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The Failures of Translation across Incommensurable Knowledge Systems: A Case Study of Arabic Grammar Instruction

Allon J. Uhlmann

School of Archaeology and Anthropology,
The Australian National University

In a 1995 paper, Ian Keen took on the issue of incommensurability between systems of knowledge, demonstrating the power of ethnographically grounded analysis to move beyond the abstractions that have dominated debates over cognitive universality and variability. Keen juxtaposes two different terminological systems that seek to capture a particular behavioural reality. One system is the analytic conceptual framework that anthropologists have applied to Yolngu kinship and social organisation. The other is the very conceptual system that Yolngu draw on in living out that sphere of life which anthropologists designate as kinship.

The metaphorical and metonymic logic of these two conceptual systems are incommensurable, leading to 'anomalies', as it were, in translation. The anthropological conceptual framework is heir to a long historical tradition that harks back to formal Aristotelian logic, and is predicated on an ontology of distinct, bounded entities embodied in the European notions of person and property (cf. Uhlmann 2006: 49ff). The application of this conceptual framework to Yolngu realities imposes that specific logics on Yolngu concepts.

The Yolngu conceptual framework is different for various reasons. Unlike the anthropological framework, it is a lived or 'enacted' conceptual framework whose application and use is quite different from the analytic, descriptive, external position that the anthropological conceptual framework adopts. Moreover, the underlying metaphors and metonyms that inhere in the Yolngu conceptual framework are quite different (Keen 1995: 504–5). As Keen writes,

Concepts such as lineage, clan, descent group, and corporate group depend on images of segmentary structure, external boundaries, and taxonomic hierarchy. These constructs go hand in hand with concepts of land and country, which also entail spatial metaphors of enclosure and boundaries and which imply hierarchies of small bounded places contained in larger ones of a different type. None of these tropes fit Yolngu modes of 'group' identity and relations, which involve images drawn from the human body and plants, and beliefs about ancestral journeys and traces. Far from being constituted by enclosure within boundaries, Yolngu 'group' identities, like those of place, extend outward from foci. Connections among such identities are not those of enclosing sets but open and extendible 'strings' of connectedness. (Keen 1995: 502)

The result is a series of anomalies, whereby Yolngu usage would seem to violate the basic rules of logic when reconstituted in anthropological terms. For example, several *malas* are said by Yolngu to make a *mala*, and groups with distinct *ba:purru* identities may also have a common *ba:purru* identity (Keen 1995: 519–20). Keen argues that such offences against Aristotelian logic are a product of the imposition of an anthropological conceptual framework—a discourse which is external to social reality and steeped in implicit European tropes—on the Yolngu lived logic of practice.

Such grounded analyses of specific cultural clashes in lived systems of logic can advance our understanding of the sociocultural influence of logic past the abstract and all-too-often moralistic debates that ensued after Lucien Lévy-Bruhl first posed the question of cognitive variability well over a century ago. But instances in which the differences between conceptual systems can be observed in detail are not easily found. They would typically require a contrast of two culturally or historically distinct conceptual frameworks that seek to conceptualise the same phenomenon. Keen's paper contrasted Indigenous and anthropological conceptualisations of Yolngu society. In what follows I will describe another case study which draws on two historically distinct sciences of the same phenomenon. The conceptualised phenomenon is Arabic grammar, and the two contrasting systems are the Orientalist and the Arab sciences of grammar as they are manifest in Arabic instruction.

University Arabic grammar instruction in Israel offers a particularly instructive instance of systemic incommensurability because it brings together students who have been schooled in the two different approaches to grammar, and enacts

a veritable cultural clash in cognition and knowledge. Arabic grammar instruction resembles the case study analysed by Keen in that in both studies the contrasted systems are ontologically different and are animated by different tropes. Furthermore, in both studies the two systems are entangled in an unequal power relationship in which the indigenous system of knowledge is in the subordinate position. And in both studies, indigenous practice, when observed through the prism of the dominant system, inevitably emerges as deficient, inconsistent or incomprehensible.

This paper relies on several years of ongoing ethnographic research in Israeli schools and universities¹ to analyse an instance where translation obscures the true meaning of the translated terms and camouflages the incommensurability between two alternative systems of knowledge. This case study points to the problematic nature of translation across different systems of knowledge. The scholarly investigation into Arabic grammar has been pursued in different historical and cultural settings. This paper discusses translation between the modern manifestations of two of these distinct scholarly traditions. One is the Arabic grammatical tradition, that is, the tradition of grammatical scholarship that was written in Arabic within the Islamic world. The other is the European, Orientalist tradition of Arabic grammatical analysis. Notwithstanding some mutual influences between the two traditions, they remain distinct intellectual enterprises that have evolved in different contexts striving to achieve different goals. Nominally, however, they appear equivalent in that both traditions seek to make sense of Arabic grammar (Suleiman 1989; Bohas et al. 1990/2006).

