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The notion of tamakkun in Sibawayhi's grammar

It is a very peculiar trait of the Arabic grammatical theory that a number of categories are applied indiscriminately to different linguistic phenomena. Decisive is the form and not the function. In our linguistic tradition this approach was for a very long time different: each linguistic phenomenon or a linguistic entity needed its own descriptive instruments. Contrary to this the Arabic theory is maximally general and maximally abstract. For instance, the inflexional affixes were categorized according to their form and not according to where they appeared. If a nominal suffix is formally identical with a verbal one, both are treated and called identically. Sibawayhi classes them all as mağāri al-kalām: their place is at the end of words and as such they are treated the same. No distinction is made between verbal and nominal suffixes (endings). So the ending (or suffix) -a is called naṣb irrespectively of where it appears. In nouns the ending -a indicates one of the nominal cases ("accusative", dependent case\(^1\)), while in verbs -a indicates some of the forms of a mood called "subjunctive". It is the form and not the function of this ending which decides about its classification.

In our grammatical tradition the approach is different. For example, the nominal ending -is in Latin (as in vit-is) is classified separately from the verbal ending -is (e.g. bib-is), although both are formally identical, even their position in a word is the same. For the Latin grammarians not the form was important but the fact that some of the endings appeared with nouns, others were added to verbs. Their formal identity was never noticed. This might be the result of the history of these teachings: in the Alexandrian school which served as the base for later grammars (and our grammatical tradition, too), the paradigm was the most important object of research.\(^2\) The Arab grammarians

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\(^2\) Б. А. Ольховников, Теория языка и вид грамматического описания в истории языкознания. Становление и эволюция канона грамматического описания в Европе, Moscow 1985, p. 86.
never bothered with paradigms, they hunted for similar phenomena across the system of the language, irrespectively of word-classes. Their attention was rather drawn by unusual phenomena, especially those which did not fit an imagined paradigm. The internal logic of their classification was different. It is not enough to find an -a at the end of words and to classify it as naṣb; this -a must also have a specific, very general, but common type of functioning. This type of functioning characteristic for -a is called i'rāb, which means that the appearance of -a is caused by a certain factor. If this is the case, then -a is called naṣb. In nouns the ending will be caused by a preceding verb, in verbs the ending would appear under the influence of the an or kāy particle. If there is no factor causing the appearance of the -a ending (as is the case in the adverb fawq-a ‘over’), the ending would not be called naṣb. In other words the mere form of an ending is not enough to classify it as such; also its function is taken into consideration.

These general grammatical concepts underwent a significant change and were elaborated during the long history of the Arabic grammatical thought. One observes a considerable difference between the ideas of Sībawayhī and of those who followed him, even in the next two or three generations. This general problem has hardly been touched upon. The recent publications of J. Owens showed how considerable these differences are and how complicated is the process of extracting the development from the material which is to our disposition.3

One of such notions which very early began to change is that of tāmakkun. It seems that the initial meaning of the term very soon was changed and became to be understood just as it is today. In Sībawayhī’s Al-Ki‘āb, however, the term tāmakkun had much wider application than it has now: it did not possess the meaning of nominal inflection only, but designated quite a number of inflexional categories. One might see in the development of the meanings of tāmakkun the process of very broad and rather instinctively understood words becoming very strict and defined terms and notions. In other words, it is the process of creating terminology.

The term tāmakkun could be the invention of Sībawayhī just as a number of other general notions seem to be the product of his reflexion on Arabic grammar. One cannot, however, quote his own definition of the term; in accordance with the whole grammatical (and not only grammatical) tradition, no explicit definitions were given.4 It is then necessary to extract the meaning of the term by a thorough analysis of fragments in which it appears. Since the term tāmakkun plays rather important role in modern Arabic linguistic theory, some attention has been paid to its analysis.

4 Confer the remarks of D. V. Frolov on defining grammatical concepts in Arabic linguistic theory: Д. В. Фролов, Способы определения понятий в традиционной арабской грамматике. Проблемы арабской культуры. Памяти академика И. Ю. Крачковского, Moscow 1987, pp. 170–192.
Werner Diehm in his article *Nomen, Substantiv und Adjectiv bei den arabischen Grammatikern*\(^5\) gives a profound explanation of the term as it is used in Sibawayhi’s work. Diehm renders its meaning as *Festigkeit*, i.e. ‘stability, solidity’\(^6\). His contention is that the term was referred by Sibawayhi primarily to syntax, and that it hardly can be interpreted as a morphological category. *Tamakkun* refers to such syntactical functions as attribution, determination etc., hence it has nothing to do with the notion of full declensional liability of nominals. W. Diehm notes, however, that Sibawayhi is inconsistent in his use of the term. The noun *kam* (‘how many/much’) has no declension it is therefore not *mutamakkin* — to use Sibawayhi’s terminology. It has only implicit flexion (virtuelle Flexion — as Diehm puts it). This is, according to Diehm, a sort of self-contradiction: if *tamakkun* is to be understood as a syntactical category, it should be so independently of its outward form. Still, it was Diehm and not Sibawayhi who defined *tamakkun* as a syntactical category, so I am not sure whether Sibawayhi should be held responsible for this inconsistency. Whatever the case may be, terminological consistency in Arabic grammatical tradition is worthy of further analysis.

