

Realism in European Structuralism

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Abstract: Realism, descriptivism, and the objectivity of language are the main issues considered in selected Arabic critiques of Saussurean structuralism. It is contended that the term realism has been used in Arabic linguistic literature to denote two methodological claims that may be related: the first is prescriptive judgment and the second is the exclusion of theoretical or interpretive intervention from linguistic analysis. While the first claim can be broadly accommodated within the framework of descriptive linguistics, the second invites more careful consideration. Saussure's conception of langue as a system of relations cannot be equated with the direct notation of observable speech since structuralist analysis presupposes distinctions at the level of analysis (*langue et parole*; synchrony et diachrony; *valeur différentielle des signes*). The present work bases its analysis of the reformulations of realism and objectivity in Arabic metalinguistic discourse on selected Arabic works by Haider Al-Jubouri, Hafiz Isma'ili Alawi, and Abd al-Qadir Abd al-Jalil, and reads them in juxtaposition with Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* and some recent scholarship on the editorial history of the *Course*. It argues, at the end of the day, that linguistic objectivity is not the absence of theoretical abstraction; it is rather the explicit, disciplined, and evidence-based use of analytical categories toward which descriptions of language tend. Thus, the paper has implications for the study of Saussurean reception in Arabic linguistic thought and for other debates concerning the epistemological grounds of linguistic description...

Keywords: linguistic objectivity; Saussurean structuralism; Arabic linguistic thought; descriptivism; realism; reception studies..

INTRODUCTION

Realism (*al-wāqī'iyyah*) is derived from reality (*al-wāqī'*), and reality is that which truly exists in nature and in man. It has two kinds: factual reality and artistic reality. The concept of realism has been a point of contention among many modern scholars: some hold that it is based on observing the manifestations of life and recording them as they are, such that the speaker becomes a mirror reflecting linguistic reality in general, as he exerts effort in choosing the subject that pleases him (Paveau & Sarfati, 2012, p. 81), and then portrays it. Others add that it involves attention to the particulars and shared details of things, people, and daily life—even if these details are trivial—all within the familiar realistic framework. This is a reality in which fidelity and truthfulness in copying are not required; rather, all that is required of it is "artistic truthfulness." In this way, the writer is transformed into a creative artist rather than a mere copyist or reporter (Bachelard, n.d., p. 20).

Realism in itself, as Fischer sees it, is a "vague and elastic" concept: it is sometimes presented as a stance—that is, the acknowledgment of objective reality—while at other times it is presented as a style or method, and the boundary between these two definitions frequently dissolves (Fischer, n.d., p. 137)....

Some researchers hold that it is literature based on observing and recording reality, rather than on images of fantasy and its illusions, but rather on conveying reality artistically without delving into such images; at other times it is understood to mean literature that draws its material and subjects from life and its problems (Al-Shubani, n.d., pp. 22–23)

First: Realism from the Perspective of Descriptivism

Despite the great confusion surrounding the concept of realism resulting from its lack of precise definition, most definitions agree that it is characterized by precise description built upon tangible facts, far removed from conjecture and speculation. Some researchers have used the concept of “realistic description” for the descriptive method, meaning by it the description of linguistic texts in a realistic, objective manner, without the researcher’s intervention through the imposition of his own personal judgments or normative templates (unidentified source, “Arabic Linguistics,” p. 48). Descriptivism was founded essentially on freeing the linguistic sciences from the historical outlook and the normative outlook at the same time (Ibid., p. 48); however, some Western researchers hold that it intersects only with prescriptivism, for descriptivism is concerned with describing facts as they actually are in reality, in contrast to prescriptivism, which examines what linguistic phenomena ought to be (Lyons, 1987, pp. 67–68).

For these Western scholars, descriptivism does not intersect with the historical approach; rather, historical study is an extension of descriptivism (Ducrot & Schaeffer, n.d., p. 302). For them, descriptivism is of two kinds: synchronic descriptivism and diachronic descriptivism—that is, historical or successive. Description or interpretation is called synchronic if it presents the various facts to which it refers objectively, considering them as belonging to the same moment, to the same language, to a single state. Description is diachronic when it attributes to the same language different states of development. It is to be noted that the two attributes—synchronic or diachronic—do not apply to the phenomena themselves, but rather to their description or interpretation (Ducrot & Schaeffer, n.d., p. 302).