The Arabic tradition can be seen as a project of an Islamic theology of language that relies on metaphors of social action and social justice in order to establish the inherent logic of a canonical corpus of texts. This tradition also strives to emphasise the uniqueness of Arabic which it sees as epitomised in Arabic's desinential inflection², or as it is called in Arabic—*'i'rāb*—which literally translates as Arabisation. The Orientalist tradition is rooted in Latin grammar and adopts a comparative approach striving to identify the underlying structures of relationships into which words and parts of words can be inserted to form meaning. The two traditions are motivated by different imperatives, have evolved at different times, were produced and propagated with different

1 The formal ethnographic research began in 2004 and spanned over several periods of fieldwork which included observations of classroom instruction at schools and universities, participation in teacher seminars, interviews, open-ended discussions and a fair amount of library work. The analysis, however, is very much informed by other experiences as well, mostly my own academic trajectory having gone through the system myself several decades beforehand. In other words, this is as much a work of observant participation as it is of participant observation.

2 Desinential inflection is inflection that commonly modifies the end of words and varies inter alia according to the word's syntactic function.

technologies of knowledge production, and were learnt and taught in vastly different educational milieux. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the two are radically different bodies of knowledge.

The Arabic grammatical tradition forms the basis for Arabic instruction in the Arab public school system in Israel. Jewish schools, where instruction is conducted in Hebrew, follow the Orientalist tradition of Arabic grammar. This very Orientalist approach carries through to universities' advanced grammar instruction in departments of Arabic language and literature. Significantly, these departments assume prior Arabic proficiency on the part of students and are not intended as programs of Arabic language acquisition. Rather, they are advanced programs in Arabic language and culture, and their students are both Arab and Jewish.

The cognitive significance of the radical alterity between the two systems of knowledge becomes apparent in university Arabic grammar classes. The fact that these advanced classes rely on the European tradition in their instruction suits the learning experience of Jewish students who come to university having studied Arabic and Hebrew grammars at school in ways that draw upon the Orientalist tradition of grammar. Arab students, by contrast, having undergone their primary and secondary school instruction in Arabic grammar in a modern variety of the Arabic grammatical tradition, encounter a new approach at university, with fateful consequences. Notwithstanding the fact that Arab students learn Arabic throughout their schooling while Jews learn Arabic as a second foreign language at high school—and notwithstanding the fact that Arab university students are proficient at Arabic while Jewish university students are not—the Arab students struggle greatly and flounder in Arabic grammar classes at university.

Elsewhere I analysed this loaded educational context (Uhlmann 2012).³ A crucial aspect precipitating Arab underachievement in these courses is the profound incommensurability between, on the one hand, the grammatical common sense

3 In Uhlmann 2012 I also discuss the broad problematic relationship between Arabs and Arabic grammar—a relationship that is beset by Arabic's diglossia and the social relations of knowledge production and reproduction in the Arab world. The issue here is different, though, and more specific, namely a clash in the area of formal grammatical analysis. In other words, it is not the mastery of Arabic that is at issue here but rather the mastery of the formal elaboration of the grammar of Arabic. There is no question that Arab students are immeasurably superior to Jewish students in their practical mastery of Arabic grammar. Jewish students are rarely able to compose any independent prose in Arabic. Arab university students invariably can, albeit to varying degrees of grammatical competence. Yet while Arab students' mastery of Arabic prose construction and decoding—uneven though it may be—is superior to Jews', this mastery fails to translate into an advantage in the formal grammatical analysis of Arabic. The fact that Arabs spend years of school instruction learning a formal grammar of Arabic further accentuates this perverse reality whereby, notwithstanding their superior mastery of grammar in practice, and notwithstanding the greater time and effort they had spent at school on a formal grammar of Arabic, Arab undergraduate students are outperformed by Jews at university Arabic grammar.

that Israeli university instruction assumes, and, on the other hand, the grammar that Arab students actually learn at school. Crucially, the extent of this difference remains largely invisible to all parties to this educational exchange, be it Arab students, Jewish students, or university grammar instructors who are almost always Jewish graduates of the Jewish school system. This misrecognition hinders Arab students from understanding their incomprehension in systemic ways, and their instructors from effectively addressing this incomprehension. Consequently, Arab students experience their underperformance as personal failure. This has the pernicious effect of reconstituting social power relations as an individualised difference in learning capacity. A social difference in knowledge construction is transformed into individual failure of Arabs. What is more, this happens in a field of knowledge that is central to Arab identity and being.

The political implications of this situation are clearly significant, but I will not dwell on them here. Rather, I would like to focus on one of several mechanisms that seem to camouflage the profound incommensurability in knowledge systems, namely the translation of concepts between the two systems of grammatical knowledge.

A common practice in Arabic grammar instruction at Israeli universities is to render Arabic grammatical concepts in equivalent Hebrew concepts which are part of the contemporary Orientalist grammar of Arabic. These translations seem to work in that they generally designate the same objects as the original Arab term. But being rooted in a different system of knowledge, this sense of translatability is misleading. In fact, the original concept is not translated in any way. And the fact that the translation seems to 'work' makes it all too easy to mistake the two systems as somehow similar conceptual frameworks that are merely rendered in different languages. They are not.