Ulrike Mosel in her *Die syntaktische Terminologie bei Sibawaih*\(^7\) also approaches the term *tamakkun* from syntactical point of view. Her analysis is completely different from that of W. Diehm whose work she seems not to know. She carefully analyses the way Sibawayhi uses the term and, by rearrangement classifies his material. Following Jahn’s German translation of *Al-Kitāb* U. Mosel proposes literal rendering of the terminology and *tamakkun* is translated as Fähigkeit—’capability’ and *mutamakkin* as fähig—’capable’. Nonetheless she notes that such a translation says nothing about the meaning of the terms\(^8\), and in the adduced examples usually the original Arabic words appear.

U. Mosel notes several different applications of the term *tamakkun* and its derivatives: for defining nouns (*asma‘*), verbs (*af‘al*) and describing such grammatical categories as determination (*nakira_MA‘RSAFA*), number (singular/plural) and gender (masculine/feminine)\(^9\). Mosel’s approach is, then, extended in comparison with Diehm’s. The number of categories covered by the notion of *tamakkun* is much greater, the range of its application much wider. It hardly can be squeezed into nominal categories. Moreover, she is not as decisive as Diehm is in

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\(^5\) Published in “Oriens” 23–24, 1970–71, pp. 312–332.

\(^6\) Similar translation of the term *tamakkun* is proposed by M. Carter in his *Arab Linguistics. An Introductory Classical Text with Translation and Notes*, Amsterdam 1981, pp. 16–17 where the term establishment (lit. ‘being firmly in position’) is used.

\(^7\) Published in 1975 in Munich.


\(^9\) Ibid., pp. 77–80.
defining *tamakkun* as either a morphological or a syntactical category. Her, rather, is the striving at showing all the possible usages of *tamakkun* in *Al-Kitāb* without commenting on them. As a nominal category *tamakkun* is seen by U. Mosel as the capability of nouns to accept flexional endings in accordance with the given factor, which means also that syntactic factors are considered. In other words, U. Mosel accepts the traditional view according to which neither syntactical nor morphological categories are treated distinctively. Nevertheless it is the morphological considerations which play decisive role in her approach to the description.

The term *tamakkun* (in all its derivative forms such as verbs and participles) appears in *Sibawayhi*’s *Al-Kitāb* a few dozen times. Syntactically and semantically there seems to be a direct relationship between the term and the primary meaning of the verb *tamakkana*—namely: ‘to be able to’. This is confirmed by the distribution of the verb — it is used with the prepositions *fi* and *min* although the former appears in the majority of all the examples. This usage is very well illustrated by a bayt from ‘Umar Ibn Abi Rabī‘a’s poetry:

* wa-tamakkantu *fi* ān-nafs ḥaytu tamakkanat
* naḥṣu l-ḥabibi min al-muḥibbi āl-muḥram
I have been able to master [my] soul, just as
the soul of the beloved masters the soul of the desperate lover.\(^{10}\)

In *Sibawayhi*’s *Al-Kitāb* it is the preposition *fi* which is used with *tamakkana*. It is difficult to tell whether it introduces the verbal object or just a circumstantial phrase. In such expressions as *yatamakkan* *fi* āl-kalām (or, once, with the variant *fi* an yakūna kalāman — I, 207.6)\(^{11}\) it seems to mean circumstantial, i.e. it is said where actually does the *tamakkun* occur. So a foreign noun (*ism aḡami*) is said to obtain *tamakkun* in speech (*fi* āl-kalām) (II, 19.4). Here, speech (*kalām*) is to mean language generally and Arabic in particular. One could also surmise that spoken language is meant. In other words, *yatamakkan* *fi* āl-kalām means “can be used in spoken Arabic language”, i.e. in its declination and grammatical peculiarities in general becomes similar to other Arabic words. It is that different grammatical categories or different words might or might not have *tamakkun* in spoken language. Thus, *tanwin* is said to indicate *tamakkun* in speech: *li-tamakkunihi* *fi* āl-kalām (II, 13.7–8): a noun consisting of three “letters” (radicals) — which is the minimal number in Arabic nouns — has *tanwin* since it is the simpliest (*li-hiffatihi*) and it has *tamakkun*. On the other hand, the word *ladun*: *lā yatamakkan* *fi* āl-kalām (II, 44–45). The expression

