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[Here: Updated version, 1st September 2014, with numbering of the pages, between square brackets, according to the paper published edition. Some *addenda et corrigenda* have also been put between square brackets in red. Some addenda also in the bibliography of the works of Gilliot and Larcher published after this article and being related to the present themes]

[p. 109] The semantic field of “[language](#)” includes several trilateral Arabic roots: *l-s-n* (Dāmaghānī, *Wujūh*, ii, 200-1; see H. Jenssen, Arabic language, 132; see also [language](#), concept of), *k-l-m* (Yaḥyā b. Sallām, *Taṣārīf*, 303-5; Dāmaghānī, *Wujūh*, ii, 186-7), *q-w-l*, *l-ḥ-n* (Khan, *Die exegetischen Teile*, 276, on q 47:30: “the burden of their talk,” *laḥn al-qawl*; Fück, *ʿArabīya*, 133; Fr. trans. 202; Ullmann, *Wa-ḥairu*, 21-2). It should be noted that *lughā* in the sense of manner of speaking (Fr. *parler*, Ger. *Redeweise*) is totally absent from the Qur'ān — although the root *l-gh-w* is attested, but with the meanings of “vain conversation” (q 23:3), “to talk idly” (q 41:26), “idle talk” (q 19:62; see [gossip](#)), or to be “unintentional” in an oath (q 2:225; 5:89; Dāmaghānī, *Wujūh*, ii, 198; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Nuzha*, 531-2; see [oaths](#)).

The Qur'ān asserts of itself: “this is plain/clear Arabic tongue/speech/ [p. 110] ¶ language (*lisānun ʿarabiyyun mubīnun*)” (q 16:103), or that it is “in plain/clear Arabic tongue/speech/language” (q 26:195). In any case, this was the meaning of these verses according to the exegetes (see [exegesis of the qur'ān: classical and medieval](#)), and most translations have followed their lead, which, as will be discussed below, is problematic. It should be noted that, in Arabic — as in English — the concept of “[language](#)” is multivalent, including both an oral and a written manifestation. As will be discussed below, the interplay between these two aspects of language in the formation of the qur'ānic corpus is only imperfectly understood, a situation that leads to contested explanations for certain features of the qur'ānic language (for more on this subject, see [orality](#)).

Various general positions on the language and style of the Qur'ān

There are many opposing points of view on the language and style of the Qur'ān, as will appear through a selection of quotations taken from both [Muslim](#) and non-Muslim scholars (for reactions of Muslims through the ages, see below). The Muslim translator of the Qur'ān, M. Pickthall (d. 1935), a British convert to Islam, described the Qur'ān as an “inimitable symphony, the very sounds of which move men to tears and ecstasy” (Pickthall, vii). An earlier (non-Muslim) English translator of the Qur'ān, G. Sale (d. 1736) thought that: “The style of the Korān is generally beautiful and fluent, especially

where it imitates the prophetic manner and scripture phrases. It is concise and often obscure, adorned with bold figures after the eastern taste, enlivened with florid and sententious expressions, and in many places, especially when the [majesty](#) and attributes of God are described (see [god and his attributes](#)), sublime and magnificent” ¶ (*Preliminary discourse*, 66). For the Austrian J. von Hammer-Purgstall (d. 1856): “The Koran is not only the law book of Islam (see [law and the Qur’ān](#)), but also a masterpiece of Arabic poetic art (see [poetry and poets](#)). Only the high [magic](#) of the [language](#) could give to the speech of Abdallah's son the stamp of the [speech](#) (q.v.) of God” (Die letzten vierzig Suren, 25). For F.J. Steingass (d. 1903), the Qur’ān is: “[...] A work, then, which calls forth so powerful and seemingly incompatible emotions even in the distant reader — distant as to time, and still more so as to mental development — a work which not only conquers the repugnance with which he may begin its perusal, but changes this adverse feeling into astonishment and admiration” (Hughes/Steingass, Qur’ān, 526-7). Another translator of the Qur’ān, J. Berque (d. 1995), has tried to find a “diplomatic” solution in the face of the peculiar language and style of the Qur’ān, speaking of its “interlacing structure,” “symphonic effects” and “inordinating junctions” (*jonctions démesurantes*, Berque, *Langages*, 200-7; cf. id., *Coran*, 740: “a triangular speech”; id., *Relire*, 33-4), showing with these unusual qualifications the difficulty he had in expressing a consistently positive [judgment](#), such as, “It is not necessary to be a [Muslim](#) to be sensitive to the remarkable beauty of this text, to its fullness and universal value” (id., *Relire*, 129).

On the other hand, R. Bell (d. 1952) remarked that, for a long time, occidental scholars called attention to “the grammatical unevennesses and interruption of sense which occur in the Qur’ān” (Bell, *Commentary*, i, xx). Indeed the Qur’ānic scholar and Semitist Th. Nöldeke (d. 1930) had already qualified the Qur’ānic language as: “drawing, dull and prosaic” (Nöldeke, *Geschichte*, 107, on the sūras of the third Meccan period; cf. id., *De origine*, 55; id., *gq*, i, 143, n. 2, written by Schwally: “[Muhammad](#)¶ [p. 111] was at the very most a middle-size stylist”). For this German scholar, “while many parts of the Koran undoubtedly have considerable rhetorical power, even over an unbelieving reader, the book, aesthetically considered, is by no means a first-rate performance” (Nöldeke, *Koran*, 34). In Strassburg, he also wrote that “the sound linguistic sense of the [Arabs](#) (q.v.) almost entirely preserved them from imitating the oddnesses and weaknesses of the Qur’ānic language” (Nöldeke, *Sprache*, 22; Fr. trans. *Remarques*, 34). J. Barth (d. 1914) was struck by “the disruptions of the relations” in the sūras (*Störungen der Zusammenhänge*; *Studien*, 113). The Iraqi English Semitist A. Mingana (d. 1937) thought that the style of the Qur’ān “suffers from the disabilities that always characterize a first attempt in a new literary language which is under the influence of an older and more fixed literature” (Syriac influence, 78; this older literature being for him Syriac; see [syriac and the Qur’ān](#)). For the specialist in Arabic literature and Ṣūfism (see [Ṣūfism and the Qur’ān](#)), R.A. Nicholson (d. 1945), “The preposterous arrangement of the Koran [...] is mainly responsible for the opinion held by European readers that it is obscure, tiresome, uninteresting; a farrago of long-winded [narratives](#) (q.v.) and prosaic [exhortations](#) (q.v.), quite unworthy to be named in the same breath with the Prophetical Books of the Old Testament” (*Literary history*, 161; see [form and structure of the Qur’ān](#); [scripture and the Qur’ān](#)).

Other intellectuals waver between reactions of disgust and attraction in reading the Qur'ān. In this category may be placed J.W. Goethe (d. 1832): “The Koran repeats itself from sura to sura [...] with all sort of amplifications, unbridled tautologies and repetitions which constitute the body of this sacred book, which, each time we turn to it, is repugnant, but it soon attracts, astounds, and in the end enforces reverence [...] The style of the Koran, in accordance with its contents and aim is stern, grand, terrible, here and there truly sublime” (Goethe, *Noten*, 33-5).

In fact, there are two conceptions of the Qur'ān. The first is theological and is proper to the world of Islam. It is a matter of beliefs, and because beliefs in the Islamic areas are obligatory, of dogmas (see [belief and unbelief](#); [creeds](#)). The other conception is anthropological, and because of the reason just mentioned, it is represented only outside of the world of Islam, although not only by non-Muslims: some Muslims, admittedly very few (and usually not living in [Muslim](#) countries), also maintain this conception of the Qur'ān. For those who subscribe to the first conception, the Qur'ān is the eternal speech of God (see [word of god](#); [eternity](#); [createdness of the qur'ān](#)); for those who maintain the second position, the Qur'ān is a text which has a history. The same conceptual dichotomy is to be found concerning the [language](#) and the style of the Qur'ān. To remove any doubt and misunderstanding on this issue we will try to deal with each of these conceptions independently, setting apart the Islamic theological thesis from the hypotheses of the Arabists.

The theological thesis on the language of the Qur'ān

For clarity of exposition, we shall first introduce this thesis in a general and theoretical way, followed by a more detailed development of some points contained therein.

The general formulation of the theological thesis

By “theological thesis” is meant the position which imposed itself definitively in Islam around the fourth/tenth century, but which had already existed from the end of the second/eighth and the beginning of the third/ninth centuries, although not in ¶ [p. 112] such a formalized, theoretical format. It begins with the assertion: The language of the Qur'ān is Arabic. But which Arabic (see [dialects](#))? This question found an answer in Islamic theology, wherein a special way of interpreting the qur'ānic text itself follows the qur'ānic statement: “And we never sent a [messenger](#) (q.v.) save with the language/tongue of his folk, that he might make [the message] clear for them” (*li-yubayyina lahum*, q 14:4). The exegetes conclude from this verse that the language of the Qur'ān is that of [Muhammad](#) and his Companions (see [companions of the prophet](#)), understood as the dialect of Ḥijāz (see [pre-islamic arabia and the qur'ān](#)), and more particularly of the [Quraysh](#) (q.v.). To that first identification, qur'ānic Arabic = the Ḥijāzī dialect or the dialect of the Quraysh (*al-lughā al-ḥijāziyya*, *lughat Quraysh*), they added a second one: the language of the Quraysh = *al-lughā al-fuṣṣḥā*. This last expression is the Arabic denomination of what the Arabists themselves call “classical Arabic.”

That identification originates less in the Qur'ānic text than in an Islamic conception of the Qur'ān, as it appears in the work of the philologist and jurist Ibn Fāris (d. 395/1004). In the Qur'ān itself *lughā*, with the meaning of [language](#), or the feminine comparative *fushḥā* do not occur, but only the masculine of this last form: “My brother [Aaron](#) (q.v.) is more eloquent than me in speech [or, “speaks better than me”; *afṣaḥu minnī lisānan*]” (q 28:34). This verse shows, however, that the *faṣḥa* 1) is above all, a quality of the one who speaks, 2) that there are degrees in it, and 3) that it is only metonymically transferred from the locutor to the language, in this case by the means of a specification (in Arabic grammar *tamyīz*; here *lisānan* indicates eloquence “concerning” language).

We find an echo of the Qur'ānic formulation in the following affirmation of a ¶ scholar of Rayy quoted by Ibn Fāris with a chain of authority (see [hadīth and the Qur'ān](#)), Ismā'īl b. Abī `Ubayd Allāh Mu`āwiya b. `Ubayd Allāh al-Ash`arī (d. first half third/ninth cent.), whose father was the vizier and secretary of the caliph al-Mahdī: “The Qurayshites are the most refined of the Arabs by their tongues and the purest by their language (*afṣaḥ al-`arab alsinatan wa asfāhum lughatan*).” To that affirmation no justification is given, save a dogmatical one: “The reason is that God... has chosen and elected (see [election](#)) them among all the Arabs (*dhālika anna llāha... khtārahum min jamī` al-`arab wa-ṣtafāhum*), and among them he has chosen the prophet of [mercy](#) (q.v.), [Muḥammad](#)” (Ibn Fāris, *al-Ṣāhibī*, 52; Rabin, *West-Arabian*, 22-3).

