What is not said: terminological issues

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Introduction

From the early stages of Arabic linguistic thought, grammarians were motivated by the general belief which held that any phenomenon needs to have a specific explanatory cause. The reformulation of incomplete sentences in order to recover missing lexical items was a common strategy. Grammarians postulated the implicit presence of one or more elements in order to justify the syntactical relations between the constituents of the sentence and, more generally, any formal aspect lacking apparent explanation. The omission of a linguistic element and its reconstruction is considered legitimate in the theory of government (ʿamal) which is the keystone of the Arabic linguistic tradition: any solution that the grammarian finds must conform to this principle. The most commonly investigated cases regard, for instance, those utterances that present the substantive in the accusative lacking regency (ʿāmil): the task of the grammarian is to identify the ʿāmil, that is, the verb which at a deep level can justify the accusative expressed in the utterance.

Treatises from the early stages of Arabic linguistics provide an extremely rich and varied terminology regarding elliptical operations. Besides ʿidmār and ḥadf, which represent the technical terms to indicate
any operation of syntactical or phonological deletion respectively, other terms, with no specific grammatical connotation, are used to refer to generic elisions that often relate to stylistic and rhetorical intent. Among these are: suqūṭ ‘falling away [of a sound]’, ḍahāb ‘departure’, taḥfīf ‘lightening’, ĩğāz and iqṭišār “abbreviation” (Carter 1991). The distinction between idmār and ḥadīf, established in Sibawayhi’s Kitāb, disappears in later treatises. The term idmār, to which the Persian grammarian devotes particular attention giving it a precise theoretical status, is not a key concept in the later tradition in which ellipsis becomes an instrument of linguistic analysis. The terminology reveals this different approach: ḥadīf starts to be used in place of idmār and the two terms are used interchangeably at both syntactical and phonological levels.

This paper aims to investigate the main stages in the Arabic grammatical tradition that consolidated the terminological status of the term ḥadīf, privileging its use over idmār when referencing the omission of lexical items. For this purpose we have chosen two works: the al-Muqtadāb by al-Mubarrad (d. 898) and the al-Ḥaṣā’iṣ by Ibn Ǧinnī (d. 1002). Al-Mubarrad is considered one of the most exemplary scholars of his time. He inherited and disseminated Sibawayhi’s (d. 796) grammatical theories, and was much involved in the consolidation of the Basra grammatical school which, based on that of Kufa, became a point of reference for the entire Arabic linguistic tradition. In contrast, Ibn Ǧinnī was an innovator: although he did not invent anything that was not already present in the earlier tradition, the organization of a theoretical framework, and a new approach to how topics are dealt with, make his work of the utmost importance from the perspective of a renewed input in linguistics. Al-Ḥaṣā’iṣ is a text that does not simply deal with a description of grammatical rules: it is a reflection on language, its aim being to extrapolate fundamental principles in order to demonstrate the perfection of Arabic. As we will see in the second section of our article, this treatise consolidated the theoretical status of ellipsis that, terminologically speaking, would hold sway in later traditions, modern grammars included.

The emergence of a theory of ellipsis: typology and applicability

Several studies have focused on the importance of the Quranic Exegesis in the emergence of Arabic Linguistics: in the first two centuries of the Hiǧra, the main concern of commentators and philologists was the interpretation of the Holy Book since it was seen not only as a reference point in matters of religion and jurisprudence,
but also as a linguistic model. The hermeneutic energies of the first commentators mainly concentrated on the comprehension of the text from both a semantic and a syntactic perspective. The discrepancy between what is said, or intended, and the form in which it is said encouraged commentators to make hypotheses regarding the lack of one or more elements in a sentence. The analysis of the first commentators was principally orientated towards reconstructing the meaning of Quranic passages, but their approach to the text can be considered the start of a general reflection on the omission of textual linguistic elements (Versteegh 1994).

Reconstructing omitted elements is a fundamental strategy of linguistic analysis in the Arabic tradition, and it was used by grammarians in order to evaluate sentences where correctness might otherwise be uncertain. Whereas the first tafasir ‘commentaries’ mainly focused on interpreting the Message, linguists used this strategy within a syntactical framework.

