ARABIC LINGUISTICS AND LITERATURE IN THE JAPANESE ACADEMIC SCENE

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1. Arabic linguistics

Arabic scholarship in Japan

In the Japanese language, we find many Arabic loanwords, most of which were introduced indirectly by way of Chinese literature in early modern times, or by way of new European artifacts with Portuguese or Spanish names in medieval times. It is, however, not until recent times that academic attention was paid to the Arabic language. Scholastic interest in the Arabic language developed as a subsidiary discipline to Islamic study, especially before and during World War Two, because so many Muslims were found in the Japanese occupied areas. Most publications during this time, like the textbook written by a Japanese leading scholar, Toshihiko Izutsu, did not aim so much at developing linguistic discussion, as at supplying a practical method for reading Arabic literature such as *al-Qur‘ān* (the Koran).

In 1958, an influential linguistic work by N. Chomsky was published. Using the theoretical basis of structural linguistics or generative grammar, many studies on Arabic appeared in America, most of which made little contribution to the linguistic understanding of the Arabic language, as in the case of work by the generative grammarians, who were satisfied with re-molding traditional Arabic grammatical rules into the new transformational framework, sometimes showing their similarities in grammatical analysis with the traditional Arabic grammatical theory developed by medieval Arabic grammarians.

Turning to the situation in Japan, Arabic study has had relatively little interest in general linguistics, partly because it is not so sensitive to current theoretical trends in America, and partly because Arabic study has been led by the staff of two universities for teaching foreign languages (Osaka University of Foreign Studies and Tokyo University of Foreign Studies). But this situation has changed as the general linguistic concerns have moved from a rigidly formal

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approach to a functional descriptive one, with particular interest in linguistic
typology, functional grammar and discourse analysis. An increasing numbers of
studies currently done in Japan are done not only with reference to theoretical
frameworks, but also from wider social or cultural perspectives.

One can get a concise view on the state of Arabic linguistics in Japan
through the *Sanseido Encyclopedia of Linguistics*, which is regarded as a
monumental work in linguistic scholarship in Japan. Regrettably, however, its
description of the Arabic language fails to give us a comprehensive picture of
recent developments in Arabic linguistics. Only the atlas of modern Arabic
dialects and the history of Arabic letters (prepared by Y. Takashina) are very
useful.

**Diachronic studies**

Traditional Arabic grammar developed as a discipline by which to
understand the correct meanings of *al-Qur’ān*, and was systematized as a
method by which to read and write Classical Arabic texts. It has been already
pointed out that the methodological attitude of the traditional Arabic
grammarians to search for as concise grammatical rules as possible for the
purpose of aiding Arabic students to memorize them gave rise to similar
analytical notions in modern transformational grammatical theory. As for the
study of the traditional Arabic grammatical theory, we find Naiki (1968), which
clarifies the meaning of the grammatical terms. Okazaki (1991) and Nakae
(1997) discuss it from a modern linguistic viewpoint. After the 11th century,
when the traditional Arabic grammarians had established and standardized
Classical Arabic, the Arabic language underwent structural change with
increasing influence of regional dialects. Ikeda (1968, 1970ab, 1973ab) aimed to
clarify pre-classical Arabic, such as Qur’anic Arabic, by analyzing the
grammatical descriptions given by those grammarians who had worked before
dogmatic Arabic became standardized. His studies have a common attitude with
recent Arabic studies that aim to clarify the detailed relationship among early
grammarians with respect to the historical development of the two so-called
major grammatical schools Basra and Kufa. Very few studies have been made in
Japan on the theoretical characteristics of the traditional Arabic grammar in
relation to the general history of grammatical theories. We find only the general
discussion in the *Sanseido Encyclopedia of Linguistics* (given by F. Yajima).

Much progress has been made in the study of the linguistic situation in the

Very few studies have been made in the field of the historical linguistics, mainly owing to the paucity of written materials showing the actual state of contemporary spoken Arabic dialects. Fukuhara (1974) discusses the diachronic change of Arabic sibilants from the viewpoint of comparative Semitic linguistics. Nishio (1991a) is a study of medieval Egyptian Arabic, based on the material found in the so-called Cairo Genizah documents. Nishio (2000), also using Cairo Genizah materials, tries to reconstruct the vowel system of medieval Colloquial Egyptian Arabic. Yoda (2000) also analyzes the diachronic change of vowel systems found in various modern Maghribi Arabic dialects. As for the diachronic syntax, Nishio (1996b) focuses on the syntactic change in wh-questions in Egyptian Arabic. We must admit that quite a few studies have been made on syntactic changes in Classical Arabic. An important contribution by Moriguchi (2001) traces the early usage of conditionals.

