 'l-'uluww yuqālu samā yasmū sumuwwan 'idā 'alā wa-minhu summiyat as-samā' samā'an li-'uluwwihā wa'l-ism ya'lū 'alā 'l-musammā wa-yadullu 'alā mā tahtahū min-a 'l-ma'nā*).<sup>42</sup>

Also, according to al-Mubarrad:

The noun refers to the *nominatum* below, but this argument is sufficient for the etymology, but it is not for the meaning. And since the noun is raised above the *nominatum* and stands above its meaning, this means that it is derived from *sumuww* and not from *wasm* (*al-ism mā dalla 'alā 'l-musammā tahtahū, wa-hādā 'l-qawl kāfin fī 'l-ištiqāq lā fī 'l-tahdīd fa-lammā samā 'l-ism 'alā musammāhu wa-'alā 'alā mā tahtahū min ma'nāhu dalla 'alā 'annahū muštaqq min-a 'l-sumuww lā min-a 'l-wasm*).<sup>43</sup>

### 3.2 Grammatical observations on etymology

Despite the evident logic behind the reasoning, it is evident that the opposition between *s-m-w* and *w-s-m* is merely speculative and part of a rather theoretical discussion.

The grammatical interpretation posing in contrast the two elements may be or may not be acceptable as a reasoning,<sup>44</sup> but for the etymology there are many proofs showing that the Kūfan interpretation is erroneous. Medieval Arabic grammarians pointed out the

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about language. Language in that thinking was entirely invented. That is to say, it owed its existence to a process of deliberate assignment of patterned vocal utterances—or components of such utterances- to meanings, of *'alfāz* (→*lafẓ*) to *ma'ānī* (→*ma'nā*)". WEISS, s.v. "Waḍ' al-Luğa", *EALL*, iv: 684.

40 This interpretation is also registered in the Lane: "A sign [such as may be uttered or written] conveying knowledge of a thing" – LANE 1863, iv: 1435.

41 *'Inṣāf*: 1-2.

42 *'Inṣāf*: 2.

43 *'Inṣāf*: 2.

44 al-Anbārī himself agrees with the Kūfans on the strictly grammatical interpretation, although he does not agree on the etymology.

uniqueness of the root through a grammar-oriented reasoning, as much as modern comparative studies do.<sup>45</sup>

Başrans' confutation of Kūfan thesis is articulated in five passages,<sup>46</sup> corresponding to the five modalities of mistake observed in their propositions. These arguments, four of which shall be examined in detail in the next paragraphs,<sup>47</sup> conclude by demonstrating that despite the logic behind the Kūfans' grammatical reasoning, there is one only possible root *ism* may be ascribed to: *s-m-w*.<sup>48</sup>

### 3.2.1 The form of the term

The first analysis reported in the *Kitāb al-'Inṣāf* refers to the form of the term *ism* and its phonetic realization, which results from the drop of the weak radical in the noun formation.

The Kūfans state that the *wāw* occurring in the first position is dropped and replaced by a *hamza*<sup>49</sup> which functions as a letter of compensation (*ta'wīd*). If this phenomenon were productive, then the initial *hamza* would be a systematic result whenever a weak radical

45 The concept of *root* is a key element shared all throughout Semitic, and, as pointed out by VOIGT: "All Semitic languages have a verbal form and a nominal form (except for functional words and particles), characteristically consisting of a triradical root and a vocalic pattern which may also require the addition of further consonants" (EALL iv: 173-74). For the case study presented in this paper, other Semitic languages further substantiate the correctness of the arguments in favor of the root *s-m-w*, for they prove that a root, either biliteral or with a weak radical occurring in final position [*s(š)-m* or *s(š)-m-w/y*], is attested all throughout Semitic. Hence, given the range of meanings: (1) 'noun', 'name', 'substantive' for Arabic *ism*, and (2) 'sky', 'heaven(s)' for Arabic *samā'*, their cognates in other Semitic languages are, for example: Akk. (1) *šumu*, (2) *šamū*; Mehri (1) *ham*, (2) *haytem*; Jibbali (1) *šem*, (2) *šutum*; Gə'əz (1) *səm*, (2) *samāy*; Old South Arabian (1) *sm*, (2) *s'myn* [Sabeian], *s'mhn* [Minean]; Syriac (1) *šomo*, (1) *šemā*, (2) *šmayyā*; Biblical Aramaic (1) *šm*, (2) *šmyn*; Biblical Hebrew (1) *šem*, (2) *šmym*. – In addition to those mentioned above, in Mehri and Jibbali are attested also the forms *sāmē* and *siēh*, both clearly Arabisms, and in Soqotri is attested a coradical form *e'ten* carrying the same meaning. – As for Hebrew, it is worth mentioning that the *Hebrew and English Lexicon* (BROWN, DRIVER, and BRIGGS 2010) reports an 'unknown' root for the lemma *שָׁמַ*, and lists among the cognates (and therefore possible related roots) both "Ar. *سَمَ* brand, mark" and "Ar. *سَمَ*, *إِسْمَ*, *أِسْمَ*, *سُمَ* name". – Finally, the *Dictionary of Semitic Inscriptions* reports also the following attestations: "šm Sing. + suff. 3 s.f. šmh 10/ 9 - subst. name. šmyn Du. abs. šmyn 7/17; 12/14(\*2), bšmyn 8/12, 11/12, 15/14, š[my]n 22/6; emph. šmy(?) 10/2, 17/11,12; + suff. 3 s.m. šmwy 8/12, bšmwhy (bšmwhy<sup>m</sup>) 16/14 – subst. Du. heavens" (HOFTIJZER et al. 1995: 1265).

