

see last night?” or “Who did you see last night?” The first is grammatically correct and the second is not, but the second sounds better because that is how we speak in everyday language. So, while there are a few remnants of case endings in English, by and large we can do without them.

Not so in some other languages. For example, German would collapse without case endings. That makes it really difficult for foreigners to learn but it also means that the language offers a lot of flexibility in terms of syntax; the subject can precede the verb or vice versa and the direct object can pop up almost anywhere. However, people proficient in the language would never be confused because the case ending attached to a word would indicate its grammatical function. The same goes for Arabic. If you put the wrong case ending on a word, it can render the sentence nonsensical.

The Bab’s writings are full of incorrect case endings, hence sometimes rendering a sentence unintelligible or difficult to understand. They are also full of other irregularities, particularly incorrect noun-adjective agreement and incorrect genitive constructions. These last two irregularities do not significantly affect the meaning of the sentence but do suggest that the author did not have a grasp of the basics of Arabic grammar. So why are there so many grammatical errors in the Arabic writings of the Bab?

It’s the Scribes’ Fault

At the time when the Bab was writing, the use of the printing press was not very widespread. Therefore, his writings were “published” the old-fashioned way: people copied them by hand. Of course, copying something by hand is a lot more error-prone than using a printing press or making a photocopy. The scribe’s eyes could inadvertently skip a line or misread a word when making a copy of the original manuscript, whether written by the Bab or his amanuensis. Now imagine that a different scribe makes a copy of this copy. He is prone to the same errors, as well as passing on any of the errors that the original copyist made. If he is unscrupulous (or perhaps unthinking), he might change a word or phrase to make it sound better. If he is really misbehaving, he will change the whole sense of a word, phrase, or more to suit his own agenda. In this world of hand-copied manuscripts, it is easy to imagine that grammatical errors would be introduced into manuscripts of the Bab’s writings.

This may certainly have happened, but it does not explain all of the grammatical errors in the Bab’s writings. First, we can collect all the later manuscripts of a work, compare them and, with some precision, discern which errors were introduced by copyists and which were the Bab’s own doing. One of the most well-attested and best-preserved of the Bab’s works, the *Qayyum al-asma*, has many grammatical errors. Possibly the most frequent of these is that adjectives often do not agree in gender with the nouns they modify. This is a very basic rule in Arabic, as it is in some European languages (Spanish, for instance). In sura 39, for example, the Bab writes *al-kalima al-`az.iim*, which is incorrect (it should be *al-kalima al-`aziima*). However, it is also important to note that he does not consistently break this basic Arabic rule;

for example, in sura 28, he writes the phrase properly as al-kalima al-`az.iima. I will return to this point later.

In addition to the errors in manuscript copies of the Bab's writings, we have several texts in the Bab's own handwriting that contain grammatical errors. For example, in a letter to Mulla `Abd al-Khaliq Yazdi, a Shaykhi leader who became a Babi, the Bab writes the phrase fii kitaab muhkam wa aayaat mutqan (a copy of this text in the Bab's own handwriting is found on page 183 of Abu al-Qasim Afnan's `Ahd-i A`la). The adjective following aayaat should be mutqana (or, for a more Qur'anic flavor, mutqanaat), to agree with the feminine gender of the preceding noun, aayaat. Of course, in this example the Bab may have been exercising poetic license by writing mutqan rather than mutqana in order to rhyme with the adjective muhkam; but recognizing that he used poetic license (see below) does not invalidate the larger point that he is sometimes solely responsible for the solecisms that appear in his writings.

In summary, it is very likely that a number of grammatical errors in the Bab's writings were introduced by later scribes. But since these errors are also found in well-attested manuscripts of his writings and works written in his own hand, the question still stands: why are there so many grammatical errors in the Arabic writings of the Bab?

He Was Uneducated

This is the most obvious answer. The Bab was a Persian merchant with little formal education, so it is no surprise that his Arabic prose is full of errors. Some of his errors, like the last one mentioned, even show the influence of his native Persian on his Arabic prose, indicating that he did not have command of the foreign language. Western academics studying the Bab would not make much of this, but Shi'i Muslims do. This is because they expect that someone speaking the literal words of God would have good grammar. If the words imputed to God are not eloquent, then they obviously cannot be from Him, since He would not speak like an imbecile. Of course, there is the contentious issue of what constitutes "eloquent," but most Muslims would maintain that God's words must at least conform to the very basic grammatical rules; otherwise, God would be speaking gibberish. And why would God speak gibberish if He wants people to know and obey His will (you cannot know His will if His words do not make sense).