In fact, the translation does not even 'work' as well as participants might think. The inevitable anomalies are kept invisible by several mechanisms. Israeli university instructors and educators in the Jewish school streams translate concepts from Arabic opportunistically and haphazardly. There is not a systematic translation of terms from Arabic to Hebrew which would inevitably stumble over refractory terms. But even when the translation of a particular term seems to succeed, this sense of success may be false. In the example I will discuss below a term in Hebrew is taken to be equivalent to an Arabic term. But this equivalence is an illusion. The Arabic term denotes a set of phenomena that is merely a subset of what is taken to be its equivalent Hebrew term. Because the instructional power relations are such that terms need to be translated from Arabic into Hebrew, but not vice versa, a false sense of equivalence between the

two terms can emerge. What the Arabic term designates is also designated by the seemingly equivalent Hebrew term. The fact that the opposite direction of translation would run into contradictions passes unnoticed.⁴

The seeming equivalence of the terms in the two systems is deceptive. People on both sides of the language/knowledge divide operate as if the two systems are somehow compatible. This false sense of commensurability then makes it impossible for stakeholders—most significantly baffled Arab university students of Arabic—to make sense of the difficulty that Arabs have with university Arabic grammar.

The areas of basic syntax and verb morphology are useful illustrations of these underappreciated limits on translatability. For example, Jewish students learn that the Arabic terms *fi'l* and *fā'il* are, respectively, the predicate and subject of a verbal sentence, and that the former normally precedes the latter in standard Arabic.

This might seem a reasonable equivalent to Arab constructions, such as ‘every sentence that is made up of a *fi'l* and a *fā'il* is called a verbal sentence (*jumla fi'liyya*)’ (*alnahw alwāḍiḥ*, elementary, book 1, p. 28).⁵ But note the lack of mention of word order in this quote. We shall return to the issue of word order below.

4 It would be an interesting intellectual exercise to think what would happen if an anthropological textbook on kinship, or a specific anthropological construct like segmentary kinship, were to be translated into Yolngu language in a way that would strive to be relevant to Yolngu concerns and to make sense to a Yolngu person of different kinship practices or what Latin grammar would look like if rendered in terms of the Arabic grammatical tradition. Readers familiar with Hebrew grammar might wish to juxtapose the contemporary grammar of Hebrew with the Qara'ite grammar of Hebrew that was produced in the Islamic world in the eleventh century (cf. Vidro 2011).

5 The discussion draws on the major Arabic textbooks used in Israel in both Arab and Jewish schools and at universities until 2010. For instruction on the Arab side I rely on three main texts. The first is the two volumes of the textbook by 'Alī al-Jārim and Muṣṭafā 'Amīn, *alnahw alwāḍiḥ fi qawā'id allughā al-'arabiyya*. This textbook, which was written in Egypt in the early twentieth century, was the main text used in Arab schools in Israel until the 1990s, and is still used in some Arab schools. The second textbook source is the series of *al-jadīd fi al-lughā*—the textbooks that are part of Israel's Ministry of Education's new curriculum for Arab schools. This series was introduced in the 1990s to replace the outmoded books by Jārim and 'Amīn, and is nominally used throughout Arab schools, although the extent to which it has transformed instruction in practice is not very clear. The third textbook to form the basis for the analysis that follows is volume 4 of *mabādī al-'arabiyya* by Rashīd al-Shartūniyy, which is universally used as a reference book by teachers and often inspires class preparation by teachers, although I have not heard of it actually being used as a textbook in class. While clearly each of the textbooks exhibits a unique approach, the commonalities among them are profound when contrasted with the textbooks that are used in the Jewish sector.

For Arabic instruction in the Jewish sector and at universities I draw primarily on the following books. Ya'aqov Landa'u, *madrikh bishvilei hapo'al ha'aravī* is the standard textbook for verb conjugation instruction beyond the very basic forms. It is used in both schools and universities. Dov 'Irōn, *tahbūr halashōn ha'aravī* remains a standard of Arabic syntax which is used at universities, and relied on by school teachers in the Jewish sector for specialised exercises and for explanations more generally. Yishai Peled's *Written Arabic Syntax: In Theory and Practice* (in Hebrew) is a recently published university-level textbook that is used at Tel Aviv University.

Another pair of terms—*mubtada'* and *khavar*—are taken by Arabic instructors in the Jewish streams and universities to be the terms that are used to designate the subject and predicate of a nominal sentence.⁶ This seems close to the terms' definition in Arab Arabic instruction, but there is an almost imperceptible yet significant difference. Consider 'Every sentence that is composed of a *mubtada'* and a *khavar* is called a nominal sentence' (*alnahw alwāḍiḥ*, elementary, book 1, p. 30); or 'The verbal sentence begins with a verb, while the nominal sentence does not begin with a verb but rather usually begins with a noun'; and 'The nominal sentence is a sentence that is headed by a noun (*ʾism*) and is composed of a *mubtada'* and a *khavar*' (*aljadīd*, grade 7, pp. 24, 110, respectively).

