

THE PROPER NAME *AḤMAR*
A MORPHOLOGICAL DISCUSSION IN THE
2ND–4TH CENTURIES AH

(SĪBAWAYH, AL-AKHFASH, AL-MĀZINĪ,
AL-MUBARRAD, IBN WALLĀD AND IBN AL-SARRĀJ)*

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INTRODUCTION

While reading al-Mubarrad's (285/898) *Muqtaḍab* I came across the expression *hā`ulā`i niswatun arba`un* ("these are four women"; *Muqtaḍab* III, 341.4) and I became interested in the case ending of *arba`*, which is not diptotic in this position, although it has a verbal pattern (*af`al*) and it serves as an adjective. These two reasons should be enough to justify its being a diptote, just like *aḥmar* ("red"), which is an adjective in the verbal pattern *afal*. However, al-Mubarrad says that in *hā`ulā`i niswatun arba`un* the numeral *arba`* is still a noun, and its adjectival use does not justify a restriction on its declension (*Muqtaḍab* III, 341.6–7).

* I would like to thank Professor Versteegh (Nijmegen) for his constant support and enlightening suggestions, as well as Professor Wisnovsky (Montreal) for his minute reading of this article and the many English mistakes he has corrected. No need to say that any remaining mistakes are imputable to me alone.

I wondered then how grammarians could be so sure about the rules that make a noun diptotic, and also when the rule of the two *mawānī' min al-ṣarf* (“[reasons] that forbid full declension”) was formulated clearly for the first time.

As far as I know, it seems to be only in Ibn al-Sarrāj’s (316/929) *Kitāb al-uṣūl fī al-naḥw* that we find fully expressed the diptote rule that later became canonical: Ibn al-Sarrāj gives a list of the nine possible conditions that cause a noun to be a diptote whenever at least two of them are satisfied (*Uṣūl* II, 80.1–5).¹

My curiosity about the noun-declension problems over which grammarians disagreed was quenched by the case of the proper name *Aḥmar*: it is one of the issues discussed by Ibn Wallād (332/944) in his *Kitāb al-intiṣār* (issue #89, 136–137), where he criticizes al-Mubarrad’s *Radd ‘alā Kitāb Sībawayh*. Proper names are widely used by Arab grammarians as “touchstones”, especially in the morphological field. (See Versteegh 1980:23–24 and Carter 1983, p. 116 in particular.)

In this paper I would like to present a discussion of this issue by focusing on the arguments of Sībawayh (180/796) in his *Kitāb*; al-Akhfash al-Awṣaṭ (215/830) and al-Māzinī (248/862) in a discussion reported by al-Zajjājī in his *Majālis al-‘ulāmā’*; al-Mubarrad (285/898) in both his *Radd ‘alā Kitāb Sībawayh* and in his *Muqtaḍab*; Ibn Wallād (332/944) in his *Kitāb al-intiṣār* where he criticizes al-Mubarrad’s *Radd*; and Ibn al-Sarrāj (316/929) in his *Uṣūl fī al-naḥw*.

By way of summary, let me state briefly that the position of Sībawayh concerning the declension of *Aḥmar* has become canonical, although it is not formulated in terms of *mawānī' min al-ṣarf*; the same position is also expressed by al-Akhfash in similar terms to Sībawayh’s; al-Māzinī refutes al-Akhfash’s opinion just like al-Mubarrad refutes Sībawayh’s opinion, although with a different stand than his teacher; Ibn Wallād takes sides with Sībawayh; al-Mubarrad stands by his opinion in his *Muqtaḍab* in a more detailed way; and Ibn al-Sarrāj does not mention the discussion but his views agree with Sībawayh’s, although with a completely different theory.

