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The Pragmatic Dimension Through Sibawayh's Vision in Linguistic Studies

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Abstract:

Undoubtedly, classical Arabic grammarians and linguists engaged extensively with the diverse dimensions of linguistics, reflecting a profound assimilation of all structural and communicative levels of language. Foremost among these pioneering luminaries was the master of Arabic grammar, Sibawayh (d. 180 AH). While contemporary linguistic discourse has witnessed the rise of formal schools—such as Structuralism and Generative-Transformational grammar—these frameworks often confined language to immanent, abstract structures. Pragmatics emerged precisely to transcend the limitations of pure formal syntax and semantics by addressing functional utility and language in use. This modern pragmatic shift represents an organic continuation of the Sibawayhian epistemological tradition in communication and discourse analysis, which operationalizes logical deduction, contextual inference, speaker intentionality, interlocutor state, and speech acts to achieve clarity and persuasion. This study investigates the pragmatic foundations and inferential mechanisms embedded in Sibawayh's monumental treatise, *Al-Kitāb*, demonstrating how early Arabic grammatical thought anticipated the core tenets of modern pragmatics.

Keywords: Sibawayh, Pragmatic Dimension, Classical Grammarians, Modern Linguistics, *Al-Kitāb*, Intentionality (Qasdiyyah), Speech Acts, Context.

1. Introduction

Language has been intrinsically linked to human existence since antiquity, serving as the medium through which human beings express their intentions, articulate their needs, and bridge the communicative gap between speaker and listener, the present and the absent. Consequently, linguistic inquiry has historically occupied a preeminent position across epistemological traditions. Scholars have consistently sought to fathom its intricacies, decipher its structural mechanics, and critically examine its dynamic shifts.

In the modern era, diverse theoretical frameworks have emerged to explore linguistic phenomena—most notably Structuralism, Transformational-Generative grammar, and Deconstruction. Despite their distinct methodological orientations, these formalist frameworks share a fundamental limitation: they consistently failed to achieve comprehensive linguistic and communicative adequacy. By confining their analyses to abstract, self-contained formal structures (immanence), they largely detached language from its living communicative context. This methodological insularity persisted until the emergence of Pragmatics.

Pragmatics successfully overcame these formalist constraints by incorporating structural insights into a broader investigation of language in actual use (*parole in context*). It systematically accounts for extra-linguistic variables, socio-cultural settings, and communicative functions through key procedural concepts: speech act theory, conversational implicature, relevance theory, argumentation, speaker intentionality, and contextual presupposition. As a result, pragmatics has established itself as an indispensable paradigm in contemporary linguistic research.

Within the classical Arabic heritage, early philologists developed sophisticated linguistic frameworks in their dedicated service to the Arabic language and the exegesis of the Holy Quran. Their encyclopedic treatises synthesized morphological, syntactic, semantic, and contextual dimensions of language. Preeminent among these scholars was 'Amr ibn 'Uthman ibn Qanbar, Abu Bishr—universally known as Sibawayh (d. 180 AH)—the unparalleled master of Arabic grammar and rhetoric. This leads to the central problematique of this study:

- **Scholarly Added Value:** What epistemological and methodological contributions does Sibawayh's paradigm offer modern pragmatic linguistics?
- **Holistic Epistemology:** Can Sibawayh be characterized as the architect of a comprehensive philosophy of discourse and communication rather than merely a normative grammarian?
- **Pragmatic Anticipation:** What foundational pragmatic traces did Sibawayh establish in his monumental work *Al-Kitāb* that continue to inform contemporary pragmatic theories?
- **Linguistic Adequacy:** Is the Sibawayhian descriptive-inferential methodology capable of fulfilling the demands of communicative adequacy as formulated in modern linguistics?

2. Pragmatic Thought: Conceptual and Theoretical Foundations

To establish the theoretical framework connecting early Arabic grammatical inquiry with modern pragmatics, it is essential to define pragmatics and delineate its primary operational concepts—particularly speaker intentionality and lexical-situational context.

2.1. The Concept of Pragmatics

Formulating a single, universally accepted definition of pragmatics remains a challenging endeavor among contemporary linguists. However, broad consensus exists regarding its core scope. As Hayat Lashehah notes, pragmatics transcends the formalist preoccupation with internal structural immanence to investigate external contexts and functional communicative utility (Lashehah, n.d.). As a branch of linguistics, pragmatics explores how listeners infer speaker meaning, given that speakers frequently convey far more than the literal semantic content of their utterances. In its most comprehensive definition, pragmatics is the study of language in use within interpersonal communication. It encompasses five fundamental constituents: the addresser (and their underlying communicative intents), the addressee, the message, the communicative context, and speech acts.