What the Arab textbooks say is that nominal sentences are sentences that contain a *mubtada'* and a *khavar*. Significantly, the textbooks do not say that *mubtada'* and *khavar* are the subject and predicate of a nominal sentence. (Below I will return to the question of what the two terms are.)

And from here an almost imperceptible departure in the systemic logic of the two doctrines begins. Jewish students are presented with the observation that Arab grammarians distinguish between nominal sentences and verbal sentences according to the first word in the sentence. If the first word is a verb, the sentence is called a verbal sentence and Arabs use the terms *fi'l* and *fā'il* to denote subject and predicate. If the first word is not a verb, usually a noun, then the sentence is called a nominal sentence and the terms *mubtada'* and *khavar* are used to indicate the same terms, namely subject and predicate. And together these two sentence structures form the universe of sentences in Arabic.

Jewish students see this as an interesting contrast with the syntax of Hebrew grammar, where the differences between nominal and verbal sentences depends on the nature of the predicate and not its position in the sentence in relation to the subject. If the predicate is a verb, the sentence is verbal. If the predicate is not a verb, the sentence is nominal.

That Arab grammarians should base their syntactic typology on something trivial like which word begins the sentence, while grammarians of Hebrew should focus on something systemic and complex like the nature of the predicate, confirms to many Jewish students and their Jewish Arabic school teachers a prejudicial sense of the relative simplicity of Arab scholarship.

6 For example:

"הנושא במשפט השמני נקרא מֻבְּתָא (מֻבְּתָא יָהּ כְּלוּמַר הַמְלָה שְׁבָה מִתְחִיל הַמְשֻׁט), וְאִילוּ הַנְּשׂוּא בַּמְשֻׁט זֶה נִקְרָא כֹּחַר (כֹּחַר – יָדִיעָה, יָדִיעָה עַל הַנְּשׂוּא), כְּגוֹן: זָיִד חָכִים. זָיִד הוּא הַמֻּבְּתָא; חָכִים – כֹּחַר." (עִירוֹן כֶּךָ א' עמ' 1).

These are, however, misconstructions based on mistranslation. *Mubtadaʿ* is a concept rooted in the syntactic theory of *ʿamal*, (which is normally translated in the historiographic research into the Arabic linguistic tradition as ‘the theory of governance’ or ‘the theory of dependency’), and is not at all a subject (see below). But once translated as subject, classroom instruction continues using the terms of subject and predicate in Hebrew, even in areas where Arab terminology differs. This consistent (mis)translation of the Arabic term *mubtadaʿ* as subject of a nominal sentence creates a false sense of security in Jewish students of Arabic and their teachers that they understand the Arabic term and that they are dealing with equivalent concepts, when in fact they are not.⁷

And so, when discussing two groups of prepositions and auxiliary verbs that lead nominal construction with abnormal desinential inflections, the conscientious Jewish-sector teacher might also present the seemingly relevant Arabic terms for the subject and the predicate. The groups are named in both Arab and Jewish-sector instruction after their prototypical member and are called *ʾinna* and her sisters (i.e. *ʾinna* and the prepositions that behave similarly) and *kāna* and her sisters (i.e. *kāna* and the auxiliaries that behave similarly). The terms that are normally presented by Jewish-sector teachers as the subject and predicate are the *ʾism* of *ʾinna* or *kāna* and the *khabar* of *ʾinna* or *kāna*. The term *khabar* seems familiar. It is the same term that is translated as predicate of a normal nominal sentence. This gives a reassuring sense of parallel between the Arabic and the Hebrew terms, but what happened to *mubtadaʿ*? It is no longer used here to denote the word that functions as subject, and is replaced by the term *ʾism*—literally ‘noun’—to create the construct of ‘the noun of *ʾinna*’ and ‘the noun of *kāna*’. The significance of the fact that in this context the term *mubtadaʿ* is no longer used to denote the word that functions as subject is overlooked by such teachers, or shrugged off as an unnecessary terminological infelicity of Arab grammarians.

With this little bit of oversight, the mistranslations of *mubtadaʿ* and *khabar* seem to work in that the translated terms seem to designate the same instances as the original ones. But conceptual cracks keep appearing, demanding some patching up.

7 As the discussion below will clarify, a more accurate way of rendering the relationship between the concepts would be to point out that the word which is the *mubtadaʿ* in the nominal sentence functions as the subject of the sentence. But this would only beg the question of what a *mubtadaʿ* actually is. And because the concept has no equivalent in the Orientalist grammar, because it is part of a heuristic system that is completely different from the European system—the two differ in their structure, their function, and the role they play within the broader intellectual culture—the only way to explain it would be to acknowledge the radical conceptual alterity between the two systems, and start presenting the alternative system of knowledge.