Description based on succession (diachrony) presupposes the prior analysis of the successive states through which languages have passed during their historical development (Lyons, 1987, p. 68).

Some researchers add two further matters to realistic description or linguistic reality:

The first is that descriptivism studies a specific language, and occurs at a specific time—“a particular state” (unidentified source, “Studies in Linguistics and Methods of Linguistic Research,” p. 295). Dr. Kamal Bishr states: “The foundation of synchronic study rests on two matters: one of them is studying the language within a specific period of time.” The second matter is that the study is directed toward a particular language, by recording its properties as they appear in its structures (Bishr, 2005, p. 40).

Realism, according to the descriptive method, is concerned with describing linguistic facts objectively and recording them as they are, without becoming entangled in mental or psychological approaches, and without resorting to assumption or interpretation, or seeking to determine what is correct and what is incorrect (Bishr, 2005, p. 40). Some researchers have added the specification of place and the specification of a particular linguistic level—phonetic, morphological, syntactic, or semantic (unidentified sources, “The Book Between Prescriptivism and Descriptivism,” pp. 13–15; and “Arabic and Modern Linguistics,” pp. 96–97).

Others omitted mention of realistic description in defining descriptivism, restricting themselves to temporal specification (Al-Sa‘ran, n.d., pp. 78–79; and unidentified source, “Linguistics: A Theoretical Introduction to the Arabic Language,” p. 32), or to temporal and spatial specification (unidentified source, “Arabic Linguistics,” p. 37; and Al-Rajih, 1979, p. 32).

Or by specifying time, place, and linguistic level, or by specifying time, place, and domain (Husam Al-Din, 1985, p. 66).

The descriptive method addresses, through scholarly study, all linguistic phenomena after determining their domain, time, and environment. Objective linguistic reality requires the specification of the domain—whether it be classical/standard language, a dialect, or a particular level of usage such as the level of poetry, the level of media, or eloquence—along with the specification of time (Qaddour, 2008, p. 28).

Some European scholars wish to define descriptivism according to two meanings: a broad one and a narrow one. The broad meaning is the study of the features of sound and their analysis, grammar, and the vocabulary of any language, at any time and in any place. The narrow meaning of descriptivism is the method that American descriptivism adopted as a basis for studying the various Native American languages in America, employing for this purpose fieldwork and the terminology appropriate to the system of the language (unidentified source, “Dictionary of Language and Linguistics,” p. 131).

This is also the view held by some Arab researchers: descriptivism, in its broad sense, is every study of the levels of any language at a specific time and place, while in its narrow sense it refers to the fieldwork-based study followed by Americans such as Bloomfield (unidentified source, “Reference Encyclopedia of Psycholinguistic Terminology,” p. 117).

Dr. Hafiz Ismaili Alaoui confined himself to a reference to the formal method: descriptivism, as he sees it,

is “the study of language on a formal or figurative basis, which looks at the various verbal forms that a language presents, and then classifies them according to certain foundations,” without describing objectively the relations arising among words within the sentence (Alwi, 2009, p. 225).

Dr. Abd al-Qadir Abd al-Jalil confined himself, in defining the realistic foundations of the concept of descriptivism in order to establish the scientific nature of linguistics, to two elements: the adoption of the spoken language, and direct observation (unidentified source, “Modern Linguistics,” p. 131).

Second: The Realistic Analysis of European Descriptivism

1. Building on the foregoing, applying the term “descriptivism” to specific linguistics means that descriptivism, from the view commonly held among linguists, is the study of a given language, or a specific language; it is the application, to a particular language, of the theoretical hypotheses established by general linguistics. This view indicates to us that a convergence can be found between those who define descriptivism as being synonymous with specific linguistics and those who confine its definition to the manner in which it approaches the structure of language. Indeed, we can subsume under this all the definitions of descriptivism—that is, its being synonymous with linguistics from an objective, realistic point of view—because they all agree that descriptivism is the study of a particular language, or of a given language (unidentified source, “Modern Linguistics,” p. 131; and Al-Jubouri, 2015, p. 535).