46 The arguments presented hereafter—mainly based on morpho-phonological observations—are meant to recapitulate grammarians' opinions as presented in al-Anbārī's *Kitāb al-'Inṣāf* (*Inṣāf*: 3-6). Similar—if not identical—arguments may be found in other works, too. One example is al-Bāqillānī who reports a more concise examination of the issue in the *Kitāb al-Tamhīd* (al-BĀQILLĀNĪ 1957: 255-257).

47 The fifth wrong argument presented by al-Anbārī shall not be analyzed here in detail, since it mainly proposes different variants of the term as registered in local Arabic varieties. The text mentions few different realizations of the term: *ism*, *usm*, *sim* and *sum* (*ism bi-kasr al-hamza*, *wa-usm bi-ḍammihā*, *wa-sim bi-kasr as-sīn*, *wa-sum bi-ḍammihā*. *'Inṣāf*: 6). So, for instance, *usm* would be registered as of the tribes Tamīm and Qurayš. Besides, al-Anbārī briefly reports further explanations for some of the variants, as for *sum*, shaped on the pattern 'ul from a proposed historical form "sumaw" with a consequential shift of the *wāw* onto a 'alif because of the vocalization in *fatha* of the preceding letter.

48 The arguments presented in §3.3.1–3.3.4 are also briefly mentioned in LANE 1863, iv: 1435.

49 Clearly a *hamzat al-waṣl*, but it is always referred to as *hamza* only by the grammarians.



occurred in the first position. Hence, in cases such as *wa'ada* the expected realization would be *\*i'd* (*wa'ada*—*\*i'd* as in the pair *wasama*—*ism*).

Yet, the resulting terms reflect a different state of affairs, as the outputs of this type of roots would consist of terms ending with a *tā' marbūṭa* (in fact the attested form derived from *wa'ada* is *'ida*), as rightly stated by the Baṣrans.

Baṣrans consider the final *tā' marbūṭa* as a compensation letter indicating the drop of the first—weak—radical, while the initial *hamza* would result from the drop of the last radical. Thus, *ism* derives from an underlying form *\*simw*, shaped on the pattern *fi'l* where the first radical is vocalized in *kasra* and the second is quiescent.<sup>50</sup> According to the Baṣran proposition, in that instance the root would suffer from the drop of the third radical and, resulting biliteral, would compensate the elision of the *wāw* by appending a *hamza* at the beginning of the word, on the paradigm *if'*.

### 3.2.2 The past tense

The second Baṣran proposition is about verbal analysis and how verbs are formed out of this type of root, starting with the *māḍī* of the fourth form. The Baṣrans argue that the underlying form of the verb is *\*'asmawtu*, but the *wāw*—which comes to be the third radical of the root and occurs here in the fourth position—undergoes a regular process of transformation, turning into a *yā'*,<sup>51</sup> resulting then in the form *'asmaytu*. The proposed theoretical form, as well as the resulting one, shows that the weak radical does not occur in first position in the root, which otherwise would result in a fourth verbal form *\*'awsamtu*.

The same phenomenon is also attested in the *muḍāri'*, where the vowel shift is usually very regular due to the vocalization pattern of the form (*'af'ala*—*yuf'ilu*), as in *yu'lī*, *yud'ī*, and *yusmī*, inferred from the underlying forms *\*yu'liw*, *\*yu'diw*, and *\*yusmiw*, and where a quiescent *wāw* is preceded by a letter vocalized in *kasra*. The phenomenon is very regular and is recorded whenever a quiescent *wāw* comes to occur in a position adjacent to a consonant vocalized in *kasra*, as for instance in *mīqāt*, *mī'ād*, and *mīzān*, whose underlying forms would be *\*miwqāt*, *\*miw'ād*, and *\*miwzān*, inferred from *al-waqt*, *al-wa'd*, and *al-wazn*.