THE POSITION OF SĪBWAYH

Sībawayh’s teaching about the proper name *Aḥmar* (*Kitāb* II, ch. 286; 1.8–4.5) is that it is a diptote in the definite, just like when it was not a proper name, and

1. The edition of Ibn al-Sarrāj’s *Uṣūl* by al-Fatli is of very poor quality. The first volume has been corrected on the manuscript of Rabat by Barakat and Bohas (1991) and Bohas (1993). For the two other volumes, I had no choice but to rely on al-Fatli’s edition. In 2009, in an even worse attempt, Muḥammad ‘Uthmān has published al-Fatli’s edition at the Maktabat al-Thaqāfa al-Dniyya in Cairo. However, ‘Uthmān does not mention al-Fatli’s edition and has replaced al-Fatli’s footnotes by his own.

a triptote in the indefinite (II, 1.10), which can be rendered as follows: *marartu bi-Aḥmara wa-bi-Aḥmarin ākhara* (“I passed by Aḥmar [whom you and I know] and by some other Aḥmar”). This nunation is specific to proper names in those cases where the indefinite contrasts with a definite proper name, as in the example; and it corresponds to other cases where a noun is primarily definite and is then put in the indefinite, as opposed to the more common cases where the noun is primarily indefinite (as *baytun* “a house”) and can be put in the definite either by the addition of the article (*al-baytu* “the house”) or by annexation (*baytu al-rajuli* “the man’s house”).²

In order to make his point even clearer, Sibawayh gives the example of proper names, such as *Turtubun*, that are not diptotic in the definite because they do not have a verbal pattern and others, such as *aklubun* (“dogs”), that were not diptotic before they were used as proper names even though they had a verbal pattern because they were not adjectives, and which are diptotic as definite proper names (*Aklubu*).

As one can see from this passage, the theory of the two necessary conditions that make a noun diptotic is not presented as such by Sibawayh, nor is it mentioned by Reuschel (1959, 41–47) in his detailed study of the diptote declension, but this chapter would be quite obscure if one did not have that theory in mind. The examples presented by Sibawayh perfectly fit this frame because they are contrastive: the proper name *Turtub* has only one *māniʿ min al-ṣarf* (its being a proper name), just like the substantive *aklub* (“dogs”) (its verbal pattern), so that neither of them is a diptote; whereas the proper name *Aklub* has two *mawāniʿ min al-ṣarf* (it is a proper name in a verbal pattern), so it is a diptote.

THE DISCUSSION BETWEEN AL-MĀZINĪ AND AL-AKHFASH AS REPORTED IN THE *MAJĀLIS*

The issue of the proper name *Aḥmar* is discussed by al-Māzinī and al-Akhfash al-Awsaʿ in *majlis* 41 (*Majālis* 92–93). Al-Akhfash shares the same opinion as Sibawayh (who is not quoted), and is reported to say that as an adjective *aḥmar* is diptote in both the definite and the indefinite because of its pattern and adjectival nature, but

2. See Kouloughli (2001) for a detailed account of both traditional and modern views on the *tanwīn*. He draws a distinction between determined nouns (definite as in *al-kalbu* “the dog”, or indefinite as in *kalbun* “a dog”) and undetermined nouns (definite as in *kalbu Zaydin* “Zayd’s dog”, or indefinite as in *kalbu ṣaydin* “a hunting dog”). On the interpretation of the *tanwīn* in the proper names, both in *hādhā Zaydun* and in *hādhā Zaydun ākharu*, see pp. 32–34. For the traditional account on the *tanwīn* see *Idāh* (97–99) along with its translation and commentary in Versteegh (1995:168–176).

when used as a proper name it is fully declinable in the indefinite, and not in the definite (*Majālis* 92.7–11). His position can thus be summed up as follows: *marartu bi-Aḥmara wa-bi-Aḥmarin ākhara*, which corresponds to Sibawayh's teaching.