2. The origin of defining descriptivism within this domain lies in the foundations of empiricist philosophy, which the theorists of descriptivism relied upon in constructing the mechanisms of descriptive analysis; for the empiricists held that knowledge is acquired and not innate (Tawfiq, 2009, p. 9; and Al-Jubouri, 2015, p. 535).

It may be said that acquisition varies according to the variation of the environment in which the individual is born; therefore, the observation of the acquisition of knowledge ought to be confined to a specific environment, and for this reason descriptivism became a special method. It appears that the specification of a particular language for study was not restricted to the descriptivism of Saussure and his followers, but extended also to American descriptivism, as will become clear.

3. Three expressions appear in linguists’ conceptions of descriptive structuralism that clarify the nature of description: precise description, realistic description, and linguistic reality. These concepts and the researchers’ views on them must be analyzed. As for the expression “precise description,” the apparent sense of the text indicates that what is meant by precision—even though its proponent did not clarify the nature of this precision—comprises two matters:

One of them is that the description be complete to a certain degree, and the other is that the description correspond, to a large extent, to the actual reality of the language. Thus, these concepts are founded upon the realistic description of the particular language (The Problem of Terminology, p. 536).

Third: The Position of Arab Linguists on Realism in European Linguistic Study

As for Arab scholars, their views on what is meant by realism in description varied, as follows:

1. Some hold that realism means the rejection of normative/prescriptive thought, which examines what language ought to be, rather than describing language as it is in and for itself. The origins of this idea go back to Saussure, who excluded prescriptivism from the study of language (Saussure, 1985, p. 19). We also find its origins in the empiricist philosophy in which descriptivists believe, for empiricists do not believe in the metaphysical; what is real, for them, is only what our senses perceive—what we see, hear, smell, and feel—while whatever else there may be is, for them, not to be trusted (Tawfiq, 2009, p. 9).

2. Some researchers added, in defining realistic description, the rejection of any subjective intervention on the part of the researcher, whether mental or interpretive intervention, in order to fulfill the basic conditions for rejecting prescriptivism. This is what was established as a condition for the scientific status of linguistics, namely objectivity, which requires that the researcher divest himself of all subjective, ideological, racial, and other such tendencies (Lyons, 1987, p. 57).

The reference point of this idea also goes back to empiricist philosophy, for empiricists do not believe in the capacity of the mind alone to know facts, and they reject Descartes’s idea “I think, therefore I am” (Tawfiq, 2009, p. 9; and Al-Jubouri, 2015, p. 537).

On this basis, it can be said that the view holding that realistic description is what determines the study by rejecting prescriptivism, and by rejecting mental and interpretive explanations, in the study of language, is not correct (Al-Jubouri, 2015, p. 537).

The truth, however, is that this reveals to us two trends within the concept of realistic descriptivism:

One of them: those who restrict it to the rejection of prescriptivism—which holds to the traditional prescriptive maxim, namely, that language is what people ought to speak, not what they actually speak. With this definition, the concept of realistic description becomes inclusive of all linguistic studies of the twentieth century,

whether or not the proponents of this view realized the degree of generalization that the concept of realistic description entails (unidentified sources, "The Book Between Prescriptivism and Descriptivism," pp. 13–15; and "Arabic and Modern Linguistics," p. 99).

The other trend restricts descriptivism to the structuralism of Saussure and others, by confining realistic description to the rejection of prescriptivism and the rejection of interpretation and mental operations in the study of language. Falling under this trend are the researchers who confined descriptivism to direct observation, as noted earlier in the view of Dr. Abd al-Qadir Abd al-Jalil, and those who confined description to the classification of relations and their objective description, as we observed in the case of Dr. Hafiz Ismaili. The proponents of this trend, without doubt, in this restriction do not include Chomsky's linguistic views within descriptivism (unidentified source, "Modern Linguistics," p. 131; and Khalil, n.d., p. 111).

