

Pierre Larcher

Linguistique arabe et pragmatique, préface de Kees Versteegh, Beirut, Presses de l'Ifo [PIFD, 281], 438 p., 2014, ISBN: 978-2-35129-401-8, 30 €.

The book contains a collection of twenty articles, published between 1983-1997, that are the result of Pierre Larcher's innovative reflection upon the connection between the Arabic linguistics and the domain of modern Pragmatics. The articles were mostly drawn from the author's (unpublished) doctorate thesis,¹ defended in 1980 and prepared between 1971-1979, devoted to pragmatic notions and concepts within the Arabic grammatical tradition, with focus on the opposition *inšā'/ḥabar* (performance/information or performative/constative). Larcher's pioneering work in the field of Arabic Pragmatics, whose research means were to be "invented" (in the archeological sense of the term), was very little understood at the time; it started arousing interest, among researchers in Arabic linguistics, not earlier than the 90s, when the domain of modern Pragmatics itself, as a subfield of linguistics, reached its full maturity. The central post-Classical concept of *inšā'* itself, when first approached and explained by P. Larcher, in the 80s, was left by others in penumbra or disregarded, being considered an obscure notion, whose impact and role in Arabic grammatical thought has only recently been acknowledged (cf. Versteegh's attestation, "Preface", p. 5).

The syntagm *linguistique arabe*, in the French title, allows for a double interpretation: as "linguistics produced in Arabic (in the Arabic linguistic Tradition) and applied to the Arabic language", which constitutes the domain of investigation in the first part of the book; and as "linguistics of the Arabic language" (*linguistique de l'arabe*) that applies to the approach included in the second part.

The articles, initially scattered over various journals, are brought together in the present book. As Kees Versteegh states in the "Preface", "the present volume will make it much easier for the specialist to read them as a coherent whole". As someone who had read most of the articles long before their inclusion in this volume, I was surprised, when re-reading them in the new disposition (similar to the alignment of a series of paintings, sharing one and the same theme, spotlighted in an exhibition hall) to discover that their continuity was highly relevant, adding weight and significance to the content of each article and to the whole.

We need to emphasize a significant feature. Most of the studies pertaining to the field of Pragmatics, applied to the Arabic language, focus on pragmatic

1 Pierre Larcher, *Information et performance en science arabo-islamique du langage*, thèse de doctorat 3^e cycle, Université de Paris III, 1980.

aspects identifiable within the various types of colloquial discourses (dialects). While this is a justifiable trend—since Pragmatics itself, after defining its operational area in Western linguistics (in the second half of the 20th century) took the ‘colloquial’ (the conversation or live discourse) as its domain of investigation—the reviewed book has the merit to be the first consistent, exhaustive contribution to focus on what the Arabic Classical linguistic heritage has produced in matters of pragmatic thought. It constitutes a peculiar, much needed approach that demonstrates the existence of an ‘Arabic-Islamic Pragmatics before the letter’ and points out to its foundation and evolution in the medieval period (8th to the 14th centuries AD).

The articles are distributed in two main parts comprising a multitude of topics that can only be summarized here. The first part (p. 5-225) entitled “Arabic Linguistic Tradition and Pragmatics”, is divided into three sections: the first (articles I-III) contains the showpiece of the gallery, a *tour de force* on the central pragmatic concept of *inšāʾ* (performative utterance, performance); the second (articles IV-IX) encompasses detailed analyses of some peculiar pragmatic elements within the Arabic Post-Classical grammatical theory (such as the self-referentiality or *bihi* semantics, performatives of the type *faʿaltu*, delocutive derivation, presuppositions, pragmatic values of the particles assimilated to the verb, a return to the category of *inšāʾ* as object of occultation); the third (chapters X-XIII) refers to the “the sources”, *i.e.* three grammarians whose works are veritable sources of pragmatic thought (Raḍī al-Dīn al-Astarābādī, Ibn al-Ḥāḡib and ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Ġurġānī). In fact, this first part rises to a panoramic view of the Arabic Pragmatics *avant la lettre*, by inquiring a large number of Arabic Classical texts on a variety of pragmatic topics, using the modern Pragmatics’ means. From this perspective, the book’s first part lays the foundation stone of the systematic “Pragmatics of Classical Arabic”, which is—borrowing the formulation from the title of a pivotal article (not included in this volume)—“[a] Pragmatics before the Pragmatics: medieval, Arabic, and Islamic”.²