Al-Māzinī challenges al-Akhfash's position by saying that this would compel him to consider *arba'* a diptote in the expression *marartu bi-niswatin arba'in* (and thus say *marartu bi-niswatin arba'a*) because in this expression *arba'* is "a noun that has been made an adjective" (*li-anna-hu smun ju'ila šifatan*; *Majālis* 92.12–13). He then expresses his own opinion which can be summarized as follows: *marartu bi-Aḥmara wa-bi-Aḥmara ākhara*, i.e. as a proper name *Aḥmar* remains diptote in all cases. He justifies his position by saying that whatever its use, it remains an adjective "in origin", just like *arba'* remains a noun "in origin" (*fī al-aṣl*; *Majālis* 93.3–5), hence its full declension in *marartu bi-niswatin arba'in*.

THE ACCOUNT OF SIBAWAYH'S POSITION BY AL-MUBARRAD IN HIS *RADD*

In his *Radd* (135–136), al-Mubarrad first recalls the teaching of Sibawayh concerning the so-called *asmā' mubhama* "unspecified nouns"³ that are used as proper names (*alāmāt khāṣṣa*). The corresponding teaching is found in chapter 310 (*Kitāb* II, 38.16–40.21), where Sibawayh⁴ does not only talk about the "unspecified nouns" like *Dā*, *Dī*, *Tā*, *ʿUlā*, *Alladī*, *Allatī* and so on, which are used as proper names, but also about the *ma'dūl* ("deflected") nouns⁵ that are used as proper names, such as *Ams* or *Saḥar*, and which become fully declinable.

According to al-Mubarrad, Sibawayh says that these *ma'dūl* nouns should be fully declined in the definite and also in the indefinite when used as proper names, and that this "compels him for other [similar cases]" (*yulzimu-hu fī ukhara*; *Radd* 136.3),

3. According to Sibawayh, an "unspecified noun" is a noun that "applies to everything" (*taqā'u 'alā kulli shay'in*; *Kitāb* II, 38.17). These nouns can replace a whole class of nouns, just like *hādihā* or *alladhī*. See Versteegh 1993:158.

4. The only reservation that one could have while reading Chapter 310 is that Sibawayh quotes al-Khalil and Yūnus, and that he may not fully agree with them since nowhere does he overtly express his own opinion. This is very common in the *Kitāb* (see Reuschel 1959:18) and one can only suppose that Sibawayh would have expressed his opinion overtly if it were different from the authorities he quotes.

5. The description given by Sibawayh for *al-asmā' al-ma'dūla* "deflected nouns", like *ʿUmar* and *Zufar*, is as follows: *humā* [*ʿUmar* and *Zufar*] *maḥdūdāni ʿan al-bināʿi alladhī huwa awlā bi-himā wa-huwa bināʿu-humā fī al-aṣli* "they are modified from the pattern which is more adequate for them and which is their original pattern" (in chapter 297; II, 14.9–10). In this context, *ma'dūl ʿan* and *maḥdūd ʿan* are synonyms, as Troupeau (1976:65) states. He translates them as "dévié" ("deflected, swerved").

i.e. all other *ma'dūl* nouns are fully declinable when used as proper names. This is the strategy he follows in order to prove Sībawayh wrong in the case of the proper name *Aḥmar*.

Sībawayh is reported by al-Mubarrad as holding that *ma'dūl* nouns are fully declined when used as proper names, although they are diptotic otherwise. When used as proper names, they are no longer to be treated as “deflected”, because they stand on their own with no semantic link to a “non-deflected” form. Thus, according to al-Mubarrad’s interpretation, they are not to be considered “deflected” anymore, so that the reason that made them diptotic is removed.

However, Sībawayh does not say that *ma'dūl* nouns are diptote merely because they are *ma'dūla*, which al-Mubarrad seems to claim. And indeed, being *ma'dūl* is one of the nine *mawānī' min al-ṣarf* listed by Ibn al-Sarrāj in the canonical theory, but it is only if they acquire another *mānī'* that these nouns are diptotic, such as being adjectives, being proper names and so on.

