

King Faisal Prize acceptance speech, M. G. Carter

Your Majesty, the Royal family, members of the king Faisal Prize committees, esteemed colleagues, I am greatly honoured by the award of the King Faisal Prize for Arabic Language and Literature in the topic of linguistic studies on Arabic in other languages. My field of research is by nature abstract—some might say too abstract—so it is especially gratifying that my work has been recognised as a practical contribution to the wider goals of the Prize Committee, to reinforce the global importance of Arabic, as confirmed in 1973, when Arabic became the sixth official language of the United Nations.

Like most languages, Arabic is both a secular and a religious medium, a vehicle for day to day communication as well as for the highest level of spirituality. In the course of my studies I came to realise that Arabic goes further than any other language in uniting earthly and heavenly discourse: the faithful literally speak the same language as God, and vice versa. I know of no other contemporary language which shares this property.

For their part the Arabic grammarians (not all of them were Arabs), never doubted that the object of their attention connected God with the created world in a direct and intimate way, and they were aware from the very beginning that every linguistic speculation inevitably had consequences for theology and the holy law.

The science of grammar is almost as old as Islam itself. The foundations were laid in the 2nd/8th century by Sībawayhi, significantly of non-Arab origin himself. His grammatical treatise, known only as “the Book” is of unprecedented originality and scope, a virtually exhaustive description of Arabic at a level of systematic rigour which has few equals in the general history of linguistics. The authority of Sībawayhi’s “Book” remains undiminished, and it has rightly earned the title of “the Qur’ān of grammar” .

I first began to study Sībawayhi more than half a century ago, so I have been reading him for longer than he actually lived, and I have never tired of it. But I hope I am not alone in confessing that I am often taken to the limits of my intellectual capacity by Sībawayhi’s reasoning, as well as by the complex arguments of the grammarians who succeeded him.

The King Faisal Prize this year brings together two parallel traditions, Arab and non-Arab, both reading the same texts in the same search for understanding, one from the inside, the other from the outside. Those grammatical texts are where we meet, and they are what we talk about to our respective communities. This generous prize will surely encourage collaboration between us all.