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The Historical Origins of Arabic Grammar: Abu al-Aswad al-Du'ali and the Development of the Basrah Tradition

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Abstract

The historical origins of Arabic grammar (*nahw*) involve interconnected developments in linguistic scholarship, Qur'anic recitation, and Arabic writing. This study examines the emergence of grammatical thought during the first century after the Hijrah, focusing on contributions attributed to Abu al-Aswad al-Du'ali, Yahya ibn Ya'mar, and Nasr ibn 'Asim, alongside the subsequent development of the Basrah grammatical tradition. It aims to contextualize early grammatical initiatives, critically examine traditional accounts, and explain the relationship between early linguistic practices and later grammatical systematization. A qualitative historical approach based on library research was employed, drawing on classical Arabic sources and modern scholarly literature. The analysis examined historical narratives and scholarly interpretations concerning the circumstances, attribution, and development of early grammatical knowledge. The findings identify several interconnected factors associated with the emergence of *nahw*: the expansion of Islam, the increasing use of Arabic among linguistically diverse communities, the preservation of Qur'anic recitation, and concerns about linguistic error (*lahn*). Abu al-Aswad al-Du'ali occupies a prominent position in traditional narratives, while Yahya ibn Ya'mar and Nasr ibn 'Asim are associated with subsequent developments in grammatical inquiry and Arabic writing. The analysis distinguishes *naqṭ al-i'rāb*, which marks vowel or inflectional features, from *i'jām al-ḥurūf*, which differentiates letters through dots. The later development of the Basrah tradition, particularly the systematic scholarship associated with Sibawayh, is

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interpreted as a gradual intellectual process. The study concludes that accounts of Arabic grammar's origins require critical historical interpretation because their attributions and details vary. Its contribution lies in connecting early linguistic practices with subsequent grammatical scholarship while maintaining distinctions among different forms of innovation. Further comparative research should clarify the chronology and transmission of early Arabic grammatical knowledge.

Keywords: Arabic Grammar; Nahw; Abu al-Aswad al-Du'ali; Basrah Grammatical Tradition; Historical Linguistics

INTRODUCTION

The development of Arabic grammar (*nahw*) represents an important stage in the intellectual history of the early Islamic world. Following the expansion of Islam beyond the Arabian Peninsula, Arabic became increasingly important as a language of religious instruction, Qur'anic recitation, administration, and scholarly communication. Contact between Arabic-speaking communities and populations with different linguistic backgrounds created new circumstances for the use and transmission of Arabic (Dhayef and Kareem 2025; Mahmudah et al. 2026). In this context, concerns about *lahn*, commonly understood as linguistic error or deviation from established Arabic usage, became an important part of the historical explanation for the emergence of grammatical studies (Muttakin et al. 2026). Nevertheless, the development of Arabic grammar should not be reduced to a single event or a simple response to linguistic mistakes. It must also be understood in relation to the broader development of Qur'anic interpretation, linguistic observation, and scholarly practices in the early Islamic period (Versteegh, 1993, 2014). The Arabic grammatical tradition subsequently developed into a systematic intellectual discipline, with *nahw* and ṣarf becoming its principal branches (Baalbaki 2013). These developments provide the historical background for examining how early grammatical knowledge emerged and how it was transmitted to subsequent generations of scholars.

Within this historical context, Abu al-Aswad al-Du'ali occupies a prominent position in traditional accounts of the origins of Arabic grammar. Classical biographical and bibliographical sources associate him with the initial formulation of grammatical principles and with early practices of marking Arabic writing to assist correct reading (Heredia et al., 2026; Zainuddin and Hikmah 2026). However, historical reports do not present an entirely

uniform account of the discipline's origins. Ibn al-Nadim's al-Fihrist, for example, preserves different accounts concerning the earliest contributions to Arabic grammar, including traditions associated with Abu al-Aswad, Ali ibn Abi Talib, Nasr ibn 'Asim, and other early figures (Ibn al-Nadim, 1970). Such reports demonstrate the importance of Abu al-Aswad in the historical memory of Arabic linguistic scholarship, but they also require critical examination regarding their provenance, transmission, and historical reliability. Moreover, the early marking of Arabic writing should be discussed with attention to the distinction between *naqṭ al-i'rāb*, which indicates vowel or inflectional features, and *i'jām al-ḥurūf*, which distinguishes letters through dots. These practices are related to the history of Arabic writing, but they should not automatically be treated as identical innovations or attributed to one individual without qualification (Apaydin 2026; Bachtiar et al. 2026). Accordingly, Abu al-Aswad's contribution is best examined by distinguishing the traditional attribution of foundational importance from the extent to which specific historical details can be established through the available evidence.

