

Abstract

This thesis is a comprehensive text-based interpretation of the grammar of Arabic. It is a descriptive sketch of the grammar of Arabic based on systemic functional theory and systemic functional descriptions of other languages. The thesis has two aims and is divided into six chapters; apart from the first and the last chapters, which are respectively the introduction and the conclusion, each of the remaining four corresponds to one of the three metafunctions, with one metafunction viz. the ideational one split over two chapters. Thus, Chapter 2 deals with the interpersonal metafunction, Chapters 3 and 4 with the ideational metafunction – Chapter 3 with the experiential mode and Chapter 4 with the logical mode - and finally Chapter 5 with the textual metafunction.

The first aim of this work is to elaborate a systemic description of the grammar of Arabic. It can be better understood by intersecting the spectrum of metafunction with the hierarchy of rank. This will locate the areas of interest of the thesis within concrete and familiar dimensions of the lexicogrammar. These dimensions are first and foremost the clause, then the prepositional phrase, nominal and verbal groups and to a lesser extent the morpheme which is studied especially in relation to the verbal group, more precisely Subject affixes and the systems of MODALITY and POLARITY.

The second aim of this thesis is to assess the work of Arab grammarians to see whether it can be developed and also whether it can be borrowed from. This is related to a future objective, which consists of replacing the English terminology used in this description with an Arabic one. It would be more practical to use terms which are familiar to Arab grammarians than come up with new ones – more practical, especially when these terms refer to similar systemic functional notions. As the Arab tradition had dealt with notions similar to those dealt with by systemic functional descriptions, when the time comes to develop an Arab terminology, many Arabic terms used by Arab grammarians will be kept as they are. However, as the work of Arab grammarians is less sophisticated than the systemic functional paradigm, I expect that there will be much work that needs to be done to come up with new adequate terms.

In terms of methodology, this description (which explores both the paradigmatic and syntagmatic aspects of the grammar of Arabic) is register-based. As text types instantiate a particular set of choices from the system of lexicogrammar, data selection for each chapter is not random. In chapter 2 for instance, while studying the resources of Arabic for enacting social roles and relations, dialogic texts were studied more closely than other text types.

This description of the grammar of Arabic also starts from theory, moves towards instances and then goes back to theory. Though the paradigmatic networks which present different lexicogrammatical systems find their origin in systemic functional theory and systemic functional descriptions, the final sketch is proper to Arabic as the whole process is based on analysis carried out on texts in the target language (i.e. Arabic). In this thesis, language is seen as meaning potential and is described through instances of Arabic text, which have been treated as samples or points of access to this system we use to mean. As different text types instantiate different aspects of the system, it was necessary to look at a variety of registers set within a variety of contexts. The thesis does not claim to be complete though, but the final product is fairly comprehensive.

Finally, in this description, Arabic has been at times likened to English, sometimes French and at others Japanese and Chinese, this is to be expected as all these aforementioned descriptions share one theoretical background. The similarities remain just that (i.e. similarities) and are used to make some points easier to understand. In other words, they are just typological generalizations and they should not be taken in any way as “universal entities” or as a proof that “the theory is Anglo-centric” (Matthiessen et al. 2000: 14).