Among the pragmatic topics approached in the first part of the book, the most impactful is certainly the concept of *inšāʾ* (performance), to which the author devotes, roughly, the half of this part’s content. The prominent fact is

2 Pierre Larcher, « Une pragmatique avant la pragmatique: “médiévale”, “arabe” et “islamique” », *Histoire Épistémologie Langage* 20/1 (1998), p. 101-116, traduit en arabe sous le titre « Tadāwuliyya qabl al-tadāwuliyya: hiya tadāwuliyya qarnwastīyya ʿarabiyya islāmiyya », *Iṭlālāt ʿalā l-naẓariyyāt al-lisāniyya wa-l-dalāliyya fi-l-niṣf al-tānī min al-qarn al-ʿiṣrīn, muḥtarāt muʿarraba bi-īṣrāf wa-tansīq*, ed. ʿIzz al-Dīn Maġdūb, Tunis, Académie Tunisienne des Sciences, des Lettres et des Arts-Beīt al-Hikma, 2012, 1, p. 499-518.

the author's early discovery (in 1971!) of the *inšā'* category and the opposition (perceived as fascinating, p. 9) it forms with the category of *ḥabar* (information). P. Larcher's pioneering, cut-edge research in this field, extended over twenty years of laborious efforts, brings to light the surprisingly developed reflections, forged within the Arabic linguistic Tradition, upon "how to do things with Arabic words" (paraphrasing John Langshaw Austin).³

Whoever is interested in the Arabic pragmatics before the letter, and needs to retrace the notion of 'performance' within the major texts of the Arabic linguistic tradition, finds in P. Larcher's articles on *inšā'* not only the explanation of the concept itself, but its much needed history, as well. In early 90s, coming across this term within such major texts (*Talḥīṣ* and others) by the rhetorician al-Qazwīnī (d. 739/1338), I was, myself, fascinated by it. Aware that such an elaborated concept couldn't have come ex nihilo, I started inquiring about its roots, to have the revelation that the excavation and restoration work had already been exceptionally well done by P. Larcher, in his doctorate thesis and further on in a series of articles, most of them included in the present book. His archeological work on *inšā'* has the prominent merit of clearly demonstrating at least two far-reaching aspects: 1. that this is a late category, dating from the second half of the 13th century; 2. that it is not a purely grammatical notion, but a trans-disciplinary one, whose roots and evolution—as demonstrated by P. Larcher—proved to stem from *fiqh* and *uṣūl al-fiqh*, as well as logic, rhetoric, and even theology. Thus, he reconstructed the term from elements scattered over the wider field encompassing the Arabic linguistic Tradition and the Arab-Islamic science of language. One might notice that the author analyzes the concept preponderantly in the grammar's field, especially within the work of an exceptional author, discovered and brought to light by P. Larcher: Raḍī al-Dīn al-Astarābādī (d. around 688/1289), who—as stated several times by the author—is the representative figure that ideally illustrates the pragmatic tendencies in the Arabic linguistic Tradition, by virtue of going in the same direction as many of his confreres, but much further than any of them, thus offering the advantage of "revealing tendencies that, otherwise, could have remained unnoticed" (p. 90).