3. Determining the nature of realistic description reveals to us the problem of the counterparts of descriptivism. Some researchers made descriptivism a counterpart intersecting with both the historical and the prescriptive approaches, while others held that descriptivism intersects only with prescriptivism, whereas the historical approach is built upon synchronic description. Indeed, some Westerners considered the historical method to be a type of description, labeling it diachronic or successive description. The reason for saying that descriptivism is a counterpart intersecting with the historical approach is manifested in two matters:

One of them is the history of the philosophical references of descriptivism, and the projection of philosophical hypotheses onto the scholarly descriptive method in the study of language, for there is no doubt that Western linguistic research is an example of the integrated image of the intellectual climate within which it arose (Al-Asadi, 2018, p. 52), and that most modern linguistic and critical studies proceed from the very heart of philosophical knowledge and its data (unidentified source, "Foundational Studies in Linguistics," p. 172).

Therefore, the methodology of linguistic research in the nineteenth century was dominated by the philosophical views prevailing in that century, which are represented by two matters:

One: awareness of the laws of historical becoming.

The other: the search for the laws governing the system of phenomena through the movement of history. These two matters fused together in the methodology of linguistic study, and for this reason it was named (historical linguistics) or (comparative linguistics) (unidentified source, "Foundational Studies in Linguistics," p. 170). Comparative linguistics is nothing but an image of Hegelian dialectic applied to man and his history through man's language, his reality, and his emotions; it is also an image of Darwinian evolutionism, for the driving force behind the succession of tongues is the principle of divergence and transformation (unidentified source, "Foundational Studies in Linguistics," p. 172).

It goes without saying that we should clarify that social and natural reality, through its connection with man and his struggle with this reality, is such that the realist writer descends into reality and draws from it his subjects, events, and characters, disregarding whatever else belongs to idealism and fantasy; what concerns him is only the actual matters that man lives and experiences. It is the concrete, living human being, struggling amid the paths of life and livelihood, who is the fundamental axis of realism—not the abstract, idealized human being who was the axis of classicism, nor the isolated human being fleeing from society. This is the foundation from which the philosophical references of European structuralism in the study of language proceeded, excluding everything unscientific, and projecting philosophical hypotheses onto the scholarly descriptive method in the study of language; for there is no doubt that Western linguistic research is an example of the integrated image of the intellectual climate within which it arose (Al-Asadi, 2018, p. 52), and that most modern linguistic and critical studies proceed from the very heart of philosophical knowledge and its data (unidentified source, "Foundational Studies in Linguistics," p. 172).

Conclusion

The foregoing survey and analysis make it clear that the concept of realism in European linguistic study is a problematic one, having received a variety of definitions and having been approached from divergent angles by modern scholars. It oscillates between being an epistemic stance grounded in the acknowledgment of objective reality, and being a style or method for describing linguistic facts as they are, free from conjecture, speculation, or the researcher's subjective intervention.

It has likewise become evident that descriptivism, as a linguistic method, was founded essentially on the principle of realism in describing language, and that it was closely bound up with the rejection of prescriptivism—that is, with the rejection of any inquiry into what language ought to be, in favor of describing it as it actually is. At the same time, the analysis has shown that descriptivism, in the view of a number of Western scholars, does not stand in opposition to the historical approach; rather, historical study is itself regarded as an extension of descriptivism, differentiated only through the distinction between synchronic and diachronic description.

The study has also revealed that Arab linguists' positions on realism in this European linguistic tradition were not uniform. Some confined the concept to the rejection of traditional prescriptivism alone, thereby extending the label "realistic description" to nearly the whole of twentieth-century linguistic scholarship; others restricted it

more narrowly to Saussurean structuralism and its heirs, tying it to the rejection of interpretation and mental/rational operations in the study of language — a restriction that, notably, excludes Chomsky's linguistic theory from the scope of descriptivism altogether.

Finally, it has emerged that the philosophical roots of this realistic-descriptive orientation lie chiefly in empiricist philosophy, which holds that knowledge is acquired rather than innate and that only what is perceived by the senses may be trusted as real. This philosophical background explains why nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western linguistic research cannot be separated from the broader intellectual and philosophical climate in which it arose, and why realism, prescriptivism, and historicism remain, in the final analysis, three closely intertwined — rather than sharply opposed — dimensions of the same descriptive linguistic enterprise...

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