AL-MUBARRAD’S ANSWER TO SĪBWAYH IN THE *RADD*

Al-Mubarrad agrees with what he asserts is the opinion of Sībawayh (*Radd* 136.4), and he uses this opinion to contradict him on another point: the fact that the proper name *Aḥmar* is said by Sībawayh to be a diptote (*Kitāb* II, ch. 286; 1.8–4.5). Al-Mubarrad asserts that as a proper name *Aḥmar* has lost its semantic link with the colour red or, in other terms, it is not a *ṣifah mufradah* anymore, which was — along with its *afal* pattern — the reason for its being diptotic (*Radd* 136.11–13).

Al-Mubarrad draws a contrastive comparison with the numeral *arba'* “four” which is a noun that can be “used by extension as an adjective” (*tawassā'ta wa-waṣafta bi-hi*)⁶ as in *marartu bi-niswatin arba'in* “I passed by four women”. In this case the grammatical properties of *arba'* are not modified and it is still fully declinable — despite its *afal* pattern — because it keeps its nominal value of “four” (*Radd* 136.13–22).

By doing so, al-Mubarrad wants to show that it is inconsistent to consider that the proper name *Aḥmar* should not be fully declined: both its substantial category (adjective) and its meaning (“red”) have changed, as was the case for the *ma'dūl* nouns mentioned above. The question raised by al-Mubarrad can be formulated as follows: why should the proper name *Aḥmar* be a diptote when *Ams* is fully declinable as a proper name?

6. On *ittisā'* and its development in the history of grammar, see Versteegh 1990.

IBN WALLĀD'S CRITICISM OF AL-MUBARRAD'S *RADD*

According to Ibn Wallād there is a consensus among the Arabs that *aḥmar*, be it in the position of an adjective or a proper name, is a diptote (*Intiṣār* 136.23–25). He gives other similar examples of nouns of the pattern *afal* which are diptotic both in the definite and in the indefinite: *adham*, *aswad* and *arqam*, each of which refers to a species of snake (*Intiṣār* 136.25–137.2). It is not clear however whether Ibn Wallād means here the proper names or the substantives.

These examples are found in *Kitāb* Chapter 287 (II, 4.6–18), devoted to words with a verbal pattern and whose substantial category is not agreed on among Arabs, like *ajdal*, *akhyal* (two falcon species) or *afā* (a snake species), which some Arabs would regard as adjectives whereas others would regard them as nouns. According to Sībawayh, those who consider them to be adjectives would have to treat them as diptotes (just like *aḥmar*). There are also adjectives with a verbal pattern that are sometimes used by the Arabs as proper names like *Adham*, *Aswad* and *Arqam* and which are also diptote (just like *Aḥmar*).

The position of Ibn Wallād himself does not differ from that of Sībawayh, whom he defends: The proper name *Aḥmar* is diptotic. Ibn Wallād does not enter into details about its declension in the indefinite, although there is no reason to think that he would differ from Sībawayh on this very point.

AL-MUBARRAD'S POSITION IN HIS *MUQTADAB*⁷

In *Muqtadab* III, 340.8 al-Mubarrad says that the proper name *Awwal* is fully declinable, whatever its original substantial category, be it a qualifier like *Aḥmar* or a noun like *Afkal* (*al-afkal* can refer to a woodpecker species). And in III, 342.14 he says that unlike *Aḥmar*, the proper name *Ajma'* is fully declinable in the indefinite (*marartu bi-Ajma' in ākhara* "I passed by some other Ajma'"), because it was definite before being used as a proper name, whereas the qualifier *aḥmar* was already diptotic when it was indefinite. Its use as an indefinite proper name adds further weight to its remaining a diptote (*Muqtadab* III, 342.14–15).

