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GRAMMARIANS DIFFER ON THE REGENT GOVERNING THE MUBTADA (SUBJECT) AND KHABAR (PREDICATE)

Abstract. *This article offers a comparative analysis of the views of medieval Arabic grammarians on one of the contested questions of syntax (nahw): the regent (omil) that governs the nominative case (rafʿ) of the mubtada (subject) and the khabar (predicate). It sets out the three positions on the question – those of the Basran school, of Sibawayh and of the Kufan school – and then examines in detail al-Zamakhshari’s Basran formulation in al-Mufasssal, together with the critical commentaries of Qasim al-Khwarizmi and Taj al-Din al-Jandi on that work and al-Jandi’s logical refutation of the Kufan theory of “mutual requirement.” The article shows that the question rests not only on grammatical but also on logical and philosophical foundations, and that the commentary (sharh) tradition served not merely to explain but also to generate new scholarly ideas.*

Keywords: *Arabic grammar, nahw, mubtada, khabar, regent (omil), nominative (rafʿ), predication (isnad), al-Zamakhshari, al-Mufasssal, al-Khwarizmi, al-Jandi, Basran school, Kufan school.*

INTRODUCTION

One of the disputed questions of syntax (nahw) among the scholars of the field is that of the regent (omil – the factor that governs case inflection) of the mubtada (subject) and the khabar (predicate). Three different views are advanced on this matter. According to the scholars of Basra, the regent of the mubtada and khabar is inchoation (ibtido) – that is, their being free of overt (lexical) regents (al-Jami, 2015:155). According to Sibawayh, the regent of the mubtada is inchoation, while the regent of the khabar is the mubtada (Sibawayh, 1988:126-127). The scholars of Kufa held that the regent of the mubtada is the khabar and the regent of the khabar is the mubtada (al-Anbari, 2009:40).

MAIN PART

That Mahmud al-Zamakhshari shared the view of the Basran scholars on this matter may be seen clearly from his words: “The mubtada and the khabar are two nouns, free of overt regents, combined for the purpose of being linked to one another through predication (the relation between subject and predicate) – as in the sentence *زيد منطلق* (Zayd has set out)” (al-Zamakhshari, 2004:32). Here the aim of their being separated from overt regents is to free them of overt regents such as *كان وإن وحسبت وأخواتها* and the like (which affect the case of the subject and predicate). For if these regents enter upon the mubtada and khabar, the two come under their influence, and the case of the mubtada and khabar then changes not because of an abstract (semantic) regent but because of those overt regents (al-Zamakhshari, 2004:156).

The mubtada and khabar’s being free of regents for the purpose of being linked to one another through predication is the cause of their coming in the *rafʿ* (nominative) case. For predication (*nisbat*) is a meaning that encompasses both of them at once in a single manner; by its nature it is not realised without two sides – the side to which the relation is directed and the side that is related. A similar situation exists with the particle *كَأَنَّ* (*ka-anna*): since the meaning of likeness requires both the thing likened and the thing to which it is likened, the particle *كَأَنَّ* operates upon both elements. The mubtada resembles the agent (*faʿil*) in being the subject of predication (*musnad ilayh*), and the khabar resembles it in being the second element of the sentence (al-Khwarizmi, 1990:255).

Citing the full text of *al-Mufasssal*, Qasim al-Khwarizmi noted two critical qualifications to al-Zamakhshari’s view on the mubtada and khabar.

The first qualification concerns al-Zamakhshari’s statement that “the mubtada and khabar’s being free of regents for the purpose of being linked to one another through predication is the cause of their coming in the *rafʿ* (nominative) case.” The import of this expression is that, when a relation of predication arises between two nouns and no other overt regents enter upon them, this state shows that they are entitled to inflection; but it does not definitively determine that they come specifically in the *rafʿ* inflection.

The second qualification: if their coming in the *rafʿ* (nominative) were determined solely by their being free of overt regents for the purpose of being linked through predication, then what need remains to adduce the resemblance of both the mubtada

and the khabar to the agent? This could only be interpreted as “Their inflection is not a specific inflection but a general state of being inflected” – yet the author’s text does not bear such an interpretation.

Analysing this subject critically, al-Khwarizmi tries to re-examine its theoretical foundations, which testifies to the highly developed culture of intellectual diversity and scholarly debate in the science of nahw. The commentator sets out his scholarly-theoretical analysis thus: “The inflection of the mubtada and khabar, and in particular their coming in the nominative (raf‘) form, has a definite grammatical basis. The phenomenon of inflection (e‘rob) is directly connected with syntactic linkage and the formation of sentence structure. That is, when a predicative relation (isnad) arises between the mubtada and khabar, a new predicative meaning is produced, and inflection is the means of expressing this meaning grammatically. The reason the mubtada and khabar come specifically with the raf‘ inflection is explained by their resemblance to other units in the nominative state. The mubtada resembles the agent, since it too is the subject of predication, and therefore comes in the nominative. The khabar, in respect of its predicativity, is compared to the imperfect verb (mudari‘) – it gives information about the subject and brings about a judgement, and the imperfect verb likewise expresses a judgement and has the property of connection with time. On the basis of this resemblance, the mubtada and khabar’s being free of overt regents ensures their coming in the raf‘ inflection” (al-Khwarizmi, 1990:257).