Similarly, Jamil Hamdaoui observes that the pragmatic approach investigates linguistic signs in relation to their concrete users. Drawing upon Charles Morris's semiotic triad, language comprises three complementary components: syntax (relations of signs to signs), semantics (relations of signs to referents), and pragmatics (relations of signs to interpreters) (Hamdaoui, n.d.). Pragmatics systematically examines indexicals (deixis), intentionality, speech acts, discursive function, context, referential anchoring, linguistic argumentation, persuasion, and dialogism—all of which are richly represented within classical Arabic grammatical treatises, especially Sibawayh's *Al-Kitāb*.

2.2. Speaker Intentionality (*Al-Qasdiyyah*)

Intentionality lies at the very heart of the communicative process, directing and resolving intricate stylistic and syntactic configurations by clarifying the reciprocal goals of speaker and interlocutor. In the classical Arabic grammatical tradition, speaker intention (*qasd* / *gharad*) represented the primary functional catalyst of utterance generation. Classical grammarians recognized 'the consideration of speaker intent' (*mura'at al-gharad min al-kalam*) as an essential contextual clue (*qarinah*) that determines the syntactic status of constituents and guides structural analysis. This matches what modern linguists designate as intentionality.

In contemporary Arab thought, Taha Abderrahmane argues that intention (*al-qasd*) is synonymous with meaning itself, governing discursive exchanges and legal-theological contracts. He anchors this in what he terms the pragmatic 'Principle of Verification' (*mabda' al-tasdiq*): 'Do not utter to another that which your action contradicts' (Abderrahmane, n.d.). This concept aligns directly with the jurisprudential doctrine of conceptual implication (*dalalat al-mafhum*) developed

by scholars of Usul al-Fiqh. As Al-Juwayni defined it in *Al-Burhan*: 'The implied meaning (al-mafhum) is that which is derived from the utterance without being explicitly articulated' (Hamdi, n.d.). Al-Ghazali similarly noted in *Al-Mustasfa*: 'It is the comprehension of the unuttered through the uttered, guided by conversational context and speaker intent' (Hamdi, n.d.). Intentionality remains intrinsically bound to situational context.

2.3. The Lexical and Situational Context

Because pragmatics investigates language in use while accounting for speaker intention, interlocutor comprehension, and environmental circumstances, the analysis of context is paramount. Mahmoud Ahmad Nahla defines pragmatics as 'the study of contextual dimensions that are formally encoded in linguistic structures, thereby forming an integral component of the user's communicative competence' (Nahla, n.d.). Pierre Guiraud similarly emphasizes that the semantic ambiguity surrounding polysemous signs is resolved only when placed within their concrete context (Guiraud, n.d.).

3. Classical Arabic Grammarians: Transcending Formal Syntax

Classical Arabic grammarians, led by Sibawayh, looked beyond formal grammatical rules and rigid boundaries to explore the functional meanings that serve authentic Arabic discourse. Salah al-Din Zarral delineates three historical stages in the evolution of Arabic grammatical studies: the first was characterized by holistic inquiry across all language sciences; the second witnessed the methodological separation of syntax from rhetoric for dogmatic considerations (primarily safeguarding the Quranic text from grammatical solecism / lahn); and the third reintegrated syntax with rhetoric to analyze discourse and textual cohesion (Zarral, n.d.).

Saleh Belaid characterizes this third stage as the phase of functional linguistic studies, emphasizing that syntax is not an isolated set of formal rules, but a dynamic system intertwined with semantic relations. These relations define the communicative meaning of speech, wherein the speaker continually calibrates their utterance according to the listener's cognitive state and communicative needs (Belaid, n.d.). Foremost among these scholars was Abu Bishr 'Amr ibn 'Uthman ibn Qanbar, famously known as Sibawayh (d. 180 AH), author of *Al-Kitāb*—a foundational masterpiece historically revered as the 'Quran of Arabic Grammar'.

4. Applied Pragmatic Dimensions in Sibawayh's *Al-Kitāb*

Sibawayh played a pioneering role in enriching linguistic and pragmatic theory through his treatise *Al-Kitāb*. His analytical vision approached speech from multifaceted dimensions, establishing a unified philosophy of grammar, rhetoric, and communication. A prime manifestation of this pragmatic orientation appears in his celebrated chapter entitled 'Chapter on Straightforward,

Inverted, and Deviant Speech' (Bab al-Istaqamah min al-Kalam wa al-Ihalah) (Sibawayh, n.d., Vol. 1):

'Speech may be: straightforward and well-formed (mustaqim hasan), absurd (muhal), straightforward yet untruthful (mustaqim kadhib), straightforward yet uncouth (mustaqim qabih), or absurd and untruthful (muhal kadhib). Straightforward and well-formed is exemplified by: 'I came to you yesterday' and 'I will come to you tomorrow'. Straightforward yet untruthful is like: 'I carried the mountain' or 'I drank the ocean water'. Straightforward yet uncouth is placing an element outside its normative distribution, such as: *Qad Zaydan ra'aytu [Indeed, Zayd I saw] or *Kay Zaydan ya'tiyaka. Absurd and untruthful is uttering: 'I shall drink the ocean water yesterday' (Sibawayh, n.d., Vol. 1, p. 25).