The metonymy is again seen at work in the book of the grammarian Ibn Jinnī (d. 392/1002; *Khaṣā'iṣ*, i, 260; see [grammar and the Qur'ān](#)) saying of the language of the Ḥijāz: “it is the purest and the oldest (*al-lughā al-fuṣḥā al-qudmā*).” Here, it is true, a third idea appears, linking superiority to precedence or antiquity. It is already in Sībawayhi (d. 177/793 or 180/796; *Kitāb*, ed. Derenbourg, ii, 37, l. 15; ed. Būlāq, ii, 40; ed. Hārūn, iii, 278): “the Ḥijāzī is the first and oldest language” (*wa-l-ḥijāziyya hiya l-lughā l-ūlā l-qudmā*; Levin, Sībawayhi's attitude, 215-6, and n. 61). Of course, this declaration could be a later interpolation. It is the qualification of a philologist, the counterpart of the concept of “the corruption of [language](#)” (*fasād al-lughā*): to say that [language](#) is subject to corruption is to acknowledge but also to condemn linguistic change, which is diachronic. Traditionally the linguistic superiority of the Quraysh has been seen as the consequence of their being at greatest remove from the non-Arabic speaking areas: “Therefore, the dialect [or, better, “manner of speaking,” Fr. *parler*, Ger. *Redeweise*] of the Quraysh ¶ [p. 113] was the most correct and purest Arabic dialect (*afṣaḥa l-lughāti l-`arabiyyati wa-asfaḥa*), because the Quraysh were on all sides far removed from the lands of the non-Arabs” (Ibn Khaldūn, *Ibar*, 1072; Eng. trans. Ibn Khaldūn-Rosenthal, iii, 343). But Ibn Fāris himself (*al-Ṣāhibī*, 52) considers this superiority to be the product of the selection of the best elements of the different Arabic dialects, a selection made possible by the fact that [Mecca](#) (q.v.) was the center of an inter-tribal [pilgrimage](#) (q.v.; we shall see the interpretation given by Kahle to this conception).

The Qur'ān on its own language and style. Does the Qur'ān really say it is in “a clear Arabic tongue”?

As the Qur'ān is a very self-referential text (Wild, *Mensch*, 33), it has often been said that it was “somewhat self-conscious with respect to its [language](#)” (Jenssen, Arabic language, 132), providing commentary on its own [language](#), style, and perhaps arrangement. Support for this view is drawn, first of all, from the apparent qur'ānic qualification of itself as being “plain/clear Arabic tongue/speech/language.”

It would appear, however, that most of the occurrences of *lisān* in the Qur'ān refer to “tongue” as a vocal organ (Wansbrough, *qs*, 99; see also [language](#), concept of), like q 39:28: “A lecture in Arabic, containing no crookedness (*ghayra dhī `iwajin*, without distortion)”; and in this case it can be related to a topos of prophetic communication (see [prophets and prophethood](#); [revelation and inspiration](#)), reflecting the speech difficulties associated with the calling of [Moses](#) (q.v.; Exodus 4:10-7): “O my [lord](#), I am not eloquent, neither heretofore, nor since you have spoken unto your servant, but I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue” (verse 10). The Qur'ān, too, knows this story, as evidenced by q 20:27, wherein [Moses](#) says: “And loose a knot from my tongue” (cf. also q 28:34, “My ¶ brother Aaron is more eloquent than me in speech [*afṣaḥu minnī lisānan*],” which is a reversal of Exodus 4:14-5: “Is not Aaron thy brother? I know that he can speak well [...]. And thou shalt speak unto him, and put words in his [mouth](#) and I will be with thy [mouth](#) [or: I will help you speak], and with his mouth.”). Such is the case also for q 19:97: “And we make it [this scripture] easy for your tongue (*yassarnāhu bilisānika*).” It should be noted that the same expression in q 44:58 has been translated by Pickthall, with no apparent reason for translating the two passages differently, as: “[...] easy in thy [language](#).” This theme becomes a refrain in q 54:17, 22, 40: “And in truth we have made the Qur'ān easy to remember” (see [memory](#)). Such texts “could support the hypothesis that linguistic allusions in the Qur'ān are not to the Arabic language but rather, to the task of prophetic communication” (Wansbrough, *qs*, *ibid.*; cf. Robinson, *Discovering*, 158-9).

The Qur'ān says not only that it is in Arabic or Arabic tongue/speech/language (*lisān*), but it seems also to declare that it is in a plain/clear (*mubīn*) tongue/speech/language: “We have revealed it, a lecture (*qur'ānan*) in Arabic” (q 12:2; 20:113); “We revealed it, a decisive utterance (*ḥukman*) in Arabic” (q 13:37); “a lecture in Arabic” (q 39:28; 41:3; 42:7; 43:3); “this is a confirming scripture in the Arabic language” (*lisānan `arabiyyan*) (q 46:12); “in plain Arabic speech” (*bi-lisānin `arabiyyin mubīnin*) (q 26:195; cf. 16:103; see Rippin, *Foreign vocabulary*, 226).

The reasons why the Qur'ān insists on the quality and value of its own language seem to be polemical and apologetic (see [polemic and polemical language](#)). The argument for its Arabic character, first of all, should be put in relation with q 14:4: “We never sent a [messenger](#) save with the language/tongue of his folk (*bi-lisāni ¶ [p. 114] qawmihi*), that he might make [the message] clear for them.” This declaration, by stressing the [language](#) of this [messenger](#) ([Muhammad](#)) and this folk (the Arabs), can be understood as a declaration of the ethnocentric nature of this prophetic [mission](#), but also as a divine proof of its universality (Wansbrough, *qs*, 52-3, 98), challenging another sacred language, Hebrew (*op. cit.* 81), perhaps also Syriac, or more generally Aramaic (see [informants](#)).

But in stressing that it is in Arabic, the Qur'ān answers also to accusations which were addressed to [Muhammad](#) during the Meccan period (see [opposition to muhammad](#)): “And we know well what they say: Only a man teaches him. The speech of whom they falsely hint (*yulḥidūna ilayhi*) is outlandish (*a`jamī*), and this is clear Arabic speech” (q 16:103). The commentators explain *yulḥidūna* (Kūfan reading: *yalḥadūna*; Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, xiv, 180; see [readings of the Qur'ān](#)) by “to incline to, to become fond of” (Muqātil, *Tafsīr*, ii, 487; Farrā', *Ma`ānī*, ii, 113), which is the meaning of the Arabic *laḥada*. But these explanations seem not to be convincing. Indeed, it has been shown elsewhere that the linguistic and social context to which this verse refers could be a Syriac one: the Arabic root *l-ḥ-d*, being probably an adaptation of the Syriac *l`ez*, “to speak enigmatically,” “to allude to,” like the Arabic root *l-gh-z* (Luxenberg, *Lesart*, 87-91; Gilliot, *Coran*, § 6; see also [informants](#)).

The contrast of *a`jamī*, often understood as barbarous or outlandish, with *`arabī*/Arabic, becomes very significant, if we consider q 41:44: “And if we had appointed it a lecture in a foreign tongue (*qur`ānan a`jamiyyan*) they would assuredly have said: If only its [verses](#) (q.v.) were expounded (*fuṣṣilat*) [so that we might understand]? What! A foreign tongue and an Arab (*a`jamiyyun wa-`arabiyyun*)?” (or, in ¶ the rendition of Arberry: “If We had made it a barbarous Koran [...] Why are its [signs](#) (q.v.) not distinguished? What, barbarous and Arabic?”). *Fuṣṣilat* was undertood by an early exegete, al-Suddī (d. 128/745), as “clarified” (*buyyināt*, Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, xxiv, 127; Tha`labī, *Tafsīr*, not quoting al-Suddī: “whose verses are clear; they reach us so that we understand it. We are a people of Arabs, we have nothing to do with non-Arabs [*`ajamiyya*]”; cf. Muqātil, *Tafsīr*, iii, 746: “Why are its verses not expounded clearly in Arabic?”).

The expression “In plain/clear Arabic speech/tongue (*bi-lisānin `arabiyyin mubīnin*)” (q 26:195; cf. 16:103) still needs more reflection, because the translation given here is — like most translations of the phrase — misleading from the point of view of morphology, and consequently of semantics. *Mubīn* is the active participle of the causative-factitive *abāna*, which can be understood as: “making [things] clear.” Such an understanding of that expression is suggested by q 14:4, which utilizes the causative factitive *bayyana*: “And we never sent a [messenger](#) save with the language/tongue of his folk, that he might *make* [the message] *clear* for them (*li-yubayyina lahum*).”

But the adjectival opposition found in q 16:103 between *a`jamī* on the one hand, and *`arabī* and *mubīn*, on the other, was understood by the exegetes as “barbarous,” i.e. non-Arabic (*`ajamī*) and indistinct (*a`jamī*), in contradistinction with clear/pure Arabic (Wansbrough, *qs*, 98-9; see [language](#), concept of; for the opposing traditional view, variously expressed, i.e. “in clear Arabic/pure tongue,” see Widengren, *Apostle*, 151-2, in relation to the question of a pre-Islamic Arabic translation of the Bible; Horovitz, *ku*, 75).

The consequence, according to the theologians, is that the Qur'ān must be in a “smooth, soft, and plain/distinct speech ¶[p. 115] (*sahl, layyin, wāḍiḥ*)”: “In the Qur'ān there is no unusual/obscure (*gharīb*) sound-complex (*ḥarf*) from the manner of speaking (*luḡa*) of the Quraysh, save three, because the speech (*kalām*) of the Quraysh is smooth, soft, and plain/distinct, and the speech of the [other] Arabs is uncivilized (*wahshī*),

unusual/obscure” (Abū l-`Izz Wāsiṭī, d. 521/1127 , *al-Irshād fī l-qirā`āt al-`ashr*, quoted by Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, chap. 37, ed. Ibrāhīm, ii, 124). This dogma of the alleged superiority of the Ḥijāzī dialect did not have, in reality, great consequences in choosing among the various readings of the Qur`ān. In fact, “the home dialect of the Prophet has not occupied a particular place” in the qur`ānic readings (Beck, `Arabiyya, 182), but, rather, the grammarians and exegetes tried to preserve a certain scientific autonomy in this respect (Gilliot, Précidence, 100; id., *Elt*, 135-64; 171-84). Some contemporary [Muslim](#) scholars have, for this reason, accused them of “distorting” the qur`ānic readings, e.g. the book entitled “Defence of the readings transmitted via different channels against the exegete al-Ṭabarī” (Anṣārī, *Difā` an al-qirā`āt al-mutawātira...*).

