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An Investigation into the *Nūn al-Wiqāyati* in Classical Arabic

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The article aims to explain the denomination of the *nūn al-wiqāyati* (“the *nūn* of protection”) and its real function in classical Arabic, focusing on linguistics and the theories of the Arab grammarians. Explanations of its function fall broadly into two camps. One sees its function as a *wiqāyati* (“protection”) element, while the other considers it as a personal suffix, i.e. 1st p. sg. *-nī* as an object. At the same time this paper argues for the two personal endings for the 1st p. sg. *-ī* and *-nī* in order to reach an acceptable morphological analysis. After reviewing the opinions of the classical and modern Arab grammarians about the *nūn al-wiqāyati* as an Arabic term, its original function becomes clear.

1. Introduction¹

In Arabic, the pronominal suffixes appended to the verb usually express the direct object, i.e. that of the personal pronoun. The suffixes for the accusative and those for the genitive are distinguished from one another only in the 1st p. sg. (*-ī* with substantive, *-nī* with transitive verbs). The phonetic element which differentiates the verbal affix has been defined in classical Arabic as *nūn al-wiqāyati* (“the *nūn* of protection”), which is considered a morpheme attached to the end of the perfect and imperfect verb to separate it from the suffixes. For instance, in ‘*allama-n-ī* “he taught me”; *yu’allimu-n-ī* “he teaches me”, respectively, the *nūn* “of protection” appears between the active, transitive ‘*allama* “he taught” and *yu’allimu* “he teaches” and the suffixed objective pronoun *-ī*: “me”.

In this paper I will shed light on the 1st p. sg. suffix in *maṣṣūb* “accusative” (in combination with verbs) and *maḡrūr* “oblique” (in combination with substantives, prepositions and particles) explaining its relationship with the linguistic phenomenon called *nūn al-wiqāyati* in Classical Arabic.

The study of this linguistic phenomenon will be based on the use of texts and poetry. The first hint of this issue goes back to Sībawaihi, a grammarian of Persian descent, in his *al-kitāb* (Sībawaihi, II, 359-373). Sībawaihi (died ca. A.H.180/796 A.D.) is considered one of the most prominent representatives of the Baṣran School. His *al-Kitāb*, composed in the eighth century A.D. in the city of *al-Baṣra* in southern Iraq, is the earliest known Arabic grammar. It includes a description and analysis

¹ I am deeply indebted to Professor Yūsyf Qūzī for providing me with invaluable sources. I further wish to express my thanks to Professor Vermondo Brugnatelli for his guidance.

of the old Arabic language, as well as some linguistic theories and notions. Sībawaihi was the most brilliant student of the great teacher al-Ḥalīl, whose grammatical statements are largely cited in his text; he was quoted by Sībawaihi in *al-Kitāb* up to 548 times (Ḥaddād 1998). Thus, al-Ḥalīl is considered the founder of the first bases of Arabic grammar.

Most grammarians, the first of them being al-Ḥalīl, agreed that if [yā'u l-mutakallim]² comes after a verb, it means that it comes in the *manšūb* (“accusative”) condition. In this case, the consonant *nūn* needs to be added between the verb and yā'u l-mutakallim, in order to “protect” the verb ending from an assimilation to the *kasra* (-i vowel), required by the yā, as its originates from the same nature and has a weak consonant. For this reason, the consonant *nūn* supports the *kasra* vowel while the verb “refuses” it, so that structurally and syntactically the verb keeps its form.

In other words, *nūn al-wiqāyati* can be translated as the “guarding or preventive *nūn*”, because it prevents the final vowels of the verb from being absorbed by the long vowel -ī (Wright 1981: vol: I, 101).

The verb in the perfect tense maintains its final *fathā*, for instance *kafala-n-ī* “he assured me”; while the verb in the imperfect maintains its final *ḍamma*, as *yakfulu-n-ī* “he assures me”; and the verb in the imperative or in the *maǧzūm* “jussive” maintains its final *sukūn*, as in *'akfil-n-ī* “grant me, assure me!”; *lam yakfil-n-ī* “he did not assure me”.

2. Suffix pronouns

The suffix pronouns may be attached to a verb or preposition denoting the objective governed by the word to which it is attached, or to a noun denoting the genitive/oblique (*'idāfa* or *maǧrūr*) which the noun depends on, for all the persons except the 1st p. sg. as in *'aḥī* “my brother”. In either case the suffix is attached to the full word on which the noun depends, i.e. root, formative, and termination, and therefore a final vowel or consonant, which in ordinary speech is elided as it is final, is restored before the pronominal suffix. When a suffixed pronoun is attached to a noun, the noun is thereby defined just as it would be by a following noun in annexation, traditionally called the genitive/oblique construction, for instance: *wizāratu l-'amal-i* “Ministry of work”.

² yā'u l-mutakallim , i.e. the -ī expressing the affix of the 1st p. sg. (“the speaker”).