Previous scholarship has provided several important perspectives on the formation of Arabic grammatical thought. Khan (2009) examines the relationship between early Qur'anic exegesis and the development of Arabic linguistic analysis, demonstrating the value of exegetical materials for understanding the emergence of grammatical terminology and interpretive practices. In his broader account of the Arabic language, Khalil (2022) situates linguistic development within historical, cultural, and social contexts, including language contact and the formation of the Arabic linguistic tradition. Khan (2009) analyzes medieval Arabic grammatical theory through its concepts, analytical procedures, and technical vocabulary, offering a framework for understanding grammar as a developed intellectual discipline rather than merely a collection of rules. Similarly, Baalbaki (2013) surveys the Arabic grammatical tradition, including early grammar, the emergence of grammatical theory, and the influential position of Sibawayh's Kitāb. Talmon (2018), meanwhile, investigates early Iraqi grammatical thought through critical analysis of material preserved in early sources, extending the discussion beyond the better-known works of al-Khalil ibn Ahmad and Sibawayh. Taken together, these studies demonstrate that the history of Arabic grammar requires attention to early linguistic practices, textual evidence, and the gradual development of grammatical concepts. However, their different analytical emphases also indicate the need to distinguish the earliest traditions concerning grammatical origins from the later systematization of grammatical theory.

A further historiographical issue concerns the interpretation of Basrah and Kufa as the principal schools of early Arabic grammar. These designations have become influential in accounts of the history of Arabic linguistic scholarship, but their historical development should not be assumed to have been complete or uniform from the beginning. Shimiyeva (2026) argues that early Arabic grammatical thought should be understood in relation to a period of intellectual heterogeneity, in which scholars could employ different ideas and terminology before later processes of standardization strengthened the distinction between grammatical schools. This perspective is significant for evaluating claims that early grammatical practices attributed to Abu al-Aswad developed directly and continuously into a fully established Basrah school. The existence of later Basrah grammatical scholarship, particularly the systematic treatment of grammatical analysis associated with Sibawayh, does not by itself demonstrate that every earlier practice belonged to an already unified school or that a continuous line of transmission can be reconstructed without additional evidence (Alshizawi and Ithawi 2026; Fatoni 2026). Carter (1973) study of an eighth-century Arabic grammarian also illustrates the importance of examining the historical development of grammatical thought through the intellectual activities and analytical practices of individual scholars. Consequently, the relationship between Abu al-Aswad, subsequent early grammarians, and the later Basrah tradition needs to be investigated as a historical process involving transmission, adaptation, and systematization rather than presumed to be a fully documented linear succession.

Although these studies provide substantial foundations for understanding Arabic grammatical history, the present article focuses on the relationship among three connected historical questions: the linguistic and sociopolitical circumstances surrounding the emergence of *nahw* in the first century AH; the historical attribution of foundational grammatical practices to Abu al-Aswad al-Du'ali; and the transmission and subsequent development of early grammatical knowledge in relation to the Basrah tradition. The research gap addressed here does not lie in the absence of scholarship on Abu al-Aswad or the history of Arabic grammar. Rather, it concerns the need to bring these dimensions into a single historical discussion while maintaining a critical distinction between traditional narratives, evidence preserved in early sources, and later interpretations of grammatical schools. In particular, reports concerning Abu al-Aswad's role, the contributions of figures such as Yahya ibn Ya'mar and Nasr ibn 'Asim, and the emergence of Basrah grammatical scholarship need to be considered in relation to the chronology and limitations of the available evidence.

This approach also avoids treating the transmission of grammatical knowledge as a proven direct chain when the sources do not sufficiently establish every link. By placing these issues in conversation with scholarship on early Arabic linguistic thought and the development of grammatical theory, the article seeks to clarify how the origins of *nahw* have been represented and how the early history of the discipline can be reconstructed cautiously.

