

Sibawayh and His Contributions to Arabic Grammar: An Analysis of His Book *Al-Kitab*

Anuar bin Sopian

Academy of Language Studies Universiti Teknologi MARA Melaka, Malaysia

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.10100096>

Received: 05 January 2026; Accepted: 12 January 2026; Published: 23 January 2026

ABSTRACT

This study discusses the significant contributions of the classical Arab linguist, Sibawayh (d. 180H/796CE), in the formation and development of Arabic grammar through his seminal work, *Al-Kitab*. The objective of this study is to analyse the methodological approach employed by Sibawayh in formulating Arabic grammatical theory, as well as the impact of his work on the development of modern Arabic linguistics. Using a qualitative and textual analysis approach, this study examines the contents of *Al-Kitab*, including the use of *qiyās* (analogical reasoning), empirical methods, and descriptive and deductive approaches grounded in authoritative sources such as the Qur'an and classical Arabic poetry. The study also considers the historical background, the influence of Khalil ibn Ahmad al-Farahidi as Sibawayh's teacher, and the differences between the Basran and Kufan schools which influenced the formation of grammatical theories. The findings reveal that *Al-Kitab* not only laid a solid foundation for the standardisation of Arabic grammar but also remains relevant in modern linguistic discourse. This work demonstrates Sibawayh's ability to formulate grammatical rules scientifically despite not being a native Arabic speaker, making him a pivotal pioneer in the Islamic intellectual tradition.

Keywords: Sibawayh, *Al-Kitab*, Nahw (Arabic Grammar), Arabic Linguistics, Syntax

INTRODUCTION

Sibawayh (d. 180H/796CE) was a renowned Arabic linguist best known for his seminal work, *Al-Kitab*. He is recognised as a pioneer in the field of Arabic grammar (*nahw*) and played a crucial role in the formulation of grammatical principles. *Al-Kitab* not only serves as a primary reference in the study of grammar but has also influenced Arabic linguistic studies as a whole (Owens, 1988; Baalbaki, 2008).

Throughout the history of Arabic linguistic development, various scholars have contributed to the consolidation of grammatical principles. However, Sibawayh is considered the pioneer as he codified and systematically organised the rules of *nahw*. *Al-Kitab* is not merely a compilation of Arabic grammatical rules; it represents an in-depth analysis of linguistic variation, the role of context in syntactic structure selection, and the phonetic aspects related to grammar (Versteegh, 1997; Carter, 2004).

Furthermore, Sibawayh's importance in Arabic linguistic studies is evident through his influence on the Basran school of grammar, which became the main school in the development of Arabic grammatical theory (Owens, 1988). This school differs from the Kufan school, which adopted a more prescriptive approach in analysing the Arabic language. The methodological differences between these two schools continue to be debated in modern Arabic linguistic studies, with *Al-Kitab* remaining a key text in understanding these distinctions (Baalbaki, 2008; Talmon, 1995).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study by Noori (2021) in *Sibawayh Arabic Language and Education* shows that *Al-Kitāb* also contains principles of pragmatics, including the analysis of context, meaning, and speech function, although these are not explicitly presented as a separate branch of pragmatics.

Additionally, Mohd Bakhit Ali (2009) maps Sibawayh's historical-analytical approach and refers to him as the "master of syntax and the founder of Basrah's thought," highlighting the role of *Al-Kitāb* as a widely

Sibawayh's historical-analytical approach and refers to him as the "master of syntax and the founder of Basrah's thought," highlighting the role of *Al-Kitāb* as a widely recognized systematic grammar work.

According to Andi Muhammad Ashar and Muh. Mufti Rahman (2025), there are pragmatic elements in *Al-Kitāb* that demonstrate Sibawayh's application of contextual nuance and speech function through his textual analysis. Meanwhile, Rasulova's (2023) study focuses on Sibawayh's role within the Basran school and finds that the foundational theories in *Al-Kitāb* influenced linguistic debates of the time. Al-Marshudi (2024), when discussing the issue of attribution in post-Sibawayh works, stresses the need for caution when associating statements or theories with him that are not present in the original text.