3. Personal pronoun of the 1st p. sg. attached to nouns and prepositions and to verbs

In Classical Arabic *-ī* appears as a suffix and the final vowel of the substantive being elided, thus *'ab-ī* “my father”; but in exclamation *-ī* becomes *-i*, as *yā qaum-i* “o my people” (Qur’ān 5, 21); and in pause *-iya*, as in *kitāb-iya* “my book”, or *-ā*, as in *yā rabb-ā* “o my God”. Ibn ‘Aṣḫūr regards the use of *-iya* as the correct one.³ According to O’Leary (1923: 149) it is very probably the original form.

In Arabic the forms of this suffix 1st p. sg. are normally *-nī*, for instance *ḍaraba-nī wa-bakā wa-sabaqa-nī fa-iṣṭakā* “he beat me and cried, and went before me to complain”; or *-niya*, as in *'u'allimu-hu ar-rimāyata kulla yawmin *** fa lamma 'štadda sā'idu-hu ramā-niya* “I taught him archery everyday / and when he got good in hitting he hit me” (al-Ḥalīl: VII, 183). Sometimes in the imperative *-nī* is shortened to *-ni*, as in *ittaqū-ni* “fear me!”

As we can see, when the suffix of the 1st p. *-nī* is used to express the accusative and is attached to the verb it is different from the pronoun attached to nouns and prepositions, since it also contains the consonant *-n*. This appears as a purely phonetic addition which is called by the Arabic grammarians “the supporting *nūn*” or “the protecting *nūn*”. Among modern linguists, Brockelmann suggests that the *nūn* is used to avoid a hiatus (Brockelmann 1906: 100; Wright 1981: 96).

4. Medieval Arabic grammarians who believe that the *nūn* is for *al-wiqāyati*

Among the grammarians who believe that *nūn* is for *al-wiqāyati* I quote the following:

1. Al-Ḥalīl b. Aḥmad b. ‘Amr b. Tamīm al-Farāhīdī l-Azdī l-Yaḥmadī l-Baṣrī Abū ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān (died ca. A.H.175/791 A.D.; Sībawaihi, III, 369-373) is the first grammarian who suggested that the *nūn* is for *al-wiqāyati*, as narrated by Sībawaihi in his *al-kitāb*.

2. Ibn Ya‘īš, born in Aleppo (A.H. 553/1158 A.D.) and died there (A.H.643/1245 A.D.). In his *ṣarḥu l-mufaṣṣal*, the famous commentary on al-Zamaḥṣārī’s *mufaṣṣal*, he reported that the *nūn* was chosen due to its affinity to the weak and soft consonants (Ibn Ya‘īš 2001, II/347).

3. Ibn Mālīk, born in Jaen (Southern Spain) between (A.H. 600-601/1203-1205 A.D.), and died (A.H. 672/1274 A.D.). In his *al-‘Alfiyya* he outlined the issue in four poetic verses (Verses 68-71; Dieterici 1852: 28-30) and said:

³ For further discussions of the nouns added to *yā’u al-mutakallim*, see Ibn ‘Aṣḫūr Al-Iṣbīlī, *Ṣarḥ al-Ġumal*, ‘Alī b. ‘Abd al-Mu‘min b. ‘Aṣḫūr al-Iṣbīlī, 1998, *Ṣarḥ Ġumal al-Zaġġāġī*. Presentation by Fawwāz al-Ša‘ār; Dār al-kutub al-‘ilmyya, Bayrūt, vol. II, 197-204.

وَقَتَلْ يَا نَفْسِي مَعَ الْفِعْلِ التَّزِيمِ	***	نُونُ وَقَائِيهِ وَيَسِي قَدْ نَظِمُ
وَلَيْتَنِي فَشَا وَلَيْتَنِي نَدْرَا	***	وَمَعَ لَعَلِّ اعْكِسْ وَكُنْ مُخَيَّرَا
فِي الْبَاقِيَاتِ واضطراباً خَفَّفَا	***	مِنِّي وَعَنِّي بَعْضُ مَنْ قَدْ سَلَفَا
وَفِي لَدْنِي لَدْنِي قَلَّ وَفِي	***	قَدْنِي وَقَطْنِي الْخَذْفُ أَيضاً قَدْ يَنْفِي

“Before *yā u n-nafsi* with the verb you have to keep *nūn wiqāyatin* (prevention) and *lais-ī* has been used in poetry or rhymes,

And *layta-n-ī* is common and *layt-ī* is rare. And with *la‘alla* do the opposite and you have a choice with the rest [meaning that *la‘alla-n-ī* is common and *la‘all-ī* is rare].

Some earlier authors made *min-n-ī* and ‘*an-n-ī* lighter only in case of metrical constraints.

And *ladu-n-ī* is rarer than *ladun-n-ī* and by *qad-n-ī* and *qaṭ-n-ī* too the deletion is enough.”

The general meaning of the first verse is that before *yā u n-nafsi* (the *-ī* of the 1st p. sg.) one must add the *nūn al-wiqāyati* to the verb. “*lays-ī qad nuẓim*” refers to the possibility of omitting the consonant *nūn* from the verb *laysa*, which comes in two figures: *laysa-n-ī* o *lays-ī*.

