

NASALS AND NASALIZATION AS TREATED BY EARLY MUSLIM PHONETICIANS

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This paper attempts to give a summary of the contribution made by early Arabs and Muslims in the field of phonetic sciences. Works by scholars like Al-Khalil (d. 791), Sibawaihi (d. 793), Ibn Jinni (d. 1001), Ibn Sina or Avicenna (d. 1037) and others will be given special attention in this connection. In particular, this paper will present the various treatments of the Arabic nasal sounds and the phenomenon of nasalization.

Nasals as a category of sound

As a term of reference, the Arab and Muslim phoneticians divided the Arabic phonemes into categories such as: glottals, pharyngeals, palatals, dentals /l, r, n/, and labials /f, b, m, w/. Al-Khalil is one of the first Arab phoneticians to order the Arabic phonemes, in terms of place of articulation, along the vocal tract from the glottis upward to the lips. His student, Sibawaihi, and later phoneticians also recognized other categories in terms of manner of articulation such as: voiced/voiceless, stop/non-stop, rolled, lateral, nasals /m, n/. They also recognized nasal variants, e.g. [ŋ, N].

Nasality as a distinctive feature

Further, Sibawaihi and Ibn Jinni seem to lay more emphasis on treating "yunnah" or nasality and other features in terms of binary distinctive feature analysis.

Nasalization as a prosodic feature

The Muslim phoneticians also recognized that in certain contexts /n/ and /m/ may influence non-nasals, both vowels and consonants.

Conclusion

A close look at the early Arabic grammatical works reveals an underlying systematic approach and a rich mine of terminology which are relevant both to modern Arabic phonetics and general phonetics.

References (apart from the original sources)

Semaan, K.I. (1968): "Linguistics in the Middle Ages", Leiden: Brill.