

# Historiography of the Arabic Grammar in Europe: The Legacy of Wright's Arabic Grammar

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**Abstract**— Arabic Grammar is a branch of science that emerged in the early Islamic era. Nevertheless, grammatical works compiled by the Arab scholars such as Sibawaih with his *al-Kitāb* considered difficult to understand by those who are not Arabic speakers (especially for Europeans) in terms of paradigm and its presentation techniques. Therefore, Western scholars (Orientalists) began to write a number of works on Arabic grammar based on their grammatical tradition. The formal object of this research is the paradigm and thought on Arabic grammar, namely particular paradigm and thought used by Western scholars on compiling Arabic grammar for their own interests. Meanwhile, material object is the work of William Wright "A Grammar of the Arabic Language." The authors used universal grammar theory initiated by Noam Chomsky, which emphasized that language, in essence, has general rules. Finally, the authors found three major conclusions. First, early writing of Arabic grammar by European scholars began in the 16th century; it coined by the birth of de Alcalá's work. Second, the peak of Arabic grammatical writing in Europe occurred in the 17th century with the birth of *Grammatica Arabica* by Thomas Erpenius. Third, although Wright's Arabic grammar clearly adopted European grammatical tradition but he did not avoid Arabic linguistic terms while finding its equivalent in English, Latin, and Hebrew. However, Wright's work is not suitable for the beginners due to his comparative linguistic approach.

**Keywords**—*Arabic grammar, historiography, Europe, Wright*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the 12th century after the Crusades, Europeans had a dualism of interest in learning Islam in general and Arabic language in particular. First, they considered Arabic as the language of the enemy (Islam). Second, in contrast to the first view, Arabic for Europeans was the key to enter a world of rich knowledge especially in medical sciences and Greek philosophy. In fact, Arabic books on Greek philosophy and medicine are very complete and the door to enter these intellectual properties is the Islamic Empire in Cordoba. At that time, European scholars began to translate Islamic sources, especially the Qur'an into European languages [1]. The main purpose is to understand the Scripture but also to attack and even to weaken the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad [2]. The attitude between hatred and pleasure towards Arabic was a picture of the early contact between Europe and the Islamic World and Arabic in particular through Cordoba.

The attention of Western scholars towards Islam and Arabic in particular is increasingly dominant after the Renaissance era. The interest in learning Arabic at first was more of a practical goal for understanding terminology and inflection systems in Arabic [3], [4]. In addition, Arabic is an important key as well as a tool for Western scholars who want to do research on Islamic studies [5]. Thus, the initial nuance of interest in the study of Arabic in Western-European circles can be released from the interests of colonialism.

West Europeans as invaders of the Arab region and the Islamic world in general need practical and easily Arabic grammar books written by their own scholars. Since then, several Arabic grammar works have been published such as the work of Duncan Forbes entitled "Grammar of the Arabic Language" published in 1863. Clearly written in its cover that the purpose of writing the book besides as a personal instructional book on Arabic grammar but it is also in a specific purpose intended "for the use of young men preparing for the East India civil service," that is to help anyone who is carrying out civilian services in East India at that time [6], [7]. Arabic grammar in the context of Western society at the time compiled with the concepts and objectives of learning foreign languages that could be understood by all groups. Such objectives may depart from the tradition of Western scholars who have become accustomed to composing and writing grammar on foreign languages that stressed on language competence.

Different from the birth of Arabic grammar in the Western context, the emergence of grammar in the Arab World is more due to the chaos and confusion in the recitation of al-Qur'an by the Arabs or non-Arabs (*mawālī*: such as Persians, Rome, Nabataea, and others who converted to be Muslims but lack of Arabic) [8]. At that time, grammatical errors often occurred, mainly errors in reading the Qur'an such as in nominative case but were read accusatively, or vice versa. Not only that, there are errors in certain expressions, such as expressions for admiration for something but expressed in interrogative sentences.

