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A BRIEF HISTORICAL REVIEW OF PHILOSOPHICAL
TERMINOLOGY IN ARABIC

ABDUL FATAH IBRAHIM
The National University of Malaysia

SINOPSIS

*Dalam bahasa Arab jahiliyah banyak terdapat kalimat-kalimat yang ber-
asal daripada perkataan asing. Bahasa Arab ini merebak dan berkembang
dengan hebatnya di mana-mana negeri yang tertaklok dibawah pemerentah-
an Islam. Bahasa ialah cermin kemajuan. Bahasa Arab menjadi bahasa yang
kaya dengan istilah-istilah dan falsafah yang menggambarkan kemajuan
Islam pada masa itu. Kesusastraan dan Kebudayaan Parsi mempengaruhi
Arab sejak dari zaman kerajaan Ummayah lagi. Di zaman kerajaan Abba-
siah terjemahan buku-buku sains dan falsafah dimulakan dengan besar-
besaran. Diwaktu inilah lahirnya istilah-istilah termasok istilah falsafah.
Tapi istilah ugama dan tasawuf tidak timbul disini kerana pengalih-pengalih
bahasa itu kebanyakannya tidak berugama Islam dan khalifah-khalifah
sendiri, yang mengambil inisiatib dalam perkara ini, menitikberatkan ilmu-
ilmu perubatan dan falsafah. Oleh kerana morphology dan syntaz bahasa
Sam berlainan dengan bahasa Indo–European maka alih bahasa ini banyak
tidak tepat. Diantara cara mengatasi kesukaran ini ialah dengan memberi
arti-arti baru melalui etimoloji dan mengarabkan perkataan-perkataan
asing.*

SYNOPSIS

*Before Arabic spread to the neighbouring countries through the Islamic
conquest, its vocabulary had already assimilated foreign words as a result
of contact with neighbouring people. Following the Islamic conquest, Arabic
took new forms unknown to the language before. The Mu'tazilite introduced
a new style and philosophical terminology to meet the challenge of the time.
In the Ummayad period, the form of secular prose was inspired, to a certain
extent, by the Sasanid literature. The Sasanid cultures and traditions began
to influence the Arab. The Abbasid period saw the beginning of the trans-
lation from Greek scientific and philosophical works into Arabic. The
Caliphs themselves took the initiative and the learned men, irrespective of
creeds and religions, rubbed shoulders together. The translators introduced
terminology including the philosophical. They were not concerned with
theology, mysticism or religious speculation because most of them were not
Muslims and the chief interest of the Caliphs, who ordered the translation,*

was in medicine and philosophy. Since the Semitic languages are different from the peculiarities of Indo–European morphology and syntax, the translations considerably failed to convey the ideas precisely. Despite the difficulties, philosophical terminology grew up as the result of the flourishing and advancing stages of Islamic–Arabic literatures. The language expanded, to meet the needs of the developments, from within by giving new meanings to old words or forming new words from old roots, and from without by arabisation.

Arabic philosophical was influenced by the Greek. The works of the translators of coining new terms took place or began after the second century of the Hijrah in the more populated areas or first started with the establishment of the Abbasid Caliphs. The Arabic Language reached its culmination in the third century. These centuries covered the period of the translations. The criteria established in modern studies of the subject are hardly applicable to the works written centuries ago. Yet the study of the creation of philosophical terminology is important for intensive research. The writer believes this article covers the most important ideas on the subject. And much remains to be done.

Arabic is a Semitic language. It is, probably, in many ways the most pure and the richest of them. During the pre-Islamic period, it was spoken by the inhabitants of the Arabian peninsula. Through the Islamic conquest, it spread to the neighbouring countries. In each of the conquered provinces the Arabs established their main bases in towns on the edges of the deserts. In these garrison towns the Arabs built their cantonments and the main centres of government. The Arabs formed the dominant element in these cities and Arabic became the chief language as well as the language of administration[1]. This language had already undergone a considerable development when Arabic scientific and philosophical writing first appeared. The vocabulary had already assimilated the foreign words as a result of infiltration and contact with neighbouring people. In the North, the language was infiltrated by Armenians, in the South by Persian garrisons, the Yemen. At Edessar and its neighbouring provinces the language was expressed by trilingual inscriptions of Syriac, Greek and Aramaic and at Harran by the bilingual of Arabic and Greek. In Ghassanid provinces, Greek and Arabic were used. Greek words entered Arabic in early days mostly by way of Arabic and Syriac. Hira was the main channel through which the Greek heritage flowed into Arabic[2].