Furthermore, Abalkheel and Sourani (2023) compare Sibawayh's functional approach with Roman Jakobson's theory. They find that "Sibawayh's comprehensive analysis ... lays the groundwork for the development of functional linguistic theories," emphasizing the compatibility of *Al-Kitāb* with modern functionalist linguistics. The study by Hussein and Majeed (2020), published in the *Journal of Tikrit University for Humanities*, elaborates on how Sibawayh used Qur'anic recitation to support grammatical rules demonstrating the integration between linguistic discourse and Qur'anic reading in *Al-Kitāb*.

Current research shows that *Al-Kitāb* is not merely a grammar manual; rather, it contains analyses of pragmatics, phonology, and Qur'anic recitation, and has the potential to be adapted to contemporary linguistic theories such as functionalism. However, researchers emphasize the need for careful verification of theoretical attributions linked to Sibawayh.

Research Objectives

This study aims to analyse Sibawayh's contributions to the development of Arabic grammar through a close examination of *Al-Kitāb*, and to explore the methodology he employed in constructing grammatical theory. Additionally, the study seeks to identify the impact of *Al-Kitāb* on the development of modern Arabic linguistic studies by comparing Sibawayh's approach with those of other grammarians throughout the history of Arabic grammar.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative approach using textual analysis of *Al-Kitāb* by Sibawayh. The methodology involves content analysis by examining the text of *Al-Kitāb* to understand the principles and grammatical methods proposed by Sibawayh. This approach helps identify key themes within the book and their relevance to modern Arabic linguistic theories.

The study also employs historical and contextual approaches by exploring the historical development of Arabic grammar during Sibawayh's era, including the influence of his teacher, Khalil ibn Ahmad, and the differences between the Basran and Kufan schools.

In addition, the study compares the methodologies and theories used by other grammarians such as Al-Farra' and Al-Zamakhshari to understand the variations in their approaches. It also refers to various secondary sources including books, journal articles, and previous studies to strengthen the analysis of *Al-Kitāb* and its impact on the study of Arabic grammar.

Background of Sibawayh

Sibawayh was born in Persia and was a student of renowned scholars such as Khalil ibn Ahmad al-Farahidi. Despite not being a native Arabic speaker, Sibawayh mastered the Arabic language to the extent that his work became a principal reference in the field of grammar (Carter, 2004; Baalbaki, 2008). His excellence in the field of language made him a prominent figure in the study of Arabic syntax.

Moreover, his analysis of Arabic was based on classical sources such as the Qur'an and Arabic poetry, establishing him as a pioneer of the descriptive method in linguistics (Versteegh, 1997; Talmon, 1995). As a scholar, Sibawayh was greatly influenced by his teacher Khalil ibn Ahmad, who was known for introducing the

system of Arabic prosody (*‘arud*). This influence is evident in Sibawayh’s phonetic and morphological analyses in *Al-Kitāb* (Owens, 1988; Baalbaki, 2008).

Furthermore, Sibawayh applied an empirical approach in compiling grammatical principles, taking into account the dialectal variations among Arab tribes during his time (Baalbaki, 2008; Bohas, Guillaume & Kouloughli, 2006).

The Contribution of Al-Kitāb to Arabic Grammar Methodology

Al-Kitāb by Sibawayh is a monumental work in the field of Arabic grammar (*nahw*), serving as a principal reference for systematically understanding the structure of the Arabic language. In this book, Sibawayh introduces the concepts of *‘āmil* (the agent that causes grammatical inflection) and *ma ‘mūl* (the word affected by the *‘āmil*), and employs the method of *qiyās* (analogy) in his grammatical analysis. He also emphasizes the use of classical Arabic, especially that found in ancient Arabic poetry, as the foundation for establishing grammatical rules.