Considering all of this evidence, the paper aims to introduce Western works on Arabic grammar by focusing on the paradigms and techniques used by the scholars. In addition, the paper tries to introduce modern terms that commonly used by Western scholars in describing and presenting Arabic linguistic cases. Besides, the paper also

wants to portrait the vibration of Western scholarships on Arabic grammar in the 16th century until the beginning of the 20th century with its special attention to the Arabic grammar of William W Wright.

## II. ARABIC GRAMMAR IN THE EUROPEAN LANGUAGES

### A. *Historical Background*

Serious attention of European scholars on Arabic studies began in the 16th century and stimulated by the intensive contact between Europeans and Arabs as well as easy access to Arabic manuscripts. This situation occurred in Spain after the re-occupation of Granada by the Christians [9]. The interest in Arabic also occurred in various other European countries, which previously had absolutely no interest and contact with the Muslim world. This wave began in the 17th century with the establishment of various centers of Arabic language studies such as in Rome, Vienna, London, Breslau, Heidelberg, and Paris [9].

In the Netherlands, for example, Arabic for academics occupied a special position. In fact, Arabic at that time was not part of the European culture such as Latin, Hebrew, or Greek. Nevertheless, this alien language was the most considered foreign language in the academic field in the Netherlands. This was evidenced by the inauguration of Thomas Erpenius (1584-1624 AD) as the first professor on Arabic studies at Leiden University on May 14, 1613. He delivered his influential inaugural speech entitled "On the Excellence and Dignity of the Arabic Language" [10].

In other European countries such as Britain, several important figures in Arabic grammar have also emerged. One of them was William Price (1771-1830), a young man who studied Oriental languages independently. Price became very famous for he published his great work entitled "Dialogues in the vulgar Arabic of Morocco" (1797). This was the first book on Arabic grammar on Moroccan dialect [11].

### B. *Important Works and Figures*

As mentioned earlier, works on Arabic grammar among Western scholars appeared in the 16th century. The first work that attempted to present Arabic grammar for Europeans, written by Pedro de Alcala, it printed in 1515 in Spanish [12]. In another note, the book appeared in 1505. The book of de Alcala entitled "Arte para ligeramente saber la Lengua arauiga." This was the first book on Arabic grammar with its main discussion on North African Arabic dialect, which commonly used by Muslims in Spain [13]. The next work entitled *Die arabischen Studien in Europa bis in den Anfang des 20*, written by William Postel and printed in Paris in 1538 AD. The work also felt to have not provided solid knowledge about Arabic rules in general [12].

Erpenius's glorious Arabic grammatical work in Latin survived until the 17th century. However, Erpenius's work was still being replicated and modified by other writers. For example, Johann Hirt in 1770 published Arabic grammar in Latin but was not a direct duplication of Erpenius's *Grammatica Arabica*. John Richardson

translated Erpenius's work into English and became the first book in that language on the Arabic grammar.

Michaelis published a short version of the Arabic grammar in German, and in 1796, Johann Jahn published another work in the same language. A new wave of Arabic grammatical works emerged in the 18th century with the emergence of works written by French scholars namely A. I. Silvestre De Sacy with his *Grammaire Arabe* in 1810. This work was quite different from previous works. De Sacy tried to present Arabic grammar by matching every terminology compiled by the Arab experts based on his own knowledge. Nonetheless, De Sacy claimed to be confused with the Arabic grammar books compiled by the Arabs that he viewed as too complicated from the start because there were disputes among them regarding certain rules. Apparently, De Sacy did not directly refer to Arabic original works, but instead examined the translations and comments made by previous Western writers.

The next work born in the hands of Henrich Ewald in German language. This work intended as a counter to previous Latin works, including De Sacy's work in French, which he viewed, was too Arab in style so that it did not show independent linguistic investigation. Ewald's work "*Grammatica criticae linguae Arabicae*," tried to compare Arabic grammar with other Semitic languages. According to Stewart, Ewald's work was more as a philological work than as a work that portrayed language in its real contexts [14].