Based on this rationale, the present study aims to examine the genealogy of Arabic grammar during the first century AH through a historical analysis of Abu al-Aswad al-Du'ali's attributed contributions and the subsequent transmission of grammatical knowledge associated with the Basrah tradition. Specifically, it addresses three research questions: (1) What linguistic, social, and political factors contributed to the emergence of Arabic grammatical studies during the first century AH? (2) How should the contribution attributed to Abu al-Aswad al-Du'ali be interpreted in light of differing historical reports? and (3) How was early grammatical knowledge transmitted and developed by subsequent scholars in relation to the formation of the Basrah tradition? The article contributes to the history of Arabic linguistics by connecting the social context of grammatical emergence with the historiography of its foundational figures and the later development of grammatical scholarship. Its approach is historical and interpretive: it seeks to assess the significance of early reports without assuming that every traditional attribution can be verified equally. The findings are expected to provide a more nuanced account of the emergence of *nahw*, the place of Abu al-Aswad in its historical memory, and the relationship between early grammatical practices and the later intellectual tradition of Basrah.

METHODS

1. Type of Research

This study employs a qualitative approach using historical library research to examine the emergence of Arabic grammar (*nahw*) during the first century after the Hijrah (AH), with particular attention to the contributions attributed to Abu al-Aswad al-Du'ali and the transmission of early grammatical knowledge in relation to the development of the Basrah grammatical tradition. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study focuses on interpreting historical narratives, examining textual evidence, and understanding the development of linguistic ideas within their historical and intellectual contexts rather than measuring variables numerically. Library research enables the systematic examination of

written materials relevant to the research questions, including classical Arabic texts, historical accounts, biographical works, and contemporary academic publications. Bowen (2009) and Rizza et al. (2026) explains that document analysis can provide a systematic procedure for reviewing and interpreting documents to develop empirical knowledge and understanding of a particular phenomenon. Accordingly, this study treats historical texts as documentary evidence that requires contextual interpretation and critical assessment rather than accepting every statement in the sources as an established historical fact.

2. Research Design

The study uses a historical-interpretive research design to investigate the circumstances surrounding the emergence of Arabic grammar, evaluate historical attributions concerning Abu al-Aswad al-Du'ali, and examine the development and transmission of early grammatical knowledge. The research is organized around three interconnected analytical dimensions: the linguistic and sociopolitical context of the first century AH, the historical accounts of Abu al-Aswad's contributions, and the relationship between early grammatical practices and the later Basrah tradition. The analysis proceeds chronologically where the available evidence permits, while also comparing different accounts of the same historical events or scholarly contributions. Historical interpretation requires attention to the origin, context, and credibility of documentary evidence, particularly when sources preserve differing accounts of the past (Scott 2014). Therefore, the study distinguishes between information explicitly reported in historical sources, interpretations offered by later scholars, and conclusions developed through comparison of the available evidence. This design enables the article to examine the genealogy of Arabic grammar without assuming that the formation of the Basrah school followed a single, uninterrupted line of transmission.

3. Participants and Sampling Technique

Because this research is based on library materials rather than human participants, the units of analysis consist of written documents relevant to the history of early Arabic grammar. The sources are divided into primary and secondary materials. Primary materials include classical Arabic works that preserve information about early grammarians, the origins of grammatical studies, and the development of grammatical thought, particularly al-Fihrist by Ibn al-Nadim, al-Khaṣā'iṣ by Ibn Jinni, al-Kitāb by Sibawayh, and Bughyat al-Wuʿāt by al-Suyuti. These works are considered in accordance with their historical context and the period in which the accounts they preserve were transmitted or compiled. Secondary

materials consist of scholarly books and academic publications concerning the history of Arabic linguistics, medieval Arabic grammatical theory, and the development of early grammatical schools, including works by (Baalbaki 2013; Carter 1973; Khan 2009; Talmon 2018).

Sources are selected purposively according to their relevance to the research questions, their scholarly or historical significance, and the extent to which they provide information about the emergence of *nahw*, Abu al-Aswad's attributed role, early grammatical practices, and the formation of the Basrah tradition. Materials are prioritized when they provide identifiable historical accounts, relevant textual discussions, or scholarly interpretations that can be compared with other sources. Documents that do not directly contribute to these themes are excluded from the principal analysis, although broader historical works may be consulted to establish context. The selected sources are examined comparatively to identify agreements, differences, and limitations in their accounts. This selection strategy is consistent with qualitative document analysis, in which materials are chosen based on their capacity to address the research problem and contribute meaningful evidence (Bowen 2009). The final number of documents analyzed should be reported after the source-selection process has been completed and documented.