At the beginning of the Islamic era, classical Arabic literature consisted of the highly parachial jahiliyah poetry in addition to the textual verses

1 B. Lewis, *The Arabs in History,* Essex, The Anchor Press, Third Edition, 1956, p. 55.
2 S.M. Afnan, *Philosophical Terminology in Arabic and Persia,* Leide, E.J. Brill, 1964,
   p. 10.

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of the Quran. Many foreign words i.e. Greek and Persian, are found in the Quran. The Quran is the first and the greatest classical prose and the supreme model and source of profound influence on Arabic literature. Jahiliyah poetry is the most distinguishable character of the language. The poets were the men of knowledge for the Arabs. Their expressions were characteristically of a concrete and local character depicting nomadic life. There are marks of abstract terms for such notions as humour, generosity, honesty, honour, bravery, love and social life.[3] Following the Islamic conquests, the social and political situation helped the development of language and literature. The non-Arabic Muslims for instance, who neither spoke nor wrote good Arabic helped establish the Grammar. The garrison cities of Basrah and Kufah where the creative Persian Muslims outnumbered the Arabs were centres of learning.[4]

In the above mentioned conditions prose took new forms unknown to the language before. Muslim philosophers introduced a style and terminology which stood intermediate between the religious and the secular.[5] They employed certain philosophical terms for their particular purposes. They were the most advanced and rigorous group of religious leaders who sought and found in Greek philosophical literature and Christian–Hellenistic apologetic works the dialetic equipment to meet and overcome the dualist arguments and to reinforce an ethics, based on the Quran.[6]

In the late Ummayad period the form of secular prose began to appear. The style was, to a large extent, inspired by the Sasanid literature. It differed from the religious literature in aim, object, and the manner of expression. Secretarial offices called Dewans had been established. The occupants of the officers were known as Katibs. They were the elite class whose number was small but very influential in community life and who combined foreign learning and culture with Islamic knowledge. They were known as men of good merit and manliness. Their epistolary literature gradually merged with rhetoric. The sentences were direct and short.

The Arabs conquered the Sasanid empire but in many ways the Sasanid traditions and cultures conquered the Arabs. The influence of the old Persian order of the Sasanids became increasingly strong and much of the Abbasid practice was a deliberate imitation of Sasanid habit which were now becoming known from surviving Sasanid literature and Persian officials.[7] The secretarial class of the Katibs were charged with supplying the necessary guides by translating books specifying the duties of a monarch and the proper procedures of court. The Ummayad Hisham, for instance, translated a history of the kings of Iran. The Islamic writers

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3 B. Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 131.
4 S.M. Afnan, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
5 *Ibid.*, p. 13.
6 H.A.R. Gibb, *Studies on the Civilization of Islam*, Bostpn Beacon Press, 1968, p. 13.
7 B. Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

such as Ibn Nadim with his Catalogue on Fihrist, forwarded us with various information that from the Iranians the Arabs learnt the method of administration.[8]

The period of al-Mansur, al-Rashid and al-Ma'mun was the most remarkable features of the Abbasid age. Shortly after the inauguration of the Abbasid Caliphate, the translation into Arabic began to be made of Greek scientific and philosophical works. Probably, at first the choice of works depended on the individual scholar or his patron. Later, the caliph al-Ma'mun or his advisors realized the importance for the whole empire of the Greek sciences and organized the work of translation on a large scale. The house of Wisdom, Baitul Ḥikmat, was set up. In this institution books were translated or retranslated and copied and a library was kept for reference.[9]

The association between the Arabs, the Iranians and the Armenians was not always a very happy one,[10] but the Muslim students of the subject were far from being fanatical adherents of Islam. In philosophical discussions and even in the work of teaching, Muslims and Christians seemed to have associated on equal terms.[11] The chief seats of intellectual culture, however, were, Basra and Kufa in which Arabs, Persians, Muslims, Jews, Magians and Christians rubbed shoulders together.[12] The liberal outlook and receptive attitude granted an opportunity to men of learning of different races and religions to participate in the intellectual activities on equal terms. The translators came to enjoy at least some measure of social status. They travelled extensively to centres of learning in the Hellenistic world and brought back the Greek manuscripts. The caliphs provided the translators with full support to enable them to devote their time to translations.[13] There were countries with members of illustrious families such as the Zayyat, the Munajjim, the Bermakites, the Naubakhs and many others who were the translators. Abdul Hamid al-Katib, a close friend of Ibn Muqaffa', was one of the best translators who derived the models of epistolary literature from Persian language, then turned it into Arabic.

