

Paretymologies in the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* in the light of Ibn ‘Arabī’s hermeneutic principles

Federico Salvaggio

In the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* Ibn ‘Arabī presents us with several linguistic explanations about the meanings of specific words and expressions (mostly Koranic occurrences). From a contemporary linguistic perspective, many of those explanations would be classified within the category of paretymologies or folk etymologies. In the present contribution we will examine the paretymologies in Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* against some aspects of the Islamic linguistic thought, as specifically developed by Ibn ‘Arabī, and try to make explicit the epistemological and theoretical framework standing behind those disputable etymologies. In so doing we will attempt to show how, far from simply being the product of popular fantasy or fanciful speculations, Ibn ‘Arabī’s semantic explanations appear as highly sophisticated hermeneutic practices, grounded in a thorough knowledge of various language-related branches of Islamic science, and consistent with the metaphysical vision of language emerging from the Andalusian master’s speculations on the nature of the sacred text and on the linguistic structure of revelation.

Keywords: Arabic linguistic tradition - Islamic linguistic thought - Koranic Hermeneutics - Akbarian studies

1. Introduction

Paretymologies are a universal pre-modern linguistic practice of semantic interpretation of a term that does not take into account the actual history of the word but rather relies on superficial analogies (usually at the phonetic level) with other words from the same language (very often etymologically unrelated) thus establishing a false lexical and semantic connection that leads to misinterpretation and misunderstanding of the original meaning of that word (Bronkhorst 2001: 147). Despite neglecting the historical and diachronic dimension (paretymologies usually operate at the synchronic level) involved in the process of word-formation and word-derivation and despite being based on wrong linguistic assumptions, paretymologies, from a cultural and semantic standpoint, may carry valuable

information in that they throw light on perceived and associated meanings related to a certain term in a given cultural and historical context. Since they are frequently associated with popular explanations, paretymologies are often referred to by the term ‘folk etymologies.’¹

The resort to semantic interpretations reminiscent of the methods of folk etymologies within the works of some of the great authorities of the past² such as Plato, the great Greek philosopher, Isidore of Seville (d. 636), *Doctor Ecclesiae* and revered theologian (author of the *Etymologiae*), or, as in our case, Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1240), *al-šayḥ al-’akbar* ‘the Greatest Master,’ has caused bewilderment among scholars.

In the case of the paretymologies in Plato’s *Cratylus*, for instance “to explain the resort to seemingly folk etymologies on the part of a philosopher whose teachings can be hardly considered popular,” two contrasting hypotheses, that epitomize the intensity of the academic debate, have been postulated. Baxter (1992) posits that the etymological section of the *Cratylus* should be read as a parody by which Plato aims at ridiculing the attitude of some Greek poets and intellectuals towards their language. On the other hand, Sedley (2003) not only argues that the etymologies in the *Cratylus* were taken seriously by Plato but also maintains that their inclusion in the work is to be interpreted in relation to the main topic of the dialogue, namely the discussion about the natural (φύσει) or conventional (θέσει) origin of language, and to Plato’s own position on the matter. Thus, according to Sedley, the resort, on Plato’s part, to this peculiar ‘etymological’ practice must be seen as an indication of the specific vision and conception of language endorsed by the Greek philosopher.

Similarly Bronkhorst, commenting on the presence of numerous paretymologies in the Vedic *Brāhmaṇas*, convincingly argues that when investigated in the light of the epistemological framework of Hindu thought those semantic explanations result largely consistent not only with the Vedic approach to language but also with Vedic *Weltanschauung* in general:

the etymologies of the *Brāhmaṇas* fit in with other aspects of the religion that expresses itself through these texts. [...] Nor is the idea of a network of connections only noticeable where the *Brāhmaṇas* present **etymologies**. In short, all the characteristic features that reveal themselves in our study of the etymologies are also found in other aspects of the religion of the *Brāhmaṇas* (Bronkhorst 2001; 156; bold in the text).

¹ The two terms are best kept separate (the first being more general and the second applying to a particular context). Paretymologies and folk etymologies have recently been the object of reevaluation also in the field of proper etymological studies (Durkin 2009: 202-206).

² In this case ‘learned paretymologies’ would probably be a more appropriate definition.

In line with these remarks, in the present contribution by examining the paretymologies in Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* against some aspects of the Islamic linguistic thought, as specifically developed by Ibn ‘Arabī, we will try to make explicit the epistemological and theoretical framework standing behind those disputable etymologies.³ In so doing, we will attempt to show how, far from simply being the product of popular or intellectual fantasy, Ibn ‘Arabī’s semantic explanations appear as highly sophisticated hermeneutic practices (grounded in a thorough knowledge of various language-related branches of Islamic science) and consistent with the metaphysical vision of language emerging from the Andalusian master’s speculations on the nature of the sacred text and on the linguistic structure of revelation.

2. Linguistic explanations in the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*

Scholars of Ibn ‘Arabī have frequently underlined the abundance of Koranic quotations in his works (Chodkiewicz 1992: 40-41) and posited that Ibn ‘Arabī’s entire production is “essentially Koranic hermeneutics” and is “nothing if not commentary upon the Holy Book” (Chittick 1989: XV-XVI). One should not then be surprised to find in his works several explanations about the meanings of specific words or expressions used in the Koran.