The superiority of the Arabic language and the excellence of the Arabic of the Qur`ān

The [Muslim](#) scholars of religious sciences (see [traditional disciplines](#) of qur`ānic study) and the ancient Arab philologists have spared no effort in enhancing the alleged superiority of the Arabic language over other languages: “Of all tongues, that of the Arabs is the richest and the most extensive in ways of expression (*madhhaban*). Do we know any man except a prophet who apprehended all of it?” (Shāfi`ī [d. 204/820], *Risāla*, 42, no. 138/[modified] Eng. trans., 88; Fr. trans., 69; Ibn Fāris, *al-Ṣāḥibī*, 40-7; Goldziher, *Sprachgelehrsamkeit*, iii, 207-11). The Kūfan exegete, grammarian and ¶ jurist, al-Farrā` (d. 207/822), explains the superiority of the speech of the Quraysh in a particular way, namely as based upon the pilgrimage and their outstanding taste and capacity of selection: “[His fictive interlocutor saying] Sagacity and beauty came to them merely because the Arabs were accustomed to come to the sanctuary for *ḥajj* and *`umra*, both their women and men. The women made the circuit round the House unveiled and performed the ceremonies with uncovered faces. So they selected them by sight and thought after of dignity and beauty. By this they gained superiority besides those qualities by which they were particularly distinguished. [al-Farrā` answers] We said: In the same way they were accustomed to hear from the tribes of the Arabs their dialects; so they could choose from every dialect that which was the best in it. So their speech became elegant and nothing of the more vulgar forms of speech was mixed up with it” (a text of al-Farrā` in Kahle, *Geniza*, 345; Eng. trans. Kahle, *Arabic readers*, 70). In a word, the Quraysh through their sagacity in choice were prepared to become the “chosen people of God” in language, that is Arabic.

The Mu`tazilite theologian and man of [letters](#), al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 255/867; see [mu`tazilīs](#)) is no less explicit on this subject, using the example of poetry whose “excellence is limited to the Arabs and to those who speak the tongue of the Arabs, and it is impossible that [Arabic] poetry should be translated and it cannot be conveyed [into another language].” He explains that, in translation, the meter, the rhyme, the rhythm, arrangement (*naẓm*) and verse would be destroyed. Of course, everybody, including al-Jāḥiẓ, is familiar with the difficulty of translating poetry. But for this theologian only the Arabs have poetry in the sense of the Arabic term *qaṣīda* (odes) and accord with its norms; his primary ¶ [p. **116**] point is the superiority of the Arabic language as a presupposition for the excellence of the qur`ānic Arabic (Jāḥiẓ, *Ḥayawān*, i, 74-5; Gilliot, *Elt*, 86). We could, of course, continue to quote a number of philologists, exegetes and theologians on this

matter drawn from all periods of Islamic history up to the present day; but these samples are sufficient to provide an insight into the essential features of this apologetic discourse.

The “Challenge Verses”

In the religious *imaginaire* on the language of the Qur’ān, the Challenge Verses (*āyāt al-taḥaddī*: q 2:23; 10:38; 11:13; 17:88; 52:33-4; see Wansbrough, *qs*, 79-82; Gilliot, *Elt*, 84-6; Radscheit, *Herausforderung*; van Ess, *tg*, iv, 607-8; see also [provocation](#); [inimitability](#)) have also played a major role in the elaboration of a conception of a *lingua sacra*. These verses continue to be an important theme of [Muslim](#) apologetics, although they might be better explained in the context of Jewish polemics. The objection of the adversaries of Muḥammad here seems to have had nothing to do with language, and the answer of the Qur’ān, “then bring a sūra like unto it,” also appears not to refer to [language](#) (see [sūras](#)). Three of these verses are a response to the accusation of [forgery](#) (q.v.) against [Muḥammad](#): “He has invented it” (*iftarāhu*, q 10:38; 11:13; *taqawwalahu*, q 52:33). The framework indicates a “‘rabbinical’ test of prophethood” (Wansbrough, *qs*, 79): “Verily, though humankind and the [jinn](#) (q.v.) should assemble to produce the like of this Qur’ān, they could not...” (q 17:88). The audience was not at all impressed by the product given by [Muḥammad](#), which they did not find particularly coherent — in any case, not as coherent as the other revealed books (Muqātil, *Tafsīr*, iii, 234; Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, xix, 10, ad q 25:32; van Ess, *tg*, iv, 608; see [book](#)): “Why is the Qur’ān not revealed ¶ unto him all at once? [It is revealed] thus that we may strengthen your [heart](#) (q.v.) therewith; and we have arranged it in right order” (*wa-rattalnāhu tartīlan*; Arberry: “better in exposition,” q 25:32).

But the same verbal noun (*nomen verbi*), *tartīl*, is problematic (Paret, *Kommentar*, 492). Several interpretations have been given by ancient exegetes: to proceed in a leisurely manner, pronounce distinctly, to recite part after part (Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, xxix, 126-7, ad q 73:4; Lane, *Lexicon*, i, 1028). Besides, it can be understood elsewhere as recitation or cantillation: “and chant the Qur’ān in measure” (*wa-rattili l-qur’āna tartīlan*, q 73:4; Arberry: “and chant the Koran very distinctly”; Andrae, *Ursprung*, 192: “and recite the Koran in equal sections”). But this last passage has been also understood as “and make the Qur’ān distinct,” perhaps alluding to [Muḥammad](#) “at the labour in composition” (Bell, *Origin*, 97; id., *Commentary*, ii, 444). It could also refer to the style of the Qur’ān: “the sense of the word [in q 25:32] is not exactly known, but it is likely to refer to the rhyme, the existence of which cannot be denied” (Mingana, Qur’ān, 545 b).

The adversaries of [Muḥammad](#) — but not only they — in fact, most of the Quraysh were not particularly impressed by the [language](#) or the content of his predication: “muddled dreams (see [dreams and sleep](#)); nay, he has but invented it; nay, he is but a poet. Let him bring us a portent even as those of old [i.e. messengers] were sent [with portents]” (q 21:5; Blachère, *Histoire*, ii, 232). Despite the original auditors' apparent skepticism as to the excellence of the qur’ānic language, Muslim exegetes, philologists, jurists and theologians (see [theology and the qur’ān](#)) opened the door to an elaboration of sacral representations and mythical constructions on the pre-eminence of the Arabic language

and the supposed superiority and inimitability of the qur'ānic language, ¶ [p. 117] sentiments which were not present *expressis verbis* in the Qur'ān.

The foreign words

But q 41:44 became also a *locus classicus* in qur'ānic exegesis in the debate over the occurrence of foreign words in the Qur'ān (in addition to Rippin, Foreign vocabulary, 226, see Ibn al-Jawzī, *Funūn*, 186-93) and, with q 16:103, on the informants of Muḥammad (see Madigan, *Self-image*, 199-200; see also [informants](#)). Some ancient exegetes had general pronouncements on the issue: according to the Kūfan companion of Ibn Mas'ūd, Abū Maysara al-Hamdānī (d. 63/682): “There are [expressions] in the Qur'ān from every language (*lisān*)” (Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaḥ*, [[Kitāb](#) 22. *Faḍā'il al-Qur'ān*, *bāb* 7], vi, 121, no. 29953; Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, i, 14, no. 6/Eng. trans. *Commentary*, i, 13; Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, chap. 38, ed. Ibrāhīm, ii, 126; id., *Muḥadhdhab*, 194, ed. al-Hāshimī, 60-1). The same words are also attributed to the Khurasānī exegete al-Ḍaḥḥāk b. Muzāḥim (d. 105/723; Ibn Abī Shayba, *ibid.*, no. 29952; Suyūṭī, *Muḥadhdhab*, 194, ed. al-Hāshimī, 61). Or, according to another Kūfan, Sa'īd b. Jubayr (d. 95/714): “There is no [language](#)(*lughā*) on the earth which God has not revealed in the Qur'ān. And he [Ibn Jubayr or somebody else in the chain] said: the name of [Jibrīl](#) ([Gabriel](#), q.v.) is the servant/man (*`abd*) of God, and the name of Mikā'il ([Michael](#), q.v.) is the small servant/man of God” (see for this etymology Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, ii, 389-92, ad q 2:97: *jabr* means *`abd*, servant/man). Wansbrough (followed, unfortunately, by Gilliot, *Elt*, 103), writes that the tradition of Ibn Jubayr was transmitted by Muqātil (*qs*, 218). It is indeed in Muqātil (*Tafsīr*, ii, 606), but it was added with a chain of authority by one of the transmitters of this book, `Abdallāh b. Thābit al-Tawwazī (d. 308/920; Gilliot, Muqātil, 41; see [hadīth and the qur'ān](#)). Or, according to Wahb b. Munabbih ¶ (d. 110/728): “There are only a few languages which are not represented in some way in the Qur'ān” (Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, chap. 38, ed. Ibrāhīm, ii, 135; id., *Muḥadhdhab*, 213, ed. al-Hāshimī, 106-7; id., *Durr*, i, 335, l. 16-7, ad q 2:260, quoted from the qur'ānic commentary of Abū Bakr b. al-Mundhir, d. 318/930). But the tradition of Ibn Jubayr is also presented as one of the [occasions of the revelation](#) (q.v.) of the verse under discussion, q 41:44 (Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, xxiv, 127; Tha`labī, *Tafsīr*, ad q 41:44), because of the word *a`jamī*, linked by ancient exegetes to the theme of the informants (Muqātil, *Tafsīr*, iii, 745-6; Tha`labī, *Tafsīr*, quoting Muqātil; see Gilliot, Informants, 513). That which “is not of the speech of the Arabs” was not, however, to everybody's taste, and some ancient philologists who had extreme arabophile sentiments had hard opinions on this issue and condemned others: “some knowledgeable (*naḥārīr*) [philologists] sometimes introduce non-Arabic words as pure Arabic out of their desire to mislead people and make them fail” (al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad, d. 175/791, *Kitāb al-`Ayn*, i, 53, quoted by Talmon, *Arabic grammar*, 122).

All this entirely contradicts the quasidogma of the “purity” of the Arabic of the Qur'ān, but a theologian can always find a solution to a seeming contradiction, namely by transforming its object into a quality or a “[miracle](#)” (q.v.): “Other books were revealed only in the [language](#) of the [nation](#) to whom they were addressed, while the Qur'ān contains words from all Arabic dialects, and from Greek, Persian, and Ethiopic besides” (Ibn al-Naqīb, d. 698/1298, in Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, chap. 38, ed. Ibrāhīm, ii, 127; Gilliot, *Elt*, 101;

Rabin, *West-Arabian*, 19). It is possible that a tradition attributed to [Muhammad](#) and transmitted from Ibn Mas`ūd had an influence here on the theological representation of the superiority of the Qur`ān over the other revealed books: “The first book was ¶ [p. 118] revealed from a single door, in a single manner (*ḥarf*, or, “genre, sound-complex”; this last, in other contexts, according to Rabin, *West-Arabian*, 9), but the Qur`ān was revealed in seven [manners](#)...” (Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, ed. Shākir, i, 68, no. 67; Gilliot, *Les sept “lectures.”* II, 56; id., *Langue*, 91-2).