According to al-Mubarrad, the difference between the qualifiers *ajma'* ("whole") and *aḥmar* ("red") or *awwal* ("first") is that, exactly like the proper names, *ajma'* is primarily and semantically definite (*Muqtadab* III, 342.12), which implies that it is a diptote. When used as a proper name however, *Ajma'* is fully declinable (*Muqtadab* III, 342.12–13). The fact that *ajma'* is definite is clear from expressions of the type *al-ālamu ajma'u*

7. I follow Bernards (1997) who considers that the *Muqtadab* is a later work than the *Radd*.

(“the whole world”), where *ajmaʿ* does not need to take the definite article to be definite, unlike *aḥmar* (compare with *al-ʿālamu al-aḥmar* “the red world”). To put it in other words, *ajmaʿ* is a “primarily definite” adjective that cannot be put in the indefinite; whereas *aḥmar* is a “primarily indefinite” adjective that can secondarily be put in the definite as in *al-aḥmar*. For al-Mubarrad, it seems obvious that *ajmaʿ* and *aḥmar* should behave differently when used as indefinite proper names because they behave differently as adjectives as far as indefiniteness is concerned.

It is as if, for al-Mubarrad, *ajmaʿ* is diptotic because it is a primarily definite adjective that cannot be put in the indefinite. Once this rationale is removed by its use as a proper name (i.e., when it is not an adjective anymore and it can be put in the indefinite), there is no reason to restrict its declension, both in the definite and in the indefinite. In the case of *aḥmar* it is as if the restriction on its declension is linked to its pattern and its being indefinite, characteristics still possessed by the indefinite proper name *Aḥmar*. As a definite proper name, however, there is no reason to limit its declension because it is not an adjective anymore and it is definite. What is interesting is that al-Mubarrad does not seem to know (or to acknowledge) the rule of the two *mawānīʾ min al-ṣarf*, and instead bases his analysis on other considerations such as the term-to-term comparison between similar (or contrastive) cases such as *ams*, *ajmaʿ*, *aḥmar* and *arbaʿ*. Sībawayh, by contrast, aimed at a comprehensive explanatory system, which was later reformulated by Ibn al-Sarrāj in more straightforward terms.

In a nutshell, the position of al-Mubarrad concerning the proper name *Aḥmar* can be represented as follows: *marartu bi-Aḥmarin wa-bi-Aḥmara ākhara*, which is the exact opposite of Sībawayh’s position in both the definite and the indefinite.

Interestingly, in this position he also differs from his teacher al-Māzinī, who considers that the adjectival nature of *Aḥmar* still forbids its full declension when it is used as a proper name. However, for al-Mubarrad, it is probably not satisfactory for *Aḥmar* to behave in the same manner both in the definite and in the indefinite.

IBN AL-SARRĀJ’S POSITION IN HIS *UṢŪL*

Ibn al-Sarrāj does not devote much attention to dealing with the issue of *Aḥmar* as a proper name. It is enough for him to formulate the general principles of grammar, which is the first aim of the *Uṣūl fī al-naḥw*. In the beginning of the chapter devoted to the declensional system he says that the proper name *Aḥmar* does not take the *tanwīn* in the definite and that its oblique case is like its dependent case: *hādihā Aḥmaru wa-raʾaytu Aḥmara wa-marartu bi-Aḥmara* (“this is Aḥmar and I saw Aḥmar and I passed by Aḥmar”; *Uṣūl* I, 46.5–7).

Then in the chapter devoted to the nine reasons that cause a word to be a diptote, he says that the proper name *Aḥmad* is fully declinable in the indefinite as in *marartu bi-Aḥmada yā hādhā wa-bi-Aḥmadin ʾākharā* (“I passed by Aḥmad and by another Aḥmad”; *Uṣūl* II, 80.10–12). The case of *Aḥmar* is not mentioned explicitly, but there is no reason to think that it differs from *Aḥmad*. Both *Aḥmar* and *Aḥmad* share the same two reasons for being diptotic, their verbal pattern and their being proper names; one can also assume that if *Aḥmar* had exhibited a different behaviour, Ibn al-Sarrāj would have mentioned it; and lastly, this interpretation corresponds to the teaching of the *Kitāb*.

