EXCEPT FOR A FEW...
THE EXCEPTION IN QU'R'ĀN 11.116

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One of the things which set Sībawayhi apart from his predecessors is the importance he attaches to the various sources on which he, and the other grammarians, based their grammatical rules. These are: the kalām al-'arab (Bedouin speech), pre-Islamic poetry, and the text of the Qur'ān. Sībawayhi only accepts an expression if he is absolutely certain it actually occurs in Bedouin speech. At the same time, he sees the text of the Qur'ān, that is, the officially accepted 'Uthmānic text, the Mushaf, as the prime example of the kalām al-'arab.1

In the present article, I shall demonstrate the way Sībawayhi's ideas on the valuation of sources were taken up by his fellow grammarians, a problem which plays a central role in my research on the reception of the Kitāb Sībawayhi among the early Arab grammarians.2 For this I shall use the example of the various opinions on the exceptive particle illā as it occurs in Qur'ān 11.116. But let me first present a short analysis of the general rules on illā in the Kitāb Sībawayhi.

Penrice says in his Dictionary and Glossary of the Koran with Copious Grammatical References and Explanations of the Text (1873) that illā stands for in lā, that it means "unless, except, if not" and that it


commonly governs the accusative. Unfortunately, it is not quite as simple as that. Sibawayhi uses more than ten full pages of his *Kitāb* to discuss the various constructions with what he calls the “original” exceptive particle *illa*. In short the rules are as follows:

When the thing excepted is placed after the general term and the proposition containing that term is affirmative, the exception is always put in the accusative, as in *atānī l-qawmu illā zaydan* or *ra‘aytu l-qawma illā zaydan*.

When the exception is placed after the general term and the proposition containing that term is negative or implying a negation, for instance beginning with *law*, the thing excepted takes the place of the general term as a *badal/badalan min*. It is therefore dependent on the same regent and put in the same case as the general term, as in *mā atānī l-qawmu illā zaydun*; or it can be considered as a description of the general term, thus resembling an adjective (a *sifā*) and therefore be put in the same case, as in *mā gā‘anī aḥadun illā zaydun*. However, according to trustworthy informants⁴, the exception in this type of exceptive sentence may also be put in the accusative, because *illa* incorporates the meaning of *wa-lākinna*: “the people did not come but Zayd did.”

If the thing excepted belongs to a fundamentally different category from that of the general term, the accusative is usually preferred, in accordance with the dialect of the Ḥiḡāz, as in *mā gā‘anī aḥadun illā himāran*, because a donkey can never take the place of or be a description of a human being. So, in this case the exception can be neither a *badal* nor a *sifā* and *illa* again takes on the meaning of *wa lākinna*, governing the accusative. The Banū Tamīm accept the interpretation of *illa* as a *badal* even in this type of exceptive sentence, but Sibawayhi prefers the accusative⁵.

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⁴ As Sibawayhi reports on account of Yūnus and ʿĪsā: Sibawayhi, *Kitāb* II, 319.

If the general term is not expressed at all, the thing excepted is put in whatever case the general term would have been, had it been expressed; thus mā ḡā'ānī illā zaydūn and mā ra'aytu illā zaydān.

So there are three kinds of exceptive sentence. First: the ʾistīṯnāʾ muttasīl, the “joined exception”, in which the thing excepted is put in the same case as the general term as a ʿbadal or a ʾṣīfa. Second: the ʾistīṯnāʾ munqāṭīʾ, the “severed exception”, in which the thing excepted is always put in the accusative because illā incorporates the meaning of wa-lākin-na, whatever the case ending of the general term may be. (Incidentally, in Sībawayhi’s view the term munqāṭī refers to the fact that general term and exception have different case endings and not, as has been the interpretation of later grammarians, to the fact that they belong to different categories). And third: the ʾistīṯnāʾ muṣarrāḡ, the “void exception”, in which the general term is not mentioned and the exception takes whatever case the general term would have had. This type of exceptive sentence is discussed by Sībawayhi as if it were an ʾistīṯnāʾ muttasīl. Neither this third type of exception nor the other possible constructions with illā, for instance those in which the exception precedes the general term, are relevant to the subject under discussion here⁶.