4. Instruments and Data Collection

The principal research instrument is a document-analysis guide developed around the objectives and research questions. The guide is used to organize information from the selected sources according to the following categories: (1) historical and sociolinguistic factors associated with the emergence of Arabic grammar; (2) accounts of Abu al-Aswad al-Du'ali's contributions; (3) references to subsequent scholars, including Yahya ibn Ya'mar and Nasr ibn 'Asim; and (4) accounts concerning the development of the Basrah grammatical tradition. For each relevant passage, the analysis records the source's bibliographic details, the historical figure or event discussed, the nature of the claim, the relevant chronology where available, and any differences from accounts found in other sources.

Data collection is conducted through several stages. First, relevant classical texts and modern scholarly publications are identified through their bibliographic relevance to the research topic. Second, the selected materials are read to locate passages addressing the research questions. Third, relevant information is extracted and organized into a source matrix according to the analytical categories. Fourth, passages reporting similar events or

attributing particular contributions to different individuals are compared to identify convergences, discrepancies, and gaps in the available evidence. Finally, the extracted information is organized chronologically and thematically for interpretation in the Results and Discussion sections. Document analysis requires researchers to examine both the content of a document and the circumstances in which it was produced, including its purpose, context, and limitations (Bowen 2009; Hellerstein et al. 1999; Husnullail et al. 2024). Accordingly, the study does not treat the repetition of a historical report across later works as sufficient proof of its authenticity. Instead, the analysis considers whether the reports can be contextualized and compared with other relevant evidence.

To strengthen the trustworthiness of the research, the study uses source comparison and transparent documentation of the relationship between textual evidence and historical interpretation. Particular attention is given to distinctions between *naqṭ al-iʿrāb*, referring to marks associated with vowel or inflectional indications, and *iʿjām al-ḥurūf*, referring to dots used to distinguish Arabic letters. These practices are not treated as interchangeable. Similarly, claims that Abu al-Aswad produced the first grammatical document or established a direct transmission chain to later Basrah grammarians are evaluated cautiously and retained only to the extent that the consulted sources support them. This procedure helps distinguish documented historical accounts from interpretations that remain uncertain or contested.

5. Data Analysis Technique

The collected data are analyzed through qualitative content analysis and historical interpretation. The analytical process follows a systematic sequence of data organization, reduction, categorization, comparison, and interpretation. Miles (2014) describe qualitative analysis as an interactive process involving data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. These principles inform the organization of the documentary evidence in this study, while the historical nature of the research requires additional attention to chronology, source context, and differences between historical accounts.

First, data reduction is conducted by selecting passages that directly address the research questions and removing material that does not contribute to the analysis (Fernandes et al. 2024; Huberman and Miles 1983). Second, data categorization organizes the selected passages into the main themes of the study (Krusche et al. 2020). The historical context of the emergence of *nahw*, the contributions attributed to Abu al-Aswad, the transmission of early grammatical knowledge, and the development of the Basrah tradition. Third,

comparative analysis examines how different sources describe the same figures, events, or linguistic practices (Mihalcea 2026; Shabambayeva, Abdrahmanov, and Sadykova 2026). Similarities and differences are recorded without assuming that the most frequently repeated account is necessarily the most historically reliable. Fourth, chronological and contextual interpretation situates the reports within their historical and intellectual settings, distinguishing early grammatical practices from later theoretical systematization. Fifth, conclusion drawing and verification connects the interpreted evidence to the three research questions and evaluates whether the conclusions are adequately supported by the sources. Krippendorff (2018) emphasizes the importance of systematic and context-sensitive interpretation in content analysis, while Scott (2014) highlights the need to assess documentary evidence critically. These principles guide the study in interpreting historical narratives without conflating traditional attribution with independently established fact.

The final analysis synthesizes the evidence to explain how linguistic and social circumstances contributed to the emergence of Arabic grammatical studies, how Abu al-Aswad's role is represented in historical sources, and how early grammatical knowledge relates to the subsequent Basrah tradition. The findings are presented descriptively in the Results section, while their historical significance, relationship to previous scholarship, and limitations are examined in the Discussion section. The study does not claim to establish a definitive chain of transmission where the documentary evidence is insufficient. Instead, it aims to provide a historically informed and evidence-conscious account of the emergence and early development of Arabic grammar.

RESULTS

1. Historical and Linguistic Factors in the Emergence of Arabic Grammar

The emergence of Arabic grammar (*nahw*) during the first century after the Hijrah (AH) was closely associated with the expansion of Islam and the increasing use of Arabic across diverse linguistic and cultural communities. As Islamic rule expanded beyond the Arabian Peninsula, Arabic came into contact with languages spoken by non-Arab populations, creating new circumstances for linguistic communication and learning. Arabic became increasingly important as a language of religious instruction, Qur'anic recitation, administration, and scholarly communication. These developments increased the need to maintain appropriate Arabic usage, particularly in contexts where linguistic accuracy was

essential for understanding religious texts. Consequently, the historical emergence of Arabic grammar can be understood in relation to broader social, cultural, and religious transformations in the early Islamic period.