### 3.2.3 The diminutive

Within the debate, also the formation of the diminutive contributes to the definition of the root. Considering the root proposed by the Kūfans, *w-s-m*, the diminutive form of *ism* would result in the form *\*wusaym*, where the first weak radical is retained. Yet, the variant attested for *ism* is *sumayy*.

The Arabic lexicon does not record a form containing a weak radical occurring at the beginning of the word, whereas it records a form with a last weak radical.

The word is ascribable to an underlying form *\*sumayw*, on the paradigm *fu'ayl*, but having a *wāw* as its last radical it shifts into a *yā'*: when a *yā'* and a *wāw* occur together and the first letter is quiescent, then the *wāw* turns into *yā'*, resulting in a geminated form. This

<sup>50</sup> On a pattern R<sub>1</sub>-i-R<sub>2</sub>-Ø-R<sub>3</sub>.

<sup>51</sup> Other examples from the text are *'a'laytu* and *'ad'aytu*, from the underlying forms *'a'lawtu* and *\*'ad'awtu*.

paradigm is widely attested and productive, as demonstrated by common terms such as *sayyid*, *ḡayyid*, and *mayyit*, whose underlying forms would be *\*saywid*, *\*ḡaywid*, and *\*maywit*. *yā'* being easier to articulate,<sup>52</sup> a shift of the *wāw* onto a *yā'* is favored.

### 3.2.4 The plural

The last Baṣran proposition concerns to the formation of the plural form of *ism*, for which two major forms are registered: *'asmā'* and *'asāmī*. Both are derived from the root *s-m-w* and cannot be ascribed to *w-s-m*, from which the resulting forms would be *\*'awsām* and *\*'awāsīm*.

Of the two possible plural forms mentioned above *'asmā'* is more correct because of its major attestation and plausibility. Its underlying form is *\*'asmāw*, which records a *wāw* occurring in the final position, and preceded by a *'alif zā'ida*. In such cases, the *wāw* usually shifts into a *hamza*, as recorded in other examples such as *samā'*, *kasā'*, and *raḡā'* whose underlying forms would be *\*samāw*, *\*kisāw*, and *\*raḡāw*.

In addition to this, another proposition argues that the *wāw* undergoes a process of shift into *'alif*, acknowledging the existence of an abstract form where the *fatha* occurring before the *'alif* is triggered by a vocalized *wāw*. The latter, when occurring in a vocalized form and preceded by a letter carrying a vocalization in *fatha*, must necessarily turn into a *'alif*.

The conclusion would then be the combination of two *'alif*, one added to the root and one deriving from the last radical. But being both quiescent they do not merge; therefore, the second *'alif* turns necessarily into a *hamza*, both *hamza* and *'alif* being two *hawā'iyya*<sup>53</sup> letters.

## Conclusions

The aim of this contribution was to present an overall view on how Arabic grammarians dealt with the issue of defining the root from which the Arabic term *ism* should be derived. It was inferred from the inventory of arguments discussed in early works and here presented through the words of a 12<sup>th</sup>-century scholar, that *ism* may be derived from two distinct roots: *w-s-m* and *s-m-w*.

The history of the Arabic linguistic tradition shows that the speculative activities of grammarians belonging to the Baghdādi tradition, like al-Anbārī, often reiterate previously discussed arguments with a manifest orientation towards Baṣran ones. Nonetheless, it is undoubtedly important that in retracing the development of Arabic linguistic sciences the debate itself becomes as important as the linguistic issue discussed, because of the methodological approaches proposed. Al-Anbārī's way to present the debate is a kind of storytelling, where the Baṣran predominance is justified by the fact that the method of analysis they propose is better theorized and developed. Thus, strict methodological procedures and

52 *'ahaff*, lit. 'lighter'.

53 "*al-hāwi* <qui comporte un souffle> est un épithète de l'*'alif al-ḡarsī*: <celui qui produit un son> par opposition à l'*'alif* support de *hamza*". CANTINEAU 1960: 24.

a sophisticated attitude to the reasoning show a clear superiority of the Baṣran group over its counterpart, as in the case study presented in this paper.

In fact, as discussed in paragraphs 3.2.1 through 3.2.4, it is evident how the discussion led by Kūfan grammarians—despite its logic—does not have very solid foundations, but rather presents a more speculative approach. Not considering the propositions on semantics, common to both groups and ascribable to a higher level of linguistic abstraction, Baṣrans' arguments on morphological phenomena are more well-grounded, and properly explain why the term *ism* cannot be derived from the root *w-s-m*, contrary to what Kūfans argue. Furthermore, cognates evidence that also in other Semitic languages the root is either biliteral or has a weak letter as its last radical, thus adducing an additional proof on a comparative level.

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