The omission of a linguistic element can be categorized according to three typologies: obligatory, permitted and rejected, as Ibn al-Sarrāġ summarizes in the chapter entitled dikr mā ya’rid min al-idmār wa-l-īzhār, ‘On what is implied and expressed’, in the al-Ūṣūl:

\[
\text{i’lam anna al-kalām yağī’ ‘alā ṭalāṭa aḍrub: zāhīr lā yahṣunu idmār-hu wa-muḍmar musta’mal ẓhāru-hu wa-muḍmar matrūk ẓhāru-hu.}
\]

‘Know that a word can occur in three ways: expressed, and that cannot be elided; implied but that can be expressed, and implied, and that cannot be expressed’.


This distinction is already seen clearly in Sībawayhi’s Kitāb. Both grammarians use the same term to refer to the three kinds of ellipsis: al-zāhīr lā yahṣunu idmār-hu ‘the expressed that cannot be elided’, al-muḍmar al-musta’mal ẓhāru-hu ‘the elided that can be expressed’ and al-muḍmar al-matrūk ẓhāru-hu ‘the elided that cannot be expressed’.

The constituents that must be expressed belong to the first category, since the interlocutor has no elements, neither linguistic (dalīl lafẓī) nor situational (dalīl ẓarīf), to reconstruct the sentence. This is, for instance, the case with the verb in the third person. In the following sentence, the listener might mistakenly understand that the order to hit Zayd is addressed to him:
In the second category, we find those terms that can be elided, such as imperative forms and proverbial phrases (Sibawayhi, *al-Kitāb*, I, p. 141), where the listener can recover the omitted words:

1. \textbf{*li-yaḍrib ‘Amran Zayden} \quad “That ‘Amr nom hit Zayd acc” 
\textit{(Sībawayhi, al-Kitāb, p. 128)}

In (2) and (3) the listener can recover the verb in the imperative and understand that the order is addressed to him thanks to the situational context. With regard to proverbial phrases, the speaker can elide lexical items that the listener can easily recover since the proverbs are so well-known and in such current use that ambiguity (iltibās) is avoided, as in the following sentence:

1. \textbf{al-asada} ‘The lion acc’ 
\textbf{lā taqrab al-asada} ‘Do not get close to the lion acc’.

2. \textbf{al-ǧidāra} ‘The wall acc’ 
\textbf{ʾiḥdar al-ǧidāra} ‘Be careful of the wall’ 
\textit{(Sībawayhi, al-Kitāb, p. 128)}

Finally, we find expressions such as:

1. \textbf{marḥaban} \quad ‘welcome’ 
\textit{(Sībawayhi, al-Kitāb, p. 149)}

in which the omitted verb is superfluous as in the cases of absolute object.

As these examples illustrate, the elliptical operation depends on the recoverability of the elided term: the linguistic and extralinguistic contexts must allow the listener to recover what the speaker did not explicitly express.

This approach required precise constraints regarding its applicability as it would no longer be a reliable expedient if it was employed to justify any kind of utterance. Indeed, the abuse of this technique led some, such as Ibn Maḍā (*Al-Radd ʿalā al-nuḥḥāt*, p. 78), to criticize its artificiality and its widespread use.
As Bohas (2001, p. 1) says, “du moment qu’un grammaire admet, pour rendre compte des phénomènes observés, de recourir à des éléments extérieurs à ceux-ci, se pose le problème de la limitation du recours à ces éléments ‘abstraits’, ‘profonds’, ‘supposés’ ou ‘sous-entendus’. Leur prolifération pourrait en effet amener à justifier n’importe quoi”. The limitations of such operations of ellipsis correspond to the limitations that a grammarian must respect in his analysis of the sentence. Reference to elided elements in order to justify the internal coherence of the utterance must respect the principle of economy and phonetic harmony, and what is more, the order of the constituents must not be upset. All these principles, as well as offering a fundamental theoretical framework to the Arabic grammatical tradition, are based on the central principle which states that the omitted element must be easily comprehensible, otherwise the utterance is considered incorrect. From this it can be deduced that the use of ellipsis and the interpretation of the utterance are distinct but closely related processes.