Many of these linguistic elucidations line up with the principles, methods, and terminology of the Arabic linguistic tradition. As noted by Bausani, in relation with the phonetic domain, Ibn ‘Arabī’s linguistic insights sometimes can even be ahead of the common knowledge of his time on the matter and carry an appreciable scientific value also from a contemporary linguistic perspective (Bausani 1979: 201-202).

This notwithstanding, many other of his explanations are far more problematic and less conventional from the standpoint of the mainstream Arabic linguistic tradition and would definitely be classified within the category of paretymologies from a contemporary linguistic perspective. In this connection with reference to the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, in the introduction to his translation of the work, Austin comments:

In addition to the general lack of organization, the reader is also likely to be sorely tried by the devious and tortuous methods Ibn al-‘Arabī employs in commenting on and

³ Disputable, as discussed below, not only from the point of view of modern linguistics but also from that of the mainstream Arabic linguistic tradition.

interpreting not only material from the *Qur’an* and elsewhere but also the associated meanings of the Arabic words themselves (Austin 1980: 20-21; italics in the text).

On the whole, linguistic explanations in the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* can be divided into the following groups dealing with different linguistic aspects:

- grammatical rules and terminology;
- etymologies and paretymologies;
- polysemy and enantionymy of words;
- anthroponyms and toponyms.

In the present contribution we will content ourselves with the analysis of some examples from the first and the second group. The third group of explanations, dealing with polysemy of words would deserve a study on its own. The identification of the polysemic dimension of some terms (and especially Koranic terms) plays a key role in Ibn ‘Arabī’s hermeneutic approach and should be investigated from the perspective of the relation between form and meaning in the Akbarian linguistic thought (see Section 5). Moreover, Ibn ‘Arabī seems particularly concerned with a peculiar case of polysemy: enantionymy. The fact that some Koranic terms may have opposite meanings bears a special significance to him and has to be correlated with his metaphysical conception of *coincidentia oppositorum* (Chittick 1989: 375). The last group presents us with Ibn ‘Arabī’s interpretation of the meaning of some anthroponyms and toponyms which include the prophets’ names *Šīt* (Seth), *Šu‘ayb*, *Dāwud* (David), *Yaḥyà* (John), *Mūsà* (Moses), and *Muḥammad* and the toponym *Lubnān* (Lebanon).

3. Grammatical explanations

Despite the above mentioned harsh judgement by Austin on the methods employed by Ibn ‘Arabī in his linguistic interpretations in the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, more often than not Ibn ‘Arabī’s observations are anything but “devious” or “tortuous” (at least not from the point of view of the linguistic tradition he belonged to) and reveal a confident use of grammar terminology and a thorough knowledge of Arabic grammar rules.⁴

In the Chapter of Zechariah discussing the word *raḥīm* Ibn ‘Arabī suggests that it should be considered as an active participle since, he argues, both *rāḥim* and *raḥīm* belong to the category of *’ism*

⁴ On Ibn ‘Arabī’s linguistic and literary training and acquaintances within the literary milieu of the time see Addas (1993: 100-102).

al-fā'il (*Fuṣūṣ*, 178).⁵ As noted by Wright, while *fā'il* is the principal form for active participles derived from a verb of the first form (*raḥīma* in our case), “there are other verbal adjectives derived from the first form of the verb” which Arab grammarians call *ṣifāt muṣabbahah bi-ʾasmāʾ al-fā'il wa-l-maf'ūl* ‘adjectives assimilated to active and passive participles’ and which include the form *fā'il* (Wright 1967: 133).⁶

In the Chapter of Jesus commenting on the Koranic expression *ʾin tuʿaddib-hum* ‘if you punish them’ (Koran 5, 118) Ibn ʿArabī points out that the suffix pronoun *-hum* ‘them’ is a third person pronoun and, in doing that, employs the technical term used in the Arabic linguistic tradition, *ḍamīr al-ġāʾib*, which literally means ‘the pronoun of what is absent or hidden.’ Then, building on a symbolic interpretation of the meaning of this conventional grammatical term, he provides us with a much less conventional reading of the Koranic verse by stating that the ‘pronoun of the absent’ has here been chosen as an allusion to veil that conceals from God (*al-Ḥaqq*) those who are to be punished (*Fuṣūṣ*, 148-149).

In the Chapter of Muhammad another third person pronoun attracts Ibn ʿArabī’s attention. This time he notices an ambiguity in the reference of the suffix pronoun *-hu* in the expression *bi-ḥamdi-hi* in the Koranic verses: *wa-ʾin min ṣayʾin ʾillā yusabbiḥu bi-ḥamdi-hi* (Koran 17, 44). The pronoun is generally understood as referring to God (cfr. Arberry 2008) and the verses interpreted as: ‘There is nothing that does not glorify Him by His praise.’ Ibn ʿArabī points out that a different reading is also grammatically possible here. He interprets the pronoun as referring to the word *ṣayʾ* (a masculine) and reads: ‘There is nothing that does not glorify Him by its praise.’ The praise of the thing, he explains, means that one only praises the God of his own belief and connects himself to that particular conception of God (*Fuṣūṣ*, 226).