Umar al-Jandi too begins by expressing a critical attitude to the definition the author of *al-Mufasssal* gives of the mubtada and khabar. In his view, uniting the two within a single definition on the basis of their belonging to the category of the “noun” is not methodologically sound.

For, from the standpoint of grammatical status and syntactic function, these two elements have a mutually distinct essence, and gathering them under a single definition contradicts the logical criteria of the theory of definition. The scholarly requirement of a definition is that it should express the essence of the concept being defined precisely and determinately (al-Astarabadi, 1971:196). Yet the difference between the mubtada and khabar is manifested in their functional-semantic role in the sentence: the mubtada occurs as the subject of predication (musnad ilayh) and the khabar as the predicate (musnad).

Therefore, uniting them solely on the basis of their belonging to the category of the “noun” means contenting oneself with defining through the common genus, which leaves the differentia (fasl) out of account. As a result, the definition descends not to the level of a full definition (hadd) but to that of a description (rasm).

Umar al-Jandi explains this approach through a logical analogy: defining a human being and a horse as “a moving body” (الإنسان والفرس جسم متحرك), though it expresses their common features – corporeality and motion – cannot disclose the distinctive essence of each. Likewise, gathering the muftada and khabar under a single definition on the basis only of their belonging to the noun category does not sufficiently illuminate their distinctive syntactic-functional nature (al-Jandi, 2002:303).

If, by way of objection, it were explained that the reason for gathering the muftada and khabar under one definition is that both possess the property of being free of regents, al-Jandi answers: “If the author’s aim had truly been to define them on the basis of this very common feature, the structure of the definition too would have had to reflect that commonality fully and precisely. For, according to the theory of definition, if two concepts are united on the basis of a common genus or shared attribute, that genus or attribute must be expressed openly as the central component of the definition.” From this standpoint, it would be logically more correct for the author to express the muftada and khabar not merely by their belonging to the “noun” category – المبتدأ والخبر هما الاسمان – but rather as “two nouns in the nominative by reason of inchoation, free of overt regents for predication” (المرفوعان بالابتداء هما الاسمان المجردان للإسناد) – that is, as two nouns freed of regents specifically for the predicative relation. For if a human being and a horse are defined as a moving body, both fall within the definition, since both are moving bodies; and if the aim is to define them by their common feature – animality – then that commonality must be clearly indicated in the definition. Otherwise the definition expresses only their common side and not their distinctive features (al-Jandi, 2002:303).

Having set out his views, al-Jandi explains the author’s gathering of the muftada and khabar under a single definition thus: had the author defined the muftada and the khabar each separately, a serious objection to the definition would have arisen through an example such as أقائم الزيدان (Are the two Zayds standing?). The essence of the matter is that the grammarians distinguish the muftada as the subject of the judgement

(musnad ilayh) and the khabar as the bearer of the judgement (musnad). This distinction appears logically correct and consistent in an ordinary sentence structure; but in the construction أفائم الزيدان the situation becomes complex. If the mubtada were defined separately and strictly designated as the subject of predication, then, although the first part of this sentence, أفائم, stands in the position of the mubtada, it is in meaning the predicate – the bearer of the judgement – producing an incongruity between definition and practical usage. Likewise, if the khabar were defined separately and confined to being the “predicate,” the second part of the sentence, الزيدان, appears in the position of the khabar, whereas it is in fact the subject of predication. Hence the author’s presenting them under a single definition is a scholarly-methodical approach aimed at removing the contradictions arising from exceptional cases and preserving consistency in the definition (al-Jandi, 2002:304-305).

The author of *al-Mufasssal* said that the mubtada and khabar’s being stripped (mujarrad) for predication – that is, free of overt regents – is the regent of their coming in the nominative (their “raiser”). Here, by “raiser” is meant the factor that performs the act of raising, not the cause of the raising; for the cause of the raising is something other than its regent. The cause of the raising is the resemblance of the mubtada and khabar to the agent, while its regent is their being stripped for predication. Yet their being free of overt regents for predication is not an overt (word-form) regent but an abstract state; it is not directly expressed in language but is understood through meaning. To the objection that “the meaning of being free of overt regents is nothing but the absence of overt regents, and so the absence of overt regents itself becomes the regent,” the commentator answered: “The meaning intended by being free of overt regents is the mubtada’s being the subject upon which the judgement is borne and the khabar’s being the bearer of the judgement. This definition is transmitted from Shaykh Abu Ali and is a positive (existential) attribute, not a state of non-existence. More clearly still: the meaning intended by the grammarians’ words ‘stripping a noun of regents so that predication may be made to it’ is not a reference to a privative (non-existential) state but means presenting the noun without a regent – and presenting a noun without a regent is undoubtedly an existential state” (al-Jandi, 2002:306).