One of the important factors associated with the development of Arabic grammar was the phenomenon of *lahn*, which refers to linguistic errors or deviations from established Arabic usage. Traditional historical accounts frequently connect concerns about *lahn* with the need to preserve the accuracy of Qur'anic recitation and spoken Arabic, especially as Arabic was increasingly used by speakers from different linguistic backgrounds. These concerns contributed to the growing importance of observing linguistic patterns and establishing principles that could help maintain correct language use. However, the emergence of *nahw* should not be explained solely as a direct response to linguistic errors, because the development of grammatical knowledge also involved the gradual organization of linguistic observations into systematic scholarly practices. Therefore, the expansion of Islam, language contact, and concerns about *lahn* provide an important historical context for understanding the emergence of Arabic grammar, while the precise chronology and relative influence of these factors require careful examination of the available historical sources.

2. Abu al-Aswad al-Du'ali and the Historical Attribution of Early Grammatical Innovations

Abu al-Aswad al-Du'ali occupies a prominent position in traditional accounts of the emergence of Arabic grammar during the first century after the Hijrah (AH). Classical sources associate him with the initial development of grammatical principles intended to help preserve the accuracy of Arabic language usage. His contribution is also linked to early practices of marking Arabic writing to assist readers in distinguishing vowel sounds and maintaining correct pronunciation. These practices are particularly significant in the historical context of Qur'anic recitation, where accurate pronunciation and linguistic interpretation were essential concerns. Nevertheless, the historical significance of Abu al-Aswad must be examined through the available documentary evidence rather than accepted solely on the basis of his established reputation in later grammatical tradition.

Despite Abu al-Aswad's prominent position in the traditional history of *nahw*, classical accounts differ regarding the origins, circumstances, and specific contributions associated with early grammatical innovations. Some narratives connect the beginnings of grammatical study with Abu al-Aswad's efforts, while other reports refer to the involvement

of additional early figures in the development of Arabic linguistic practices. Historical analysis must therefore distinguish between the traditional attribution of foundational importance to Abu al-Aswad and the verification of particular innovations through reliable textual evidence. It is also necessary to differentiate *naqṭ al-iʿrāb*, which refers to marking vowel or inflectional features, from *iʿjām al-ḥurūf*, which uses dots to distinguish Arabic letters, because these practices represent different aspects of the development of Arabic writing. Accordingly, Abu al-Aswad's role is best understood as a central element in the historiography of Arabic grammar, while specific claims about the earliest grammatical innovations require critical comparison of classical sources and modern scholarship.

3. The Transmission of Early Grammatical Knowledge through Yahya ibn Yaʿmar and Nasr ibn ʿAsim

The development of early Arabic grammatical knowledge was not limited to the contributions traditionally attributed to Abu al-Aswad al-Du'ali, but also involved subsequent scholars who participated in the study and preservation of Arabic linguistic practices. Yahya ibn Yaʿmar and Nasr ibn ʿAsim are frequently mentioned in historical accounts concerning the early development of Arabic linguistics, particularly in relation to grammatical analysis and the clarification of written Arabic. Their scholarly activities are associated with efforts to improve the accuracy of Arabic reading and to address linguistic challenges that emerged as Arabic was used by increasingly diverse communities. In this historical context, the development of grammatical knowledge and the refinement of Arabic writing can be understood as related but distinct processes that contributed to the preservation of linguistic accuracy. Nevertheless, the specific contributions of these scholars must be examined through historical reports and classical sources to establish the nature and extent of their roles.

The roles attributed to Yahya ibn Yaʿmar and Nasr ibn ʿAsim also illustrate the gradual development of Arabic linguistic practices beyond the earliest accounts associated with Abu al-Aswad. In particular, Nasr ibn ʿAsim is traditionally connected with the development of *iʿjām al-ḥurūf*, or the use of dots to distinguish letters with similar written forms, while early grammatical activities were concerned with identifying and explaining patterns of Arabic usage. These developments should not be conflated with *naqṭ al-iʿrāb*, which concerns the marking of vowel or inflectional features, because each practice addressed a different aspect of written Arabic. The historical relationship among these

scholars, however, should not automatically be interpreted as a fully documented chain of direct transmission, since the available accounts may differ in chronology, attribution, and detail. Therefore, examining the contributions attributed to Yahya ibn Ya'mar and Nasr ibn 'Asim provides insight into the early transmission and refinement of Arabic linguistic knowledge while highlighting the need for critical evaluation of the historical evidence.