Topicalised sentences—in particular those where the subject of the predicative clause is topicalised—are usually classed in the Jewish-sector schools and university classrooms as normal nominal sentences. Dov Iron's book, the most advanced text on syntax that is used at schools, does discuss topicalisation as a complex sentence in which the *khavar* may be a verbal sentence (vol. 1, pp. 2–3). But it focuses on sentences in which the subject of the topicalised sentence is an object of the verbal sentence. The example given is 'زَيْدٌ مَرَضَ أَبُوهُ' (*zaydun mariḍa 'abūhu*)—literally, 'Zayd, his father fell ill'. Significantly, the concept of topicalisation is exemplified with sentences whose verbatim translation into Hebrew inevitably produces a sentence that is topicalised too. This further reinforces the false sense of conceptual compatibility between the two systems of grammatical theory. Iron does not canvass sentences that to Arab grammarians are topicalised, yet may be translated as simple Hebrew sentences (see below). This further confuses things as Jewish students assume that their intuitive notion of topicalisation applies to Arabic topicalisation. By the same token, Arab university students are also led to believe that when they discuss topicalisation they mean, in fact, the same thing as their instructors and fellow Jewish students.

The problems would become apparent if instructors chose to foreground topicalised Arabic sentences in which the subject is identical in both the topicalised sentence and its predicative clause. The sentence 'زَيْدٌ مَرَضَ' (*zaydun mariḍa*) would appear to the Jewish student as 'Zayd fell ill', where in fact it is best translated as a topicalised construction, something like 'Zayd, he fell ill'. This construction may be used to indicate meanings that are constructed in English as 'It is Zayd who fell ill' or any number of alternative constructions that foreground and emphasise the fact that the person who fell ill was Zayd. By contrast, 'Zayd fell ill' would be conveyed in standard Arabic by the simple verbal sentence 'مَرَضَ زَيْدٌ' (*mariḍa zaydun*) with the verb preceding its subject.

Sentences like 'زَيْدٌ مَرَضَ' (*zaydun mariḍa*) which I glossed as 'Zayd, he fell ill' are presented in the Israeli-Jewish classroom as inverted simple sentences, a kind of unusual construction that is reserved for specific stylistic contexts like newspaper headlines. Students learn that, notwithstanding such unusual constructions, Arabic generally prefers to have the verb appear before its subject. The latter point needs to be emphasised to Jewish students because contemporary Hebrew stylistic preferences would have the subject precede the predicate in contrast with the preferred construction in standard Arabic. Hence the need to reiterate to students the practice of putting the verb first.

However, when instructors at Israeli universities and in Jewish schools identify such topicalised sentences as nominal sentences, they open up a new can of worms for the teachers and students of Arabic, namely the problem of inconsistency in agreement in number between verb and subject.

This involves another mistranslation, as it were, of the conceptual framework of Arabic grammar into the Orientalist grammar of Arabic. Or rather, in this case, it involves ignoring the difference between the two scholastic traditions in the designation of the analytic boundaries of verb morphology. In contrast with the Arab construction of syntax, the dominant approach in Jewish schools and in Israeli universities sees the pronominal suffixes of verbs as part of the verb conjugation as a matter of morphology rather than a matter of syntax. And so, those schooled in Israeli-Jewish grammar of Arabic treat the pronominal affixes of conjugated verbs as an integral part of verb morphology, that is, as one of the dimensions along which verbs are conjugated.

This leaves us with the following anomaly. When the subject seemingly precedes the verb, as in the topicalised sentence 'الأولاد مرضوا' (*al'awlād mariḍu*) 'the children, they fell ill', the verb appears to agree in pluralisation with the subject. The 'u' sound at the end of the verb '*mariḍu*' is a pronominal suffix that indicates masculine, third-person plural. In other words, when the subject is plural, dual, or singular, the affixes of the verbs will indicate plural, dual or singular, respectively. But when the subject is stated explicitly after the verb, as in 'مرض الأولاد' (*mariḍa al'awlād*) 'the children fell ill', the verb lacks a pronominal affix, seemingly appearing in the singular.⁸

So from the perspective of Jewish students and instructors in university Arabic grammar classes, Zayd and his friends can fall ill in grammatically variable ways. One of these ways, مرض الأولاد (*mariḍa al'awlād*) 'the children fell ill', appears to have a verb in the singular preceding a plural subject; while the other, الأولاد مرضوا (*al'awlād mariḍu*), appears to convey the same meaning, but with the verb, now following the subject, appearing in the plural.

And so, Jewish students of Arabic learn that a verb that precedes its subject will always come in the singular, but a verb that follows its subject will agree with the subject in duality and pluralisation.

These syntactic irritants, namely the preference to begin a sentence with a verb and the inconsistent agreement between subject and verb, are major hurdles for Jewish students. The paucity of composition and free-writing exercises that Jewish students are required to undergo throughout their academic careers both hides the extent of the problem and hinders them from internalising proper syntactic style in Arabic writing.

⁸ Strictly speaking, from the perspective of Arabic grammar that will be briefly described below, the verb here is not in the singular. It is a verb without any indication of person. This very same structure, however, in appropriate syntactical contexts can also indicate both the verb and an implicit pronominal referent indicating a subject in the third-person singular.

