In the past others have already addressed the issue of the relevance of ʾiʿrāb (commonly understood as (desinential) inflection or inflectional endings, though that translation appears to be reductive, see Fleisch 1986 and Peña 1997). I myself have discussed it elsewhere (Sartori 2013) and I will repeat here some of the arguments that were developed there. The purpose of this article is twofold.

First and on the surface, it is to evaluate the syntactic and semantic relevance of the desinential inflection, that is to say a grammatical fact. To do so, I will base my argument on medieval Arabic grammatical texts. This means that my goal is not to write the grammar of this state of the language, which we should do for the current state of what is known as Modern Standard Arabic. That is also why I will not use literary texts of which it is always possible to infer a Middle Arabic character (see Larcher 2001). In assessing the relevance of this phenomenon, it will bring grist to the mill of ʾiʿrāb skeptics.

Further, the aim is then to describe the grammar of medieval Arabic. In particular, this is to distinguish between verbal statements claimed by grammarians and their nonverbal attitudes (i.e. what they do not say and however do), and then to show, by the existence at least of a hiatus—if not an internal inconsistency—the ideological aspect of certain grammatical positions. Put another way, by examining the Arab grammatical sources themselves, the idea is to deconstruct the ideology of the Arabic linguistic tradition to reconstruct the history of representations related to it. In that context, it is possible to see ʾiʿrāb as a medieval contrivance or even invention.

1 ʾTrāb. Definition

The desinential inflection is a case ending on nouns and modal in the case of imperfect verbs. I concentrate on the first from a new perspective, but I will mention what I said of the second (Sartori 2013). In addition, and without going...
into unnecessary details, the Arabic language has two forms of desinential inflection: one using short vowels (-u, -a, -i, indefinite -un, -an, -in), the other with long vowels (wāw, ‘alif and yā’). The first is related to singular, irregular plural (also known as broken plural), and regular feminine plural (also known as sound plural). The second is related, in addition to regular masculine plural, to dual and to the “six nouns” (on this last point, see Sartori 2010). Unlike the first, subject to a phenomenon of scriptio defectiva—short vowels and, more generally, signs not included in the consonant script are not necessarily present in the script, the second inevitably leaves a trace in the written form, the long vowel being part of the ductus or word’s skeleton. This long vowel, for regular masculine plural and dual, is a wāw or an ‘alif in the nominative case and a yā’ in the objective case (accusative-genitive). It is the desinential inflection by means of short vowels which particularly interests me here.

It is commonly said that the desinential inflection has an intrinsic semantic interest. According to ʿUkbarī (d. 616/1219), ṣāʾrāb is what differentiates the syntactic functions of words.4 There is no lack of references, in fact, to support, with a lot of which is very similar to grammarians’ examples, the thesis of a semantically relevant ṣāʾrāb. This is what we find in Sibawayhi (d. 180/796?) and which is then transmitted to the grammatical tradition of which he is the basis. I will take two examples of this desinential inflection presented as relevant, modal on one hand and case on the other. The author of the Kitāb

1 However one exception concerning the inflectional ending by means of short vowels, that of the indefinite accusative. The latter is indeed marked, for nouns that do not end with a tāʾ marbūta or an hamza or being diptotes, by an orthographical ‘alif which, itself, leaves a graphic trace.

2 Thus, dealing with desinential inflection by short vowels, one must, by working on grammatical texts, differentiate between the author’s text and the more or less suitable additions made by the scientific editors and thus to be wary of vocalizations given in the editions. Those to be taken into account are either explicitly given by the author himself (e.g. bi-rafʿ al-ṣifa, etc.) or to be deducted by an analytical work in the absense of explicit indication of the author himself.

3 I follow the Orientalist use giving for years as for centuries the Hijri dates then the Christian ones.

4 See ʿUkbarī Masāʾil: 79–80. This is also what Mubarrad emphasizes (d. 285/898) in his Muqtaṣab, as noted by Guillaume 1998: 44 whom we will consult about all grammarians’ discussions around the value to be given to marks of ṣāʾrāb. On the identification of ṣāʾrāb as the final inflected mark or rather as the inflectional commutativity of the final, i.e. on the fact of conceiving ṣāʾrāb as lafẓī or maʿnawī, see Versteegh 1985: not. 153–156. As for the reasons given for such a phonetic realization to be related to such case / mood, see among others Bohas 1981: 205 ff.