The Concept of Wisdom of Arabs and 10th Century Grammar Apologetics:
a Study in Arabic Language Ideology

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> *"Classical Arabic is the language whose musical and aesthetical qualities move its listeners, creating the feeling of spirituality, nostalgia and community. Classical Arabic socializes people into rituals of Islam, affirms their identity as Muslims, and connects them to the realm of purity, morality, and God."*
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Initially emerging as a branch of Islamic theology whose main purpose was to determine the proper method of Qur'anic reading, Arabic grammar began to be established as an independent scientific discipline in the 9th and 10th centuries AD. Penetration of the Aristotelian logical heritage into Arabic grammar began roughly at the same time – and although at first limited, by the end of the 9th century its influence was unmistakably evident. Through an examination of the cultural conflict which ensued as a result of the assimilation of the Aristotelian philosophical heritage into the Islamic intellectual tradition, I intend to offer a deep and thorough analysis of the language ideology teachings which 10th century grammarians propagated in order to successfully oppose their opponents among the logicians. Their intellectual debates were soon to become one of the most popular entertainments in the courts of the royalty and nobility of Baghdad. And while logicians on their side were determined to limit the role of grammarians to that of simple school masters, whose sole purpose would be to teach children correct verbal and written expression, for 10th century Arab grammarians, much larger issues were at stake. Viewing their opponents as representatives of a foreign culture, Arab grammarians felt they had more to defend than their traditionally assumed authority to interpret and analyze the very nature of reality itself. The pretensions of logicians, as they saw them, also represented a threat to the group identity of Arab people, the cultural orientation of the empire, and even to Islam itself. To explain and elaborate how and why this was the case is one of the primary aims of my dissertation.

The ultimate goal of my dissertation is to undertake an analysis of the concept of the "wisdom of Arabs" (hikmat al-'arab): the crown jewel of language ideology teachings established in the works of Ibn Sarraj and his students. The concept of the wisdom of Arabs was born as a result of the strivings of grammarians involved in a desperate struggle with their opponents. Viewed as the shaping force behind the unmatched beauty, balance and harmony of the Arabic language, it was at the same time seen as the structural imprint of the genius of the people who were its progenitors. Firm believers in the superiority of classical Arabic language, 10th century grammarians viewed its prestige as the ultimate reflection of the qualities of people who spoke it. Their main purpose and duty, as they understood it, was twofold:

1. To capture the inherent properties and grammar patterns of the Arabic language in order to deploy them as the ultimate proof of the superb wisdom and qualities of Arab people;

2. To explain the divinely sanctioned superiority of the Arabic language and the Arab nation over all others.

hrough the reconstruction of the genuine methodology of 10th century grammarians, as well as the reasoning process behind it, it is my intention to analyze which linguistic features of classical Arabic were seized upon by grammarians, and how they used them as proof of the superior qualities of Arabs. Naturally, my goal is not to question or affirm if certain linguistic properties can be objectively treated as the expression of superior qualities of one group of people over another. Rather, I seek to show how the role of language in underpinning these assertions can indicate the capacity of language itself to be used as a symbol of group identity. Most importantly, however, I am interested in exploring how classical Arabic reflects the way in which Arabs perceived their place in the rapidly changing world around them.

Through the analysis of the birth of 10th century language ideology, as well as the key factors and intellectual influences which shaped and determined its development, my dissertation will thus strive to offer a new perspective on language, group identity and social and power relations in the 10th century Arab world.