This work not only contributed to the codification and standardization of Arabic grammar but also influenced the formulation of grammatical frameworks for other languages, such as the Malay language, notably in *Bustān al-Kātibīn* by Raja Ali Haji (Ismail, 2018). Through a systematic approach, Sibawayh discusses the methods of Arabic grammar with reference to various authoritative sources (Baalbaki, 2008; Owens, 1988; Talmon, 1995).

In addition, he applies a deductive analytical method to understand Arabic sentence structures (Owens, 1988; Carter, 2004; Versteegh, 1997). To support the grammar theories he developed, he frequently uses examples from the Qur’an and classical Arabic poetry. For instance, the verse "*Wa in kāna dhū ‘usratin fanāziratun ilā maysarah*" is used to explain the concept of the *marfū‘* noun (Versteegh, 1997; Baalbaki, 2008; Bohas et al., 2006).

Therefore, *Al-Kitāb* serves as a foundation for the development of Arabic grammar and continues to be a key reference for language scholars to this day. Its importance in the field of Arabic linguistics demonstrates that the work is not merely a documentation of grammatical rules, but a scientific endeavor that contributes to the evolution and standardization of the Arabic language structure.

Methodology In Al-Kitāb

Sibawayh employed several key methodologies in structuring the science of *nahw* in *Al-Kitāb*, including:

- **Empirical Approach:** He collected linguistic data from various sources such as the Qur’an, classical Arabic poetry, and the speech of native Arab communities to develop grammatical principles. For example, he analyzed poetry such as "*Idhā gharifta fazidhu suqyā*" to explain the use of *majzūm* verbs.
- **Principle of Qiyās (Analogy):** Sibawayh applied analogical reasoning in analyzing language forms and establishing grammatical rules based on established patterns, such as drawing analogies between the present tense verb (*fi ‘l muḍāri‘*) and the past tense verb (*fi ‘l māḍī*) in terms of *i‘rāb* rules.
- **Descriptive and Deductive Approach:** His analysis was based on observation of actual language usage, followed by the application of deductive principles to formulate general grammatical rules.
- **Phonetic and Morphological Approach:** Sibawayh also gave attention to phonological aspects of Arabic, including phonetic changes and their relationship with word formation and syntax (Baalbaki, 2008; Versteegh, 1997; Bohas et al., 2006).

Development Of Arabic Grammar (Nahw) During Sibawayh’s Era

The science of *nahw* (Arabic grammar) flourished during the Abbasid period, particularly in the 2nd century Hijri, driven by the need to preserve the purity of the Arabic language in understanding the Qur’an, hadith, and classical Arabic literature. The influence of foreign cultures, resulting from the rapid expansion of the Islamic

empire, motivated scholars to systematically compile grammatical rules of the Arabic language (Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimah*).

The Influence of Khalīl Ibn Aḥmad Al-Farāhīdī On Sibawayh

Sibawayh (d. 180H/796CE) was a student of Khalīl ibn Aḥmad al-Farāhīdī (d. 170H/786CE), a renowned linguist from Basra. Khalīl is known for introducing:

1. **The concept of prosody** (‘*arūḍ*’) in Arabic poetry, which laid the foundation for phonetic studies in Arabic (Baalbaki, *The Legacy of the Kitāb*).
2. **A methodology of grammatical formulation** that emphasized evidence from the Qur’an, poetry, and eloquent Arab speech (Versteegh, *The Arabic Linguistic Tradition*).
3. **A scientific approach to Arabic linguistics**, such as the use of *qiyās* (analogy) in constructing grammatical rules (Ibn Jinnī, *Al-Khaṣā’iṣ*).

Sibawayh adopted and expanded these approaches, developing Arabic grammar more systematically in his seminal work *Al-Kitāb*, which became the primary reference in the field of Arabic grammar (Harun, *Tahqīq Al-Kitāb*).

Differences Between the Basrah and Kufah Schools of Grammar

During Sibawayh’s time, two major schools of Arabic grammar emerged: the **Basrah School** and the **Kufah School**.

