FROM LEXICAL TO GRAMMATICAL:
NAFS AND OTHER IDENTIFIERS

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This article puts forth some observations regarding the forms of semantic and grammatical evolution manifested within a small category of elements in literary Arabic, whose prototype is nafs (the initial, as well as the present, lexical meaning of the lexeme is “soul” and “person”). To introduce our hypotheses on this form of evolution, we shall make constant reference to the English self, which, like the Arab equivalent, develops out of the same lexeme, usually called an “intensifier” (my self) and a “reflexive marker” (I hate myself). I must add that nafs often appears as an equivalent to “same.” Other elements that are commonly grouped together in Arabic in the above-mentioned category, given that they display partially similar behavior, are ʿayn whose initial lexical meaning was “eye”—and dhāt, which originally was the feminine form of a deictic (dhū) whose meaning was that of “owner.” The lexical meaning of this feminine form, which also set itself apart as an identifier among deictics, was originally that of “being,” “essence.”

In the past decades, several works have discussed the functions of elements similar to self from a typological perspective, i.e., trying to find explanations of a typological nature for certain resemblances among languages, from the perspective we are interested in here—such as:

a. the common lexical source, on a general or areal level, of certain metaphors that become “intensifiers” and “reflexive markers.” Schladt brings forth data from 150 languages that show the main sources of reflexive markers, mentioning among the most common: body parts names; nominal sources: person, self, owner; emphatic pronouns;¹
b. the kinds of meanings that various authors group under the heading “intensivity” or “emphasis,” which is the nature of the reflexive;²
c. possible explanations of the formal identity of intensifiers on the one hand, and reflexive markers on the other hand, in several languages:

¹ Schladt (2000).
² For example, see König and Siemund (2000); Gast and Siemund (2006).
from the point of view of most authors, the elements of the first category, intensifiers, are at the origin of the second category, reflexive markers.

d. the structures to which the above-mentioned elements are circumscribed, and, in relation to that, the problems associated with anaphora.3

In what follows, we shall start from some of the issues mentioned above in order to derive observations on the expression of those meanings in literary Arabic, both classical and modern. A common name shall be used for elements such as *nafs, ‘ayn, dhāt*—that of “identifier,” starting from the hypothesis that the function of expressing identity and identification is one from which others derive; we shall continue to keep the widely used terms “intensifiers” or “self intensifiers,” as well as “reflexive markers” to refer to certain specific functions within the more general function of expressing identity.

**Briefly, About “Identity”**

Ever since ancient times, the concept of “identity” has held enormous interest for philosophers, including those in the Arab world. Philosophers commonly speak of three types of identity, or rather of three ways to conceptualize identity: a **numerical** identity (two or more expressions for what is one: “evening star” and “morning star” are a common example of such a type of identity); a **personal** identity, of that which “remains itself” despite the changes that come about during the course of its existence: one’s genetic print, character etc. is said not to change over time; and, a **specific or qualitative** identity, if, despite differences manifested in time or space, there is a constant feature or quality that differentiates one object or being from the next. The law of identity is formally expressed by *a=a*.

An interesting distinction regarding this topic is that made by Ricoeur between identity as *mèmeité* (En. “sameness”) and identity as *ipséité* (En. “selfhood”).4 *Nafs* and the other elements belonging to the same category in Arabic can be equated in English with both *same* and *self*, i.e. they express both types of identity. The testimonies of various languages on the way the idea of identity is expressed, beginning with the identity of the person, are important for the very definition of the concept of

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