The problems of qur`ānic grammar

Up until the present day, special books have been written by Muslims on this issue, particularly with the aim of finding a solution to the following problem: “What the grammarians forbid, although it occurs in the Qur`ān” (Ḥassūn, *al-Naḥw l-qur`ānī*, 12-114; Anṣārī, *Nazariyya*; see also [grammar and the qur`ān](#)), or related issues, like “The defence of the Qur`ān against the grammarians and the Orientalists” (Anṣārī, *al-Difā` al-Qur`ān...*).

The mythical narratives on the superiority of Arabic

Interpretations of the passages of the Qur`ān that understand the language in a sacral and theological orientation, combined with ethnocentric Arab conceptions, have contributed to the elaboration of a hierarchy of languages, at the summit of which stands Arabic. Even if these ideas existed before, they were only systematically collected during the second half of the second/eighth and the third/ninth centuries. The constitution of an empire and the construction of a mythical conception of a common “perfect” [language](#) go together.

We find a statement about this hierarchy by the Cordoban jurist and historian `Abd al-Malik b. Ḥabīb (d. 238/852), for whom the languages of the “prophets” were Arabic, Syriac and Hebrew: All the sons of [Israel](#) (q.v.; i.e. [Jacob](#), q.v.) spoke Hebrew (see also [children of israel](#)); the first whom God allowed to speak it was [Isaac](#) (q.v.). Syriac was the language of five prophets: [Idrīs](#) (q.v.), [Noah](#) (q.v.), [Abraham](#) ¶ (q.v.), [Lot](#) (q.v.) and [Jonah](#) (q.v.). Twelve of them spoke Arabic: Adam (see [adam and eve](#)), Seth, [Hūd](#) (q.v.), [Sālih](#) (q.v.), [Ishmael](#) (q.v.), [Shu`ayb](#) (q.v.), al-Khiḍr (see [khaḍir/khiḍr](#)), “the three in Sūrat Yā Sīn” (q 36:14), [Jonah](#), Khālīd b. Sinān al-`Absī, and Muḥammad. According to `Abd al-Malik b. Ḥabīb, Adam first spoke Arabic, but later this language was distorted and changed into Syriac (‘Abd al-Malik b. Ḥabīb, *Ta`rīkh*, 27-8; Suyūṭī, *Muzhir*, i, 30-1/Eng. trans. Czapkiewicz, *Views*, 66-7; Goldziher, *Grammar*, 44-5; Loucel, *Origine*. IV, 167-8).

This last opinion is supported by a tradition attributed to an individual often cited on such matters, the cousin and Companion of Muḥammad (who was ca. 10 years old when Muḥammad died), namely Ibn `Abbās (d. 69/688): “His [i.e. Adam's] language in [paradise](#) (q.v.) was Arabic, but when he disobeyed his [lord](#) (q.v.), God deprived him of Arabic, and he spoke Syriac. God, however, restored him to his grace (*tāba`alayhi*), and he gave him back Arabic” (Ibn `Asākir, *Ta`rīkh*, vii, 407; Suyūṭī, *Muzhir*, i, 30; Loucel, *Origine*. IV, 167). It has been said that Adam “spoke 700,000 languages, of which the

best was Arabic” (Tha`labī, *Tafsīr*, ad q 55:4, from an anonymous source; Goldziher, *Grammar*, 45, quoting Baghawī, *Ma`ālim*, presently still only in manuscript form; but the figure “700” in Baghawī, *Ma`ālim*, iv, 266 has to be corrected!). The exegetes (*ahl al-ta`wīl*) explain the diversity of languages in the following way: God taught all the languages to Adam, but when his sons were scattered, each of them spoke one [language](#), then each group that issued from them spoke its own language (Wāhidī, *Wasīt*, i, 116; Nīsābūrī, *Tafsīr*, i, 220; Abū Ḥayyān, *Baḥr*, i, 145, ad q 2:31).

These endeavors of the [Muslim](#) exegetes and theologians express a mimetic concurrence with trends found among the Jews ¶ [p. 119] (see [jews and judaism](#)) and the Syrians; for the latter, however, Adam spoke Syriac/Aramaic (Grünbaum, *Beiträge*, 63). Other sources refer to seventy two, seventy or eighty languages in the world (Goldziher, *Grammar*, 45-6; Loucel, *Origine*. IV, 169-70: only for 72).

The influence of the theological representations appears in the desperate attempts of the jurists to give sense to a set of contradictory, or disparate, ideas or facts: at the beginning there was a single [language](#) which God taught to Adam (see [knowledge and learning](#)), and it was, of course, the best one, Arabic (because the Qur`ān is in Arabic); there are several languages; the Arabic of the Qur`ān is the best Arabic; the Prophet was an Arab, and he belonged to the tribe of Quraysh (see [tribes and clans](#)). One of the solutions found, with recourse to [legends](#) and argumentation, was the following: at the beginning God taught a single [language](#) to humankind; the other languages were taught only later to the [offspring](#) of [Noah](#), after the flood (according to Abū Manṣūr `Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī, d. 429/1037); according to Ibn `Abbās, the first to speak Arabic was Ishmael, which is interpreted as “pure Arabic,” meaning the Arabic of the Quraysh, “because the Arabic of Qaḥtān and Ḥimyar [South Arabic] was spoken before Ishmael” (Zarkashī, *Baḥr*, ii, 16; Suyūṭī, *Muzhir*, i, 27, quoting him; Goldziher, *Grammar*, 44).

These mythical [narratives](#) on [language](#) which are quoted in different genres of literature (exegesis, historiography, *adab*, etc.), and, even up to the present, appear in popular books, play a major role in the linguistic *imaginaire* of the Muslims. They are as important as the arguments of the scholars, who, moreover, also quote them to confirm their line of argument and to establish it definitively in the minds of their readers (for the origin of speech ¶ according to the grammarian Ibn Jinnī, see Versteegh, *Arabic linguistic tradition*, 100-14; on al-Suyūṭī's [d. 911/1505] presentation, see A. Czapkiewicz, *Views*, 64-6).

The “creation” of a Prophet against his competitors (poets, soothsayers, orators, story-tellers, etc.)

The strategy of [Muhammad](#) and of the first generations of [Muslim](#) scholars concerning poetry and poets had a reason other than the traditional tribal defense of [honor](#) (q.v.; `irḍ; Nahshalī, *Mumtī`*, 220-7: How the Arabs protected themselves and defended their honor with poetry; [Jacob](#), *Beduinenleben*, 176-8; Farès, *Honneur*, passim), even if [Muhammad](#) saw himself more and more as a supra-tribal chief and was concerned to defend his own reputation. This other reason was a linguistically theological one.

Not only had the Qur'ān to be sharply distinguished from poetry (Hirschberg, *Jüdische und christliche Lehren*, 27-32; Gilliot, Poète, 378-9, § 111, 116) and the [rhymed prose](#) (q.v.; *saj'*) of the Arab [soothsayers](#) (q.v.), but its superiority to poetry had to be demonstrated, an idea which was not obvious. Before the Arab poets, diviners (see [divination](#); [foretelling](#)) and orators, [Muhammad](#) had to “create” himself with the help of his supporters and to be “created” by the first generations of [Muslim](#) scholars. *The Prophet* whose language was excellent, “the most Arab of the Arabs,” is depicted as, after his birth, having been placed in the care of another in order to be nursed (see [lactation](#); [wet-nursing](#); [fosterage](#)) and brought up in clans whose Arabic was the “purest” (see also [sīra and the Qur'ān](#)). According to the Companion Abū Sa`īd al-Khudrī, [Muhammad](#) is supposed to have said: “I am the Prophet who does not [lie](#) (q.v), I am the son of `Abd al-Muṭṭalib, I am the one who speaks the best Arabic (or “the most Arab of the Arabs,” *a`rab al-`Arab*). The Quraysh has procreated ¶ [p. 120] me, I grew up in the tribe of Sa`d b. Bakr [his [nurse](#) Ḥalīma was of that clan!] [So you should not ask] from where this my manner of speaking comes (*fa-annā ya'tīnī l-laḥnu*)” (Ṭabarānī, *Kabīr*, vi, 35-6, no. 5437; Ibn al-Sarrāj al-Shantarīnī, *Tanbīh*, 121-2; Gilliot, Poète, 385). Or: “Of you, I am the one whose Arabic is the best (*anā a`rabukum*), I am from the Quraysh, my language is that of the Sa`d b. Bakr” (Ibn Sa`d, *Ṭabaqāt*, i, 113; cf. Suyūṭī, *Khaṣā'is*, i, 63); “I am of the Arabs whose language is the most pure and understandable (*anā afṣaḥ al-`Arab*).” This long translation is the nearest to the meaning of *faṣīḥ* at this time: whose Arabic is “*rein, verständlich*,” in opposition to the foreign languages, but also to the Arabic of the Arabs of the “frontiers” (Vollers, in his review of Nöldeke [*Zur Grammatik*], 126). Or: “I am the most eloquent creature” (Suyūṭī, *Muzhir*, i, 209-13; Wansbrough, *qs*, 93-4). Or, more expressly in relation to the Qur'ān: “Love the Arabs for three reasons, because I am Arab, the Qur'ān is Arabic, and the speech of the people of paradise is Arabic” (Ibn al-Anbārī, *Idāh*, i, 21; Kahle, Qur'ān, 174, no. 28; 173, no. 22; cf. Muqāṭil b. Sulaymān declaring: “The speech [*kalām*] of the inhabitants of the sky is Arabic”; Ibn al-Sarrāj al-Shantarīnī, *Tanbīh*, 77. This declaration was included in a tradition attributed to [Muhammad](#) which continues: “and their [language](#) when they are standing before God in the [last judgment](#) [q.v.]”; Kahle, Qur'ān, 173-4, no. 25).

It should be noticed that these declarations of (or sayings attributed to) [Muhammad](#) on the best language pertain to the categories of the [pride](#) (q.v.; *fakhr*) of the ancient Arabs and their poetry, and that they can be extended to other fields, for instance in that other saying of Muḥammad transmitted from the Companion Anas b. Mālīk: “I was made superior to people with four qualities: generosity (see [gift-](#) ¶ giving), bravery (see [courage](#)), frequency of sexual intercourse (*kathrat al-jimā`*), great violence (*shiddat al-baṭsh*)” (Abū Bakr al-Ismā`īlī, *Mu`jam*, ii, 621-2 620-1, no. 251; Ibn `Asākir, *Ta`rīkh*, ed. al-`Amrawī ~~viii, 69-70~~ IV, 21-22 [Ṭabarānī, *al-Mu`jam al-awsaṭ*, VII, p. 49, no. 6816; *TB*, VIII, p. 69-70, *sub* no. 4144; Dhahabī, *Mīzān*, I, 543]; Suyūṭī, *al-Jāmi` al-ṣaḡhīr*, II, p. 217, no. 5884]) These traditional tribal values of the ancient Arabs, and above all the quality of the [language](#), were transformed into proofs of prophecy.