4. From Early Grammatical Practices to the Formation of the Basrah Tradition

The emergence of Arabic grammar (*nahw*) during the first century after the Hijrah laid an important foundation for the subsequent development of Arabic linguistic scholarship. Early efforts to observe linguistic patterns, address *lahn* (linguistic errors), and preserve accurate Arabic usage contributed to the gradual formation of grammatical knowledge. These practices provided an initial basis for scholars to examine the structures and rules governing the Arabic language. Over time, linguistic observations became increasingly organized and developed into more systematic forms of grammatical analysis. In this historical process, Basrah emerged as an important center of Arabic grammatical scholarship, although the precise stages connecting the earliest practices to the later Basrah tradition require careful examination.

The formation of the Basrah grammatical tradition should therefore be understood as a gradual intellectual development rather than as the result of a single individual or isolated event. Early figures such as Abu al-Aswad al-Du'ali, Yahya ibn Ya'mar, and Nasr ibn 'Asim occupy significant positions in traditional narratives concerning the development of Arabic linguistic knowledge, although the specific contributions attributed to them vary across historical accounts. The subsequent development of grammatical scholarship involved the refinement of linguistic observations and the establishment of more systematic approaches to explaining Arabic language structures.. Nevertheless, the relationship between early grammatical practices and the mature Basrah school must be evaluated critically by comparing historical reports and scholarly interpretations rather than assuming an uninterrupted chain of transmission.

DISCUSSION

The historical origins of Arabic grammar (naḥw) require an analytical approach that considers the relationship between early linguistic practices and the gradual development of

grammatical scholarship. Rather than treating its emergence as a single invention attributable to one individual, this study examines the historical circumstances, competing attributions, and intellectual developments associated with the formation of Arabic grammatical thought.

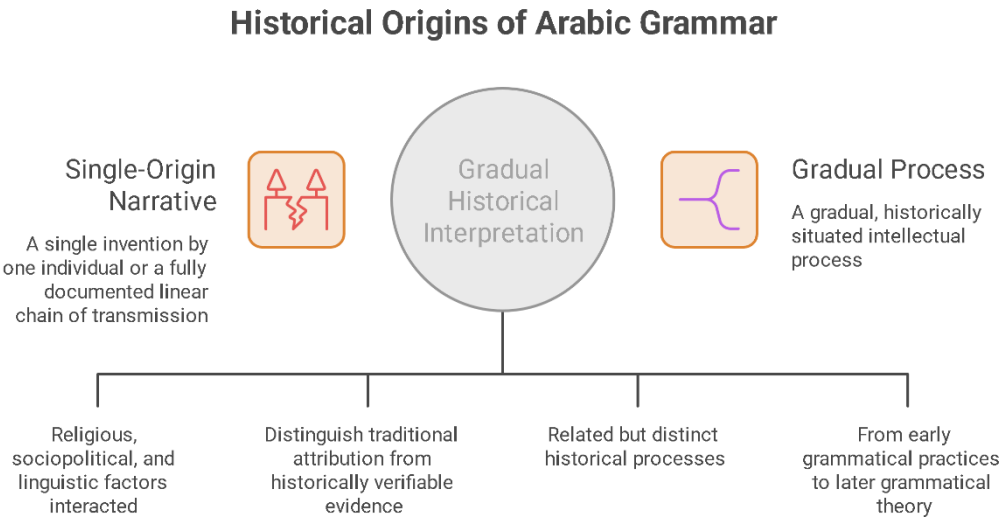

Figure 1. Analytical Framework for Interpreting the Historical Origins and Gradual Development of Arabic Grammar

As illustrated in Figure 1, the emergence of Arabic grammar is understood as a gradual intellectual process shaped by interacting religious, sociopolitical, and linguistic factors. This perspective distinguishes traditional attributions concerning early grammatical innovations from claims that can be substantiated through historically verifiable evidence. It also recognizes that early grammatical inquiry and developments in Arabic orthography represent related but distinct historical processes that should not be conflated. Furthermore, the transition from early linguistic practices to the systematic grammatical scholarship associated with the Basran tradition should be examined without assuming a fully documented or uninterrupted chain of transmission. Overall, this framework provides a basis for critically examining the contributions attributed to Abu al-Aswad al-Du'ali and subsequent scholars while acknowledging the limitations of the available historical evidence.