CONCLUSION

Ibn Wallād summarizes his criticism by saying that al-Mubarrad has applied to *aḥmar* the analogy of the *maʿdūl* nouns and that he has ended up with a form that is not uttered by the Arabs (*Intiṣār* 137.6–8). The disagreement is based on the rules that make a noun diptotic. Al-Mubarrad does not seem to know (or to acknowledge) the rule of the two *mawānī min al-ṣarf*. For him, the fact that the proper name *Aḥmar* is not an adjective anymore — or at least that it has lost its meaning as a colour — removes the restriction against its being fully declinable. He does not see that as a proper name *Aḥmar* still satisfies two conditions of being a diptote (namely, its verbal pattern and its being a proper name). In the case of the *maʿdūl* nouns once they are used as proper names they are not considered to be *maʿdūl* anymore; and this in turn removes one of the two conditions of being diptotic, with the only remaining condition (their being proper names) not being sufficient on its own to negate their full declension.

According to the canonical theory, as expressed by Ibn al-Sarrāj, the way words are treated is very flexible and the effects of these treatments on their syntactic behaviour is not always straightforward: for example *ams* (“yesterday”), which is an invariable *ṣarf* (with only one *mānī min al-ṣarf*, namely, being *maʿdūl*), changes considerably when treated as a proper name: *Ams* is fully declinable, with only one *mānī min al-ṣarf*, namely, being a proper name. When it is treated as a proper name it is not considered to be *maʿdūl* anymore, and it has lost its meaning of “yesterday”.

The case of *aḥmar* (“red”) is as follows, always according to the canonical theory: it is an adjective, diptotic for the two reasons that it has a verbal pattern and it is an adjective; whereas as a definite proper name, *Aḥmar* is diptotic for the two reasons that it still has a verbal pattern and it is a proper name. When it is treated as a proper name it is still considered to have a verbal pattern but it has lost its adjectival meaning of “red”.

Lastly, the case of *arbaʿ* (“four”) is as follows: it is a numeral, fully declinable, with only one *māniʿ min al-ṣarf*: having a verbal pattern. In *marartu bi-niswatin arbaʿin* “I passed by four women” it is treated as an adjective but this does not justify a second *māniʿ min al-ṣarf*, which added to its already having a verbal pattern would have made it a diptote, so that it remains fully declinable. Its meaning “four [fem.]” is maintained.

The legitimate question that is raised by al-Mubarrad can be formulated as follows: If the *maʿdūl* quality of *ams* disappears in the proper name *Ams* as well as its original meaning why should it be different for *aḥmar*, whose essential category and meaning are lost in the proper name *Aḥmar*? One could also legitimately question the fact that the adjectival use of *arbaʿ* does not make it a diptote. And what about the case when *Aḥmar* is the proper name of a red-hair man, since there still would be a link to its original meaning?

There is no answer to these questions except that treating *Aḥmar* as diptotic, and *Ams* or the adjectival *arbaʿ* as triptotic, reflects actual linguistic usage. To put things differently, al-Mubarrad apparently prefers to deduce the grammatical behaviour of *Aḥmar* from his reasoning, rather than find a reason in its actual usage, which opposes what Bernards (1997:91) sees as Sībawayh’s distinctive approach.

In this issue, it is noteworthy that al-Mubarrad clearly contradicts Sībawayh, whereas he is known to have retracted his criticism on most issues (Bernards, 1997:92–93). The exact links between Sībawayh and al-Mubarrad have not yet received the attention they deserve and the systematic exploration that Bernards (1997) has begun and which this article pursues is not yet finished and in this respect the “intermediate” position of al-Māzinī in the issue dealt with in this paper is extremely interesting.

Lastly, as detailed as the account of this issue may appear, there are other debates in which the proper names have traditionally been used as “touchstones” and which also warrant investigation, such as the dual of the proper name *Aḥmar* (*Aḥmarāniʿ?*), its plural (*Aḥāmīrʿ?*), its relative adjective (*aḥmariyyʿ?*), its diminutive (*Uḥaymarʿ?*) and the syntactic behaviour of all these names.

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