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\(^{11}\) I quote the Būlāq edition of Sibawayhi’s *Al-Kitāb* (1318 A. H.); the Roman numerals indicate volume, the subsequent Arabic numerals — page and line(s) respectively.
tamakkana fi is also applied to nominals (asma': I, 204.15; I, 207.6; II, 205.20; II, 311.1ast), to circumstantials (I, 284.13), verbs (af'âl: II, 160.21), adjectives (ṣifât: II, 211.8), word structures (abniya: II, 186.19; 349–350).

Tamakkun used with the preposition min introducing object is very rare. I have been able to find one example in Al-Kiûb: the words qaṭân and saḥar are said not to be declinable in ṣarr (genitive, oblique): la yatamakkana min al-ṣarr (I, 115.7). Literal translation would be: they are unable to appear in genitive, with the sense of overpowering present in the expression tamakkana min.

Usually, however, tamakkun is used without object. The given category is just called mutamakkîn without any other specifications. The participles usually keep their verbal meaning, i.e. the participle has the same meaning as the verb, as in al-wâhîd iṣm mutamakkîn (II, 34.11) "the numeral 'one' is a mutamakkîn nominal part of speech".

Often the internal object of maš'âl mutlaq is used in definitions. This serves to express comparison. For example the fact that qaṭ has different tamakkun than ḥasbuka is expressed in the following way: "qaṭ" la tamakkana ḥâdâ æt-tamakkun (II, 35.16): 'qaṭ does not have this (or: such) tamakkun'. The same construction is used to explain the lack of imāla in mà: it is said not to have the same tamakkun, and ðâ: lam tamakkun tamakkun ðâ (II, 267.11).

The syntactical use of tamakkun/tamakkana forms hardly gives a clear picture of its meaning. Some more light is shed by the application of this term to different grammatical categories. And although U. Mosel has given a fairly comprehensive overview of the usage, below a maximally complete list of applications of tamakkun/tamakkana in Sibawayhi's Al-Kiûb will be presented. Of course, the classification is my own and I am not completely sure whether all possible usages have been noted.

**Group I: Parts of speech**

A. Asma' — Nominal parts of speech

1. Fully declined nouns.
2. Nouns with bi-consonantal roots (yadv-, dam-, : II, 308; II, 305.5).
4. Mašdars in general and mašdars of the type subhâna, sa'dayka (I, 190.8–11).
5. Names of Qur'anic suras such as sâd, sin (II, 30.16).
6. Circumstantials (ṣurûf) as a sub-class of nominal parts of speech are described in a detailed way from the point of view of tamakkun (II, 44–ff.).

B. Af'âl — the verbs

1. Generally, the verbs are regarded to be less mutamakkîn than asma' (I, 6.9–10).
2. There is a differentiation between verbs depending on the degree of tamakkun: some verbs are more mutamakkîn, other are less. For instance laysa ('not to be'), a defective verb is called a non-mutamakkîn one (II, 400.11).
C. Ḥurūf — prepositions, particles etc.

1. All Ḥurūf are almost without exception called non-mutamakkīn; instead of tamakkūn they are said to have their “place” (mawdī‘), i.e. function.\(^{12}\) (E.g. I, 291.5).

2. In some cases (e.i. in qaṭ, ‘an), the sukūn is said to be caused by the lack of tamakkūn in Ḥurūf (I, 387.19; II, 35.16).

**Group II: Grammatical categories**

D. Determination

Generally indetermined word is called to be more mutamakkīn than a determined one (II, 22.17), and hence tanwil (the indefinite article) indicates a mutamakkīn noun (II, 155.3).

E. Number

Singular (wāḥid) and plural (gam‘, gamī‘) are taken into consideration; dual is not considered, probably because of its similarity in grammatical functioning with singular. Singular is more mutamakkīn than plural is the unmarked term in the opposition (II, 15.20).

F. Gender

Masculine is classified as more mutamakkīn than feminine (II, 13.6; II, 22.16–17), since it is primary.\(^{13}\)

**Group III: Phonemes**

G. Phonemes, and more general sounds are sometimes described from the point of view of their morphological functions. It is, in such instances, their tamakkūn which is described. Consequently, some phonemes are said to have greater tamakkān than other.