Ellipsis: terminological issues

Carter (1991) identifies a group of terms that refer to the concept of elision and that can be divided into specific and non-specific terms: some of them, such as *suqūṭ* ‘falling away’, *ḏahāb* ‘departure’, *taskīn* ‘silencing’, *kaff* ‘refraining’ and *istiḥfāf* ‘lightening’, are not considered technical terms. They usually refer to the loss of linguistic elements, mostly as a consequence of phonological phenomena of contraction, which does not play any role within the theoretical framework of ellipsis. Indeed, they do not imply the intention of the speaker to omit elements or require the reconstruction of the sentence by the grammarian. Among the terms that display a clear-cut technical status, *idmār* and *ḥadf* are the most important. They denote two different linguistic operations: *idmār*, the verbal noun of *admara* ‘to keep in mind, to hide’, refers to the syntactical level and to the action of implying a linguistic element, generally a lexical item. The role of the speaker is fundamental: indeed, the term is often associated with the locution *fi al-niyya* ‘with intention’. The counterpart of the omission of the speaker is its reconstruction by the grammarian who recovers the elided element through a virtual sentence (*tamtil*) in which he makes the *idmār* explicit, illustrating the syntactical relations of the sentence (Ayoub 1990). What emerges clearly is that the theoretical framework of the *idmār* relates strongly to the principle of the ‘*amal*, since, albeit missing in the phonetic sequence, it continues to exercise its syntactical effect over the sentence. Moreover, *idmār* has two interrelated meanings: ‘ellipsis’ and ‘pronominalization’. Ayoub explains this dual meaning by discussing the fact that the speaker can elide parts of the
discourse that can be recovered by the interlocutor. Thus muḍmar, in the general sense of ‘implied’, can also refer to anaphoric pronouns. Both meanings are present in the Kitāb, although Sībawayhi gives greater importance to the ʾidmār with regard to ellipsis, several chapters being devoted to it in order to illustrate which part of the discourse can be elided.

The term ḥadf denotes a phonological phenomenon that regards the elision of morphemes or phonemes in a word. It refers to an operation that occurs at surface level and that leaves the utterance formally incomplete, whereas ʾidmār refers to a deep level operation that does not involve an incomplete utterance since the omitted term exercises its syntactical implication in the surface utterance. The link between the ʾidmār of grammatical treatises and that of the commentaries is evident, even though the purpose of the device differs: in the commentaries the main effect of the restitution of the deleted element is interpreting the intention of the speaker, whereas in Sībawayhi’s Kitāb, a quintessential text of the Arabic grammatical tradition, its restitution is in function to the analysis of the formal relations between the elements in the utterance. The theory of ‘amal, that represents a key concept in the linguistic analysis of elliptical operations, is absent in the early commentaries. The first taḥṣīr that pays some attention to the syntactical implications in reconstructing an utterance with regard to Quranic passages is Maʾānī al-Qurʾān by al-Farrāʾ (d. 822), a commentary in which semantic, formal and syntactical perspectives are considered together. The terms ʾidmār and ḥadf are used to refer to ellipsis and elision respectively, although this differentiation is not always respected. Let us examine some passages:


And [when] He says: ‘they will ask you if it is right to wage war during the holy month’, the reading of ʿAbd Allāh is ʾan qitālin fi-hi and is rendered with the genitive, involving the omission of ʾan.

(al-Farrāʾ, Maʾānī al-Qurʾān, I, p. 141)

And [when] He says (may He be Blessed, He that is exalted): ‘you bestow the Kingdom upon whom you wish’, Arabs are content with what is expressed at the start of the phrase, from what has to be expressed after ši’ta. Thus they say: ‘take what you want’, ‘be what you want’, which means ‘what you want to be’, and where the verb that follows was eliminated.

(al-Farrā’, Maʿānī al-Qurʾān, I, p. 204)

The two terms are intentionally used by al-Farrā’: he refers to ʾidmār when he makes a syntactical analysis of the sentence. He does not consider the theory of government, and he never refers to the elided element in terms of ʿāmil, ‘governor’. In these passages he clearly refers to syntax when discussing elliptical sentences, although syntactical analysis is in its early stages here: al-Farrā’ does not make any serious recourse to the syntactical level of analysis in order to recover the omitted element. Very often he refers to other ʿqiraʾāt (mostly by ‘Abdallāh Ibn Masʿūd) where the element is present rather than suggest a syntactical reconstruction of the sentence.

Ellipsis attains its theoretical and terminological status in the Kitāb: the theory of government becomes the basis for a linguistic analysis and reasoning regarding elliptical sentences. The use of ʾidmār is stable: Sibawayhi devotes several chapters to verbs that it is possible to omit, and he always refers to this operation using the same term: ʾidmār. The differentiation between ʾidmār and ḥadīf is straightforward: the former refers to an operation that takes place at a deep level, in the speaker’s mind, and that must respect the principle of syntactic regency; the second occurs on a surface level, and does not need syntactical analysis in order to reconstruct what has been implied.

