

The Abbasid connection

The circulation of linguistic theories among Greek, Syriac and Arabic scholars, 8th-10th cent.

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The connection between the Greek, Syriac and Arabic linguistic thinking has been widely explored since the 19th century and is still the object of a lively debate. However, the focus being on the possible influence of Greek texts first on Syriac and then on Arabic linguistics, researchers have mainly explored the Late Antique and Early Islamic period. Moreover, the potential sources that have been taken into account are Hellenistic Greek authors (beside Aristotle), sometimes through the intermediary of their Syriac reception.

This approach has certainly been fruitful as far as the Greek-Syriac connection is concerned, the Syriac authors translating and quoting explicitly their Greek sources¹. However, as far as Arabic grammar and linguistics are concerned, the research of Greek models has led to a dead end: in the absence of clear and direct borrowings and translations for the earliest stages of Arabic linguistic reflection, scholars split between the partisans of a purely native origin of Arabic grammar and those of a Greek influence, evidence of which is to be found in the arguments of rhetorical and logical teachings. Moreover, the patent influence of the Greek authors onto their Syriac epigones has been studied mainly through explicitly mentioned models and clearly structured pieces of linguistic theories. Hardly any research has been conducted on the underground circulation of ideas and authors, such as Apollonius Dyscolus, and even this research has been limited to parts of speech and the sequence of examples, without ever considering translations and incorporations of texts.

In this workshop we propose to move forward along the chronological axe and to broaden the perspective, from the origins of Syriac and Arabic linguistic thinking towards a more complex picture of the ideas on language circulating among Byzantine Greek, Syriac and Arabic scholars, between 8th and 10th cent. Leaving aside the problem of the origins of grammatisation, is it possible to observe mutual influences and convergences of ideas?

The translation movement from Greek into Arabic (often with a Syriac intermediary) that animated this epoch has been intensely studied. The activity of lexicographers, who were often responsible for the translations, has been celebrated and studied to a large extent. However, little attention has been paid to the circulation of grammatical theories that must have accompanied the collaboration of polyglot translators coming from different linguistic communities and cultural backgrounds². Moreover, the presence of Greek grammarians in cities where Syriac and Arabic grammarians dwelled has not sufficiently been taken into consideration. To give just an example, at the beginning of the 9th cent., in Edessa, a city under Islamic rule, Michael the Syncellus, an Arab native of Jerusalem, wrote a Greek grammar (*Peri syntaxeos*) which enjoyed great popularity, from the moment it appeared.³ Contemporary of Syncellus was the Chalcedonian bishop Theodore Abu Qurrah, a native from Edessa, who wrote works in Greek, Syriac, and Arabic, while the Miaphysite bishop of the city Theodosius translated patristic works from Greek into Syriac.⁴

Nikolai Serikoff, in two recent articles (2018 and 2019), argues for the circulation of an adaptation of a grammatical work by Choeroboscus (Greek grammarian who taught at the University of

¹ Essentially the *Téchne Grammatikè*, Theodosius' *Canons*, Ammonius' reductions of the Aristotelian and Stoic logical corpus.

² Mavroudi 2014, p.295: "Although several translators were Christians of the same variety as Byzantium, the translation movement is supposed to have been uninterested in its contemporary or near contemporary Byzantine learning, and to have been exhausted by the end of the tenth century".

³ Cf Mavroudi 2014, p. 329: "A document that could lead to a better understanding of how approaches to Greek grammar may have influenced the organization of Arabic grammar as a discipline is the treatise on syntax by Michael the Synkellos", see pp. 329-332 on Synkellos' grammar.

⁴ Tannous (2020), ch. 8.

Constantinople in the 8th-9th cent.) in a Syro-Arabic environment, from which the East Syriac translator and polymath Hunayn Ibn Ishaq would have produced a grammar of Greek for an Arabic-speaking public. To this same author is attributed the Arabic grammar based upon the model of the Greek *Téchnè Grammatikè* contained in a Judeo-Arabic manuscript from the Cairo Genizah that has recently been found and published by Nadia Vidro (2020). Actually, more generally, it is almost certain that the circulation of Greek, Syriac and Arabic intellectuals through the several cities of the Middle East, both in the Byzantine and Islamic empires hosting rich libraries and cultural centers should be regarded as an opportunity of exchanging language descriptions, grammatical and lexicographical tools as well as ideas on language.

This is the hypothesis that this workshop intends to explore about later Greek, Syriac and Arabic (meta)linguistic interactions, on the basis of which we will propose some new research directions.

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