A last example of how Ibn ʿArabī uses precise grammatical observations as a starting point for his own metaphysical speculations is provided in the same chapter where he discusses a *ḥadīṭ* attributed to the Prophet. In the famous *ḥadīṭ*, the Prophet mentions three things that have been made beloved to him: women, perfume, and prayer. Ibn ʿArabī remarks that the grammatical form for the numeral three used in the *ḥadīṭ* is the masculine one (*ṭalāt*). He then mentions the custom of the Arabs (*ʿādat al-ʿarab*) according to which, as far as gender is concerned, in a mixed group of words the masculine

⁵ Page numbers of the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* refer to Affifi’s edition (see references). We would like to express our gratitude to Dr. Marco Aurelio Golfetto, University of Milan, who kindly made available to us, for comparison purposes, a copy of his forthcoming critical edition of the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* based on a different and autograph manuscript (see references).

⁶ Moreover, the replacement of the form *fā'il* by *fa'il*, with an active meaning, is particularly common with verbs with specific semantic value or form (cfr. Manca 1999 :221).

prevails over the feminine even when there is only one single masculine element among several feminine elements. Hence, since two of the counted objects are feminine (*nisā* ‘women’ and *ṣalāh* ‘prayer’)⁷ and one masculine (*ṭīb* ‘perfume’), the group mentioned in the *ḥadīṭ* has to be considered masculine. Consequently, because of the rule, in the Arabic language, of inverted agreement between numerals and counted objects, the Prophet should have used the feminine form of the numeral three, that is to say *ṭalāṭah* instead of *ṭalāt*. What Ibn ‘Arabī brings up is, needless to say, a very sensitive issue. The Prophet, from an Islamic perspective, is considered as a model of perfection also from the linguistic point of view and regarded as the most knowledgeable of all Arabs about the Arabic language. Ibn ‘Arabī explains that the Prophet’s deviation from the rule was no mistake at all. It was an intentional rhetorical choice to bring out the importance of the feminine element over the masculine in the specific context of this prophetic teaching (*Fuṣūṣ*, 214–220).

All the examples illustrated above show what a careful observer of formal linguistic phenomena Ibn ‘Arabī can be and how well acquainted he is with the Arabic linguistic tradition and its terminology. Even when such observations lead him to a metaphysical domain that has little to do with *stricto sensu* grammar, the linguistic considerations illustrated so far are not per se particularly problematic from the perspective of the Arabic linguistic tradition. In the next section we will illustrate some linguistic explanations that not only would very likely fall, from a modern linguistic perspective and to quote the title of a volume edited by Auroux *et al.* (1984), into the category of “la linguistique fantastique” but that would also have looked as much disputable and unconventional to the eyes of mainstream grammarians of Ibn ‘Arabī’s time.⁸

4. Etymologies and paretymologies

As demonstrated by the very etymology of the word etymology, the role of Greek and Latin as donor languages in the formation of the religious, philosophical, scientific, and technical vocabulary of most European languages (for instance all the languages that, in various forms, have adopted the Greek *ἔτυμολογία*: English, French, German, Italian, Russian, Spanish, etc.) is so essential that, without relying

⁷ Ibn ‘Arabī distinguishes here between the feminine gender of a word like *nisā*, which he calls *ta’niṭ ḥaqīqī* ‘authentic feminine’ (we would say feminine by natural gender), and the feminine of the word *ṣalāh* which he defines as *ta’niṭ ḡayr ḥaqīqī* ‘non-authentic feminine’ (we would say feminine by grammatical convention).

⁸ We are referring to a volume on the history of linguistic ideas that, as we will see in the next section, includes an article by Versteegh on the notion, within the Arabic linguistic tradition, of *al-iṣṭiqāq al-kabīr* ‘great etymology,’ an ‘etymological’ practice playing a key role within Ibn ‘Arabī’s hermeneutic approach. On Versteegh’s own position on the appropriateness of the definition of “fantastique” with respect to *al-iṣṭiqāq al-kabīr* see Section 5.

on the knowledge of Greek and Latin lexicon, the vast majority of the educated vocabulary of those western languages could not be properly interpreted and analyzed. This historical and diachronic dimension is therefore a key element of the contemporary and western concept of etymology.

Conversely the Arabic word that is usually translated as ‘etymology,’ *ištiqāq*, “n’a pas la connotation de la reconstruction d’un procès historique : au contraire, c’est un procédé entièrement synchronique” (Versteegh 1984: 45). Unlike the way etymology is applied today (but perhaps not so differently from how it was exercised by Isidore of Seville) the traditional Arabic *ištiqāq* practice in order to elucidate the meaning of a word looked at its semantic relations with related terms (or so deemed) from a synchronic and not from a diachronic perspective and confined itself to the boundaries of a single language: Arabic. In this connection, it is worth mentioning, that, in the case of Arabic the need to resort to the knowledge of external or older languages to understand the morpho-semantic structure of its cultivated and erudite vocabulary appears as far less significant than in the above-mentioned case of several European languages.⁹ This aspect of the Arabic language may be regarded among the factors that account for the general character of self-referentiality of traditional Arabic etymologies.¹⁰

As to question of when, from the standpoint of traditional Arabic etymology, two or more words are to be considered as ‘etymologically’ related, three different levels of *ištiqāq* must be distinguished. For the first level, *al-ištiqāq al-ṣaġīr/al-ʾaṣġar* ‘minor etymology,’ words are connected if they share the same root, like in *kitāb*, *kutub*, *kātīb*, *maktaba*, *kuttāb*, etc. (Baalbaki 2014: 234). For the second level, *al-ištiqāq al-kabīr* ‘great etymology,’ words that share the same radical letters can still be considered related even if the order of those letters is not the same: *klm*, *mkl*, *kml*, *lkm*, etc. For the third level, *al-ištiqāq al-ʾakbar* ‘greater etymology,’ a relation between two words may be established also in the case in which they only have two radical letters in common (Versteegh 2014: 123).¹¹ While the first level of *ištiqāq* is widely accepted within the Arabic linguistic tradition, the other levels, although mentioned