This was and still is a necessary presupposition to persuade the Arabs and the non-Arab Muslims of the so-called superiority and inimitability of the Qur'ānic language, style and content (Gilliot, *Elt*, 73-93, but also chaps. four and five). Through lack of written Arabic

texts at their disposal (see [orality and writing in arabia](#)), they could only lean on the “thesaurus of the Arabs” (*dīwān al-ʿArab*), poetry, according to a celebrated declaration attributed again to Ibn ʿAbbās (Ibn al-Anbārī, *Īdāh*, i, 99-101, no. 118, 120; taken up by Suyūfī, *Itqān*, chap. 36, 281, ed. Ibrāhīm, ii, 67; Wansbrough, *qs*, 217; Gilliot, Poète, 374-5; cf. Goldziher, *Richtungen*, 70). This ancient poetry became a benediction from the divine favor (see [blessing](#); [grace](#)) because the “best language,” Arabic, was destined to prepare the coming of a still “more excellent” language, tongue and speech, the language of the Qurʾān (Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī, *Zīna*, i, 92), the *lingua linguarum, scilicet Verbum Dei!*

But these scholars were conscious that the poet had been a dangerous competitor to the Prophet of Islam and to the text he presented as revelation (Gilliot, Poète, 331-2; 380-8). Indeed, according to the Baṣran philologist, also a specialist in ancient poetry and Qurʾānic readings, Abū ʿAmr b. al-ʿAlāʾ (d. 154/771), in a statement transmitted by his pupil, the Baṣran philologist al-Aṣmaʿī (d. 213/828): “The poets occupied, among the Arabs (bedouins, see [bedouin](#)) during the [Age of Ignorance](#) (q.v.), the rank occupied by prophets in the nations [which have received a revelation]; ¶ [p. 121] then the sedentaries entered in relation with them (*khālaṭhum*) and were taken on by poetry (*iktasabū bi-l-shiʿri*), and the poets lost their rank. And after that came Islam and the revelation of the Qurʾān, and poetry became vilified and qualified as falsehood (*bi-tahjīn al-shiʿr wa-takdhībīhi*). As a consequence, the poets lost their rank even further. At last they used flattery and fawning (*al-malaq wa-l-taḍarruʿ*), and people disdained them” (Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī, *Zīna*, i, 95; cf. Nahshalī, *Mumtīʿ*, 25). This ideological break between the “Age of Ignorance” — in another epistemological context the “savage thought” of C. Levi-Strauss — and Islam will lead [Muslim](#) scholars to a paradox: on the one hand, pre-Islamic poets and poetry are disparaged, but on the other hand their language, although it is, from their point of view, less sublime than the language of the Qurʾān, is extraordinarily praised because the verses of these poets are considered to be the best, sometimes the only evidence that can be quoted as support (*shawāhid*) for argumentation in the sciences of language (Baghdādī, *Khizāna*, i, 5-17/Fr. trans. Gilliot, Citations, 297-316). A certain nostalgia may be seen behind the laudatory break which al-Aṣmaʿī traces between “savage thought” on the one hand and “culture” — here, Islam — on the other when he declares: “Poetry is harsh (*nakid*); therefore it is strong and easy in evil (see [good and evil](#)), but if it is used in good, it becomes weak. For instance, Hassān b. Thābit was one of the best poets (*fuḥūl al-shuʿarāʾ*) in the Age of Ignorance, but when Islam came, his poetry was dropped (*saqaṭa shiʿruhu*)” (Ibn al-Athīr, *Usd*, ii, 6, l. 17-18; Goldziher, *Alte und neue Poesie*, 136; with some difference in Ibn Qutayba, *al-Shiʿr*, 170, l. 9-11). But al-Aṣmaʿī, like the other philologists, collectors of poetry, jurists, exegetes, etc., is “at the borders of the [orality](#) (q.v.) to which he wishes to put an ¶ end [...]. The ʿālim [scholar] establishes a civilization of [literacy](#) and of its ways of thinking. As the builder of a culture he wants to control the relations between written science and knowledge which is orally transmitted” (Bencheikh, *Essai*, II).

But before poetry came to be controlled by philologists who were also jurists and specialists in the Qurʾān, traditions were employed to create a “united” [language](#), or, better, the imaginary model of such a language, which had to be, more or less, in

accordance with the “qur’ānic model.” These prophetic, or alleged prophetic, traditions had to be recalled, produced, or coined, against or in favor of poetry, giving a certain status to poets and poetry, so that they would not be competitors to the Prophet and to the book he had delivered. Ancient poetry was necessary to explain, justify and enhance the alleged pre-eminence of the qur’ānic language; but it had also to be put in its “proper place,” so that the Qur’ān should not be compared with human productions.

The philologists and theologians, in arranging and harmonizing the different and even contradictory traditions which circulated about the Arabic of the Qur’ān, the “eloquence” of the Prophet and of the Arabs — traditions whose enormous numbers, variety, contradictions and repetitions make the reader's head swim, so that one is tempted simply to believe them and stick to the reasoning of the theologians — have established the enduring conception of a *lingua sacra*. Not only believers, but also many Orientalists in their presentations of the Arabic and qur’ānic language have been influenced by the power of this conviction.

The hypotheses of the Arabists

A gulf lies between the theological thesis and the approach of a linguist, as it already appears in the following declaration ¶ [p. 122] of one of the founders of the Arabists' school, F.L. Fleischer (d. 1888): “The question for us is not: What is the purest, the most beautiful and correct Arabic, but what is Arabic in general?” (Über arabische Lexicographie, 5).

What constitutes the strength of the theological thesis for believers is precisely what represents its weakness for the critical scholar: It is based only on the qur’ānic text and upon conviction, without any verification of another nature. The extant (and scanty) epigraphic material (see [epigraphy and the qur’ān](#)) that evidences a language close to classical Arabic, insofar as its graphemes and the hazards of deciphering them allow, comes exclusively from northern Arabia (see [arabic script](#); [orthography](#)). More precisely, it is from areas that were under the control of the Ghassān and the Lakhm, considered to be Arabs whose “linguistic habit was not perfect (*fa-lam takun lughatuhum tammāt al-malaka*)” “because they had contact with non-Arabs (*bi-mukhālaṭat al-a`ājim*)” (Ibn Khaldūn, *Ibar*, 1072/Eng. trans. Ibn Khaldūn-Rosenthal, iii, 343).

Moreover, from the data preserved by the Arab grammarians and compiled by Rabin (*West-Arabian*, passim), it appears that pre-Islamic Arabic was heterogenous, but that a regional east-west differentiation could be seen in it (for a detailed list of the features, above all morphological and syntactic, see Blachère, *Histoire*, i, 70-5; Versteegh, *Arabic*, 41-6). Now, what the Arabs call *al-lughā al-fuṣḥā* and the Arabists term classical Arabic coincides with neither eastern nor western Arabic, although — taken as a whole — it is closer to the eastern sphere.

The different arabist hypotheses have their origin in the contradiction between the theological thesis and these data. These hypotheses can be reduced to two: one weak, the other strong. Moreover, they ¶ have in common the presupposition of a diglossic situation

in ancient Arabia: i.e. the coexistence of, on the one hand, the various dialects of the Arab tribes, and, on the other, a common language (which, among other things, was the vehicle of poetry, and for that reason, has been termed poetic *koiné*). Poetic *koiné* pertains to the ancient Arabic linguistic type, whereas the dialects should be, if not entirely at least partly, of the neo-Arabic type. The difference between both is the presence of *i`rāb* (case and mood endings) in the common language, its absence in the dialects.

But the Arabists do not agree on the origin of this *koiné*. For some — who think in terms of the Greek *koiné*, the basis of which is Attic Greek — it has a geographic origin: according to this hypothesis, this shared language began as an inter-tribal or super-tribal language, at the point of encounter of the two dialectical areas of Arabia, that is to say in central or north-eastern Arabia. For others — who consider it along the lines of the Homeric Greek model — it is a *Kunstsprache*, an artificial language of great antiquity, without any connection to the linguistic reality. The Arabists also do not agree on the interpretation of *i`rāb*. For some, it is syntactic, even if they recognize that its functionality is weak, not to say non-existent (see the debate between Blau, Synthetic Character, and Corriente, Functional yield; id., Again on the functional yield). For others it is linked to the constraints of prosody and rhyme in an oral-formulaic poetry (Zwettler, Classical Arabic poetry).

In this context, the weak hypothesis is that of the majority of Arabists. For them the Qur`ānic Arabic is, save for some “Ḥijāzī” peculiarities, basically the same as the Arabic of pre-Islamic poetry; hence the qualification of “poetic and Qur`ānic *koiné*,” sometimes given to that language, and which is considered to be the basis of ¶ [p. 123] classical Arabic (Blachère, *Histoire*, i, 82: “*koinè* coranico-poétique”).

The strong hypothesis is originally that of Vollers (d. 1909). He concludes that the Qur`ān was first delivered by [Muhammad](#) in the vernacular of [Mecca](#) (q.v.), a west Arabian speech missing, among other features, the *i`rāb* (Vollers, *Volkssprache*, 169; Zwettler, *Oral tradition*, 117-8, with discussion of this thesis; Versteegh, *Arabic*, 40-1), before it was later rewritten in the common language of poetry (Vollers, *Volkssprache*, 175-85). For Vollers this language, though it is the basis of the literary classical language, is primarily an eastern Arabic speech, fitted, among other features, with *i`rāb*. More than the question of the *i`rāb*, that of the “glottal stop” (*hamza*, Vollers, *Volkssprache*, 83-97) best summarizes the hypothesis of Vollers. It is said that the inhabitants of the Ḥijāz were characterized by the loss of the glottal stop (*takhfif al-hamza*), contrary to the other Arabs who used the glottal stop (*taḥqīq al-hamza*). And we know that the Qur`ānic [orthography](#) attests the addition of the *hamza*, a mark of the realization of the glottal stop.

The hypothesis of Vollers was taken up again by P.E. Kahle (d. 1964), but in a modified form (he does not maintain that the Qur`ān was rewritten). He admits, without any further explanatory discussion, that the consonantal ductus (see [codices of the Qur`ān](#); [collection of the Qur`ān](#); [mushaf](#)), traditionally attributed to the caliph `Uthmān (q.v.) represents the Arabic spoken in [Mecca](#) (Kahle, *Geniza*, 142), but for him the “readings” (*qirā`āt, variae lectiones*) of that ductus express the influence of the poetic language. He based his hypothesis on a great number of traditions, more than 120, quoted in the *Tamhīd fī*

ma`rifat al-tajwīd of al-Ḥasan b. Muḥammad al-Mālikī (d. 438/1046), in which people are exhorted to recite the Qur`ān, ¶ respecting the *i`rāb* (Kahle, Qur`ān, 171-9). Since Kahle's contributions appeared, older works containing the traditions upon which he based his theory have been made available (e.g. Abū `Ubayd, *Faḍā'il*, 208-10, and passim; Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaḥ*, [[Kitāb](#) 22. *Faḍā'il al-Qur`ān*, *bāb* 1], vi, 117-8, nos. 29903-19).

