

## CHAPTER TWO

### COMPLEMENTARITY

Whereas the historical background of the *Kitāb* and Arab linguistics in general has been the focal point in the previous chapter, this chapter aims to provide us with deeper and/or new insights into the linguistic tools and mechanisms employed by Sībawayhi in his work.

The present chapter falls within the interpretative domain of global linguistic principles that not only seem to underpin some western linguistic theories but also turn out to have upheld the first systematic and comprehensive treatise on Arabic language and linguistics. I will be bringing these principles into focus, because they strikingly dovetail those used in the *Kitāb Sībawayhi*. Once unravelled, readers of Sībawayhi will find these principles familiar, and as I proceed, I shall explicitly refer to them wherever parallels are drawn.

Since unity of language will be shown to be the dominant feature of the *Kitāb*, approaching it from the right angle requires the presupposition of the two necessary poles of Sībawayhi's method, i.e. syntax and pragmatics and the complementarity of functional and formal explanations.

Generally speaking, the history of western and Arab linguistics has been dominated by a formal approach to language, with a system of rules employed as a standard gauge of the acceptability/grammaticality and unacceptability/ungrammaticality of a structure. Sībawayhi can therefore be argued to be one of the first grammarians who successfully managed to strike a balance between the formal and functional components of human speech.

In order to prevent confusion, I should emphasise that modern linguistic language is borrowed to serve as a medium to illustrate Sībawayhi's approach to Arabic. This means that this chapter is not intended as a comparative study between Arabic and modern linguistics nor are linguists quoted randomly, just because some similarities of approach are traced. Modern linguists will be referred to only when certain aspects of their linguistic model or insights efficiently and accurately convey fundamental insights found in the *Kitāb* and translate them into modern language. In short, my aim is to pinpoint where Sībawayhi's linguistic thinking intersects with modern linguistics.

To illustrate this point I might refer for instance to the fact that Sibawayhi's reliance on native speaker knowledge is comparable to the Chomskyan approach to language which states that the borderline between grammatical and ungrammatical structures can only be drawn by native speakers. This correspondence with the Chomskyan view does not exclude the relevance of Lyons's statement (1977: 34–5) that an essential part in the communication process is based on the congruence between the communicative intention of the speaker and its recognition by the listener as being the intended receiver, which forms part and parcel of Sibawayhi's linguistic analysis.

Leech's communicative approach to language has proved to be the most adequate medium for our purpose and the reasons are twofold. First, it involves a fruitful interaction among the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic levels underlying the language. Second, there is a great deal of common ground between Leech's linguistic account and Sibawayhi's. In fact, the whole thrust of this account is that it studies language as a system of human communication and gives prominence to the complementarity of syntax and pragmatics in such a way that it escapes a rigid *either-or* approach to language. Within the framework of a complementary approach, syntax and pragmatics are equally important factors in the analysis of language.

Given that the Principle of Complementarity forms the core of the present study, I will be approaching language as 'a simultaneous bundle of syntactic, semantic, pragmatic and phonological features'. These features are decoded instantaneously, and not in any particular sequence.<sup>1</sup> What is more, the plurality of these linguistic features and their non-linearity are the underlying principle of the simplest utterance produced.

---

<sup>1</sup> In the light of his paper 'Patterns of Reasoning: Sibawayhi's Analysis of the Ḥāl' (2002), Carter argues that 'modern theoretical linguistics rather overlooks that the relationship between deep and surface structure, and the transformations involved, are only in a logical sequence, not a temporal one, but sometimes this is forgotten. Perhaps only in word order can we speak of a linear element. Years ago the phoneme was defined as a *'simultaneous bundle of distinctive features'* and nobody, I think, ever stopped to ask how this plurality of features is decoded instantaneously, not in any sequence. Ibn Jinnī and others were partly aware of this when they argued that logically consonants come before vowels but in practice, they are of equal importance... It might be possible then to speak of a *'simultaneous bundle of syntactic features'* in the same spirit, i.e. a plurality of features decoded instantaneously' (in personal communication, 2004).