**Synchronic studies**

As for synchronic study, morphological issues, such as the vowel alternation in the derivation of weak verbs or the syllabic structure in the formation of broken plurals, have been a main concern. With a new stream in general linguistics, we find also in the field of Arabic linguistics much theoretical discussion about syntactic, semantic and discourse structures. Ban (1986) gives us new materials for the semantic analysis of negative particles. Nishio (1989) and Kondo (1999) discuss the verbal tense-aspect system in connection with syntactic environments. Nishio (1988) is a semantic analysis of Arabic modal particles. The above-mentioned two studies by Nishio, based on the analysis of the Qur’anic Arabic usage, propose that pre-Classical Arabic, as exemplified by Qur’anic Arabic, has a structurally different verbal (tense-aspect-modal) system than the so-called standardized Classical Arabic. Nakamichi (1999) makes a functional-discourse analysis of the Qur’anic Arabic usage of
conjunctions. As for the study of Modern Standard Arabic, Sakaedani (1998, 1999) and Kondo (2001), both of which make textual analyses, give us new understandings about the issues of definiteness and negation respectively.

Recent Arabic studies in Japan characteristically handle large amounts of data, sometimes with statistical analysis, and of showing cognitive processes in linguistic representation and its relation to Arabic culture. It is theoretically acknowledged that the human cognitive process is given some structural framework by representing the world phenomena by means of language, and that the semantic and cognitive structure of a given language will shed light on the cultural cognition of those who use it. Izusu (1959), a work by a leading Japanese scholar in Islamic studies, is regarded as an epoch-making study, which tries to reconstruct the structure of the Islamic worldview through a semantic analysis of Qur'anic religious terms. When looked at from the viewpoint of modern semantics, his theoretical framework, which is a structural-lexical-semantic approach, has limited plausibility, so we must re-evaluate his work with the help of modern theory concerning linguistic categorization on prototypes or cognitive frames. Nishio (1996a) tries to clarify the metaphorical structure of cognitive space of Bedouin Arabs.

**Dialects and the national language**

The study of Arabic dialects is a very active scene, as can be seen in the activity of the Japanese members of AIDA (L'Association Internationale pour le Dialectologie Arabe). Nakano (1982) and Nishio (1992, 1994a), all of which are based on field research, are important contributions. Nutahara (1982) and Shimizu (1991) are anthropological works. The study of language and its relation to ethnic groups or nation-states is becoming an interdisciplinary field of linguistics, anthropology, area studies and so on, because the issues pertain to ethnicity, language nationalism and linguistic policy. The Egyptian linguists Saleh (1998, 1999) discusses the history of language nationalism in Egypt in comparison with the formative process of the national language in Japan. It is very regrettable, however, that his study doesn’t give enough attention to recent discussions in the West, but it should be regarded as a valuable contribution made by a native Egyptian scholar who has a keen interest in theoretical problems present in Japanese linguistics. Nishio (2001) discusses language nationalism in the Arab world with special reference to the history of Arab nationalism in an Islamic context.
Recent Arabic studies in Japan have common interest with the academic
trends in the world and make important contributions in the various fields of
Arabic linguistics. One should note also the many contributions of foreign
scholars active in Japan, as shown in Bouslama (1999), Oh (1997), Ratcliffe
(1998), Wahba & Miller (1997). It should be noted, though, that there are no
comprehensive Arabic dictionaries for Japanese readers. Contrastive linguistic
studies of Arabic and Japanese are necessary to develop tools for Japanese
scholars.