These, then, are the rules given by Sībawayhi for the construction of exceptions with illā. If we compare this to the way Mubarrad treats the same subject about sixty years later in his Muqtaḍāb, we see that his rules are more or less the same. The division of the chapter on ʾistīṯnāʾ into paragraphs differs from that in the Kitāb and some paragraphs which do occur in the Kitāb do not in the Muqtaḍāb, but the general

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principles are the same, mostly expressed in the same technical terminology.

There is, however, some disagreement between the two authors about the regency in the istiğnā’ munqatī’. Sībawayhi says that the exception is governed by the previous part of the utterance in the same way as dirhaman is governed by ‘iṣrūna in ‘iṣrūna dirhaman. In other words zayd is put in the accusative through regency of illā’. Mubarrad, on the other hand, says that the accusative occurs because illā takes the place of a verb which governs the accusative. In his view, the underlying construction is lā a’nī zaydan, “I do not mean Zayd” or astattnī minhum zaydan, “I except Zayd from them”, just as is the case with the accusative of the vocative.

Let us now take a look at the exception in Qur’ān 11.116: fa-lawlā kāna min al-qurūnī min qablīkum ūlū baqīyyatin yannahwānā ‘an al-fadasī fī l-ardi illā qalīlan mimman anḡaymā minhum, “...or if there had been, of the generations before you, men of a remainder forbidding corruption in the earth – except a few of those whom we delivered from them.”10 Here we find the exceptive particle illā followed by an accusative, qalīlan. This, of course, is visible in the consonantal text. If we apply the rules given by Sībawayhi to this construction, we see that: one, the general term is mentioned; two, the proposition containing the general term is implying a negation, because there were no men of a remainder, except etcetera; and three, the general term and the exception belong to the same category, that of human beings. Thus, on the basis of the rules there is no reason at all not to see the exception as an

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9 Mubarrad Muqtadab IV, 389-94.

istīnā’ muttaṣīl with qalīlun in the nominative, as a ṣifa or maybe even a badal. According to the rules, ills qalīlun should at least be considered correct, if not better than ills qalīlan and this is exactly what we find as the opinion of a number of other early grammarians. Farrā’, for instance, states that reading the nominative ending ʿalā niyyat al-waṣīl in this verse is correct, too. It has been said both of Ġarmî and of Māzinî that they allowed the nominative as a ṣifa in this verse. Ḥfaṣ also mentions the nominative as a correct alternative.11

However, Sībawayhi includes this verse in a separate paragraph on execeptive sentences, in which ills can only have the meaning of wa-lākīnna and thus must perforce take the accusative. Neither from the other verses of the Qur’ān cited as examples in this paragraph, nor from the explanation given on the basis of poetry and quotations from the kālam can one deduce Sībawayhi’s reasons for discussing Qur’ān 11.116 in this particular paragraph.12

I think we can understand his reasons better if we take a closer look at what Mubarrad has to say on this verse in his Muqtaḍab. What strikes us in Mubarrad’s treatment of the subject? In the first place he discusses the verse in the paragraph on execeptive sentences in which the exception is of a different category than the general term and thus cannot be a ṣifa or a badal. He does not include a paragraph on exceptions which can only take the accusative because ills is used to incorporate the meaning of wa-lākīnna. He says that he includes the verse in this particular paragraph because lawlā has the meaning of hallā “is not...?” As far as I can

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12 Sībawayhi, Kitāb II,325-29.
see, this statement does not make things any clearer. But then he continues, saying that the grammarians allow the nominative ʿalā l-wasf in this type of expression, but that they do not allow it in this particular case, because they do not want to change the consonant-al text of the Qurʾān. We have already seen that this is not true for all grammarians. It clearly shows Mubarrad's personal opinion on this matter.

Maybe the opinion ascribed by Mubarrad to the other grammarians sheds some light on the reason why Sībawayhi made an exception of Qurʾān 11.116 and put it in a separate paragraph. Although Sībawayhi does not refer to the Mushaf in this case, his statement on, for instance, the reading of Qurʾān 12.31 clearly shows his thinking on this kind of problem. In the chapter on the negative particle mā he says: wa-miṭalu dālika qawlu bīna mā hādā bašarān fi luḡati abli l-hīgāzī wa-banū tamīm yarfaʿūnahā illā ma ʿarafa kayfa hiya fī l-mushafī. This is extensively treated by Beck.