Still, this construction of Arabic syntax and grammar seems basic to Jewish teachers and students of Arabic. Academic instruction in Arabic assumes that students are already familiar with these aspects of Arabic, yet they are completely bewildering to Arab students, many of whom had never encountered the conditional statement about the verb's erratic agreement with the subject. Their bewilderment is no less bewildering to the few Jews who are made privy to their bewilderment.

It would have been much less bewildering all round if it were recognised that the seeming translation of syntactic terms, although it appears to work, is a mistranslation. The syntax that Jews acquire during their schooling—a contemporary variety of Orientalist grammar—is fundamentally different from the grammar that Arabs learn at school.

For their part, Arab students arrive at university having learnt a set of observations that are rooted in a science of dynamic relations between words and particles that produce specific desinential inflections and structures in specific contexts. The systemic logic of the grammar that Arab students learn is fundamentally different from that which is taught at Jewish schools or at universities.

At its core, the Arab science is constructed around a theory of *'amal*, a word that is normally translated in this context as 'governance' or 'dependency'. This theory is effectively a social science of words and parts of words, and it underpins the conceptualisation and instruction of desinential inflection. Syntax and grammar in this approach are predicated on a notion of words and parts of words as entities which enter into relationships to form and modify meanings. This is rather different from the conceptual framework that operates in the European approach to grammar, including subject and predicate, or in their more appropriate Arabic translations of *musnad 'ilayhi* and *musnad*. The field of desinential inflection is perceived as the heart of Arabic grammar in the Arab tradition, and the theory of *'amal* is the core of that field, and is fixed in its position by the inertia of tradition, along with the stylised declamation of the analysis of desinential inflection.

According to this theory, the verb always precedes its subject and acts upon it in such a way that it produces the *rafl*, or what European grammarians have construed as the desinential inflection that marks the nominative.

Ironically, perhaps, for Arab grammarians no less than for grammarians of Hebrew, a verbal sentence is a sentence whose predicate is a verb. Word order as such is not what defines the type of a sentence. This is in contrast with the

understanding that is propagated among Jewish students of Arabic according to which Arab grammarians define the sentence by the nature of its first word (see above).

As far as the canonical Arab grammarians are concerned, verbs always precede their subject. The subject can take the form of a separate word (noun or pronoun), e.g. 'مرض الاولاد' (*marīḍa al'awlād*—'the children fell ill'); a pronominal suffix, e.g. 'مرضوا' (*marīḍu*—'they fell ill'); or be implied in the verb, e.g. 'مرض' (*marīḍa*—'he fell ill') which can strictly speaking form a complete sentence entirely on its own (see e.g. *aljadīd*, grade 7, p. 163).⁹

Significantly, in the Arabic grammatical tradition the pronominal suffixes are not part of the verb, and verb morphology does not include a dimension of plurality. Rather, pronominal suffixes that indicate pluralisation are elements of syntax. They are but one of the three ways mentioned above (along with implicit pronouns and explicit nouns) to connect subject to predicate in order to render a potentially complete sentence. Not surprisingly, then, when verb conjugations are discussed in Arab texts, pluralisation is not emphasised, and often not even included in systematic discussions of conjugation tables.

Now, some sentences have no verbs. These are nominal sentences. In these sentences subjects are not preceded by verbs. Instances where a subject is not preceded by a verb posed a theoretical challenge to theorists of *'amal*, namely the need to explain what gives such a subject the inflection of the *raff*. According to the theory, the governing element must precede the word it governs. In a verbal sentence the verb precedes its subject and produces the *raff*. But in nominal sentences the opening words are not preceded by the verb that would normally put its subject in the *raff* in a verbal sentence. How can the fact that such words have the mark of the *raff* be explained? The explanation that emerged was that it is the principle of *'ibtidā'*—of initiation, of beginning—that governs these words and inflects them with a mark of *raff*.

So the term *mubtada'* does not mean a subject in a nominal sentence. Rather, what the term *mubtada'* designates is a word in the *raff* (i.e. nominative according to European grammarians) whose desinential inflection is governed by the principle of initiation for lack of an apparent alternative governor.

9 Within the European approach the verb 'مَرَضَ' (*marīḍa*) is a past tense in the third-person singular regardless of whether it appears in the sentence 'the children fell ill' (*marīḍa al'awlād*) or 'he fell ill' (*marīḍa*). Instructors within the Arabic grammatical tradition would interpret the former instance as a verb stripped of any indication of subject (because the subject is explicitly indicated following the verb), and the latter instance as a verb plus the implicit third-person singular subject.

Arab educators have traditionally avoided explicitly elaborating on the theory of *amal* in treatises and works that were aimed at the general public, or textbooks aimed at the general population of school pupils. Their definitions tend to be rather laconic, as in ‘the *mubtadaʿ* is a noun in the *raʿf* at the beginning of a sentence’ (*alnahw alwāḍiḥ*, elementary, book 1, p. 25). This reluctance to elaborate on the underlying logic of grammar—the preference to keep instruction on a ‘need-to-know’ basis—is also a significant contributing factor to the invisibility of the incommensurability between the Arab and Orientalist approaches to grammar.

