'IDMĀR IN THE MAʿĀNĪ OF AL-FARRĀ’:
A GRAMMATICAL APPROACH BETWEEN DESCRIPTION AND EXPLANATION

Kinga Dévényi
Corvinus University, Budapest

1. Introduction

Kees Versteegh stimulated the discussion on the history and development of Arab grammatical thinking in a number of his publications. In one of his books (Versteegh 1993, 150), he reflects upon my earlier analysis of al-Farrā’s linguistic methods in his Maʿānī (Dévényi 1990). He pointed out the insufficient analysis of ‘idmār and its related terms in this author’s work. In another chapter of the same work (Versteegh 1993, chapter five), he assembled data in an attempt to present the inter-relationship between grammarians, readers and commentators who worked in the 2nd/8th century.

The present contribution would like to pick up these two threads and examine, on the one hand, in some detail the role of ‘idmār in the Maʿānī l-Qurʿān of al-Farrā’ and, on the other hand, analyze the role and place of this grammatical commentary of the Qurʿān from the point of view of other grammars (mainly Sībawayhi’s Kitāb) and other exegetical works, like for example those of al-Axfaš and at-TCHAbarī.

It is a well-known fact that al-Farrā’ (d. 207/822) held in great esteem Sībawayhi’s (d. 180/796) Kitāb, which more than twenty years predated his composition. Their starting points and approaches were, however, widely different. Versteegh (1993, 180) has already pointed out that the interests of the two authors lay elsewhere. To this, we can add that al-Farrā’ and Sībawayhi, though working within the framework of practically one grammar—or one grammatical ideal—had widely different aims. While al-Farrā’, in his Maʿānī, used his grammatical knowledge for the analysis of an existing corpus which he described from the point of view of the listener to this text, Sībawayhi aimed at creating, from the point of view of the speaker, a comprehensive grammar in which he used poetical and Qurʿānic excerpts only by way of illustration.
2. An overview of al-Farrā’’s methods

In order to have a brief overview of the methods used by al-Farrā’, a few examples from the beginning of the Ma’ānī will be presented first. That the corpus al-Farrā’ is working on is the text of the revelation has special importance. On the one hand, al-Farrā’—like grammarians and later rhetoricians—considers that ‘i’rāb is a necessary prerequisite for the understanding of any text and so the text of the Qur’ān. On the other hand, since the Qur’ānic text is usually understood without relying on the ‘i’rāb endings, there is a strong tendency to analyze different endings at a given place without entailing a change in the meaning. This method aims at eliminating the problems posed by the different qirā‘āt. Although in most of the cases the grammatical analysis only underlines and systematizes the interpretation given by the first exegetes of the Qur’ānic text, in several cases, however, it is the grammatical analysis which helps to disclose the meaning of the ‘āya.

2.1 Ma’ānī I:3 regarding Q 1:2 al-ḥamdu li-llāhi

The task here is to determine the vowel ending of the word al-ḥamd.

Step (1): The examination of the readings (qirā‘āt):
According to al-Farrā’ the readers are in total agreement concerning the raf’ ending. It is also interesting to note, that al-Farrā’ only mentions this ending but does not present a grammatical explanation for it.

Step (2): The elicitation of extra-textual linguistic source:
The Bedouins (ahl al-badw) say three things:
(a) al-ḥamda li-llāh,
(b) al-ḥamdī li-llāh,
(c) al-ḥamdū lu-llāh.

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1 A notable exception, where different readings reflect a difference in meaning is e.g. Q 5:6. For the analysis of this ‘āya, see Dévényi 1987–88 and Burton 1988.
2 Makram and ‘Umar (1985, I:5) also list al-ḥamda and al-ḥamdī among the readings of this verse.
3 This is in contrast with al-Axfaṣ (Ma’ānī I:9 ff.) whose analysis at this place is rather similar to that of al-Farrā’, but who also provides a detailed grammatical analysis of the raf’ ending.