Book note on David Justice, The Semantics of Form in Arabic

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Review
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Each of these four problems is first considered in isolation; the data base is largely drawn from the Heidelberg Research Project on Pidgin German (reported in a series of publications between 1975 and 1979, cited in Klein’s bibliography) and is therefore entirely in German. The four problems are not, of course, isolated from each other; to some extent, each is dependent upon the others. They occur in the context of a number of factors—propensity [motivation], language faculty . . . , and access, which determine the structure, the speed, and the end state of language acquisition’ (167). None of these has been adequately studied, so they are not well understood. There is not at present a sufficient amount of acceptable data or a sufficiently complete model to provide a serious base for second language teaching. Klein concludes that none of the existing approaches to second language acquisition (surveyed in the first part of the book) is adequate, that all leave a great deal to be desired, and that there is a need for extensive additional research before any claims can be made about models which might constitute a foundation for second language instruction.

The volume contains a splendid bibliography of some 300 items, of which about 70% are current. It is fair to say that the reference selection is heavily European: nearly half the bibliographic citations are continental, and a substantial number of the others are British, though U.S. publications are also well represented. The heavy reliance on European publications provides a range of references that should be better known in this country than they are now.

In sum, this very impressive volume is perhaps the best available introduction to second language acquisition studies, showing clearly where the field has arrived and equally clearly laying out the major remaining problems which require extensive additional study—or which have yet to be examined at all—before any serious claim can be made that second language acquisition research contributes to second language teaching (except perhaps at the level of methodology). The book comes at a time when programs in applied linguistics are proliferating and when many graduate students are in need of precisely such a scholarly, informed, balanced examination of a field which has great promise but whose promise has so far remained unfulfilled. [ROBERT B. KAPLAN, University of Southern California.]


Justice’s first aim in this volume is to demystify the Arabic language, which is widely perceived as difficult to learn and which has been characterized as ambiguous and confusingly polysemous, unnecessarily prolix and redundant in style, violent, and primitive. J dismantles these stereotypes one by one in the first three chapters of the book.

J then turns to the central focus of the book, an examination of connections among form, meaning, and use. His initial conjecture is a version of the Whorf hypothesis, without Whorfian claims about cognitive matters: semantic classes encoded in simple, regular morphological and syntactic constructions will be used more often and will, as a result, become richer and more productive than semantic classes which are more difficult to encode. J explores this conjecture by means of analyses of various aspects of the morphology, syntax, and literary style of Arabic (mainly Classical Arabic, with some reference to Modern Standard Arabic). For example, in Ch. 4 J examines duality, which pops up on various levels in Arabic, from obligatory and very regular noun, verb, adjective, and pronoun marking for dual number, to the marked stylistic preference in prose for balanced two-part conjoined structures. J rejects the idea that linguistic duality reflects any sort of philosophical or cognitive duality in Arab culture. His claim is that duality is used for aesthetic reasons because ‘the grammar of duality’ is easily available for use and expansion in Arabic; there is no single simple meaning attached to twoness.

In other chapters, J looks at the Arabic tendency to accumulate words in its lexicon and to pile up words in prose; at ‘enantiosemantics’, or the existence of words and structures that can apparently mean two opposite things; at the ways in which Arabic treats nouns of manner; at the apparent looseness of Arabic syntax, in-
including tamyiz constructions for specification; at various kinds of seeming redundancy in Arabic; and at the encoding of causatives and ascriptives. J’s conjecture that the availability of a semantic strategy will lead to its use, which will in turn lead to greater availability, is sometimes confirmed and sometimes not; J is exemplary in his reluctance to force the language to fit his hypothesis, though in a number of chapters it takes some effort on the reader’s part to discover what the point is.

J’s professional affiliation is with Merriam-Webster, and he seems bent on getting readers to use their dictionaries: the book is full of archaic and obscure English words. But his almost pompous erudition is balanced by his sense of humor and, more importantly, by his careful, thorough analyses. The volume makes important points about Arabic, and about how languages acquire their textures. [BARBARA JOHNSTONE, Texas A&M University.]


Two decades ago I was privileged to introduce American linguists to Rôna-Tas’s first monograph, a study of the Tibetan loanwords in Monguor (Lg. 44:147–68, 1968). Subsequently our energetic Hungarian colleague has frequently taken time from his tenure of a largely Turkological chair in Szeged to lecture abroad; teaching in Vienna in 1983/84, he returned to his earlier concern with Tibetan and its history. This sturdy volume, documenting the rich content and considerable range of his Vienna lectures, has been slow to appear (pace its date of publication) and even slower to reach reviewers; but the anticipation with which it has been awaited has not been misplaced. There is much here for everyone concerned with the Tibetan language, particularly for those interested in its history.

Despite the promise of the title, little here might properly be dubbed Kulturgeschichte; most of the volume is directly concerned with language, with special attention to early European sources for its history. Many of these sources, some reproduced at length and intact, are interesting, and a few are useful; but only patriotism can explain devoting fifteen pages to a facsimile reproduction of Grôf Kuun Géza’s compendium of Arabic notices of Tibet (59–74), still (as in its 1900 original) in Arabic script with a Hungarian translation and nothing more. When R-T himself must admit, ‘ich habe weder Kompetenz noch Zeit, das Ganze neu zu bearbeiten’ (58), what can be expected of the rest of us?

Such problems apart, the book shows that R-T led his Austrian students along a carefully conducted survey of a somewhat eclectic selection of the existing European-language literature on the history of Tibetan. Mainly he contents himself with repeating (or sometimes recasting) earlier studies. He also frequently attempts the Verbesserung of others’ views, not always with success. At first glance it might seem that his new reading (245–9) of a difficult passage in the Zaa.ma.tog of 1514 (cf. Lg. 31:479, 1955, but with the date wrong) concerning the formative period of the grammarians’ tradition in Tibet is of considerable importance. But in the absence of a convincing philological commentary, Laufer’s earlier version (SBAW 3.548 ff., 1898) still wins the day. I was particularly gratified to read R-T’s restudy of the Tunhuang Formulaire (349–53), and to discover how many of his views on matters of detail in this troublesome fragment (Hackin wrote with understandable exasperation of its ‘formes bâtarde’) agree with those I first published (HJAS 26:141–44, 1966)—moreover, apparently agree independently, since R-T does not mention my paper. Somewhat more problematical are the errors that R-T professes (249–52) to correct in my earlier edition and translation (TP 51:72–84, 1964) of a fragment of the early grammatical treatise by bSod.nams rTse.mo (1142–82). Certain of my renderings may well have been, as he now puts it, ‘irreführend’ (251); but his Verbesserung is scarcely better, especially when, as in 1.16 (151), it violates the grammar (as well as the sense) of the original. Questionable also is his contention that this text is not a phonetics-cum-phonology treatise at all but merely a spelling manual. The linguistic significance of the text is now independently confirmed by the study of Huanc Bufan, Minzu Yuwen (Peking) 1983.3:33–42, unknown to R-T.

A long chapter on the Tibetan writing system