Note: For more comprehensive information, see T. Nishio & Sh. Nakamichi (2002) “Arabic
Linguistic Studies in Japan: A Bibliographical Survey,” Bulletin of the National Museum of

2. Arabic literature

*The Arabian Nights*

One of the most popular Arabic literary work in Japan is *The Thousand and
One Nights* or *The Arabian Nights’ Entertainments*. It was and remains
influential in the formation of Japan’s image of the Middle East or the Arab-
Islamic world. *The Arabian Nights* was first translated into Japanese in 1875. It
was one of the earliest works of foreign literature introduced in the Meiji Era.
Sugita (1999) traces the translations of *The Arabian Nights* and its literary
influence in Japan. Japanese versions of *The Arabian Nights* have long been the
translations of English or French versions, such as those of Lane, Burton, or
Mardrus. Maejima & Ikeda (1966-92) is the first and only translation from the
Arabic original. We have many studies on *The Arabian Nights* from various
discusses the history of illustrations of the work, and Yamanaka (2001b) treats
the literary description of space. As pointed out by Nishio (1994b), what is
needed now is to reconstruct the medieval Arabic society by using *The Arabian
Nights* as an historical source and to re-evaluate the Western images of the
Middle East and their influence on Japanese culture.

Beside *The Arabian Nights*, we have only a few Japanese translations of
Arabic literary works, most of which are translated from European versions.
There has been no textual edition of Classical literary works. This situation
surely shows that in Japan Middle Eastern studies in general, and Arabic literary
studies in particular, developed their basic methodology under the influence of
Western scholarship. This fact can be especially appreciated when we contrast
the enormous number of translations of European literature in Japan.

**Classical Arabic literature**

As for the general history of Arabic literature, we have only the very concise history of Shimada (1964). Sekine (1979) makes topical remarks about Arabic literary history. We need a comprehensive work that gives a general history of Arabic literature. Ogasawara (1983) is a concise description of pre-Islamic (al-Jāhiliyya) Arabic poetry. Ban (1970) makes a linguistic analysis of the works of Imru’ al-Qays. Yamamoto (2001) tries to reconstruct the social activity of the poets called Sa‘ālik. We have several Japanese translations of Classical Arabic poetry, such as Hanawa (1988). While it is usual to discuss rhythmic patterns, the semantic structures of words, or their symbolic meanings, Motoyoshi (1999ab, 2001) tries to find a poetic way of representing the world, applying the inter-arts theory. Her attitude is shared by Sugita (1993), a comparative study of Arabic and Persian literature. As for Classical prose literature, we have a translation of Ibn al-Muqaffa’‘s *Kalīla wa Dimna* by Y. Sasaki. Iwase (1999) traces the literary origin of a certain story in *Kalīla and Dimna*, comparing it with ancient Indian tales. We have a translation of Ibn Ḥazm’s *Ṭawq al-Ḥamāma* by T. Kuroda. An annotated translation of Ibn al-Baṭṭūta’s *Rihla* is now under publication by Y. Hikoichi. T. Nishio’s translation of al-Jāḥiz’s *Kitāb al-Bukhālā* will be published soon. Hamada (1999) discusses the rhetorical terminology used by al-Jāḥiz.

**Modern Arabic literature**

The literary themes found in Modern Arabic literature do not fail to influence literary studies in Japan, most of which, such as Ikeda (1986), Oka (1992, 1993) and Yagi (1995ab), discuss the issues concerning the relation of literature with its society, ethnic groups and nations. Special attention should be paid to the eminent studies of Nutahara (1985, 1999), in which he speculates about the regional characteristics pertaining to modern Arabic literature in literary media and universality in literary themes. A similar attitude is found in Okazaki (1995), which rather focuses on the internal world of a writer in relation to his literary and social background. Fukuda (1997, 1999) discusses the relation between narrative reality and narrative construction in the literary world. As for modern Arabic poetry, Mori (1998) is an eminent study, elucidating Jubbarn’s poetic idea in relation to his actual literary activities.
**Arabic folk literature**

As for Arabic folk literature, we have several translations from the works written in European languages. Imoto (1987) and Nishio (1991b) are comparative folkloric studies. Horiuchi (1985) discusses the origin and development of poetic rhythm in Arabic folk songs, with special reference to cultural and natural environments of the Arabs. Takeda (1986) classifies the folk stories of *Juḥā* and traces their historical development as a literary genre. As the *Arabian Nights* has long been looked down in the Arab world, so no appropriate academic concern was given to the study of folk literature in general. Now we find many folk literatures disappearing from the cultural scene in every region in the world, so it is urgent task to record oral folk tales as part of the human cultural heritage. Oda (2001) is a study on the theory for accomplishing this purpose.


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Vol. XXXVII 2002


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ARABIC LINGUISTICS AND LITERATURE IN THE JAPANESE ACADEMIC SCENE


Vol. XXXVII 2002 73


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