This, I think, is the heart of the matter. As I have mentioned above, referring to the valuation of the sources, according to Sībawayhi the Mushaf is the prime example of the kalām al-ʿarab. Consequently, when the sources contradict each other, he always prefers to follow the Mushaf, whereas some of his colleagues do not hesitate to offer alternatives to this text. Baalbaki in his article on the treatment of qirāʿāt, says that the difference in treatment by Sībawayhi and Mubarrad on the one hand, and by Farrāʾ and Ahfāṣ on the other, lies in the fact that both Sībawayhi and Mubarrad have a tendency to reject material which does not conform to their grammatical norms, whereas Farrāʾ and Ahfāṣ prefer to rely on what actually occurs in Beduin speech. This is also true for their pupil and colleague Ġarmī.

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13 Mubarrad, Muqradaq IV, 416. 2.
With regard to Sībawayhi’s rules, however, important as they may be to him, the case of Qur’ān 11.116 demonstrates that they can be “over-ruled” and restricted by an authoritative consonantal text which leaves no room at all for alternative readings. This approach we see again in Mubarrad’s treatment and he is even more outspoken about it than Sībawayhi. Where the latter restricts himself to an implicit rejection of variant readings, Mubarrad openly criticizes a number of qirāʻāt, as Baalbaki has pointed out\(^\text{16}\). The fact that with regard to Qur’ān 11.116 Mubarrad not only follows Sībawayhi’s line of thinking, but also provides him with a plausible reason for his obscure placing of the verse, fits in very well with the thesis that Mubarrad, well-known as a critic of Sībawayhi in his younger years, felt a need to support and promote the Kitāb Sībawayhi later on and that his contribution to the consolidation of the Kitāb as authoritative text has been great indeed\(^\text{17}\).

To test the validity of this argument, let us take a look at the treatment of another Qur’ānic verse, 4.66: mā faʻalūhu illā qalīlan minhum “they would not have done it, save a few of them”\(^\text{18}\), where we face a similar problem, or rather, its exact opposite: illā followed by a nominative, whereas according to the rules an accusative is also allowed, because the general term is mentioned, the proposition containing that term is negative and the general term is of the same category as the exception. We see that in this case Sībawayhi applies the rules, stating that one who says mā atānī al-qawmu illā abāka really ought to say mā faʻalūhu illā qalīlan minhum as well. This, of course, would mean a change in the consonantal text of the Mushaf. Nevertheless, he does not

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reject the use of the accusative in this verse, although he goes on to express a positive preference for the nominative in this type of expression\(^{19}\).

From the other early grammarians we only know Fārā‘\(\)’\(\)s opinion\(^{20}\) – he treats it the way he treats 11.116 and allows both nominative and accusative – and that of Mubarrad. In the Muqtadab, the latter discusses the verse in the context of a theoretical exposition on the use of the nominative as a *badal*, but does not mention the alternative reading with the accusative. I think we can interpret this as indirect criticism of Sibawayhi, something which is not at all unusual for Mubarrad. On the other hand, it is a well-known fact that he withdrew most of his criticism later on in his life and indeed, we see that Mubarrad in this case, too, eventually chooses to follow Sibawayhi’s lead. In one of his later works, if not his last, the *Kāmil*, he states that *illa qalīlun* is the correct reading, but that one may read *illa qalīlan* as well\(^{21}\).

So, although we are confronted with an inconsistency in what we see as Sībawayhi’s line of thought, this does not affect our opinion on Mubarrad’s historical role, on the contrary: it even confirms it. If we add to this that Mubarrad says in the *Kāmil*, referring to the discussion on the regency of *illa*, that he only offers an interpretation of Sībawayhi’s words, that he only tries to clarify things, without – and this he emphasizes – contradicting him, I think we may conclude that he felt he needed to present himself as the keeper *par excellence* of Sībawayhi’s legacy.


\(^{20}\) Fārā‘, *Ma‘āni* I, 166.