The work of translation of Aristotle began about A.D. 450 into Syriac. For the later philosophical movement in Islam, the significance of the earliest versions in any time, the transmission from Syriac speaker to Arabic speaker after the Muslim conquest was quite gradual. The first

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8 S.M. Afnan, *op. cit.*, p. 12.
9 W.M. Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, "Islamic Survey", Edinburgh, the University Press, 1962, p. 41.
10 *Ibid.*, p. 21.
11 See Ahmad Amin, *Duha el-Isla'm* Cairo Maktabah el-Nahdah el-Misriyah, 1964, Vol. 1 Chap. III.
12 T.V. De Boer, *The History of Philosophy in Islam*, New York, Dover Publication, Ins., 1967, p. 3.
13 S.M. Afnan, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

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Baghdad translation began with Ibn al-Muqaffa' who translated part of the Aristotle "Organon" and paraphrased it presumably from Pahlavi into Arabic.[14] The Fihrist clearly stated that the Persians had in the early days translated some of the books on logic and medicine into the Persian language. These were translated into Arabic by Ibn al-Muqaffa' who was the first in Islamic nation to occupy himself with the translation of the books on logic for Abu Ja'far al-Mansur.[15] Two copies of Ibn al-Muqaffa's work can be found now, one in Mashhad Perisa and the other at St. Joseph University Beirut. From these two copies it may be concluded that the manuscripts are the translation of a commentary on the Eisagoge of Porphyry, the Categories of Aristotle. There is no evidence that the Aristotle works were translated during the period when the Ummayad ruled in Damascus, but as soon as the centre of the empire was moved to Baghdad under the Abbasid, the Arabic versions of Aristotle began to appear.[16] As the earliest information which the Arabs obtained from Syriac sources was confined to his logical works which had been translated or retranslated into Syriac and on which several commentaries were accesible. The corpus of Aristotalian logic included the categories, the Hermeneuties, the Prior Analytics, the Postarion Analytics, the Topics, the Sophistica, the Rhetoric and the Politics. These last two works were classed with the logical treatises by the Arabs.[17] As regards philosophy proper i.e. Airstotalian philosophy, the Arabs displayed the teaching of Aristotle in the form in which it was commented by its New-Platonic interpreters.[18]

With the exception of Ibn al-Muqaffa's work, philosophical terminology was introduced by the translators. These terms were derived from Greek directly or by the way of Syriac.[19] In the first instance, the translation movement was not dependent upon contact with the older Hellenic centers like Alexandria or Antiach but rather with the Hellenized Syriac–Christian communities in Iraq. The translators' mother tongue was Syriac. The influence of Greek and Persian was only indirect, and Arabic was the common speech of the people among whom those translators lived and worked and into whose language they translated.[20] Therefore their lingual backgrounds were very strong. Whether Monophysite or Nastorian, their education had been at monasteries or in schools attached to such institutions. Most of the translators did not know Greek but Hunain bin Ishak had learnt it and was in the habit of collecting a number of manuscripts

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14 *Ibid.*, p. 15.
15 *Ibid.*, pp. 15–16.
16 De lacy O'Leary, *How Greek Science Passed to the Arabs*, London, Roatledge a Kegan Paul Ltd., 1964, p. 161.
17 *Ibid.*, p. 159.
18 Ignace Goldzihor, *History of Classical Arabic Literature*, Berlin, Herstellung, Hermann Hagedorn, 1966, p. 95.
19 S.M. Afnan, *op. cit.*, p. 23.
20 *Ibid.*, p. 23.