There are some passages in the Kitāb that could lead us to hypothesize that the two terms are used synonymously:

_Hādā bābun yuḥḍafu min-hu al-fi’l li-ḥaṭrati-hi fī kalāmi-him ḥattā šāra bi-manzilati l-maṭṭal._

This is the chapter on verbs that are omitted because they are so frequent in their [the Arabs] discourse that they become proverbs.

(Sibawayhi, al-Kitāb, p. 141)

_Lā yaḡūzu ḥadīfu al-fi’l wa-ʾidmāru-hu ba’da ḥurūf al-ʾistīfām lī-muḍāra’ti-hā ḥurūf al-ḡazā_.
It is not allowed to erase a verb and imply it after interrogative particles because of their similarity to particles that introduce apodosis.

(Sibawayhi, al-Kitāb, p. 72)

What is really surprising in the first passage is the use of ḥadhf to indicate verbal ellipsis: in his reflections on ellipsis, this is the most representative part of the discourse. Indeed, the use of īdmar to refer to verbal ellipsis is stable, as stable as the use that Sibawayhi makes of ḥadhf to indicate the suppression of phonemes. Analyzing this factor in greater detail, we note that the use of ḥadhf for verbal ellipsis is always accompanied by the expression li-kaṭratih fī kalāmi-him ‘for the frequency of their (Arab) use’ or li-kaṭratisti‘māli-him iyyā-hu ‘for the frequency of their use of it’. It is therefore valid to hypothesize that the regular use of the utterance causes a sort of “erosion” that leads to the suppression of one or more of its constituents without any intention of inference on the speaker’s part. In the second passage, Sibawayhi uses the two terms together, but to refer to two different operations: the former to deletion, the second to ellipsis. The hypothesis that ḥadhf is used to signal a lexical item linked to an operation associated with that of phonetic cancellation is confirmed by the coexistence of ḥadhf with terms referring to the “reduction” of the utterance as in:


as when he says: ‘it is nothing except [ṣayr]’ and ‘it is nothing except [ʾilla]’, it is as if he said: ‘it is nothing except this’ [in both cases], but they [the Arabs] omitted it for sake of lightness and in consideration of the interlocutor’s knowledge of what he means.

(Sibawayhi, al-Kitāb, p. 375)

The importance of this text in the history of Arabic linguistics and its contribution to the creation of technical linguistic terminology might lead us to expect a stable use of the term in later treatises. On the contrary, this term seems to disappear in later traditions with reference to elliptical phenomena, whereas it is widely used to indicate pronominalization. The term par excellence for any kind of linguistic omission, lexical or phonological, is ḥadhf.

We will now focus on two treatises that represent important stages in the consolidation of the Arabic linguistic tradition after Sibawayhi: al-
Mubarrad’s al-Muqtaḍab and Ibn Ğinnī’s al-Ḫaṣāʾiṣ. The first text, the most representative of al-Mubarrad’s thoughts on grammar, is a voluminous and non-systematic collection of morphological and syntactical issues that take up the ideas put forward in the Kitāb. What is striking is the absence of a section devoted to ellipsis: in the Kitāb Sibawayhi had devoted much energy to the question of the legitimacy of verbal ellipsis, giving this operation a precise theoretical status. On the contrary, al-Mubarrad, although he relies on the reconstruction of the utterance as a technique for analyzing those which lack an explicit ʿāmil, seems to give little importance to the theoretical implications of the operation in question. His use of terminology demonstrates this:


If you say ‘do you have twenty boys?’ and if you say ‘are twenty boys your boys?’, this is the meaning of it because what you have said indicates what you have omitted.

(al-Mubarrad, al-Muqtaḍab, III, p. 56-57)

Al-Mubarrad breaks with the dichotomy established in the Kitāb: as we saw in the first passage, ḥadīf/izhār takes the place of ḭāmr/iżhār. In the second, the terms ḭāmr and ḥadīf are used synonymously without there being any noticeable theoretical difference between the two: both refer to the omission of the same particle.

It is necessary to wait for al-Ḫaṣāʾiṣ to have a full systematic analysis of cases of ellipsis, something that was also not present in the Kitāb. The chapter Bāb šağāʿati al-ʿarabiyya (The courage of the Arabic language) exemplifies how Ibn Ğinnī regards cases of ellipsis within a coherent theoretical system. Let us look at some illustrative passages:

> qad ḥaḍafat al-ʿArab al-ǧumla wa-l-mufrad wa-l-ḥarf wa-l-ḥaraka wa-layṣa šayʿun min ǧālika illā ʿan dalīl ʿalay-hi wa-illā kāna fi-ḥi darb min taktifʿīlm al-ġayb fi maʿrifati-hi.