⁹ To find in the Islamic world an equivalent of the influence of Greek and Latin on western languages, one should look at the role played by Arabic and Persian in shaping the morpho-semantic composition of abstract, elevated, and symbolic terms in the so-called Islamic languages (on the notion of ‘Islamic languages’ see Bausani 1981). For instance, in Urdu, to understand a common word like *ḥabardār* ‘caution’ from a phonological, morphological, and semantic standpoint one needs to recognize the meaning and function of the Arabic element *ḥabar* and the Persian suffix *-dār*.

¹⁰ Moreover this Arabic-centric approach should be put in relation to the concept of sacredness of the Arabic language that, within the Islamic linguistic thought, holds a central position and which in itself acts as a hermeneutic principle (cfr. Salvaggio 2008: 77-90).

¹¹ For the use of the term *al-ištiqāq al-ʾakbar* by Ibn Ğinnī (d. 1002) in relation to what has been described above as the second level of *ištiqāq* see Baalbaki (2014: 281).

by authorities such as Ibn Ğinnī (d. 1002), al-Rāzī (d. 1209) and al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505) never really gained popularity among grammarians (Versteegh 1984: 48). From the point of view of contemporary western linguistics, only the first level of *ištiqāq* can be, broadly speaking, accepted as a valid procedure for the identification of etymologically related words.¹² As for the other two levels, in the vast majority of cases, the etymological connections provided through the methods of the *ištiqāq kabīr* and *’akbar* would be inevitably regarded as paradigmatic instances of paretymologies.¹³

In the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* several examples of *ištiqāq* of the first and third level can be found. In the Chapter of Abraham, the epithet of *al-ḥalīl* ‘intimate (of God)’ traditionally attributed to the patriarch, is explained by juxtaposition to the form V verbal noun *taḥallul* ‘permeation’ since, Ibn ‘Arabī clarifies, that title was chosen as a reference to Abraham’s permeation of all the attributes of the Divine Essence (*Fuṣūṣ*, 80). In the Chapter of Muhammad the expression *qurrat al-‘ayn* ‘delight of the eye, solace’ mentioned by the Prophet¹⁴ with reference to the fact that “his solace was placed in the prayer,” is interpreted by Ibn ‘Arabī in relation to the form X verb *istaqarra* ‘to settle down, to be fixed’ for, he points out, the eye comes to rest (*tastaqirru*) only when it gazes at the beloved and does not look at anything else (*Fuṣūṣ*, 224-225).

In the Chapter of Jesus the word *bašar* ‘human being’ is understood in connection with the form III verbal noun *mubāšarah* ‘direct contact’ since, Ibn ‘Arabī states, man is called *bašar* because he was created by direct contact of God’s hands (*Fuṣūṣ*, 144). A last example of first level *ištiqāq* is provided by the Chapter of Hūd. Here commenting on the Koranic verses “a wind (*rīḥ*) in which is a painful punishment (*‘aḍāb*)” (Koran 46, 24), to make his point about the ambivalent nature of God’s punishment, which is at the same time a chastisement and an act of mercy, Ibn ‘Arabī associates the word *rīḥ* ‘wind’ with the word *rāḥah* ‘rest’ (both from the root *rwh*) for he says God wanted to make the wind an indication of the comfort therein. Moreover, he strengthens his argument by relating the word *‘aḍāb* ‘punishment’ to the form X verb *ista‘ḍaba* ‘to find sweet or pleasant’ and remarks that there was *‘aḍāb* in that wind, i.e. something that they would find sweet (*yasta‘ḍibūna-hu*) after tasting it (*Fuṣūṣ*, 109).¹⁵

¹² Provided of course that certain linguistic conditions are met and that, for instance, in the root examined did not merge different and unrelated roots.

¹³ They may though suggest a real historical process of metathesis of radical letters (to be verified through the methodology of scientific etymology) or bear an interest within the contest of bi-radical theories (cfr. Bohas and Dat 2007).

¹⁴ In the already mentioned *ḥadīṭ* of the three things that have been made beloved to the Prophet (see above Section 3).

¹⁵ As mentioned in Section 2, enantionymy, as in the case exemplified here of the root *‘ḍb*, plays a fundamental role within the Akbarian hermeneutic approach.

If the etymologies considered so far reflect the conventional application of *ištiqāq* as understood within the Arabic linguistic tradition and accepted by most grammarians, in the following examples not only Ibn ‘Arabī resorts to the controversial third level of *ištiqāq* but in doing that, in some cases, he pushes himself far beyond the limits of this already disputable practice (disputable, as already stated, also from the standpoint of mainstream Arabic grammarians).