before making his translation. Therefore, Ishak's work was the highest level reached by the translators from the linguistic and technical point of view. Those translators did not translate all Greek heritages on science and philosophy but what in fact was translated was that section of Greek scientific and philosophical literature which was still of value in the late Hellenistic schools.[21]

Because the translators were Christians and some of them came from Sebaen of Harran they were not concerned with theology, mysticism and religious speculation of the Mu'tazilite, except in a rare case, such as Yahya ibn 'Ady who earned his living for some time as a copyist. These people persistently maintained their traditions. In addition, due to religious disputes, the Nestorian had to establish their own educational institution and some of them persianized themselves.[22] The second reason was that the caliphs who ordered the translations were chiefly the men of secular life and thought of Baghdad. The nature of the works chosen for the purpose were determined by the taste of the caliphs whose chief interest was in medicine and philosophy. The caliphs were concerned for their own health and that of those around them... Astronomical-Astrological works also had an important place in the translation programme. Since philosophy was closely associated with astronomical-astrological science, it was natural that attention should be paid to it also.[23]

This secular literature was found in searching for the genesis of Arabic philosophical terminology. Non Quranic words were introduced by the translators for the same purposes. These non Quranic words gradually became technical terms of philosophy such as:

> adab, ta > dib, māddah, jāuhar, gharīzah, tajribah, naḥw, dhihn

and of Quranic words but in different forms and sense such as:

al-mubtada', al-lub, al-mauḍū', al-manṭiq, al-> i'tiqād, alfikr, al-> ālah, al-> idrāk, al-infirād

and of words that became technical terms of Arabic logic such as:

al-munāẓarah, al-mujādalah, al-mumārī.[24]

When translating from Greek into Arabic, whether directly or by way of Syriac, the translations had a basis to build upon with an already established tradition. While linguistically they were influenced by Arabic secular prose, technically they took over the methods of their Aramean predecessors when translating from Greek to Syriac.[25] Al-Safdi the fourteenth-century biographer summed it up: The translators used two

21 W.M. Watt, op. cit., pp. 41–42.
22 S.M. Afnan, op. cit., p. 14.
23 W.M. Watt, op. cit., p. 44.
24 S.M. Afnan, op. cit., p. 15.
25 Ibid., p. 21.

methods of translation. One is that the translator renders each Greek word by a single Arabic word of an exactly corresponding meaning. Thus establishing the translation of one word after the other until the whole has been translated. This is the method of Yuhanna ibn Bitriq, ibn al-Naima al-Himsi and others. The other method is that the translator grasps in his mind the meaning of the whole sentence and then renders it by a corresponding sentence in Arabic, regardless of the congruence or lack of the congruence of the individual words. This is the method of Hunain ibn Ishak and others. The first method is bad on two accounts. There are no corresponding Arabic words for all Greek words. Therefore, in this kind of translation many Greek expressions remain as they are. Construction and syntactic peculiarities are not the same in one language as in the other. Mistakes were also caused by the use of metaphors which are frequently used in all languages. Consequently the second method is better. Therefore Hunain's books need no revision, except in the field of mathematics which he did not completely master.[26]

This classification is somewhat conservative; the Arabic versions of Aristotle ranged from unintelligibly liberal to the absurdly free. But it is correctly noted that the pre-Hunain translators are of the literal type favoured by the Syriac translators.

Semitic languages are different from the peculiarities of Indon–European morphology and syntax which made the translation limited, difficult and partially failed to convey the idea precisely. The Falasifah never felt completely confident of the work of any of the translators. Al-Kindi and al-Farabi who were so closely associated with some of them hesitated to cast doubt on the correctness of the translations. Avicenna was frankly suspicious because he did not know Greek or Syriac himself. In his commentary on the Metaphysics, Averroes quoted from the versions of three separate translators, and sometimes of the same passage. This is ample evidence of the dissatisfaction if not distrust of the Falasifah.[27]

It does not take one long to realize the difficulties involved when putting Greek into Arabic; Arabic has no copula. The auxilary verb "to be" does not exist in Arabic and has become a great obstacle in making a logic statement. Thus, the translators had to introduce 'hūwa,' in its stead, A is B = A hūwa B. In this case, the translators soon found themselves helpless in dealing with metaphysics. The precise concept of BEING as established from Existence proves impossible to express. The translators had suggested several words such as āṣbaḥa, ṣara, wajada and as forth but none of these words was the exact equivalent. Of six different words: al-wujūd, al-hūwiyyah, al-kaynūnah, al-'isiyyah, al->inniyah, al->iṯhbāt

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26 F.E. Peters, *Aristotle and the Arabs*, New York, New University Press, 1968, pp. 63–64.
27 S.M. Afnan, *op. cit.*, pp. 24–25.