I think it is perfectly reasonable to believe that the Bab did not have a good command of Arabic because he was uneducated, although I am not interested in drawing any theological conclusions from that. Certainly, if God so desires, he can speak through uneducated merchants as well as refined nobles and literati. However, this position is untenable because there are examples of the Bab's prose where he writes in very standard Arabic. For example, in his private letters to Shaykh Salman and his uncle, Khal-i Akbar, reproduced in Ahd-i A`laa, there are no obvious errors in syntax or declension (see pgs. 91-98). There are two irregularities in morphology - al-nabawiyuun instead of al-nabiyyuun (see p. 94 and 98) and takhtiir instead of takhtaar (see p. 92 and

94) – but in other writings he uses the correct form of these words; besides, they do not impinge a great deal on the meaning of the passages.

In addition to many exemplars of standard Arabic written by the Bab, there are also instances of him quoting grammatical rules, so he was certainly familiar with the basics of the language. In a letter to a certain “Isfahani,”

he quotes the rules on case endings in a statement attributed to `Ali:

Every subject is nominative, every object of a verbal clause is accusative, and every second term of a genitive construct is genitive

(cited in Vahid Ra'fati,

Nigaahii

, Khushih-haa, v. 1, p. 66). All of this demonstrates that the Bab knew the basic rules of Arabic and often wrote according to these rules. Therefore, if the Bab could write in standard Arabic, why did he often not to do so?

He Wanted to Create a New Grammar of Arabic

This is a position that is often put forward by some Baha'is and it arises from statements like this from the Bab:

'Should someone criticize my use of vocalization or textual readings or Arabic grammar, I would reject their criticism. For such (grammatical) rules are based on the verses, not vice versa. It cannot be doubted that he has rejected for himself all such rules and the learning that is based on them. Indeed, in the eyes of thinking people, no proof is greater than being ignorant of such rules, when ignorance is combined with the ability to reveal such words and verses as these. This is because the fruit of these sciences is (real) understanding of God's Book, although it is quite unnecessary for the Tree on which the Book of God in person has alighted to have the slightest knowledge of them.

(Persian Bayan, Vahid 2, Bab 1, MacEoin trans.)

The basic argument goes that the Bab only ostensibly violated the norms of Arabic grammar. What he was actually doing was adhering to new rules of Arabic grammar. Therefore, he was not breaking the rules of the language because he was playing by his own rules, which should now be the new standard of the language, much like the Qur'an was the standard for the Arabic language. Proponents of this position go so far as to argue that if we systematically study and collect the grammatical irregularities of the Bab, we can discern this new grammar and spell it out explicitly.

Like the preceding position, this argument also ignores the fact that the Bab often wrote in standard Arabic and was conversant with basic grammatical rules. So what is to be the standard: when he violates a rule or when he adheres to it? Moreover, this position also fails to note that the Bab was not consistent in the ways in which he violated Arabic grammar (see the example above for his inconsistent rendering of al-kalima al-`az.iim). If he was consistent, then people could certainly create a new grammar of the Arabic language based on his systematic violations of grammatical rules, which would then become the new norm. However, his lack of consistency makes this impossible. Therefore, if the

aim of the Bab was to create a new grammar of Arabic, he failed miserably. If, however, that was not his aim, then why did he frequently violate the rules of Arabic grammar?

Having outlined some of the standard answers to this question, I will now offer some of my own answers. Unlike the foregoing answers, I believe the following theories are plausible, though at this stage in our study of the Bab's writings it is impossible to rule one out in favor of another. Like any good theory, they each account for the same set of data and there is no contradictory evidence so far available that would invalidate them. To summarize, here is the data:

1. The Bab frequently violates the rules of Arabic grammar.
2. Many of these violations are elementary mistakes.
3. These violations are not consistent.
4. The Bab often wrote in standard Arabic.

With all of this in mind, here are several theories that can explain this data.

Revelation as Extemporaneous Poetic Performance

The Bab prided himself on his ability to write or dictate his letters and treatises very rapidly and without forethought. He frequently cites this ability to write *bil-fitra* - extemporaneously or according to the promptings of one's innate nature - as a proof of his mission (he's unlearned but can say learned things without forethought) and as a way to deny any claims when put to the question ("Hey, I don't claim to be a bab of the Hidden Imam – my pen may have said that but I'm just writing according to my *fitra*."). Perhaps when the Bab was in the throes of his revelatory experiences he did not pay much attention to the niceties of grammar since he was writing or dictating so rapidly. This kind of ecstatic writing is similar to extemporaneous spoken-word poetry in which the poet does away with grammar for the sake of rhythm, rhyme, and conveying raw emotion unencumbered by the normal rules of language. The poet has some feeling or thought and she expresses it as forcefully and lyrically as possible, sometimes bending the language, either consciously or unconsciously, to serve her message and using rhythm and rhyme to heighten the listening experience and, consequently, the impact of the message. The Bab may have gone through a similar process during his revelatory experiences.