In the Chapter of Aaron commenting on the saying attributed to Jesus “the heart of each man is with his treasure (*māl*)” (cfr. Matthew 6, 21), Ibn ‘Arabī glosses the word *māl* ‘treasure, wealth’ (from the root *mwl*) by relating it to the verb *māla* ‘to incline’ (from the root *myl*) since he explains *māl* is so called because hearts incline (*tamīlu*) to it in worship (*Fuṣūṣ*, 192). In the Chapter of Noah illustrating the double nature of the Koran, inclusive and discriminative, and the relation between these two aspects, Ibn ‘Arabī states: *al-qurʿān* (the Koran in its inclusive aspect) *yataḍammanu* (includes) *al-furqān* (the Koran in its discriminative aspect). An implicit correlation is thus suggested between the word *qurʿān*, from the root *qrʿ* ‘to recite, to read,’ and the verb *qarana* ‘to join, unite,’ from the root *qrn* (*Fuṣūṣ*, 70). It should be noticed that the final *nūn* in the word *qurʿān* is not one of the radical letters (it is part of the suffix *-ān*) but, this notwithstanding, plays a fundamental role in producing an assonance between the terms *qurʿān* and *qarana*.

Conversely, to establish an assonance with another word, in the next example, a radical letter is removed from the term discussed by Ibn ‘Arabī. In the Chapter of Moses, examining the Koranic verses “I will surely place you (*la-ʿaḡʿalanna-ka*) among those imprisoned (*al-masḡūnīn*)” (Koran 26, 29), Ibn ‘Arabī clarifies that the *sīn* in the word *siḡn* ‘prison’ (related to *masḡūnīn* ‘those imprisoned’), despite being part of the root, for apparently inexplicable reasons, must be considered a redundant letter (*min ḥurūf al-zawāʿid*) and removed from the word.¹⁶ Thus, he adds, the verse should be interpreted as *la-ʿasturanna-ka* ‘I will surely cover you’ implying, in this way, a correlation between the verb *satara* ‘to cover’ and the verb *ḡanna* which has a similar meaning (*Fuṣūṣ*, 209). It is important to remark here that the passage from *siḡn* to *ḡanna*, through the elimination of the *sīn*, can be easier understood by considering the written form of the two words and the rules of the Arabic writing system according to which short vowels are normally omitted and double consonants are only written once: جن > سجن.

In the following example where, in the same chapter, Ibn ‘Arabī interprets a single word as a whole sentence, taking into account the written form of the word is even more essential to understand his reasoning. Discussing the word *minhāḡ* ‘method, way, path’ in the context of the Koranic verse “for each of you (*li-kullīn*) we have made a law (*šīrʿatīn*) and a method (*minhāḡīn*)” (Koran 5, 48), he explains

¹⁶ For an interpretation of this passage in relation to the science of letters see next section.

that the word *šir‘ah* here means a path and the word *minhāġ* indicates that each one came from that path *min-hā ġā’* ‘from it he came’¹⁷ (*Fuṣūṣ*, 201). To see the relation between *minhāġ* and *min-hā ġā’* both orthographic and pronunciation rules have to be taken into account. The word *minhāġ* occurs in the Koran in the indefinite accusative case *minhāġ^{an}* and thus according to Arabic orthographic rules takes an unpronounced final ‘*alif*’ (منهاجا). Moreover according to Koranic recitation rules when a word ending by the indefinite accusative is read in pause, *-an* is pronounced *-ā* and so the word *minhāġ^{an}*, in pause, is pronounced *minhāġā* (in the exact way as it is actually written).¹⁸ In addition to that if we compare the way in which *min-hā ġā’* and *minhāġ^{an}* are written in Arabic (respectively منها جاء and منهاجا) we will notice that the sentence *min-hā ġā’* is made up by two words *min-hā* (preposition plus suffixed pronoun) and *ġā’* and separated by a space that indicates the word boundary. In the word *minhāġ^{an}* a space (although smaller) is also found in the correspondent position after the first ‘*alif*’ because this letter is one of the six letters of the Arabic letters that cannot be joined to a following letter. The two expressions are therefore extremely similar both in their visual and auditory form, the only difference between them being the *hamzah* at the end.¹⁹

5. Epistemological and hermeneutic framework

Despite its traditional and etymological meaning of ‘search for the true meaning of a word’ (from the Greek *ἔτυμον* ‘true or inner meaning’) the way the term is used today betrays less metaphysical aspirations. Contemporary western linguistics conceives of etymology as the study of the history of a word and the investigation of its phonological, morphological, and semantic evolution. As remarked by Bronkhorst if we were to decide which of the two, traditional etymology or modern historical etymology, “should most appropriately be called etymologies, there can be no doubt that the historical linguist would have to search for another term” (Bronkhorst 2001: 151).

Between traditional (and traditional Arabic) etymology and modern scientific etymology thus rather than teleological development and continuity what we observe is a veritable epistemological rupture. In other words, in the process of establishing itself as a discipline, modern linguistics (starting

¹⁷ The feminine suffix pronoun *-hā* agrees with *šir‘ah* and the verb *ġā’*, in the masculine singular form, with *kull*.

¹⁸ It is worth mentioning that when reciting the Koran one can stop in the way described above only if that is indicated by a specific sign in the text and that in both *warš* and *haṣṣ* recitation styles a pause mark is found after the word *minhāġ* and so one is indeed authorized to pronounce it *minhāġā* (on rules for stopping during Koranic recitation see Crescenti 2005: 111).

