# From Qiyās to Generation: What Classical Arabic Linguistics Teaches Us About Modern Language Pedagogy

# Contemporary Language Pedagogy and Generative Linguistics

Generative linguistics revolutionized contemporary language pedagogy with a profound insight: language is not merely a collection of memorized forms, but a dynamic, productive system. Intriguingly, this very insight resonates deeply with classical Arabic linguistic theory, finding early articulation in the groundbreaking work of Ibn Jinni (d. 1002 CE). Through a meticulous examination of pivotal concepts like *qiyās* (analogy), the crucial distinction between *samāʿ* (attested input) and its productive application, and even the nascent idea of language as partially innate, we unveil striking conceptual convergences between Ibn Jinni's theories and modern generative frameworks. This paper concludes by translating these historical and theoretical insights into practical classroom applications, offering language educators—regardless of the language they teach—a historically grounded and pedagogically actionable framework for understanding and fostering language acquisition.

# Introduction: A Chasm in Linguistic History

The established canon of linguistic thought, particularly within Western academic institutions, typically traces a direct lineage from classical Greek and Latin grammarians through the European tradition, culminating in the foundational works of Saussure and Chomsky. Conspicuously absent from this widely propagated narrative is the rich millennium of Arabic linguistic scholarship—from the seminal contributions of Sībawayhi (d. 796 CE) to the profound insights of Ibn Jinni, and their numerous astute commentators. This omission is far more than a historical oversight; it represents a significant missed opportunity. Modern language pedagogy is thereby deprived of a formidable intellectual heritage that, in many instances, anticipates contemporary linguistic frameworks by centuries.

This paper endeavors to bridge this critical chasm. Our aim is not to assert historical causation, but rather to illuminate profound conceptual convergences: demonstrating how remarkably similar insights into language emerged independently across diverse traditions. Recognizing these parallels is crucial, for these historically rich perspectives hold immense and untapped pedagogical value for language educators today.

# The Modern Framework: Language as Generative Capacity

Noam Chomsky's generative grammar, introduced in Syntactic Structures (1957), fundamentally reoriented linguistics around a central question: How do speakers produce and understand sentences they have never encountered before? The answer lies in the concept of generative capacity — the internalized system of rules (later, principles and parameters) that allows for infinite linguistic creativity from finite means. Key tenets include:

### Linguistic Creativity

Speakers routinely produce novel utterances.

### Poverty of the Stimulus

The input children receive underdetermines the grammar they acquire, suggesting innate constraints.

### Competence vs. Performance

The distinction between underlying knowledge and actual use.

The pedagogical implication: language learning is not memorization — it is the development of productive capacity.

# The Classical Arabic Framework: Ibn Jinni and the Science of Language
## 3.1 Context: The Arabic Linguistic Tradition

The 8th century CE marked the genesis of a rich Arabic grammatical tradition, born from the imperative to safeguard the sanctity of the Quranic language and to institutionalize Arabic as the unifying administrative tongue of a burgeoning empire. By the 10th century, this tradition had blossomed into an extraordinarily sophisticated linguistic science. Within this vibrant intellectual landscape, Abu al-Fath Uthman ibn Jinni's monumental work, *Al-Khasā'is*, stands as a towering achievement. Far exceeding a mere grammatical treatise, it represents one of the tradition's most theoretically ambitious explorations into the very essence and nature of language itself.

## 3.2 Key Concepts in Ibn Jinni's Framework
### a) Language as Partially Innate

Among the most striking aspects of Ibn Jinni's theoretical inquiry is his profound engagement with the origins of language. In the pivotal chapter, "On the Origin of Language" (Bāb al-qawl ʿalā aṣl al-lugha), he introduces a concept that resonates deeply with modern linguistic thought:

إن كثيرًا من هذه اللغة وقع في أوله اضطرارًا لا اختيارًا

"Much of this language occurred initially out of compulsion, not choice."

This powerful assertion underscores a foundational insight. The term *iḍṭirār*, translated as "compulsion" or "necessity," points to an inherent, almost involuntary dimension of linguistic capacity that transcends conscious learning or deliberate acquisition. While not a direct precursor to Chomsky's Universal Grammar, Ibn Jinni's formulation anticipates a crucial realization: language is not solely the product of external input; it involves a significant internal, perhaps even innate, predisposition.

# b) Qiyās: The Principle of Analogical Generation

Perhaps Ibn Jinni's most significant contribution to our discussion is his treatment of qiyās (analogy):

ما قيس على كلام العرب فهو من كلام العرب

"Whatever is formed by analogy to Arab speech is itself Arab speech."

This principle establishes that the language extends beyond attested forms. A speaker who produces a novel form — unheard but rule-conforming — is not making an error. They are generating valid language. This is the essence of productive linguistic capacity.

# c) Samāʿ vs. Qiyās: Input vs. Extension

Ibn Jinni distinguishes between:

| Concept | Arabic Term | Function |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Attested Input | Samāʿ (السماع) | What the learner directly encounters |
| Analogical Extension | Qiyās (القياس) | How the learner generates beyond input |

This parallels modern distinctions between input and intake, or between exemplar storage and rule abstraction.

# d) ʿIlm vs. Istiʿmāl: Knowledge vs. Use

Ibn Jinni also distinguishes between:

- ʿIlm (علم): Underlying linguistic knowledge
- Istiʿmāl (استعمال): Actual usage/performance

He notes that a native speaker may possess perfect implicit knowledge without being able to articulate grammatical rules explicitly:

> "The Arab speaks according to his natural disposition (salīqa), without knowing the definition of subject or object."