Not surprisingly, then, if a nominal sentence should be preceded by *inna* or *kāna*—using Iron’s examples¹⁰ we have ‘كَانَ زَيْدٌ مَرِيضًا’ (*kāna zaydun marīḍan*—‘Zayd was ill’, p. 80) and ‘إِنَّ زَيْدًا عَالِمٌ’ (*inna zaydan ʿāliman*—‘Zayd is indeed a scholar’, p. 98)—the word that had been *mubtadaʿ* is no longer referred to as *mubtadaʿ* but rather as *ism inna* or *ism kāna* (the noun of *inna* or the noun of *kāna* respectively), because now its desinential inflection is governed by *inna* or *kāna*, respectively, and not by the principle of *ibtidāʿ*.

The way the *khavar* is defined fits in this scheme and differs fundamentally from the approach that prevails in Israeli-Jewish instruction. ‘The *khavar* is a noun desinentially inflected in the *raʿf* [defined in European syntax of Arabic as the nominative case] that together with the *mubtadaʿ* form a complete sentence’ (*alnahw alwāḍiḥ*, elementary, book 1, p. 25). *Khavar* according to this quote is a noun and not a verb, and if a nominal sentence is one that has a *mubtadaʿ* and a *khavar*, then a sentence with a subject followed by a verb cannot possibly be a simple nominal sentence. (This is in contrast with the way Arabic grammar is presented in Jewish education, whereby if a sentence begins with a noun it is nominal.)

Clearly, then, from an Arab perspective topicalised sentences like ‘زَيْدٌ مَرَضَ’ (*zaydun mariḍa*) ‘Zayd, he fell ill’ cannot be defined as sentences with a subject followed by its verb. Rather, they are complex sentences with a subject followed by a clause, which may itself be a verbal sentence, in which case it requires its own subject and this will follow the verb (e.g. *aljadīd*, grade 7, p. 111).

A topicalised sentence is classed as a *jumla ismiyya kubra* (literally ‘a great nominal sentence’). The first word is the nominal subject that is also a *mubtadaʿ*. The *khavar* that follows in such a sentence is itself a sentence, or a clause, composed of one word or more. When the *khavar* is a verb, the verb is in fact a

10 I include Iron’s vocalisation marks. These are not quite the way standard Arabic textbooks would have them, but that is a different issue which I will not raise here.

full verbal sentence that can be decomposed into a subject (be it a pronominal affix or an implicit subject) following its verbal predicate, in a way totally consistent with the fundamental rule that a verb always precedes its subject.

Thus, 'الاولاد مرضوا' (*al'awlād mariḍu*—'the children, they fell ill') has a topicalised subject 'الاولاد' (*al'awlād*—'the children') followed by a complete sentence, namely 'مَرَضُوا' (*mariḍu*—'they fell ill'), which in turn is composed of the verb 'مرض' (*mariḍa*—'fell ill') and its following subject, the pronominal suffix *u* which indicates 'they'. By contrast, 'مرض الاولاد' (*mariḍa al'awlād*—'the children fell ill') is again a sentence with the verb 'مرض' (*mariḍa*—'fell ill') and its following subject, in this case an explicit noun, namely 'الاولاد' (*al'awlād*—'the children').

But the clause that to Arab grammarians is a complete sentence composed of a verb and its pronominal subject ('مرضوا'—*mariḍu*—'they fell ill') would be approached by a person schooled in European grammar as a conjugated verb ('fell ill' third-person masculine plural), which appears to be a straightforward predicate to the subject that precedes it. This is why it is so easy to confuse it as a verb that is pluralised in agreement with its preceding subject.

In the Arab grammatical interpretation of topicalised sentences, then, the main sentence has no independent verb; the inconsistency in agreement between verb and subject never arises; verbs always precede their subjects; and verbs have no inherent quantity and do not conjugate along dimensions of quantity or number.

What is an elementary syntactical rule to Israeli-Jewish students—namely, that if a verb precedes its subject it is rendered in the singular, and if a verb follows its subject it agrees with its pluralisation—makes no sense in this scheme of things. The closest Arab equivalent I found in the Arabic textbooks is 'The *khavar* agrees with the *mubtada'* in number and gender' (*alnahw alwāḍiḥ*, elementary, book 3, p. 4) which is quite a different way of rendering this (see Table 7.1 for a schematic approximation of the differences between the two systems).

These differences are radical in that elements of one system cannot be reconstituted in terms of the other system. The two systems cannot be reconciled. These differences are therefore bewildering. They are shrouded in metacognitive blindness. None of the students, Arab or Jewish, that I spoke with was aware of the extent of the incommensurability of the two approaches on this particular issue. These differences, precisely because they pass unnoticed, are quite insidious.

Table 7.1 A schematic approximation of some differences between the two systems.