1. Basrah School

- Emphasized the use of **qiyās** (linguistic analogy) as the primary principle for establishing grammatical rules.
- Accepted only the most eloquent forms of Arabic from select tribes as valid sources of linguistic evidence (Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimah*).
- Adopted a more **systematic and scientific approach**, which became the foundational model in classical Arabic grammar.
- Key figures: **Sibawayh, Khalil ibn Ahmad, Al-Mubarrad** (Baalbaki, *The Legacy of the Kitab*).

2. Kufah School

- Favoured **simā’** (auditory transmission), giving importance to a wide range of Arabic dialects and linguistic variations.
- Less rigid in its use of **qiyās**, and more accepting of linguistic diversity within Arab communities.
- Linguistic sources were not restricted to select tribes, but included broader dialectal usage (Versteegh, *The Arabic Linguistic Tradition*).
- Key figures: **Al-Kisā’ī, Al-Farrā’, Ibn al-Sikkīt** (Al-Farrā’, *Ma’āni al-Qur’ān*).

Sibawayh’s Role in the Development of Arabic Grammar

Sibawayh’s monumental work *Al-Kitāb* became the **primary reference** for Arabic grammar (*nahw*), and many scholars after him relied on the **methodologies he introduced**. The **Basrah School eventually gained dominance** due to its more systematic and scientific methodology (Harun, *Tahqīq Al-Kitāb*).

CONCLUSION

Sibawayh stands as a pivotal figure in the development of Arabic grammar (*nahw*) and Arabic linguistics. Through his seminal work *Al-Kitāb*, he laid a solid foundation for understanding the structure of the Arabic language in a systematic manner. The methodologies employed by Sibawayh—including descriptive and deductive approaches—have shaped the tradition of Arabic grammatical studies, remaining relevant to this day. The influence of *Al-Kitāb* is evident not only in the evolution of modern Arabic linguistic studies but also in broader linguistic discourse. Therefore, the study of Sibawayh's intellectual legacy continues to be a significant area of interest for scholars of Arabic linguistics.

REFERENCES

1. Al-Farra'. (822). Ma'ani al-Qur'an. Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah.
2. Al-Nassir, A. A. (1993). Sibawayh the Phonologist: A critical study of the phonetic and phonological theory of Sibawayh as presented in his treatise Al-Kitab. Kegan Paul International.
3. Baalbaki, R. (2008). The Legacy of the Kitāb: Sībawayhi's analytical methods within the Arabic grammatical tradition. Brill.
4. Baalbaki, R. (2014). The Arabic lexicographical tradition: From the 2nd/8th to the 12th/18th century. Brill.
5. Bohas, G., Guillaume, J.-P., & Kouloughli, D. E. (2006). The Arabic linguistic tradition. Routledge.
6. Carter, M. G. (2004). Sibawayhi. Oxford University Press.
7. Harun, A. S. (1982). Tahqiq Al-Kitab. Kaherah: Maktabah al-Khanji.
8. Ibn Jinni. (1002). Al-Khasa'is. Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah.
9. Ibn Khaldun. (1377). Al-Muqaddimah. Kaherah: Dar al-Fikr.
10. Ismail, M. (2018). Pengaruh tata bahasa Arab dalam tata bahasa Melayu: Kajian terhadap Bustān al-Kātibīn. Jurnal Linguistik Arab, 5(2), 45–57.
11. Kouloughli, D. E. (2018). La tradition grammaticale arabe: Fondements et développements. Geuthner.
12. Owens, J. (1988). The foundations of grammar: An introduction to medieval Arabic grammatical theory. John Benjamins Publishing.
13. Suleiman, Y. (2013). Arabic in the fray: Language ideology and cultural politics. Edinburgh University Press.
14. Talmon, R. (1995). Sibawayhi's principles: Arabic grammatical theory in the classical period. Brill.
15. Versteegh, K. (1997). The Arabic language. Edinburgh University Press.