¹⁹ Although we were unable to find any Koranic recitation rules that allow the dropping of the *hamzah* in this specific case (and therefore could perhaps justify neglecting the *hamzah*), the possibility of dropping a final *hamzah* in pause is certainly enumerated among the *ḍarūrāt al-šīr* ‘poetic licenses’ in traditional Arabic metrical norms (cfr. Capezio 2013: 65-66).

from the second half of the 18th century) sets its new scientific boundaries and inevitably ends up considering what is left outside those boundaries as sheer fantasy and part of what Foucault calls the “teratology of knowledge:”

A l’intérieur de ses limites, chaque discipline reconnaît des propositions vraies et fausses ; mais elle repousse, de l’autre côté de ses marges, toute une tératologie du savoir. L’extérieur d’une science est plus et moins peuplé qu’on ne croit : bien sûr, il y a l’expérience immédiate, les thèmes imaginaires qui portent et reconduisent sans cesse des croyances sans mémoire ; mais peut être n’y a-t-il pas d’erreurs au sens strict, car l’erreur ne peut surgir et être décidée qu’à l’intérieur d’une pratique définie (Foucault 1971: 35).

Thus ultimately the difference between proper etymology and paretymology comes down to the “mesure d’acceptation dans la communauté linguistique” (Versteegh 1984: 44)²⁰ as well as to the epistemological principles endorsed by a certain linguistic tradition or within a particular linguistic thought.

The examples illustrated in the previous section show how Ibn ‘Arabī in order to prove his speculations stretches the limits of already non-mainstream etymological practices such as the *ištiqāq al-ʾakbar* by adding letters to word roots (or discarding letters from the root). Needless to say, those are nonetheless, at least according to his linguistic vision, real etymologies (in the traditional sense of ‘search for the truth’ illustrated above) and not the result of arbitrary associations of words based on superficial homophony or homography.

A deeper look into the a priori assumptions and principles that inspire Ibn ‘Arabī’s vision of language and regulate his hermeneutic approach can perhaps help us better understand his peculiar etymological practice. As shown above Ibn ‘Arabī very often builds his linguistic explanations on the auditory or visual form of words. The relation between form and meaning in his metaphysical vision of language is indeed a fundamental key for the understanding of his etymological practice.

As stated by Asín Palacios, despite the unequivocal passage of the Koran where God directly teaches Adam all the names (Koran 2, 31), within the Islamic civilization the great theologians, in relation to the debate about the nature of language, by divine institution (*tawqīf*) or conventional agreement (*ištiḷāḥ*), adopted “la ecuánime y escéptica actitud de considerar la cuestión como libremente discutible” (Asín Palacios 1939: 259). Sometimes they even hold different positions on the

²⁰ In the same passage Versteegh adds: “La notion de « fantastique » devient alors une expression purement quantitative, à savoir : « accepté par une ou plusieurs personnes » par opposition à la notion de « normale », c’est-à-dire « accepté par le groupe le plus prestigieux »”.

basis of the more doctrinal or more pragmatic perspective they adopted from case to case (see Shah 1999 and 2000). As for the *šayḥ al-’akbar* according to Gril:

Ibn ‘Arabī ne se pose pas la question classique de l’origine du langage, produit d’une institution divine ou d’une convention humaine, car pour lui tous les noms sont le Noms de Dieu, tous les êtres sont Ses parole inépuisables (Gril 2008: 196.)

Whatever secondary causes intervene in the production of language the first cause, for Ibn ‘Arabī, remains always God. In Chapter 73 of the *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyah* where he answers the questions posed by al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidī (d. ca. 900) a few centuries before,²¹ in response to question number 141, Ibn ‘Arabī discusses the order and the shape of the letters of the Arabic script and specifies that there is an instruction (*tanbīh*) in the way letters have being put down by the human hand, even if those who actually did that were not necessarily aware of the implications of their choices. He adds:

we only look at things from the perspective of their having been set down by the Creator (*min ḥaytu ’inna al-bārī wāḍi‘u-hā*) and not from the point of view of the human hand from which they came into sight (*lā min ḥaytu yad man zaharat min-hu*) and therefore [in the appearance of things] there must be a purpose (*qaṣd*) and a specification (*taḥṣīṣ*) (*Futūḥāt* II, 162).

Thus everything in language has essentially got a providential nature. If this applies to language in general, it *a fortiori* holds for Arabic and the linguistic form and structure of the revelation:

The revealed Book is the actual, true, authentic embodiment of God’s Speech. Its every letter is full of significance, since the book manifests the divine realities in both its form and meaning (Chittick 1989: XV).

The form of God’s speech therefore “n’est pas seulement l’expression la plus adéquate de la Vérité : elle est la Vérité ; elle n’est pas seulement porteuse de sens, elle est le sens” (Chodkiewicz 1992: 45; italics in the text). This principle lies at the very core of the Akbarian hermeneutic approach and explains why Ibn ‘Arabī “displays tremendous reverence for the literary text” and why in his interpretations “the linguistic form of the text takes precedence over all else” (Chittick 1989: XVI). For him the linguistic form of a word is under a certain perspective more important even than its meaning. In the

²¹ On this peculiar literary dialogue, across time, between two influential Sufi scholars see Sviri (2019).