This qualitative classification demonstrates Sibawayh's early departure from rigid binary models of grammatical correctness (sawāb vs. khata'). By distinguishing syntactic well-formedness (istiqamah) from semantic truth-value (sidq / kadhib) and situational plausibility (ihalah), Sibawayh laid the foundational groundwork for modern speech act theory and conversational pragmatics. He recognized that utterances interact simultaneously with grammatical structure, speaker intentionality, semantic coherence, and real-world reference. As Abu Sa'id al-Sirafi elaborated in his commentary on Al-Kitāb, this taxonomy evaluates discourse against communicative felicity and cognitive validity.

Commenting on Sibawayh's taxonomy, Maqbool Idris notes that designating an utterance as 'straightforward yet untruthful' (mustaqim kadhib) highlights the breakdown of correspondence between the linguistic proposition, extra-linguistic reality, and rational cognition—a distinction shared by classical rhetoricians and contemporary pragmatists alike (Idris, n.d.).

This conceptualization mirrors modern pragmatic theories regarding the felicity conditions required for successful speech acts. As George Yule notes in *The Study of Language*, conversational exchanges depend fundamentally on how linguistic utterances are structured relative to the interpersonal relationship between speaker and addressee (Yule, n.d.). Sibawayh examined syntactic construction not in isolation from external circumstances, but within dynamic, lived communication. His taxonomy represents a comprehensive theory of discourse rather than a narrow normative grammar.

Muhammad ibn Hajar elucidates Sibawayh's inferential methodology, noting that Sibawayh—following his master Al-Khalil ibn Ahmad al-Farahidi—constructed his deductions upon authentic linguistic transmission (sama') and rational analogy (qiyas), deploying procedural concepts such as syntactic analog (nadhīr), structural position (mawdī'), grammatical operator ('amil), underlying origin and derived branch (asl wa far'), and syntactic-semantic estimation (taqdir) (Ibn Hajar, n.d.). Grammarians, led by Sibawayh, approached language primarily as an instrument of transmission

and communication. Sibawayh employed an inductive methodology that examined structural patterns as dynamic functional units (Ibn Hajar, n.d.).

Sibawayh's methodology was profoundly pragmatic: he utilized rigorous descriptive and inferential tools while strictly avoiding far-fetched, speculative interpretations that contradicted the living usage and authentic communicative norms of native Arabic speakers. His analytical focus remained anchored in speaker intent and communicative clarity.

The late Algerian linguist Abderrahmane Hadj-Salah highlighted Sibawayh's genius and empirical rigor, observing that early grammatical works produced prior to the third century AH were characterized by dynamic scientific inquiry. Scholars such as Sibawayh anchored their deductions in systematic observation of living speech and continuous empirical verification (Hadj-Salah, n.d.). In his work *Al-Khitab wa al-Takhatub*, Hadj-Salah underscored that Sibawayh was the first scholar in the history of the human sciences to demonstrate that phonetic-syntactic well-formedness operates independently of semantic coherence. An utterance may be syntactically well-formed in terms of morphology, syntax, and phonology, yet remain rationally incongruous or empirically false (Hadj-Salah, n.d.). Hadj-Salah concluded that *Al-Kitāb* must be regarded as an exhaustive scientific description of the Arabic language across all structural and pragmatic dimensions.

5. Conclusion

This study of the pragmatic thought embedded within Sibawayh's *Al-Kitāb* yields several key conclusions:

- **Holistic Scientific Value:** Sibawayh formulated an encyclopedic, multifaceted approach to language that examined structural form alongside speaker intentionality and listener comprehension, anticipating the highest objectives of modern pragmatics.
- **Foundational Pillar of Communication:** Sibawayh's inferential methodology—which integrates formal syntactic structures with extra-linguistic context, speaker disposition, and verbal/non-verbal clues—establishes him as a foundational architect of discourse analysis and communication theory.
- **Shared Theoretical Concerns:** The linguistic phenomena analyzed by Sibawayh (such as discourse taxonomy, topicalization, ellipsis, repetition, foregrounding, backgrounding, and pragmatic substitution) demonstrate a profound intersection between classical Arabic grammar and modern pragmatic inquiry.

- **Pragmatic Primacy of Intentionality:** Sibawayh's rigorous focus on meaning, communicative intent (qasd), and non-literal performative utterances (uslub insha'i) confirms that classical grammatical analysis was fundamentally oriented toward pragmatic context.
- **Methodological Relevance:** Sibawayh's empirical methodology—combining authentic transmission (sama'), rational analogy (qiyas), and empirical observation—remains a vital paradigm for bridging classical linguistic heritage with contemporary pragmatic and functional theories.

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