1. Historical Context and the Emergence of Arabic Grammatical Thought

The emergence of Arabic grammar (*nahw*) during the first century after the Hijrah must be understood within the broader historical transformations that accompanied the expansion of Islam. As Islamic rule extended beyond the Arabian Peninsula, Arabic increasingly served as a language of religious instruction, administration, and communication

among communities with diverse linguistic backgrounds. This expansion created new circumstances in which the accurate use and understanding of Arabic became increasingly important. The Qur'an also occupied a central position in this historical context, as its recitation and interpretation required careful attention to linguistic accuracy. Consequently, the development of early Arabic grammatical thought can be examined in relation to the interconnected religious, social, and linguistic changes that characterized the early Islamic period.

One important concern associated with the emergence of Arabic grammar was *lahn*, a term referring to linguistic errors or deviations from established Arabic usage. Traditional historical accounts frequently associate concerns about *lahn* with the need to preserve accurate Qur'anic recitation and maintain appropriate Arabic usage among speakers from different linguistic backgrounds (Akmal, Saleh, and Misnawati 2026; Omer, Al-Mabadah, and Mahadzir 2026). These concerns encouraged greater attention to linguistic patterns and the principles underlying correct language use. Nevertheless, the emergence of *nahw* should not be explained exclusively as a response to linguistic errors, because the development of grammatical thought also involved the gradual organization of linguistic observations into more systematic forms of analysis. Therefore, the expansion of Islam, the significance of the Qur'an, language contact, and concerns about *lahn* provide an important historical framework for understanding the origins of Arabic grammatical thought, while the precise relationship among these factors requires critical examination of historical sources (Baalbaki 2013; Khan 2009).

2. Abu al-Aswad al-Du'ali and the Historical Construction of Arabic Grammar's Origins

Abu al-Aswad al-Du'ali occupies a prominent position in traditional accounts of the emergence of Arabic grammar (*nahw*) during the early Islamic period. Classical Arabic sources commonly associate him with the initial development of grammatical principles intended to preserve the accuracy of Arabic language usage. His name is also linked to early efforts to introduce written markings that helped readers identify vowel sounds and pronounce Arabic texts more accurately. These accounts are particularly significant in discussions of Qur'anic recitation, where linguistic precision played an important role in preserving and communicating the sacred text. Nevertheless, Abu al-Aswad's historical contribution should

be examined through critical engagement with the available evidence rather than accepted solely on the basis of his established reputation in the history of Arabic linguistics.

A critical examination of Abu al-Aswad's role requires distinguishing between his traditional status as a pioneer of Arabic grammar and the historical certainty of specific innovations attributed to him. Although classical narratives present him as a foundational figure, accounts concerning the circumstances and nature of his contributions vary, making it necessary to evaluate their reliability and historical context. In particular, claims regarding the earliest grammatical principles and the introduction of vowel markings should not automatically be treated as independently verified historical facts. This distinction does not diminish Abu al-Aswad's importance in the historiography of *nahw*, but instead provides a more careful understanding of how later scholars represented the origins of Arabic grammatical knowledge. Accordingly, his role is best understood by comparing traditional narratives with modern scholarship and recognizing the limitations of the surviving historical evidence (Baalbaki 2013; Fassberg 2022).

3. Early Linguistic Contributions and the Transmission of Grammatical Knowledge

The development of early Arabic linguistic knowledge involved several scholars whose contributions are discussed in traditional accounts of the emergence of Arabic grammar (*nahw*). Among these figures, Yahya ibn Ya'mar and Nasr ibn 'Asim are associated with the development of early linguistic practices and efforts to improve the accuracy of Arabic reading and writing. Their historical significance illustrates that the formation of Arabic linguistic knowledge was not limited to the contributions traditionally attributed to Abu al-Aswad al-Du'ali. Rather, early grammatical inquiry and the refinement of Arabic writing represent related developments that addressed different aspects of linguistic accuracy. Examining these figures within their historical context provides a broader perspective on the gradual development of Arabic linguistic scholarship, although their precise contributions must be evaluated through the available historical evidence.