As Kahle remarks: “The recommendation to read the Koran with these vocalic endings presupposes that they were often not read” (*Geniza*, 145 n. 1). As some of these traditions were also known by the grammarian al-Farrā' (d. 207/822; Kahle, *Geniza*, 345-6 [Ar. text], 143-6 [Eng. trans.]; we should also add that some of the traditions were also known by Abū `Ubayd al-Qāsim b. Sallām [d. 224/838] and by Ibn Abī Shayba [d. 235/849]), this reveals the existence of a problem in the second/eighth century.

Two interpretations of that issue are possible. The first, a minimalist understanding, is that there was a slackening in the [recitation of the Qur`ān](#) (q.v.) because of the non-Arab converts: in this case, these traditions are a call to order, reprimands, to stop a prevalent “lax reading” and to enforce an “exact reading” (Kahle, *Geniza*, 147). But the other possibility is that the grammarians and readers (*qurrā'*, *qara'a*) want to enforce on the community a reading and recitation consonant with an ideal Arabic that they have just established by the means of a large collection of data gathered from the bedouins and from poetry. Kahle inclines to this second interpretation, putting forward the concept he encountered in al-Farrā' (and which is also to be found in Ibn Fāris; see the translation of the text of al-Farrā' above), who presents the Arabic of the Ḥijāz, and thus of the Qur`ān, as a selection from the best of the various dialects (Kahle, Qur`ān, 179-82; id., *Geniza*, 145-6; id., *Arabic readers*, 69-70). To him the presentation of ¶ [p. 124] al-Farrā' is an acknowledgment of the influence of poetic language on that of the Qur`ān, although he “antedated the influence of Bedouin poetry to an earlier period” (Kahle, *Geniza*, 146). Indeed, when it is released from its subjective elements, such a conception amounts to saying that the qur`ānic language borrows features from different dialects (Fr. *parlers*), in other words that it is an inter-language.

Whereas the hypothesis of Vollers caused a scandal in [Muslim](#) circles and prompted a debate among the Arabists (Geyer, Review; and notably Nöldeke, *Einige Bemerkungen*; id., *Der Koran und die `Arabīja*), it seems that the hypothesis of Kahle has not really garnered much attention, with the notable exception of J. Fück (d. 1974), who rejected it (Fück, *Arabīya*, 3-4, n. 4/Fr. trans., 4-5, n. 4; see also Rabin, *Beginnings*, 25-9).

Now, however, things are changing with the progress in Arabic studies of sociolinguistics and of the history of linguistics. The Arabists today have gone beyond the diglossic representation of Arabic and are in favor of a polyglossic conception of Arabic and of a continuum, even of an inherent variation. In doing so they take up again, in some way, the conception that the most ancient Arab grammarians, notably Sībawayhi, had of Arabic. These last did not understand the *lughāt* (“dialects”) as discrete varieties, but only as variants, good or bad, of one and the same language. In this context, the various “readings” (*qirā'āt*) of the Qur`ān can be seen as the reflection of this linguistic variation.

J. Owens has shown recently that the practice of the “major assimilation” (*al-idghām al-kabīr*, i.e. a consonantal assimilation between words) traditionally linked with the reader Abū `Amr (d. 154/770), did not imply linguistically the loss of the inflexional ending, but only the absence of short vowels, inflexional or not, at the ending. This means that “[Voller’s] assumption that there was a ¶ koranic variant without case ending receives plausible support from the koranic reading tradition itself” (Owens, *Idghām al-kabīr*, 504).

Lastly, it should be noticed that none of the hypotheses of the Arabists challenges the following two assertions of the Muslim tradition: 1) the Qur’ān transmits the predication of the one [Muhammad](#), and 2) there exists an `Uthmānic codex. This discussion of qur’ānic language would be enlarged if, on the one hand, the hypothesis of Wansbrough (*qs*) — i.e. that there was a slower elaboration of the qur’ānic text than is traditionally supposed — were taken into consideration, and, on the other, if, besides the “small variation” (different readings of the same ductus), the “great variation” (the existence of a non-`Uthmānic codex) were also taken into account (Gilliot, *Coran*, § 29; id. *Reconstruction*, § 15).

From language to style

The link between qur’ānic language and the linguistic style of the Qur’ān itself is the notion of *bayān*, and it is not by chance that the founder of Bābism (see [bahā’īs](#)), `Alī Muḥammad (d. 1850) wrote a book intended to replace the Qur’ān, entitled *al-Bayān* (Bausani, *Bāb*). *Bayān*, a verbal noun (*nomen verbi*: distinctness; Fr. *le fait d’être distinct*), occurs only three times in the Qur’ān (q 55:4; 75:19; 3:138; Bell, *Commentary*, ii, 329; Paret, *Kommentar*, 465; Blachère, ii, 74-5), e.g. q 55:3-4: “He has created man. He has taught him utterance” (*al-bayāna*; or, “the capacity of clear exposition”; Arberry: “the Explanation”; Blachère: “l’Exposé”). Moreover, *tibyān* (exposition, explanation) occurs once (q 16:89), and the active participle (*nomen agentis*), *mubīn*, twice qualifies the “Arabic tongue” (*lisān `arabī*, q 16:103; 26:195; see [language](#), concept of). But twelve times *mubīn* qualifies “book” ([kitāb](#), q 5:15; 6:59; 10:61; 11:6; 12:1; 15:1; 26:2; 27:1; 75; 28:2; 34:3; 44:2), seven ¶ [p. 125] times it modifies *balāgh* (q 5:92; 16:35; 82; 24:54; 29:18; 36:17; 64:12), and twice *qur’ān* (q 15:1; 36:29). In this context, *mubīn* can be interpreted as the active participle (*nomen agentis*) of the fourth (causative) verbal form, *abāna*, used with an implicit object, simply a synonym of the second verbal form, *bayyana*, meaning “making [things] distinct/clear.” But *abāna* can also be seen as an implicitly reflexive causative, and in this case *mubīn* is interpreted as “showing [itself] distinct/clear,” as suggested by the explicit reflexive in q 37:117: “*al-kitāb al-mustabīn*” (the clear scripture). The high number of the occurrences of the root *b-y-n* and its derivatives indicates that *bayān* is a characteristic of speech.

Developed at length by Shāfi`ī (d. 204/820), the idea is that the Qur’ān says things clearly; jurist that he was, he demonstrates this theory beginning with the legal obligations (see [boundaries and precepts](#); [law and the qur’ān](#); [ambiguous](#); [abrogation](#)). But this is said with the underlying conviction that the Qur’ān expresses itself clearly because it is in Arabic (we should remember here that “Qur’ān” is qualified six times as “Arabic”; Shāfi`ī, *Risāla*, 20-40/Eng. trans. 67-80/Fr. trans. 53-68; Yahia, *Contribution*,

361-410; 368-71: on Jāhiz; cf. Bāqillānī, *Intiṣār*, 256-71; Gilliot, *Elt*, 73; id., *Parcours*, 92-6). The central character of *bayān* in matters of style is attested by the fact that the phrase *ʿilm al-bayān* (see von Grunebaum, *Bayān*) competes with *ʿilm al-balāgha* for denoting Arabic rhetoric (which is not an oratorical art, but the art of all [manners](#) of speaking: poetical, oratorical, epistolary, etc.). But, for the most part — as opposed to *ʿilm al-maʿānī* — it designates the part of *ʿilm al-balāgha* which deals with the expression of the *maʿnā* i.e. the *latʿ* in other words, stylistics. It should be noticed that the dogma of the inimitability of the Qurʾān was linked with the theme (almost an article of faith) ¶ of the “eloquency” (*balāgha*) of Muḥammad, which is in accordance with the theological representations on the “purity” of the language of Quraysh, and naturally the consummate “purity” of the language of the “chosen/purified (*al-muṣṭafā*)” one, [Muhammad](#), their kinsman, as seen above (see Rāfiʿī [d. 1937], “The inimitability of the Qurʾān and the prophetic eloquence” [in Arabic; *Iʿjāz al-Qurʾān wa-l-balāgha al-nabawiyya*], 277-342; on this book, see Boullata, *Rhetorical interpretation*, 148).

The theological thesis on the style of the Qurʾān

The theological thesis about the style of the Qurʾān, however, goes far beyond the proclamation of the alleged clarity of the qurʾānic discourse, this clarity itself being linked to the language in which it is formulated. Its core is certainly the dogma of the *iʿjāz al-Qurʾān* (van Ess, *tg*, iv, 609-11; see also [inimitability](#)). Two points should be emphasized here. First, the dogma of the Qurʾān's inimitability is to the style of the Qurʾān what the equation “language of the Qurʾān = the speech of the Quraysh = *al-lughā al-fuṣḥā*” is to its language; i.e. it, too, is the result of the intersection of a textual element (the so-called Challenge Verses) and of the Islamic conception of the Qurʾān as the speech of God (*kalām Allāh*). Secondly, the “inimitability” is bound to the stylistic order through the clear theological affirmation of the Muʿtazilite theologian and philologist al-Rummānī (d. 384/994) on the *balāgha* of the Qurʾān: “Its highest [rank is such that it] incapacitates (*muʿjiz*) [anyone who attempts to reach it]; it is the *balāgha* of the Qurʾān” (*Nukat*, in Rummānī et al., *Rasāʿil*, 75). From this point of view, most books on Islamic rhetoric function as the “maidservant of theology” (*rhetorica ancilla theologiae*), as illustrated by the title of the book by the great rhetorician ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (d. 471/1078): “The proofs of the ¶[p. 126] inimitability [of the Qurʾān]” (*Dalāʿil al-iʿjāz*; Abu Deeb, *al-Jurjānī*; Boullata, *Rhetorical interpretation*, 146-7).