In the mid-19th century, there was a debate about proper Arabic grammar writing. Should it based on the expert works of Arab grammarians, or did it depart from the grammatical forms and models contained in Arabic prose and poetry [12]. The work that attempted to answer the debate, initiated by the work of C.P. Caspari's *Grammatica Arabica*, published in 1844. This work is seen as showing good efforts in illustrating the approach between terms in original Arabic grammar and European models, although the presentation model is still very imitating De Sacy's style [12].

The appreciation for Caspari's work done by W. Wright by translating the work into English titled *A Grammar of the Arabic Language*. Previously, Caspari's work had its German translation and published in 1859. During the process of translating into English from 1859 to 1862, Wright made revision and republished it in 1874. On this re-edition, Wright made a complete overhaul by referring directly to the Arab scholars of Nahwu such as Zamaksyari, Ibn Malik, Ibn 'Aqil, and Badruddin [12]. In essence, the early European works on Arabic grammar marked by a real effort to force the Arabic system into the Latin system.

However, a new trend emerged in the 19th century, namely an attempt to present Arabic grammar from its original sources (such as poetry) as it was written, not supposed to be written [15]. This departs from the fact that the purpose of Arabic grammar writing appears not for learning Arabic itself, but for maintaining the originality of the Holy Qur'an. In summary, Western scholarships on the Arabic grammar can be clearly seen from Table 1.

**TABLE I. ARABIC GRAMMAR IN EUROPEAN LANGUAGES**

No	Arabic Grammar in European Languages		
	Title	Author	Year
1.	Arte para ligera-mente saber la lengua arauiga	Pedro de Alcala	1505
2.	Die arabischen Studien in Europa bis in den Anfang des 20. Jahrhunderts Gebundenes Buch	William Postel	1538
3.	Grammatica Arabica	Thomas Erpenius	1636
4.	Grammaire Arabe	A. I. Silvestr De Sacy	1810
5.	Grammatica critica linguae arabicae	G. H. A. Ewald	1831
6.	Grammatica Arabica	C. P. Caspari	1844
7.	A Grammar of the Arabic Language	W. Wright	1862/ 1874

What is striking here is that the first language used by Western scholars on Arabic grammar is in Latin. Meanwhile, German, French, and English language came lately.

### III. ARABIC GRAMMAR OF WILLIAM WRIGHT

#### A. Intellectual Journey of William Wright

William Wright (1830-1889) was an orientalist, son of Captain Alexander Wright who served in the East India Company. Wright was born in Mullye or Mallai, Nepal, on January 17, 1830. His mother was the daughter of Daniel Anthony Overbeck, the last Dutch governor of Bengal. His mother had the skills of several Eastern languages such as Persia and encouraged his son to follow in the same footsteps as his mother.

Wright's first school was St. Andrews, and then continued his studies at the University of Halle, where he studied Syriac and staying in Professor Rödiger's house. In this place, Wright was very knowledgeable in Eastern languages, especially in Arabic. In fact, he was able to master a very difficult language outside the Semitic family, namely Sanskrit. Therefore, Rödiger always called Wright as his best student ever. Moving to Leiden, he studied Arabic manuscripts under the guidance of Dozy, and there at the age of twenty-three, he earned the title Doctor of honoris causa. It was from Leiden that he wrote a very famous letter to Professor Fleischer in 1852, which contained his plan to devote his entire life to Arabic. This phenomenal statement later published in the Journal of the German Oriental Society (vii. 109).

Wright became chair of the center for Arabic studies at University College London from 1855-1856, and at Trinity College, Dublin from 1856-1861. In addition, he also worked at the British Museum to compile a Syriac language manuscript catalog. Furthermore, in 1870 he was recalled to serve as a professor in the field of Arabic studies at Cambridge. This position was carried out until the end of his life on May 22, 1889.