An important distinction in examining these early developments is the difference between *naqṭ al-i'rāb* and *i'jām al-ḥurūf*. The term *naqṭ al-i'rāb* refers to the use of marks to indicate vowel sounds or inflectional features, whereas *i'jām al-ḥurūf* refers to the use of dots to distinguish Arabic letters that share similar written forms. Although both practices contributed to greater clarity in Arabic writing, they addressed different linguistic and orthographic needs and should not be treated as identical innovations. The contributions

attributed to Yahya ibn Ya'mar and Nasr ibn 'Asim therefore need to be examined in relation to these distinct practices, without assuming that every historical attribution establishes a definitive sequence of development. Accordingly, the study of these scholars offers insight into the early development of Arabic linguistic knowledge while emphasizing the importance of critically evaluating historical reports and avoiding unsupported claims about a continuous chain of direct transmission (Khan 2009; Talmon 2018).

4. From Early Grammatical Practices to the Systematization of the Basrah Tradition

The emergence of the Basrah grammatical tradition represents an important stage in the historical development of Arabic linguistic scholarship. Early grammatical practices, including the observation of linguistic patterns and efforts to maintain accurate Arabic usage, provided a foundation for subsequent scholarly investigations into the structure of the language. Over time, these initial practices developed into more systematic approaches to grammatical analysis, enabling scholars to examine linguistic forms and formulate explanations of Arabic usage. Within this process, Basrah became an important center of grammatical scholarship, contributing to the organization and development of Arabic grammatical thought. Nevertheless, the relationship between the earliest grammatical activities and the later Basrah tradition should be examined through historical evidence rather than assumed to represent a fully documented and uninterrupted process of transmission (Carter 1973; Talmon 2018).

The systematization of Arabic grammar is particularly associated with the work of Sibawayh, whose grammatical scholarship represents a significant stage in the development of a comprehensive analysis of Arabic linguistic structures. His work reflects a more organized treatment of grammatical principles and demonstrates the development of scholarly methods for explaining linguistic patterns within the Arabic language. However, the emergence of this systematic tradition should not be attributed exclusively to a single scholar, because the development of grammatical knowledge occurred within a broader intellectual environment shaped by earlier linguistic practices and subsequent scholarly contributions. The historical relationship between Abu al-Aswad al-Du'ali, other early linguistic figures, and the later Basrah grammarians therefore requires careful evaluation of the available sources, particularly when assessing claims of direct intellectual transmission (Carter 1973; Fassberg 2022; Talmon 2018). Accordingly, the Basrah tradition is best understood as the outcome of a gradual process of scholarly development, while the precise

continuity between its earliest foundations and its later systematic form remains a subject for critical historical investigation.

CONCLUSION

The emergence of Arabic grammar (*nahw*) during the first century after the Hijrah was closely associated with the historical, religious, and linguistic transformations that accompanied the expansion of Islam. The increasing use of Arabic among communities with diverse linguistic backgrounds, the importance of preserving accurate Qur'anic recitation, and concerns about *lahn* contributed to the development of early linguistic inquiry. These factors provided an important context for the gradual formation of grammatical knowledge, although the origins of Arabic grammar cannot be attributed to a single cause or historical event. Accordingly, understanding the emergence of *nahw* requires consideration of the broader circumstances that encouraged scholars to observe, preserve, and explain Arabic linguistic patterns.

Abu al-Aswad al-Du'ali occupies a central position in traditional narratives concerning the origins of Arabic grammar, while Yahya ibn Ya'mar and Nasr ibn 'Asim are associated with subsequent developments in early Arabic linguistic practices. Their attributed contributions illustrate the importance of distinguishing grammatical inquiry from developments in Arabic orthography, particularly the difference between *naqṭ al-i'rāb*, which indicates vowel or inflectional features, and *i'jām al-ḥurūf*, which distinguishes letters through dots. Nevertheless, variations among historical accounts require a critical approach to evaluating the contributions of these chronology of early grammatical innovations. Their significance should therefore be examined through comparisons between classical narratives and modern scholarship rather than through uncritical acceptance of traditional attributions.

The development of the Basrah grammatical tradition represents a subsequent stage in the gradual systematization of Arabic linguistic knowledge, particularly through the work associated with Sibawayh. Early linguistic practices provided an important historical context for later grammatical scholarship, but the precise relationship between these practices and the mature Basrah tradition cannot automatically be understood as an uninterrupted chain of direct transmission. This study consequently emphasizes the importance of distinguishing historically transmitted accounts from claims that can be substantiated through critical examination of available evidence. Further research comparing classical Arabic sources, manuscript traditions, and modern historiographical interpretations is needed to clarify the

chronology, individual contributions, and intellectual connections that shaped the development of Arabic grammar.

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