The literary structure and arrangement or construction (*naẓm*, a root which does not occur in the Qurʾān; see Abu Deeb, *Al-Jurjānī*, 24-38; for Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī: Lagarde, *Index*, no. 2564; Gilliot, *Parcours*, 100-6) of the Qurʾān is far from being self-evident. For this reason, [Muslim](#) scholars have not only dealt with this theme, but have composed works entitled *Naẓm al-Qurʾān* (for this genre and a list of such books, see Audebert, *L'inimitabilité*, 58-9, 193-4; see also [literary structures of the qurʾān](#)). But the theological debate concerning the core of its “inimitability” and the question of its createdness or uncreatedness also played a role in the genesis of this genre (van Ess, *tg*, iv, 112; many Arabic studies on this theme have been published: e.g. on Zamakhsharī: Jundī, *al-Naẓm al-qurʾānī*). Eventually, entire qurʾānic commentaries came to contain this word in their title, e.g. the Karrāmīte of Nīshāpūr, [al-ʿĀṣimī \(Abū Muḥammad Aḥmad b. Muḥammad](#)

ب. ٱ. ٱ. [Addendum of Claude Gilliot, he is: Abū Muḥammad Ḥāmid b. Aḥmad b. Ja‘far b. Baṣṭām (Biṣṭām) al-Ṭaḥīrī (ou al-Ṭaḥīrī); v. Ṣarīfīnī, *al-Muntakhab min al-Siyāq*, éd. M. ‘Al. al-‘Azīz, Beirut, 1409/1989, p. 211, n° 638 ; N.R. Frye, *The Histories of Nishapur* (the part of the manuscript where is *al-Muntakhab*), f. 61^r, l. 1-3 (it has something which is not in the edition of *al-Muntakhab* : al-Ṭaḥīrī ou al-Ṭakhīrī). V. the article in Persian of Ḥasan Anṣārī Qummī (i.e. Hassan Farhang), in *Kitab Mah-i Din* (a periodical published in Tehran), pp. 56-57 (1381 sh.), pp. 69-80, and p. 80], composed the *Kitāb al-Mabānī li-naẓm al-ma‘ānī*, whose introduction has been published (Jeffery, *Muqaddimas*, 5-20; ~~for the identification of the author, see Gilliot, *Théologie musulmane*, 182-3~~). This genre was also related to the principle of correspondence (*munāsaba*; see Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, chap. 62, ed. Ibrāhīm, iii, 369-89 [*Munāsabat al-āyāt wa-l-suwar*]; id., *Mu‘tarak*, i, 54-74; id., *Taḥbīr*, 371-7; for Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī: Lagarde, *Index*, no. 2479; Gilliot, *Parcours*, 106-9) between the sūras and between the verses (see also al-Suyūṭī's special book entitled “The symmetry of the pearls. On the correspondence of the sūras,” which he seems to have compiled from his larger book “The secrets of revelation” [*Asrār al-tanzīl*]; see Suyūṭī, *Tanāsuq*, 53-4). The qur’ānic commentary of Burhān al-Dīn Abū ¶ I-Ḥasan Ibrāhīm al-Biqā‘ī (d. 885/1480) combines in his title the words “arrangement/construction” and “correspondence” (*naẓm, tanāsub*): “The string of pearls. On the correspondence of the verses and sūras” (*Naẓm al-durar fī tanāsub al-āyāt wa-l-suwar*).

Generally speaking, all of the elements of style to be found in all great literature are seen as unique and almost special to the Qur’ān because of the dogma of its inimitability. Even its weaknesses are viewed as wonderful, if not miraculous (see the introduction of Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, ed. Shākīr, i, 8-12/Eng. trans. in *Commentary*, i, 8-12; Gilliot, *Elt*, 73-8).

The positions of the Arabists on the style of the Qur’ān

Some positions until recently

Read with eyes other than those of faith, qur’ānic style is generally not assessed as being particularly clear, and “much of the text... is... far from being as *mubīn* (“clear”) as the Qur’ān claims to be!” (Puin, *Observations*, 107; cf. Hirschfeld, *New researches*, 6-7). Moreover, it does not arouse the general non-Muslim audience to such a degree of “enthusiasm” (Sfar, *Coran*, 117-8, 100-1) as that of the Muslims who are alleged to have fallen down dead upon hearing its recitation (Wiesmüller, *Die vom Koran getöten*; cf. Kermani, *Gott ist schön*, chap. 4, “Das Wunder,” 233-314; id., *Aesthetic reception*).

To understand this reaction of the non-believer, the Qur’ān should first be characterized as “speech” (Fr. *discours*) as opposed to such comparable “texts,” i.e. the Hebrew Bible and the [Gospels](#) (q.v.; see also [torah](#)). To proceed so, it is possible to refer to a noteworthy opposition found within the Arabic linguistic tradition, that of two types of speech ([kalām](#)), the *khavar* and the *inshā’*, which is equivalent to the Austinian categories of “constative,” as ¶ [p. 127] opposed to “performative utterances” (Austin, *How to do things with words*). According to these categories, the Hebrew Bible and the Gospels present themselves as *khavars* ([narratives](#) on the [creation](#) [q.v.] of the world, the

history of the Jewish people, the [life of Jesus](#)), even if these texts, whether considered as historical or mythic, are also edifying. On the other hand, the Qur'ān presents itself as non-narrative speech (*inshā'*; cf. the traditional appellation: paranesis): the [narratives](#) (q.v.) it contains, often incomplete, are a type of argumentation by example (see [nature as signs](#); [myths and legends in the Qur'ān](#)).

The lack of a narrative thread and the repetitions in the Qur'ān, when they do not provoke a negative reaction, compel the specialist to search for another organizational schema of the text, beyond that which is immediately apparent. The need for an alternative pattern behind the ordering of the text appears above all in the problem of the structure of the sūras. Of course, the ancient [Muslim](#) scholars, being experts in the Arabic language, were well aware of the organizational infelicities in the Qur'ānic text, but as men of faith they had to underscore the “miraculous” organization (*naẓm*) of the entire text, and to find rhetorical devices to resolve each problematic issue, e.g. the *iqtiṣās*, the “refrain” (Fr. *reprise*), when the passage was too allusive, incomplete or even truncated. In this case of the “refrain,” the exegete had to refer to another verse in the same sūra or in another, from which the truncated passage is supposed to have been “taken” (*ma'khūdh min*), or where it is “told accurately” (Ibn Fāris, *al-Ṣāhibī*, 239; Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, ed. Ibrāhīm, iii, 302), e.g. “and we gave him his reward in the world, and lo! in the hereafter (see [eschatology](#)) he verily is among the righteous” (q 29:27), has to be understood [as taken] from “But whoso comes unto him a believer, having done good ¶ works (see [good deeds](#)), for such are the good stations” (q 20:75; see [reward and punishment](#)). This phenomenon could perhaps be related to a variety of the *enthymema*.

For reasons which have been put forth above, it is sacrilegious in a [Muslim](#) milieu to compare the Qur'ān to poetry, but it is evident that the language of the Qur'ān can be studied by a linguist in the same way as poetic language. The poetics of Jakobson (Closing statements), is one example of how the expertise of a linguist may be applied to the Qur'ān, especially from the point of view of “parallelism,” a central concept of that poetics.

In view of the position it has taken with respect to the Qur'ān, the religious thought of Islam has tended to impose a conception that became more radical over time. According to this conception, the Qur'ān is an original work that owes nothing to an external influence, be it local or foreign. The polemics against the orators (*khaṭībs*) and soothsayers (*kāhins*), as well as those against the appearance of loanwords in the Qur'ān and those surrounding the meaning of the adjective [ummī](#) (q.v.), as it is applied to [Muhammad](#) in the Qur'ān (q 7:157, 158; “illiterate” [messenger](#) as opposed to messenger “of the community”; see [illiteracy](#)), should be interpreted in this context. Concerning this last-mentioned debate, A. Jones maintains that “[T]he notion that *ummī* means ‘illiterate’ is neither early nor accurate. It can only mean ‘of the *umma*’” (Oral, 58, n. 5). Contrary to the theological views concerning the style of the Qur'ān, Jones has shown, despite the scarcity of preserved materials, that the Qur'ānic style owes much to previous Arabic styles. These previous styles can be summarized in the following four categories: the style of the soothsayer (Jones, Language, 33-7: [kāhin](#) utterances), of the orator (Jones, Language, 38-41: *khaṭīb* ¶ [p. 128] utterances), of the story-teller (Jones, Language, 41-

2: *qāṣṣ*), of the “written documentary style” in the Medinan material (Jones, Language, 42-4: a comparison between a part of the Constitution of [Medina](#) and q 2:158, 196). In support of this thesis of Jones, the following declaration attributed to [Muhammad](#) can be quoted: “This poetry is rhymed expression of the speech of the Arabs (*saj` min kalām al-`Arab*). Thanks to it, what the beggar asks for is given to him, anger is tamed, and people convene in their assemblies of deliberation (*nādīhim*)” (Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt*, i, 224; Goldziher, *Higâ`-Poesie*, 59). Jones would argue that Muḥammad knew well the efficacy of rhymed prose, and for that reason he used it in the Qur`ān.

Finally, Jones provides two very helpful visual representations of the registers of Arabic at the rise of Islam (Jones, Oral, 57). Although practically nothing survives of these registers, he sketches the relationships between — and among — the literary prose registers, on the one hand (poets, soothsayers and preachers), and the dialects of the people, on the other. These charts are useful for conceptualizing the place of the Qur`ān within the linguistic streams of pre-Islamic Arabia (see also [orality and writing in arabia](#)).

The question of the rhymed prose (*saj`*) in the Qur`ān still needs further research, because, as noticed a long time ago, Semitic literature has a great liking for it, and, as seen above, [Muhammad](#) knew its effects very well: it “strikes the minds through its allusions, echoes, assonances and rhymes” (Grünbaum, *Beiträge*, 186). Later [Muslim](#) rhetoricians distinguished three or four types of rhymed prose in the Qur`ān: 1) *al-muṭarrāf* (touched at the extremity), words having a different prosodic measure (*wazn*) at the end of the elements of the phrase, but similar final [letters](#): q 71:13-4 (*waqāran* vs. *aḥwāran*); 2) *al- mutawāzī* (parallel), with similar prosodic measure, i.e. the same number of [letters](#), and the same final letters (*al-wazn wa-l-warī*): q 88:13-4 (*marfū`a* vs. *mawḍū`a*); 3) *al-muwāzana* (cadence), final words with similar prosodic measure, but different endings: q 88:15-6 (*maṣfūfa* vs. *mabthūtha*); 4) *al-mumāthala* (similarity), wherein all the words have corresponding prosodic measure in each member, but different endings: q 37:117-8 (Ibn Abī l-Iṣḥā`, *Badī*, 108-9; Rāzī, *Nihāya*, 142-3; Ibn al-Naqīb, *Muqaddima*, 471-5; Nuwayrī, *Nihāya*, vii, 103-5; Garcin de Tassy, *Rhétorique*, 154-8; Mehren, *Rhetorik*, 167-8). In the best examples of the genre, each of the members (here *fawāṣil*, pl. of *fāṣila*, “dividers”) have the same measure: q 56:28-9, “*fī sidrin makhḍūdin/wa-ṭalḥin mandūdin* (Among thornless lote-trees/And clustered plantains).” The second or third member can, however, be a little longer than the previous one (q 69:30-3). But for the same rhetoricians, the contrary is not permitted, save when the difference is tiny (q 105:1-2). For them the most beautiful rhymed prose is that whose members have only a few words, from two to ten; if otherwise, it is considered to be “drawling,” as q 8:43-4 (Mehren, *Rhetorik*, 166-7; on the dividers in the Qur`ān, from the traditional Muslim point of view, see Ḥasnāwī, *al-Fāṣila fī l-Qur`ān*).

There are still other valuable points of view and theses on the style of the Qur`ān which have not been presented here (for some discussion of these, see [inimitability](#)). Some examples are the discussions on the literary features and rhetorical devices (see Ṣammūd, *al-Taḥkīm al-balāghī*, 33-46, and passim; see also [literature and the Qur`ān](#); [literary structures of the Qur`ān](#)), and especially the interesting studies of A. Neuwirth on the relationship between liturgy and canonization of the text, “the structurally definable verse

groups,” contextuality, etc. (Neuwirth, ¶ [p. 129] Einige Bermerkungen; id., Vom Rezitationstext/Fr. trans. Du texte de récitation; see also her article [form and structure of the qur’ān](#)).