Some representatives of the Kufan school of nahw advance a distinctive theoretical approach on the question of the inflection of the mubtada and khabar. In their view, both

the mubtada and the khabar are reciprocally the raiser of one another; that is, each of the mubtada and khabar acts as a grammatical regent affecting the other's coming in the nominative (Rashid Ahmad, 2004:403).

The Kufan grammarians ground this view in the syntactic interdependence of the mubtada and khabar. They stress that the mubtada and khabar form an inseparable unity, since neither can, without the other, produce a sentence expressing a complete meaning. In the construction زيد أخوك (Zayd is your brother), for example, neither word is regarded separately as an independent sentence; only as a result of their mutual predicative linkage does a complete sentence structure come into being (al-Jandi, 2002:308).

For this reason the Kufan grammarians explain the grammatical relation between the mubtada and khabar through the principles of “عدم الانفكاك” (mutual inseparability) and “الافتضاء المتبادل” (mutual requirement). In their view, it is precisely because of this mutual requirement that the mubtada and khabar are to be regarded as regents acting upon one another.

The Kufan scholars supported this view by analogy with the mutual influence between أتيا and تدعوا in the Qur'anic verse أَيُّهَا مَا تَدْعُوا. In their view, a mutual grammatical influence is observed in this example too, and this serves as an analogical basis for demonstrating the theory that the mubtada and khabar may operate upon one another (al-Rajihi, 1980:403).

Umar al-Jandi expresses a critical attitude to these views of the Kufan school, stressing that their thesis – “the mubtada raises the khabar, and the khabar raises the mubtada” – contradicts important principles of the theory of the regent established in nahw. He notes that, according to grammatical theory, the regent is always posited before the governed element (ma'mul). If the mubtada is accepted as the regent of the khabar and the khabar as the regent of the mubtada, then it follows that the khabar must be before the mubtada and the mubtada before the khabar – a logically impossible situation.

Al-Jandi's second objection is connected with another rule accepted in nahw: when a regent is already present in a word-form, another regent cannot enter and operate upon it, for in grammatical theory the combining of two regents upon one governed element is not deemed permissible. This rule is confirmed by practical examples: in the sentence زيد قائما كان the khabar comes in the accusative because of the verb كان, even though

“Zayd,” performing the function of mubtada, is also present in the sentence; likewise, in *إن زيدا قائما* the noun comes in the accusative through the effect of *إن*, and although the khabar too is present, it cannot affect the noun in respect of inflection (al-Jandi, 2002:305-307).

Both *أيّ* and *تدعوا* in the noble verse the Kufan scholars adduced to support their view are recognised, by agreement, as regents – that is, as grammatically operative elements. But when it comes to the question of the mubtada and khabar, both are, without dispute, units belonging to the noun category; and it is known that, by the grammatical rule, the basic principle in a noun is that it is not itself independently a regent. That is, a noun usually comes as a governed element under the influence of another regent, and its performing the function of a regent itself is grammatically not accepted (al-Jandi, 2002:308).

In this way, through these arguments, Umar al-Jandi showed that the Kufan view of the mubtada and khabar standing in a relation of mutual regency is not sound from the standpoint of grammatical theory.

On this subject, al-Jandi consistently defends the Basran school’s idea of an “abstract regent” (inchoation) with the aid of logical analogies and sharply rejects the Kufan school’s theory of mutual requirement (*al-iqtida al-mutabadal*). Al-Khwarizmi, for his part, exposes some of the considered approaches in al-Zamakhshari’s formulation and strives to clarify the essence of the question from the standpoint of syntactic-functional relatedness. This scholarly debate shows that a distinctive diversity of views and a high academic culture existed in the linguistics of the medieval Islamic East.

On the question of the regent of the mubtada and khabar, al-Jandi takes a firm theoretical position and refutes the Kufan views on a logical basis; in his view, the relation between regent and governed element must be one-directional. Qasim al-Khwarizmi, for his part, approaches this question more flexibly and discloses certain ambiguities in al-Zamakhshari’s statements.

The wide use of the question-and-answer method in both works enhances their didactic significance; through this method, complex theoretical questions are conveyed to the reader in an intelligible and systematic manner.

CONCLUSION

The subject of the regent of the mubtada and khabar was once again confirmed to be among the complex problems of the science of nahw that have not only a grammatical

but also a logical and philosophical foundation. In general, the present study discloses the important role of the commentary (sharh) tradition in the history of Arabic grammar – not merely in giving explanation, but in shaping new scholarly ideas.

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