In the second part of the book, entitled "Linguistics of Arabic and Pragmatics" (p. 226-380, chapters XIV-XX), the author inquires modern Western linguistics with the means of the Arabic pragmatics; he brings to the fore semantic-pragmatic concepts, forged in modern linguistics, scrutinizing them in an original manner, by including in the analysis points of view and reflections on the same topics, produced, centuries before, within the Arabic linguistic

3 John Langshaw Austin, *How to do things with words?*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1962.

Tradition. While this approach leads, sporadically, to a comparative view, the author's clear purpose is rather to put the two types of discourses (that of modern pragmatics and that of the ancient Arab grammarians and rhetoricians) in the position to dialogue one with another. He positions himself as dialogue mediator, creator of contextuality, and interpreter of this perspective that integrates Arabic elements. As an illustration, in Chapter XIV (p. 229-265), Anscombe's theory of delocutive derivation is questioned through examples related to the same topic, excerpts from the Arabic linguistic Tradition, where the role of the ellipse and that of the semantic-pragmatic process of derivation are given peculiar attention, which leads to a more nuanced analysis of the illocutionary (French: *illocutoire*) derivation. This type of approach substantiates the idea that the Arabic pragmatics before the letter is liable to reveal to modern pragmatics innovative, refined suggestions of interpretation.

Similarly, in Chapter XVI (p. 291-316), discussing the category of *maf'ūl muṭlaq* (internal complement of a verb, which is semantically a resultative complement), the author analyses it within the work of some leading Arab grammarians (such as Sibawayhi, Ibn Ya'īš, Ibn al-Ḥāğib, al-Astarābādī, etc.), pointing out to the fact that their interpretations lead to a "performative hypothesis" (stating the existence, in the deep structure, of a performative verb that is elided in the surface structure) *avant la lettre*, developed in Western linguistics within the frame of the generative semantics and pragmatics, by the contribution of Austin, Ross, Schreiber, Greenbaum, Ducrot and others. Interpretations of the internal complement with enunciative incidence, forged within the Arabic linguistic Tradition, are placed in dialogical relation with modern interpretations, their analysis driving the author to revisit the interpretation of the illocutionary act, based on a *I-reading* and a *you-reading*, and propose a new classification of the internal complements. Likewise, the Chapter XVII creates a dialogical context for two pragmatic (in the sense that the 'sign' is analyzed in relation to the 'interpreter') discourses, situated at a time distance of seven centuries one from the other, on one and the same topic: the particle *lākin(na)* at al-Astarābādī and the conjunction *mais* (but, however) at Anscombe and Ducrot. The title of the article contains, indeed, the direct reference ("[...] Fragment d'une histoire comparée de la linguistique") to the author's standpoint that the term 'linguistics' refers, on the one hand, to the linguistics developed in the 19th-20th centuries, in Europe and the United States of America (thus implying the traits of 'general', 'occidental', and 'modern') and, on the other hand, to "the abstract class of discourses, of scientific pretension, on language, without restriction of area or era" (p. 317). By adopting al-Astarābādī's pragmatic point of view, stating that the particle at question conveys the meaning of a "preventive rectification" (p. 321), and relying on

additional points of view expressed within the Arabic linguistic Tradition, the author in fact demonstrates the validity of his statement that “one can utilize the linguistic discourses of the past to ‘question’ the discourses of the present” (p. 318) since such a free of constraints approach offers the chance to integrate into the pragmatic thought elements from the past that prove to be productive.

From the above detailed point of view, the second part of the book, emphasizing the contribution of the Arab Classical thought, constitutes an invaluable chapter of the larger, encompassing domain of Pragmatics’ history; this side complements the act of laying the foundation of the systematic “Pragmatics of Classical Arabic”, achieved in the first part, and together they inaugurate a scholarly legitimate, recuperative and integrative trend, whose acknowledgement and endorsement should not be delayed, in the eventuality that the stage of “historical Pragmatics” (still focusing on modern linguistics and the area of English) would be transcended towards an integrative “History of the Linguistic Pragmatic Thought”.

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