1. The phoneme ’ (hamza) is either stable (as a root phoneme or a prefix phoneme) and then it is called hamzat al-qaṭ‘ — the dividing hamza. But it also appears in the form of hamzat al-waṣl — the eliding hamza. Their respective tamakkūn is said to be different (II, 273.8). One should understand here that hamzat al-qaṭ‘ has lesser tamakkūn than hamzat al-waṣl since it cannot elide.

2. The phoneme y is regarded to have greater tamakkūn than w since the change w —> y is typical (as in ma‘di which hypothetically should be ma‘dī‘y); while opposite process is not observed (II, 260.8).

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\(^{13}\) Elsewhere (I, 7.4 and II, 23.1) S i b a w i s t a t e s t h a t m a s c u l i n e i s p r i m a r y, since the word šay‘ ‘a thing’ which is masculine can denote any noun irrespective of its gender.
Generally, these remarks do concern single phonemes, but in their grammatical, morphological functions, and not as independent entities. In other words, morphological phenomena are described here and not phonology.

**Group IV: Word formation processes**

A number of phenomena which are to be classified as word-building processes are considered by Sibawayhi from the point of view of *tamakkun*. Generally, typical word-forms are said to have a greater *tamakkun* than rare forms. For instance, the ending -atun in forms of the type *fa’latun* are called more *mutamakkin* than in other forms since *fa’latun* is more usual than *fu’latun* (II, 182.11).

Since such forms as *ilayka* or *allāqī* are irregular and one should expect *ilāka* and *allāqī* written with a long *alif* in the syllable -lā-, they are regarded as having lesser *tamakkun* than the regular forms (II, 104.22).

The same reasoning Sibawayhi applies to such unproductive affixes as *ya*- in *yarma* or *na*- in *nahsīl*. Both affixes are used no more to form new words, while as inflexional affixes they do appear in verbs. Hence as word-building affixes *ya*- and *na*- are regarded as non-*mutamakkin*. Here, *tamakkun* has the meaning of productivity (II, 350.2–3). Generally, however, word-building affixes (* zawā’id*) are said to have a great *tamakkun* (II, 349.14–15).

**Group V: Semantic categories**

The notion of *tamakkun* seems to be rarely used with semantical categories. There is one rare instance when Sibawayhi differentiates between the notions of *qurb* (vicinity) and *bur’d* (distance). One can say in Arabic *inna qurbaka* Zayd ‘Zayd is near you’, but it is impossible to say *inna bu’daka* Zayd ‘Zayd is far away from you’. From this Sibawayhi draws the conclusion that the notion of vicinity (*dunuww*) has greater *tamakkun* than the notion of remoteness has (I, 284.13–14).

This preliminary classification shows how wide is the range of application of *tamakkun* in Sibawayhi’s grammar. It does not however draw us any nearer to the comprehension of this notion.

It seems that explication of this term should be attempted within the category of grammatical oppositions. It has already been noted, though not only in reference to Sibawayhi’s theory, by J. Owens that the notion of *tamakkun* corresponds to the conception of markedness.\(^{14}\)

It is a rather easy task to reconstruct from the textual evidence on tamakkun the main notions of oppositions. There are the both terms — the marked and unmarked one. Their relationship corresponds roughly to both privative and gradual oppositions; in the latter the difference between the terms is not that of presence or absence but that of degree.

The unmarked term of the tamakkun opposition is called mutamakkin, while the marked one is called ġayr mutamakkin. For instance, the numeral wāḥid is called mutamakkin (II, 34.11), while kam and id are defined as ġayr mutamakkinayn (I, 291.16). These terms are rather rare, mostly Sibawayhi uses verbal forms and states that something yatamakkan or lä yatamakkan. Ḥurūf are said to: lam yatamakkan fi ōl-kalām (I, 291.5), while foreign words may have tamakkun, tamakkun fi ōl-kalām (II, 19.4). There is yet another word used to define the unmarked term of the opposition. In a few instances Sibawayhi uses the word awwal ‘the first’. Thus masculine gender is called awwal, i.e. unmarked (II, 22.16). The term awwal is not used specifically for tamakkun, but is used as a general term for the unmarked term of the opposition. Usually, the markers of the opposition are not defined explicitly. Only in the case of tanwin Sibawayhi states directly that tanwin is the marker of a mutamakkin (noun): at-tanwin ‘alā mat al-mutamakkin (II, 138.11, cf. also I, 7.5 where tanwin is said to be the marker of an amkan noun).¹⁵