Chapter of Noah in the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* Ibn ‘Arabī illustrates this idea when he states that sacred scriptures are to be interpreted at different levels and, while common people (*al-‘umūm*) may only see the apparent meaning of a word, the elite (*al-ḥuṣūṣ*) can understand all possible meanings conveyed by that linguistic form according to the rules of that specific language (*Fuṣūṣ*, 68). Thus, it is uniquely in the form of a word that all possible meanings are encompassed and preserved, whereas a particular meaning, however elevated, only remains one single conceivable meaning. Moreover, it is precisely the fixed form of the sacred word that allows the constant flow of its inextinguishable meanings, constantly renewed at every instant and perpetually revealed hic et nunc during each recitation of the Koran:

Le Coran perpétuellement révélé est à la fois rigoureusement identique à lui-même [...] et à chaque instant inouï : aux cœurs préparés à le recevoir il apporte sans cesse des significations nouvelles, dont aucune n’annule les précédentes et qui toutes étaient dès l’origine inscrites dans la plénitude de sa lettre (Chodkiewicz 1992: 45; italics in the text).

The meanings that may be unclosed to the prepared hearts for Ibn ‘Arabī also include the meanings of the single letters that make up the words. According to his linguistic thought letters and not words (nor morphemes) are the minimal meaningful units of language:

We may think of letters as inert things, bereft of meaning, while words and sentences convey meaning. [...] For Ibn ‘Arabī, however, letters are living creatures with their own qualities, not simply phonologically, but visually (how they appear in writing), grammatically, numerically etc. They are the living roots of all words and meaning (Hirtenstein 2015: 48).

Such considerations are directly related to the *‘ilm al-ḥurūf*, the Science of Letters extensively represented within the Islamic civilization, before, after, and by Ibn ‘Arabī (see Lory 2004 and Gril 2008), and to which the Andalusian master dedicated some short treatises and the entire second chapter of his *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyah* (*Futūḥāt* I, 55-102). As suggested by Dagli (2004: 269), it is precisely from within the symbolic framework of this ‘science,’ that we should look at cases like the one discussed above of the elimination, on Ibn ‘Arabī’s part, of the letter *sīn* from the word *siġn*, to penetrate its authentic and hidden meaning (a paradigmatic case of etymology in its etymological sense one would be tempted to say).

6. Conclusions

As noticed by Scholem, mystics have constantly moved from the concept of the language of revelation, *die Sprache der Offenbarung*, to the concept of language as revelation, *die Sprache als Offenbarung* (Scholem 1987: 9). Ibn ‘Arabī is no exception to the rule. For him the Arabic language is a pansemiotic reality where everything is purposeful and all the elements are interrelated through meaningful and multiple connections in the same way as things are interconnected in the external world. Consistently with the overall Islamic Weltanschauung, a parallel is thus established between the word and the world:

La manifestation universelle est le déploiement des *âyât Allâh*, des « signes de Dieu » (mais également des « versets », le mot *âyât* ayant l’une et l’autre signification). Ces *âyât* sont constituées de « paroles », *kalimât*, lesquelles à leur tour sont constituées de lettres, *hurûf* qui sont en quelque sorte les particules élémentaires du Livre de la création comme du Livre révélé²² (Chodkiewicz 2008: 52; italics in the text).

In the same way as Vedic etymologies were “just one more way of establishing the links that according to Vedic religious understanding link different objects belonging to this and the other world” (Bronkhorst 2001: 158), Ibn ‘Arabī’s etymologies seek, from the synchronic and intralinguistic perspective that is typical of the traditional Arabic practice of *istiqāq*, to unveil underlying existing connections between words as a way to penetrate their inner meaning (or rather multiple meanings). Such connections are revealed, to the prepared hearts, ears, and eyes, by means of the hints provided by assonance, homophony, and homography among words as well as by the hidden proprieties of the constitutive elements of language: letters.

At the same time, and given these premises quite unexpectedly, because of Ibn ‘Arabī’s reverence for linguistic forms, to prove his etymologies he does not fancifully introduce ad hoc language rules or come up with invented words. As illustrated in the case of his interpretation of the word *minhāj* (see Section 4), where he takes into account orthographic and grammar rules, Koranic recitation and metrical norms, and script peculiarities, his hermeneutic approach, though not conceivable as a reproducible method, stems from a thorough knowledge of various language-related branches of Islamic science. Rather than as just imaginary linguistic practices Ibn ‘Arabī’s (par)etymologies should be looked at as hermeneutic keys that grant us access to his “metaphysics of imagination” (Chittick 1989) and to his imaginal (*ḥayālī*) conception of the word and the world.

²² On letters as elementary particles cfr. Greek στοιχείον ‘letter and element’.