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three were specially coined for the purpose. The absence of the copula denotes significant differences of thought between Indo–European and Semites. This existed in the past, yet as a result of Western education today, they are still unable to express the thought adequately.

There are no prefixes and suffixes in Arabic to convey precision of thought or shades of meaning. For instance, the Indo–European languages have the privative "A" which the Arabic has not, such as THEIST-ATHEIST. In many ways it is used "lā" auch as lā-nihā> iyy, which actually make the word compound. Although Arabic is very rich in expression of the opposition or contraries, to express the negation of notion is not so easy as in Greek.

And as Arabic had no compound words, there were some attempts at constructing compound words such as māhiyyah which the Mystics and Theologians felt compelled to adopt them.

Abstractions are almost absent in Arabic. This difficulty was overcome by the coining of a whole series of terms ending with the suffix -yyah such as wujūdiyyah, ghāiriyyah. This form is rare in early classical Arabic. What does occur as rāhbanīyyah, zabāniyyah in the Quran are not abstraction in the strict sense of the term. Some scholars even suggested that this form was copied from Syriac which in turn adopted it from the Greek "ia", the common suffix denoting an abstraction.

After all, the Falasifah lacked of initiative on their part to coin special terms of their own. They owed most, if not all, of their old terms to the translators.[28]

In spite of these difficulties philosophical terminology grew out of the concrete as the result of the flourishing and advanced stage of Islamic–Arabic literature. As a matter of fact the vocabulary is not frequently borrowed. Loan-words denoting abstract concepts actually have a habit of travelling far beyond the original confines. Somewhat artificial terminology could be found as a result of copying and translating from Greek, not as a natural growth of the Arabic thought. These are melting pots in which philosophical idiom of Arabic has been formed and created. In this creation the Arabic gained great advantages. It is true that the great richness of Arabic vocabulary had nothing to equal it in abstract terminology. It is true that the immense synonyms which linguists were fond of emphasizing stood in direct contrast to terms of speculative thought. But it is equally true that these facts and others prove to us that Arabic has plenty of resources enabling it to carry and digest the Greek thought, and reproduce them in a new form. One of these resources is grammar. It is developed on the basis of a correct reading and interpretation of the Quran. The establishment of grammar gave new connotations and mean-

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28 *Ibid.*, pp. 29–34.

ings to some of the common words in the languages thus made them technical terms of logic and philosophy such as ﹥iḍāfah, ﹥isnād. It seems perfectly proper and helpfule.[29]

Arabic expanded to meet the needs by development from without and from within. Arabic borrowed loan-words directly from various foreign languages. These words were sometimes suitably arabised and sometimes left in their original form, such as jawhar and māddah from Persian words and ﹥usṭuqs, hayūlā, nāmūs from Greek.[30] It was the Arabisation of the conquered provinces rather than their military conquest that is the true wonder of the Arab expansion.[31] By the eleventh century Arabic had become not only the chief idiom of everyday use from Persia to Pyrene, but also the chief instrument of culture, superseding old culture languages like Coptic, Aramic, Greek and Latin.[32] As by the development from within it formed new words from old roots giving new meaning to old words. 'Absolute', for example, is a notion unknown and unnecessary to the simple minded society of the pre-Islamic Arabs. Absolute is mujarrad, in Arabic, the passive participle of jarada, to strip, peel, denude, a term normally used to locusts and connected with the word jarad locust and jarid leaf.[33] And among the most common method of express thought is by symbolisation, extraction and implication, (majāz, takhrij and taḍmīn).[34] The language created in these ways possessed a vivid concrete and pictorial vocabulary, with each term having deep roots in a purely Arab past and tradition.

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29 *Ibid.*, p. 26.
30 *Ibid.*
30 *Ibid.*
31 B. Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 132.
32 *Ibid.*
33 *Ibid.*
34 S.M. Afnan, *op. cit.*, p. 28.