Privative opposition based on the presence or absence of the markers are not the most typical types of constructions used by Sibawayhi with respect to tamakkun. His definitions usually appear as gradual oppositions; there, the terms are said to have the given property (tamakkun) to a greater or lesser degree. In such instances, comparative constructions are used. In them a terminology quite distinct from that of privative oppositions is used. Sibawayhi bases this type of oppositions on the notions of heaviness (tuql) and lightness (hiffa). The term of the opposition which has the given quality in a lesser degree is called lighter, while the marked one is called heavier. Thus verbs are heavier than nouns since nouns have greater tamakkun (I, 6.9–10). Similarly, masculine gender is called lighter (for them, says Sibawayhi, i.e. for the Arabs and beduins) than feminine, again because masculine has greater tamakkun (I, 7.3). The terms tuql and hiffa, as many early grammatical terms, must remain in some relationship to their general meaning, and originally are most probably metaphors. A marked term of the opposition is viewed

¹⁵ One should notice here that Sibawayhi uses the term marker (‘alāma) to denote tanwin, which is in turn the marker of the unmarked term in the opposition. Still, he is firm in stating that marked terms are derived from unmarked ones. Cf. for instance his remarks in: II, 22–23. A similar sense of markedness is implied from Sibawayhi’s statement that “markers are left out from what is regarded as heavy” (turk [...] ‘alāma li-mā yastaqtiltun — I, 7.5). Since tuql is the marked term of the opposition, it loses its formal marker, while the unmarked one retains it.
as one burned with a number of functions and markers. The more of these are attached to a word, the heavier it is, the less tamakkun it has. A ‘heavy’ word has little variability, while a ‘light’ word is liable to receive many functions. This variability, this potential readiness to function in different contexts is nothing else but tamakkun. Since tamakkun covers a great many grammatical functions, it usually is regarded not as a term in privative opposition but as a term in gradual opposition.

This gradual opposition is mainly expressed by degrees of comparison of the participle mutamakkin. This is, of course, expressed by the descriptive elative: asadd tamakkunan — ‘more/most mutamakkin’. In this way masculine gender is described — as more mutamakkin than feminine (I, 7.3). Almost synonymous is the expression with the so called absolute accusative. It is usually construed as follows: A has not the same tamakkun as B. The pronouns man ‘who’ and mā ‘what’ are said not to have the same tamakkun as full nouns such as Zayd or rağil ‘man’ (II, 135.18–18). Similarly, the verb laysa not to be has not the same tamakkun as a full verbs lam yatamakkkan tamakkun al-fi‘l (II, 400.11). Synonymous with absolutive accusative are comparative constructions introduced by the particle ka-. Describing the adverbs amsi ‘yesterday’ and ġadu ‘tomorrow’ Sibawayhi states: lā yatamakkanān ka-Zayd ‘they do not have the same tamakkun as Zayd has’ (II, 136.3).

In all these cases the gradual oppositions are expressed very generally: all the functions of a given class are related to another class. It is the class of time adverbs which is related to the class of “full” nouns. Tamakkun is not, then, understood as a single feature but as a set of features. These are not mentioned explicitly, but are only implied: tamakkun is to be looked for there where one class differs from the other. The difference in tamakkun between laysa and a full verb lies namely in the difference of functioning between laysa and the full verb. The same is to be said about amsi and Zayd: the limitations in functioning of amsi are the limitations in its tamakkun as compared with Zayd. The question remains open whether this functioning is meant to be syntactical only, as W. Diekmann suggested. From the above classification it ensues that the range of functions and meanings is wider than syntactical. There are morphonological phenomena (cf. the problem of difference between hamzat al-qat’ and hamzat al-waṣl), morphological questions (the productivity of suffixes such as ya-, na-), semantic problems (the difference between the concept of vicinity and remoteness, the meaning of diminutive forms — II, 138.11–ff.). They all are introduced into a system of oppositions subordinated to the general notion of tamakkun. Tamakkun is therefore understood as a wide range of different grammatical functions covering phenomena which range from phonology to syntax. These grammatical functions appear in different degree, hence they are thought within the system of gradual oppositions — tamakkun can be smaller in some cases and greater in other cases. There are also instances of complete lack of tamakkun. This leads to the conception of privative opposition: the absence or presence of tamakkun.
From the above analysis it is quite clear that Sībawayhi’s understanding of *tamakkun* differs radically from that found in later Arabic grammatical theory. There, *tamakkun* is almost synonymous with nominal inflection. In other words *ism mutamakkin* is nothing else but *ism muʿrāb*, since *ʿrāb* is a synonym of *tamakkun*. The former term, however, became to be widely used in Arabic grammatical theory while *tamakkun* slowly fell into oblivion.