The ancient Christian or Syriac connection

Some scholars (unfortunately, too few) have drawn attention to the importance of the Aramaic or Syriac substratum in the formation of the Qur’ān, basing their hypotheses on the fact that Syro-Aramaic or Syriac was the language of written communication in the Near East from the 2nd to the 7th centuries c.e. and was also a liturgical language. The stylistic idiosyncrasies of the Qur’ān did not escape Th. Nöldeke (Nöldeke, Sprache/Fr. trans. *Remarques critiques*). In addition to his observations on the Syriac loanwords in the Qur’ān, which others, prior to him, had noted, A. Mingana noticed that the qur’ānic style “suffers from the disabilities that always characterize a first attempt in a new literary language which is under the influence of an older and more fixed literature,” and that “its author had to contend with immense difficulties” (Mingana, Syriac influence, 78). But his observations led him to a hypothesis that is the opposite of the “credo” of Nöldeke which, until today, has been prevalent among most western scholars of Islam. This “credo” of Nöldeke is that, in spite of its “drawling, dull and prosaic” style (Nöldeke, *Geschichte*, 107), the Arabic of the Qur’ān is “classical Arabic.” In his research, Mingana observed and emphasized the Syriac influences on the phraseology of the Qur’ān, and placed them under six distinct headings: proper names, religious terms, common words, [orthography](#), construction of sentences and foreign historical references (see also [foreign vocabulary](#)). Unfortunately, his remarks, although referred to by some scholars, were not taken into general account for two reasons: First, Mingana, ¶ too occupied with other works on Syriac, had no time to develop his hypothesis further. (His argument was further undermined by the fact that the material he had gathered in his article was not very important.) Secondly, the “dogma” of the Islamicists (*Islamwissenschaftler*, *islamologues*) on the “classicism” of the qur’ānic Arabic continued and still continues to impose itself as self-evident proof, in spite of numerous objections to their own thesis expressed by the supporters of the alleged *al-`arabiyya al-fuṣḥā* of the Qur’ān.

Without being particularly influenced by Mingana's article and having other concerns than this scholar, the German liberal Protestant theologian and Semitist G. Lüling wrote an important study which has also been overlooked and ignored (Ger. *totgeschwiegen*) by Islamicists and Arabists. This study, *Über den Ur-Qur’ān* (“On the primitive Qur’ān”), has recently been translated into English under the title *A challenge to Islam for reformation*, with the suggestive subtitle, “The rediscovery and reliable reconstruction of a comprehensive pre-Islamic Christian hymnal hidden in the Koran under earliest Islamic reinterpretation.” The point of departure is not the Qur’ān, but Lüling's own scholarly orientation defined as promoting an “emphasis directed at self-criticism against the falsification of Christianity by its Hellenization resulting in the dogma of the trinity [sic, with a lowercase “t”] [...], as well as against the falsification of the history of Judaism” (*Challenge*, lxiii, a passage not present in the German original). The theses of Lüling on the Qur’ān are as follows: 1) About one-third of the present-day qur’ānic text contains as a hidden groundlayer an originally pre-Islamic Christian text. 2) The transmitted qur’ānic

text contains four different layers, given here chronologically: the oldest, the texts of a pre-Islamic Christian strophic hymnody; ¶ [p. 130] the texts of the new Islamic interpretation; historically parallel to the second layer is the original purely Islamic material, which is to be attributed to [Muhammad](#) (about two-thirds of the whole Qur'ān); and, finally, the texts of the post-Muḥammadan editors of the Qur'ān. 3) The transmitted Islamic qur'ānic text is the result of several successive editorial revisions. 4) The presence of the successive layers in the qur'ānic text can be confirmed by material in Muslim tradition (Gilliot, *Deux études*, 22-4; Ibn Rawandi, *Pre-Islamic Christian strophic*, 655-68). Of course, the theses of Lüling should be discussed, and not simply ignored, as has been the case until now (for more details on this work, see the reviews of Rodinson, Gilliot and Ibn Rawandi. For a second book of Lüling, *Die Wiederentdeckung des Propheten Muhammad*, see the reviews of Gilliot and Ibn Rawandi).

Recently, another Semitist scholar, Ch. Luxenberg, has taken up Mingana's thesis in his work on the Syriac influence on the Qur'ān and outlined the heuristic clearly. Beginning with those passages that are unclear to western commentators, the method runs as follows: First, check if there is a plausible explanation in qur'ānic exegesis, above all that of al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), possibly overlooked by western scholars. If this does not resolve the problem, then check whether a classical Arabic dictionary, primarily Ibn Manẓūr's (d. 711/1311) *Lisān al-'Arab*, records a meaning unknown to Ṭabarī and his earlier sources. If this turns up nothing, check if the Arabic expression has a homonymous root in Syriac, with a different meaning that fits the context. In many cases, Luxenberg found that the Syriac word with its meaning makes more sense than the Arabic term employed by the Qur'ān. It is to be noted that these first steps of the heuristic do not alter the consonantal text of the Cairene edition of the Qur'ān. If, however, these ¶ steps do not avail, he recommends changing one or more diacritical marks to see if that results in an Arabic expression that makes more sense. Luxenberg found that many instances of problematic lexemes may be shown to be misreadings of one consonant for another. If this method does not produce results, then the investigator should change one or several diacritical points and then check if there is a homonymous Syriac root with a plausible meaning. If there is still no solution, he checks to see if the Arabic is a calque of a Syriac expression. Calques may be of two kinds: morphological and semantic. A morphological calque is a borrowing that preserves the structure of the source word but uses the morphemes of the target [language](#). A semantic calque assigns the borrowed meaning to a word that did not have the meaning previously, but which is otherwise synonymous with the source word (Luxenberg, *Lesart*, 10-15; Phenix and Horn, *Review*, § 12-4; Gilliot, *Langue*, § 4).

Of course, Luxenberg's work must be discussed by Semitists and Islamicists, and poses other complicated problems, e.g. on the history of the redaction of the Qur'ān. But some of his theses do appear convincing, at least to the present writers. For instance, q 108 (Sūrat al-Kawthar), a text which has little meaning for a normal reader, and which is also a *crux interpretum* for the Islamic exegetes, has been convincingly deciphered by Luxenberg. Behind it can be found the well-known passage of 1 Peter 5:8-9: “Be sensible, watch, because your adversary the [devil](#) (q.v.) walks about seeking someone he may devour, whom you should firmly resist in the faith” (Luxenberg, *Lesart*, 269-76).

We could mention also Luxenberg's treatment of q 96 (op. cit., 276-85). But his dealing with q 44:54 and q 52:20, concerning the supposed “virgins of paradise” ([houris](#), q.v.) has already struck a number of those who have read ¶ [p. 131] this book. Instead of these mythic creatures “whom neither man nor [jinn](#) (q.v.) has deflowered before them” (q 55:56; Bell, *Commentary*, ii, 551), or “whom neither man nor jinni will have touched before them” (Pickthall), are the grapes/fruits of paradise “that neither man nor [jinn](#) have defiled before them”: “Darin [befinden sich] herabhängende [pflückreife] Früchte, die weder Mensch noch Genius vor ihnen je befleckt hat” (Luxenberg, *Lesart*, 248-51; also discussed in the following reviews of Luxenberg's work: Nabielek, *Weintrauben statt Jungfrauen*, 72; Gilliot, *Langue*, § 4; Phenix and Horn, *Review*, § 30-4).

In support of the thesis of Luxenberg we could refer to the [informants](#) (q.v.) of [Muhammad](#) in [Mecca](#), some of whom, according to the Islamic tradition, read the scripture or books, or knew Jewish or Christian scriptures. There is also the fact that the secretary of Muhammad, Zayd b. Thābit, certainly knew Aramaic or Syriac before Muhammad's [emigration](#) (q.v.) to Yathrib ([Medina](#), q.v.). In a well-known Muslim tradition, with many versions, [Muhammad](#) asks Zayd b. Thābit to learn the Hebrew and/or Aramaic/Syriac script (see Lecker, *Zayd b. Thābit*, 267; Gilliot, *Coran*, § 9-12). The hypothesis has been expressed according to which these traditions proceed to a situation reversal: the Jew Zayd b. Thābit already knew Hebrew and/or Aramaic/Syriac script; this, however, was embarrassing for [Muhammad](#) or for the first or second generation of Muslims because it could be deduced, as in the case of the informants of Muhammad, that the Prophet had borrowed religious knowledge from his secretary, and consequently from the Jewish or Christian scriptures. So the origin of Zayd's literary knowledge (see [literacy](#)) may have come from an initiative, on the part of Muhammad, to suppress these allegations (Gilliot, *Langue*, § 4). But the following text of the Mu'tazilite theologian of Baghdad, Abū l-Qāsim al-Balkhī (al-Ka`bī, d. 319/931), which seems a confirmation of our hypothesis of a reversal of the actual situation, has recently become available:

I [Ka`bī], concerning that issue, asked people well-versed in the science of the [life](#) of the Prophet (*ahl al-`ilm bi-l-sīra*, see [sīra and the Qur`ān](#)), among whom were Ibn Abī l-Zinād, Muhammad b. Ṣāliḥ (d. 252/866) and `Abdallāh b. Ja`far (probably Ibn al-Ward, d. 351/962) who impugned that firmly, saying: How could somebody have taught writing to Zayd, who had learned it before the [messenger](#) of God came to [[Medina](#)]? Indeed, there were more people who could write in Medina than in [Mecca](#). In reality when Islam came to Mecca, there were already about ten who could read, and when it was the turn of Medina, there were already twenty in it, among whom was Zayd b. Thābit, who wrote Arabic and Hebrew [...]” (Abū l-Qāsim al-Balkhī [al-Ka`bī], *Qābūl al-akhbār*, i, 202; Gilliot, *Coran*, § 12).

Without his realizing it, Luxenberg's work falls within the tradition and genre of the readings (*qirā`āt*) of the Qur`ān. It becomes still more obvious if we distinguish between “the small variation” (various readings of the same ductus) and “the great variation” (variations of the ductus, i.e. non-“Uthmānic” codices), on the one hand, and “a greater variation” (an Arabic/Aramaic transliteration of the ductus), on the other hand. The

method of Luxenberg applied to passages of the Qur'ān which are particularly obscure cannot be brushed aside by the mere repetition of the Nöldeke/Spitaler thesis, or, as some would say, dogma (see Spitaler, Review of Fück, *ʿArabīya*). It must be examined seriously. From a linguistic point of view the undertaking of Luxenberg is one of the most ¶ [p. 132] interesting. It will provoke in some Islamic circles the same emotion as did the hypothesis of Vollers formerly, because it amounts to seeing in the Qur'ān a kind of palimpsest. Such hypotheses, and the reactions they generate, push scholarship on the [language](#) and style of the Qur'ān continually to examine and question its acknowledged (and implicit) premises.

- Claude Gilliot
- Pierre Larcher

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