> wa-ammā ḥadfu al-mufrad faʿ-ʾalā ṭalāṭati aḍrāb: ism wa-fāʾl wa-ḥarf […]

The Arabs practiced ellipsis of the phrase, the word, the letter or the vowel. All this would mean nothing if there
were not a sign, without which we would be purely making conjectures. As for the (ellipsis of the) phrase, it is as if you make an oath [...] thus verbs which give an order are forbidden and are expressed as in the utterance ‘Zayd’, when you mean ‘strike Zayd’, and similar utterances. The omission of words taken on their own can occur in three ways: nouns, verbs and particles [...].

(Ibn Ṣinīnī, al-Ḥaṣāʾīṣ, II, p. 360-361)


There are two ways to omit verbs: one of these is the omission of the verb that includes the agent. And if this happens, you omit a phrase, as in ‘Zayd, I hit him’, because you mean ‘I hit Zayd’, so that when you omitted ‘I hit’, you explicited it by saying ‘I hit him’.

(Ibn Ṣinīnī, al-Ḥaṣāʾīṣ, II, p. 379)


There are two ways of omitting letters: one consists in the omission of one of the letters bearing a meaning which is added to the word, and the other regards a letter which is part of the word.

(Ibn Ṣinīnī, al-Ḥaṣāʾīṣ, II, 360-361)

Here Ibn Ṣinīnī suggests a theory of ellipsis: he does not use the elliptical mechanism to clarify the formal relations between the constituents of anomalous sentences, but he adds his reflections on ellipsis to a general reflection on the language itself. Like taqdim and taḥīr, ellipsis is viewed as a feature of dynamic flexible language. This formulation of a theory of ellipsis lead to terminological stability: ḥadīf covers all cases of deletion, both phonological and morpho-syntactical. The distinction between ellipsis and elision, which in the Kitāb was evident (e.g. in proverbial phrases), disappears and the synonymous use of idmār and hadīf becomes fixed, and remains so in the subsequent grammatical tradition. Ellipsis thus achieves a theoretical status which was present in the Kitāb, albeit not made explicit in any coherent or systematic way: there are eight occurrences of idmār in the Ḥaṣāʾīṣ compared to 215 occurrences in the Kitāb. Whereas Sībawayhi refers to
verbal ellipsis in terms of *idmār*, Ibn Ğinnī’s use of *admarta al-fīl*, ‘you omitted the verb’, is equivalent to *ḥaḏasta al-mafʿūl*, ‘you omitted the complement’, since he is referring to the same linguistic operation of deletion.

**Conclusion**

In his discussion in the *Kitāb*, Sibawayhi constructed a theory of ellipsis that, although it was not laid out in a systematic way, did make use of a precise terminology. The concept of linguistic ellipsis was considered within a theoretical framework in which the concept of regency takes on a key role. The solidity of its theoretical status is testified by its terminological coherence: *idmār* is the term that refers to elliptical phenomena as well as to those cases in which ellipsis and ‘*ʿamal* are interrelated with regard to linguistic analysis, whereas *ḥaḏf* is used for phonological deletions that are not intentional and that do not require syntactical analysis.

After Sibawayhi, this differentiation in the use of the two terms disappears. This also seems to be the case with the theoretical construct which supports a reconstructive grammar approach with regard to the utterance. It is not until Ibn Ğinnī that we are provided with another theory of the elliptical process which lays down the foundations for a new terminological usage: Ibn Ğinnī can be considered the grammarian who made the most important contribution to the theory of *idmār*: al-Mubarrad did not follow the path laid down by his predecessor, and this was also the case with grammarians working prior to Ibn Ğinnī. The latter succeeded in proposing the issue in a new way: the theoretical systemization of the concept of ellipsis was applied to all parts of the discourse. Another achievement was categorizing all cases of ellipsis by a single term: *ḥaḏf*. This includes any operation of deletion, whether phonological or morpho-syntactical. Ibn Ğinnī’s work was undoubtedly decisive, and the creation of this new terminology remained stable in the years that followed. Indeed, the use of *ḥaḏf* to indicate ellipsis has generally been accepted by subsequent, and contemporary, grammar theorists.
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