The Arab perspective	The sentence	The Jewish-sector perspective
Meaning: The children fell ill.	مرض الاولاد <i>marīḍa al-awlādū</i>	Meaning: The children fell ill.
A verbal sentence because it contains a verb.		A verbal sentence because it opens with a verb.
The verb (which never conjugates by number), <i>marīḍa</i> , precedes a noun, <i>al-awlād</i> , which is a plural noun.		The verb, <i>marīḍa</i> , precedes its subject, <i>al-awlād</i> and is therefore in the singular in disagreement with the plural verb.
The preceding verb governs the noun <i>al-awlād</i> and puts it in the <i>rafʿ</i> which is marked by <i>u</i> .		The noun <i>al-awlād</i> has the mark <i>u</i> of the nominative case ^a because it is a subject of the sentence.
Meaning: The children, they fell ill.	الاولاد مرضوا <i>al-awlādū marīḍū</i>	Meaning: The children fell ill.
A topicalised sentence without a verb (and therefore not a verbal sentence) where the predicate is a clause, which is itself a verbal sentence.		A nominal sentence because it begins with a noun (which is followed by a verb).
The verb (which never conjugates by number) <i>marīḍa</i> is followed by its subject, the suffix <i>ū</i> , to construct a full sentence, <i>marīḍū</i> (they fell ill), which serves as a clause in the topicalised construction where it is preceded by an explicit noun.		The subject is <i>al-awlād</i> and its predicate is <i>marīḍū</i> . The verb follows its subject and therefore agrees with it in number.
The principle of <i>ʾibtidāʾ</i> governs the noun <i>al-awlād</i> and puts it in the <i>rafʿ</i> which is marked by <i>u</i> .		The noun <i>al-awlād</i> has the mark <i>u</i> of the nominative case because it is the subject of the sentence.

^a Normally glossed as ‘the first case’—*hayāḥsa harishona* (היחסה הראשונה).

A fundamental reason why these limits in translatability escape the consciousness of participants in educational exchanges has to do with the direction of the translation, which is itself a reflection of power politics of language in general and the educational arena of Arabic in particular. The significant translation goes from Arabic to Hebrew, Hebrew being the language that is usually used in university educational exchanges. Moreover, the grammatical theory and knowledge that underlies Arabic instruction at Israeli universities—a variety of the Orientalist linguistics of Arabic—is written about, discussed and thought of in Hebrew, English, and to a lesser degree German, but not usually in Arabic.

The instances that are classed as *mubtadaʾ* in Arabic are a subset of the instances that are classed as subjects of nominal sentences in Hebrew, and in Orientalist grammar of Arabic more generally. This is why translating the term *mubtadaʾ* as subject of a nominal sentence seems to consistently work, but translating a

subject of a nominal sentence into Arabic as *mubtada'* does not always work (as happened with the noun of *inna* and the noun of *kāna*). And because in the context of university grammar instruction it is the Orientalist perspective that is the dominant structure, in that Arab students need to adapt to it rather than Jewish students needing to adapt to the Arabic grammatical approach, the mistranslation remains impervious to these anomalies and further reinforces the false sense of commensurability between the systems.

Such camouflaged mistranslations are among the normally invisible elements that make up the systemic incommensurability between the two grammars. The other mechanisms include differences in the organisation of the material, in the patterns and styles of reasoning, in the intellectual priorities, in the underlying analytical projects, and in the underlying metaphors and other tropes that animate the disparate grammatical and syntactical imagination. The cumulative effect of these mechanisms is a perverse situation whereby Arab students, who are far superior to their Jewish counterparts in Arabic proficiency and in the active application of Arabic grammar and syntax, are nonetheless outperformed and experience inexplicable difficulties in following and assimilating the material taught in Arabic grammar classes at university.

This becomes, then, yet another mechanism whereby formal education turns social disadvantage into personal failure, a situation made particularly acute by the fact that members of the subaltern group—Arabs—become alienated from a key component of their very cultural identity, namely Arabic.

It is possible that an instructional strategy that emphasises metacognitive awareness, where students realise that theirs is but one grammar of Arabic, not *the* grammar of Arabic, would go a considerable way towards addressing the pedagogical challenge of a student body schooled in incommensurable grammars of Arabic. In fact, by relying on the incommensurability as a point of departure, and highlighting the historic specificity of systems of knowledge, grammatical instruction could lead both Jewish and Arab students to a deeper understanding of the grammatical nature of the Arabic language.

More generally, I would suggest that close ethnographic studies of incommensurability—like the one offered here, and like Keen's earlier work—may thus be immensely significant, well beyond the narrow confines of theoretical reflection. They can support a metacognitively informed rehabilitation of subaltern systems of knowledge. In other words, where members of disenfranchised groups find their knowledge is judged in terms of dominant knowledge, such analyses can allow for the integrity of the subaltern knowledge to be defended without it being collapsed into a variant of the dominant knowledge.

And as for the field of theoretical reflection, this case study, like Keen's work before it, attests to the possible depths of incommensurability in systems of knowledge, the mechanisms that hide it, and how the incommensurability, embedded as it is in power structures, inevitably renders deficient both the subaltern and his or her knowledge.

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