This mirrors Chomsky's competence/performance distinction with remarkable precision.

# Conceptual Convergence: A Comparative Table

| Modern Concept | Arabic Classical Concept | Shared Insight |
|---|---|---|
| Generative Capacity | Qiyās (القياس) | Language extends beyond input through systematic rules |
| Innateness Hypothesis | Iḍṭirār (الاضطرار) | Language has a non-acquired, internal dimension |
| Competence vs. Performance | ʿIlm vs. Istiʿmāl | Knowledge underlies but differs from use |
| Input vs. Intake | Samāʿ vs. Qiyās | What is heard vs. what is internalized/extended |
| Linguistic Creativity | Productive Qiyās | Novel forms can be valid if system-conforming |

# Pedagogical Implications: Teaching Language as Generative Capacity

If both classical and modern frameworks converge on the insight that language is productive, not merely reproductive, then pedagogy must reflect this.

# Beyond Rote: Activating Language Patterns for True Mastery

## The Traditional Paradigm: Rote Memorization

The familiar cycle of passive learning: *"Here are ten examples of the past tense. Commit them to memory."* This approach focuses on recall, not creation.

## The Generative Shift: Dynamic Pattern Activation

A transformative alternative: Introduce a linguistic pattern, then empower learners to dynamically generate countless new instances, demonstrating profound understanding and creative application.

## Illustrative Example (English):

Consider the English past tense, often taught through extensive drilling of irregular verbs. To truly test and cultivate generative capacity:

- Challenge students with novel, invented verbs: **to blick, to snarf, to glorp**.
- Then, simply ask: *"What happened yesterday?"*
- The confident, instantaneous responses – **blicked, snarfed, glorped** – powerfully reveal that learners have internalized the underlying grammatical rule, not merely memorized a list.

## Illustrative Example (Arabic):

The Arabic root system provides another compelling demonstration. Instead of memorizing conjugation tables for every verb:

- Provide students with a root, such as ب-ر-م-ج (b-r-m-j), associated with the concept of "programming."
- Prompt them with questions that demand structural application: *"Who performs this action? Where does it occur?"*
- Students readily generate diverse, correct forms like مُبَرْمِج (mubarmij, "programmer"), بَرْمَجَة (barmaja, "programming"), or مُبَرْمَج (mubarmaj, "programmed").

In both cases, learners vividly demonstrate the internalization of abstract rules, showcasing their ability to adapt and extend language beyond previously encountered examples, moving far beyond mere memorization.

# 5.2 Activity: "The Possible Structure"

Move beyond the confines of prescriptive model sentences. To truly cultivate generative language skills, we don't present finished examples; instead, we provide a potent seed that blossoms into diverse linguistic expressions.

> "The student succeeded."

From this single, simple statement, students are empowered to dynamically generate a rich tapestry of expansions, demonstrating their intuitive grasp of linguistic patterns and creative application:

- The diligent student succeeded after years of effort, proving that perseverance truly pays off.
- Indeed, success belongs to those who persist, much like our dedicated student.
- Having faced many daunting obstacles, the student finally succeeded, a testament to unwavering resolve.

This powerful generative exercise naturally paves the way for profound meta-linguistic reflection. Engage learners further with these pivotal discussion questions:

## Discussion Questions:

| What core elements stayed constant across all generated sentences, forming the structural anchor? | What linguistic features and rhetorical devices were varied and expanded upon by the students? | Considering this underlying structure, what types of expansions would be grammatically or semantically impossible? Why? |
| --- | --- | --- |

This activity not only fosters creative expression but also deepens students' meta-linguistic awareness of language as a dynamic, generative system, far beyond mere replication.

# 5.3 Reframing Errors: Overgeneralization as Evidence of Learning

When a child says:

> "I goed to the store" (English)

Or an Arabic learner produces:

> هذا كتابان جميل (hādhā kitābān jamīl — incorrect agreement)

These are not failures. They are evidence of rule application — overgeneralized, but systematic.

## Pedagogical Response:

| Instead of... | Try... |
|---|---|
| "Wrong. It's 'went.'" | "I see the rule you're using. Let's explore when it works." |
| Red ink | Diagnostic conversation |
| Memorize the exception | Understand the pattern and its limits |

Ibn Jinni himself discussed how even "errors" often follow analogical logic — they reveal the learner's developing system.

# 5.4 Assessment: Production Over Recall

**Traditional**

Fill in the blank: He _____ (go) to school yesterday.

**Generative**

Write a paragraph about a past event. Include at least three different verb forms.

The second measures productive competence — the ability to generate language in context.

# Conclusion: Listening to the Classical Tradition

The Arabic linguistic tradition, exemplified by Ibn Jinni's Al-Khasā'is, offers a sophisticated framework for understanding language as a generative system — an insight often attributed solely to 20th-century Western linguistics. This is not a claim of priority or influence. It is a recognition of convergence: across cultures and centuries, careful observers of language arrived at similar insights.

For language educators today, the message is clear: **Language is not a warehouse of memorized phrases. It is a capacity for rule-governed creation.** Teaching, then, is not about filling empty containers. It is about activating generative potential.

The classical Arabic tradition understood this a thousand years ago. Perhaps it's time the global language teaching community listened.