References

- Addas, Claude. 1993. *Quest for the Red Sulphur. The Life of Ibn 'Arabī*, translated by Peter Kingsley. Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society.
- Arberry, Arthur J. 2008. *The Koran*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Asín Palacios, Miguel. 1939, "El origen del lenguaje y problemas conexos, en Algazel, Ibn Sīda e Ibn Ḥazm." *Al Andalus* 4/2: 253-281.
- Auroux, Sylvain, Jean-Claude Chevalier, Nicole Jacques-Chaquin, and Christiane Marchello-Nizia, eds. 1984. *La linguistique fantastique*. Paris: Éditions Joseph Clims Denoël.
- Austin, Ralph J. W. 1980. *Ibn al-'Arabi. The Bezels of Wisdom*. Ramsey, NJ: The Paulist Press.
- Baalbaki, Ramzi. 2014. *The Arabic Lexicographical Tradition. From the 2nd/8th to the 12th/18th Century*. Leiden: Brill.
- Baxter, Timothy M. S. 1992. *The Cratylus: Plato's Critique of Naming*. Leiden: Brill.
- Bausani, Alessandro. 1979. "Note su alcuni aspetti «scientifici» delle *Futūhāt Makkiyya* di Ibn 'Arabī." *Rivista degli studi orientali* 52/3,4 (May): 199-215.
- Bausani, Alessandro. 1981. "Le lingue islamiche: interazioni e acculturazioni". In: *Il mondo islamico tra interazione e acculturazione*, edited by Alessandro Bausani and Biancamaria Scarcia Moretti, 3-19. Rome: Istituto di Studi Islamici.
- Bohas, Georges and Mihai Dat. 2007. *Une théorie de l'organisation du lexique des langues sémitiques : matrices et étymons*. Lyon: ENS Éditions.
- Bronkhorst, Johannes. 2001. "Etymology and magic: Yāska's Nirukta, Plato's Cratylus, and the riddle of semantic etymologies." *Numen* 48: 147-203.
- Capezio, Oriana. 2013. *La metrica araba. Studio della tradizione antica*. Venezia: Edizioni Ca' Foscari.
- Chittick, William C. 1989. *The Sufi Path of Knowledge. Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Chodkiewicz, Michel. 1992. *Un océan sans rivage. Ibn Arabī, le Livre et la Loi*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.
- Chodkiewicz, Michel. 2008. "Une introduction à la lecture des *Futūhāt Makkiyya*." In: *Les illuminations de la Mecque*, edited by Michel Chodkiewicz, 13-75. Paris: Éditions Albin Michel.
- Crescenti, Carmela. 2005. *La ricerca della perfezione nella recitazione coranica. Trattato sulla scienza del tajwīd*. Firenze: Leo S. Olschki Editore.
- Dagli, Caner K. 2004. *Ibn al-'Arabi. The Ringstones of Wisdom (Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam)*. Chicago: Kazi Publications.
- Durkin, Philip. 2009. *The Oxford Guide to Etymology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 1971. *L'ordre du discours*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Gril, Denis. 2008. "La science des lettres." In: *Les illuminations de la Mecque*, edited by Michel Chodkiewicz, 163-282. Paris: Éditions Albin Michel.

- Hirtenstein, Stephen. 2015. “Reviving the Dead: Ibn ‘Arabī as heir of Jesus.” *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society* 57: 37-56.
- Ibn al-‘Arabī. (forthcoming). *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam wa-Khuṣūṣ al-Kalim. A Critical Edition Based on the Autograph*, edited by Marco Aurelio Golfetto. Leiden: Brill.
- Ibn ‘Arabī. 1980. *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*. Edited by Abul Ela Affifi. Bayrūt [Beirut]: Dār al-kitāb al-‘arabī.
- Ibn ‘Arabī. 2008. *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyah*. Volumes I, II, III, IV. al-Qāhira [Cairo]: Dār al-kutub wa-l-waṭā’iq al-qawmiyya.
- Lory, Pierre. 2004. *La science des lettres en Islam*. Paris: Éditions Dervy.
- Manca Agnese. 1999. *Grammatica (teorico-pratica) di arabo letterario moderno*. Roma: Associazione nazionale di amicizia e di cooperazione italo-araba.
- Salvaggio, Federico. 2008. *Insegnamento della Lingua Araba e trasmissione di saperi islamici. Il caso dell’Università al-Da‘wah al-Islāmiyya di Tripoli*. Palermo: Accademia Libica in Italia.
- Scholem, Gershom. 1987. *Judaica III. Studien zur Jüdischen Mystik*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag.
- Sedley, David. 2003. *Plato’s Cratylus*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Shah, Mustafa. 1999. “The Philological Endeavours of the Early Arabic Linguists: Theological Implications of the *tawqīf-iṣṭilāḥ* Antithesis and the *majāz* Controversy. Part I.” *Journal of Quranic Studies* 1/1: 27-46.
- Shah, Mustafa. 2000. “The Philological Endeavours of the Early Arabic Linguists: Theological Implications of the *tawqīf-iṣṭilāḥ* Antithesis and the *majāz* Controversy. Part II.” *Journal of Quranic Studies* 2/1: 43-66.
- Sviri, Sara. 2019. “Questions and Answers. A Literary Dialogue between al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī and Ibn al-‘Arabī.” In: *Studies in honor of Shaul Shaked*, edited by Yohanan Friedmann and Etan Kohlberg, 141-157. Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities.
- Versteegh, Kees. 1984. “La « grande étymologie » d’Ibn Ḡinnī.” In: *La linguistique fantastique*, edited by Sylvain Auroux, Jean-Claude Chevalier, Nicole Jacques-Chaquin, and Christiane Marchello-Nizia, 44-50. Paris: Éditions Joseph Clims Denoël.
- Versteegh, Kees. 2014. *The Arabic Language*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Wright, William. 1967. *A Grammar of the Arabic Language. Translated from the German of Caspari and edited with numerous additions and corrections. Volume I*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Federico Salvaggio holds a PhD in Arabic Linguistics from the University of Genoa and is currently a Lecturer in Arabic Language and Translation at the University of Trieste and a Research Fellow in Linguistics at the University of Udine. His research interests focus on the ideological and symbolic dimension related to linguistic knowledge and its transmission within the Arab and Islamic world. His publications mainly deal with Arabic language pedagogy and the religious and cultural influence of Arabic on other Islamic Languages.

He can be reached at: federico.salvaggio@uniud.it