Wright's works counted quite a lot. Works related to the Arabic language and literature are the Travels of Ibn Jubair (1852), Opuscula Arabica (1859), Kamil of Al-Mubarrad (1864-1882), and Arabic Grammar (1859,

1875), and the Book of Khalilah and Dimnah (1883). In addition, there are still other works mainly related to the study of the Bible in Syriac.

#### B. Wright's Grammar

As mentioned earlier, one of Wright's works on Arabic is A Grammar of the Arabic Language that published in 1859 for Volume I and in 1862 for Volume II. Wright's work was a translation of Grammatica Arabica written by Carl Paul Caspari in 1844, and translated into German by August Müller. From this German translation, Wright translated the work into English and made major revisions by referring both to previous European writers and to the Arab scholars such as Zamakhsyari, Ibnu Malik, Ibn 'Aqil, and Badruddin. Thus, this work later considered as a new work and known as Wright's Arabic Grammar.

The first edition of Wright's Grammar consists of two volumes, volume I published in 1859 and volume II published in 1862. Furthermore, the second edition with a two-volume format published in 1874. Finally, the third edition divided into two volumes, volume I published in 1896 and volume II published in 1898. Furthermore, starting from 1933 to 1981, the book published in one volume.

When examined, Wright's Grammar differs greatly from Arabic grammar books written by Arab scholars in general. The first part begins with a discussion of Arabic orthography, even though very few grammarians Arabs began the discussion with Arabic symbols and orthography. The Arab writers of Arabic in general began the discussion on the division of Kalam (sentence). Why orthography placed at the early discussion? The answer is because, Wright's Grammar intended for European readers who have never known Arabic letters and markers. Therefore, recognizing Arabic letters and orthography becomes the initial and fundamental knowledge.

Nevertheless, the introduction of orthography presented by Wright is not simply a basic introduction but it is very detail and a little bit complicated. For example, in the discussion of diphthong fathah meeting with ya (ai) or wa (au), in the case of plural verbs ending with the letter wa as a plural icon, he mentioned that at the end of wa must be added alif. This rule commonly understood in Arabic grammar and this alif has known as al-alif al-fāshilah (the separating alif) or al-alif al-wiqāyah (guarding alif). However, what is interesting from Wright's explanation is that he tried to simplify the above theory by stating that the addition of alif after wa in the plural verb is to avoid misunderstanding with the wa which functions as conjunction [16].

In the discussion on syntax, fi'il or verb and isim or noun explained in the discussion on Arabic sentences. Meanwhile, in the case of verbs, it includes the discussion on the type of tenses that apply in Arabic such as fi'il madhi (perfect tense) and fi'il mudhari (imperfect tense). While the cases that accompany the two tenses explained in the discussion of "the mood," the verbs that indicate facts, hopes, possibilities, orders, and others. Included in this discussion, fi'il 'amr (imperative sentence) is discussed in the case of the mood. This technique and presentation are certainly unusual for the Arabic grammar but it is more

familiar with the European grammar (such as English grammar).

One of the weaknesses of Wright's grammar is that since the book presented to the European readers but the book was absent from the introduction on the important position of the Arabic among Semitic languages, its history and its dialect and how these affected the Arabic [17].

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The initial writing of Arabic grammar by the European scholars began in the 16th century marked by the birth of de Alcalá's work. The peak of Arabic grammatical writing in Europe occurred in the 17th century indicated by the birth of Gramatica Arabica by Thomas Erpenius. This work triggered the birth of Arabic grammar works in Europe in various languages such as Latin, German, French, and English. In the writing techniques, there is a debate over whether the grammar presented must follow the writing model of Arabic writers or adopting grammatical writing that is more prevalent in the European context with Latin grammar as main references. In general, Arabic grammar in Europe follows the Latin grammatical tradition. However, Wright's Arabic grammar shows a different model. Wright's work though adopted the European style of presentation, but he did not avoid linguistic terms that used in the Arabic tradition while finding its equivalent in English or Latin, and also Hebrew. However, Wright's work seen as difficult to understand by the beginners because it is too comparative grammar.

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