Grammatical Errors as Mimicry of Qur'an

On the other hand, the Bab's violation of grammatical rules, particularly rules governing case endings, is reminiscent of similar irregularities occurring in the Qur'an. For Muhammad, there was no fixed grammatical standard by which to abide. Rather, the Qur'an was the first extended work in Arabic and it became a model for the development of the language. However, when grammarians applied their rules to the Qur'an, the text was not always agreeable. Therefore, they went to some lengths to try and explain why a word that had the correct case in several instances was suddenly improperly declined

in a similar grammatical position, rather than accept that Muhammad might not have always been consistent.

Even though Muhammad was fairly consistent, his few inconsistencies are excusable since no standard existed at that time. The Bab, on the other hand, was certainly aware of the rules of grammar that had been the standard for over a thousand years. In the letter to

Isfahani

that I quoted above, he demonstrates a knowledge of the basic rules for Arabic case endings. Despite this, the Bab frequently violates them. But, as pointed out above, so does Muhammad, although with less frequency. Therefore, perhaps the Bab deliberately violated some of the rules of Arabic grammar to further enhance the Qur'anic flavor of his ayat, or "verses." This was the Bab's name for a mode of writing that was purposefully patterned on the Qur'an. However, the Bab also does this in works that he does not classify as "verses," like his scientific treatises. Therefore, if he broke grammatical rules to enhance the Qur'anic flavor of his "verses," he nonetheless carried this practice into his other modes of writing.

Violations of Grammar as Subversion and Barrier

One final explanation for the Bab's violations of Arabic grammar is that he was subverting the accepted standards and markers of learning. As in any literate culture, the first indicator of true learning is the mastery of the conventions of language. In the Bab's culture milieu, this meant a command of Arabic, the language of the Qur'an. If someone could not articulate themselves well or foundered on the rudiments of the language, then what insight could he possibly have into deeper subjects?

Like so many other aspects of his religion, perhaps the Bab deliberately violated the norms of grammar in order to put off people who could not see past the surface of words and appreciate the deeper significance of his message. Contemporary poets and authors thrive on this subversion of expectations and assumptions and are happy to have critics characterize their work as unconventional gobbledygook while those who "get it" savor the significance that has eluded the guardians of literary tradition. Indeed, unlike much of the pre-modern period, violating conventions is often heralded today as a mark of genius, not ignorance. It is also a way to thumb your nose at the guardians of tradition, as if to say, "I have violated your conventions so that you will see that I have little regard for them. The persnickety pedants will obsess over these things and only those who are worthy, those who can see past the violations of linguistic norms, will appreciate what I am saying." Perhaps the Bab had something of this in mind when he violated the very elementary rules of the Arabic language.

From the foregoing, readers might conclude that the study of Arabic grammar is an unnecessary prelude to a study of the Bab's writings. This is not the case. As pointed out above, much of the Bab's Arabic prose is quite standard and could only be understood by someone versed in the norms of grammar. Even an

understanding of the Bab's grammatical irregularities requires a firm foundation in Arabic grammar; otherwise, the reader might be misled by an improper case ending and put something in the mouth of the Bab that he did not intend. Further, a basic knowledge of Arabic grammar is necessary to understand the Bab's neologisms (a subject that is beyond the scope of this essay). Finally, much of the Bab's metaphysical terminology is derived from Shaykh Ahmad, who developed many of his metaphysical ideas by contemplating the operations of Arabic grammar (for a brief discussion of this, see my paper on the Bab's Treatise on Grammar). Therefore, even though the Bab felt free to violate its norms, he relies upon the reader's understanding of those norms and the mechanics of grammar to decipher his prose and his metaphysical terminology.

Having argued that the Bab was quite capable of writing standard Arabic and knew the rudiments of Arabic grammar, I posed a new question and offered several possible solutions. However, these solutions are not conclusive because the pool of data is currently so small. One method of inquiry that might yield data that will give more weight to one theory over another is to determine the frequency of grammatical violations in the Arabic writings of the Bab. I have already pointed out that there are no obvious errors in his letters to several individuals, two of which are addressed to his uncle, but that there are a large amount in the Qayyum al-asma. Is the mode of writing related to the frequency of errors? I have suggested that errors are found not only in his mode of "verses" but also in other modes, so perhaps the mimicry-of-the-Qur'an theory is not a satisfying explanation. Further, does the frequency go up or down depending on his audience? If the errors are more frequent in works addressed to men of learning, perhaps this would lend credence to the subversion theory. Finally, are most of the errors committed in the interest of rhythm and sound? This would give more support to the performance theory. Perhaps it is a mixture of all three. No matter the ultimate conclusion, we can confidently say at this point that Bab was neither ignorant of the rules of Arabic grammar nor seeking to create them anew.

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