Whereupon, in the next verse he said: this *nūn* has become a common combination with *layta*,⁴ as *layta-n-ī* “I wish”. Viceversa *layt-ī* is very rare, for instance:

ka-muniyati Ğābirin ‘d qāla layt-ī ‘uṣādifu-hu wa-‘utlifu ğulla māl-ī

“I wish I meet him (by chance) and waste most of my money” (composed by Zaid al-Ḥair al-ṬṬā’ī; al-Mālikī 2008, I, 380; al-Uṣmūnī 1998: I, 101-102).

The construction *layt-ī* “if only I” or “I wish” is not attested to in the Qur’ān; it is present only with *nūn*.

While with other words similar to *layta*, for instance *la‘alla*⁵ and analogous examples a person can choose whether to add it or not. He also reports that *min-n-ī* “from me” and ‘*an-n-ī* “from/about me” only rarely omit the *nūn*, as in the previous verse. The presence of *nūn* is rare with *ladun-n-ī* on the

⁴ *Layta*, particle, precedes sentences, or personal suffix, denoting wishes, with dependent agreement.

⁵ A reduced form or variation for ‘*alla* “perhaps, maybe” introduces sentences with dependent clauses; it occurs only as the head of complete sentences expressing a hope or expectation. When the 1st p. sg. suffix is added to *la‘alla* > *la‘all-ī* it alternates with *la‘alla-n-ī* “I may perhaps”. For further evidence and attestations, see Badawi, Carter and Gully (2004: 336).

⁶ *ladun* is an adverb of place, which means “at, by, near” with same meaning as ‘*inda* and *ladā*, but the difference between *ladun* / *ladā* and ‘*inda*, the possessed thing must be present with person; whereas, in the case of ‘*inda*, the possessed thing does not require be present with the person.

contrary we usually find *ladun-ī*, *qadn-ī* and *qaṭn-ī* have a form without *nūn al-wiqāyati* but the presence of *nūn* is more frequent, as in (al-Uṣmūnī 1998, I, 105-106):

qadn-ī min naṣr l-Ḥubaybayni qad-ī ... laysa l-'imāmu bi-l-ṣaḥīhi al-mulḥidi 'imtal'a al-ḥawḍu wa-qāla qaṭn-ī ... mahlan ruwaidan qad mala'ta baṭn-ī (Ibn-'Aqīl: 1852, 28-30).

“It is enough for me the victory of Ḥubaybayn,⁷ it is enough for me... not the avaricious and apostate leader the cistern became full of and he said it is enough for me...slowly, gently you have filled my belly”.

4. Ibn Hišām, died in Cairo (A.H. 761/1360 A.D.). In his famous book *muğnī l-labīb 'an kutub al-'a'arīb* devoted to grammatical explanations of particles, he nominated this *nūn* as *nūn al-'imād* “the supporting *nūn*” synonym to *nūn al-wiqāyati*, because it works as a sort of support to the *yā'* which is regarded as the essential portion of the suffix (Wright 1981: 101).

5. Al-'Azharī, born in Jirjā in Upper Egypt (A.H. 838/1434 A.D.) and died in Cairo (A.H. 905/1499 A.D.). See his book *al-taṣrīḥ bi-maḍmūn al-tawḍīḥ* (Al-'Azharī 2000, I, 115-122).

5. Medieval Arabic grammarians who do not believe that the *nūn* is for *al-wiqāyah*

1. Sībawāihī, the clearest and the most specific in dealing with this issue, who, despite the opinion of his teacher al-Ḥalīl, did not consider the *nūn* to protect the verb from *kasra*, but he thought that the *nūn + yā' -[nī]* as a whole was the personal suffix of the 1st p. sg. In combination with verbs, it works as an object in the accusative like the other personal suffix morphemes, but it has no “protective” function. The suffix of the 1st p. sg. is *-[nī]*, *-[niya]* and *-[n]*. Here are some examples: *'asqān*, *'asqin* are for *'asqā-nī* “he gave me water”, *'asqi-nī* “give me water!”

A summary of Sībawayhi's opinion regarding this case is the following (Sībawāihī, II, 369-373):

1.1 *nī* is the 1st p. sg. suffix pronoun in the accusative.

1.2 *yā'u l-mutakallim* (i.e. *-ī*) is the 1st p. sg. suffix pronoun in the oblique “*mağrūr*”.

1.3 The *nūn* is omitted from *nī* for haplology in some cases where it meets similar consonants.

For instance:

'inna-nī becomes *'inn-ī*, as well as the rest of its “sisters” which have a *nūn* consonant.

⁷ Ḥubaybān, an appellation, diminutive for Abdallāh b. az-Zubayr; 624–692 and his son Ḥubayb. See al-Uṣmūnī, *Ṣarḥ*, I, 105.

1.4 The *nūn* is omitted from *-nī* with *la'alla*, perhaps because of the similarity between *nūn* and *lām*.

1.5 The *-nī* stands for a noun.

But, in spite of the merits and importance of Sibawaihi's opinion, it should be noted that he neglected the function of *-nī* as a singular suffix pronoun in the oblique case in certain instances, as will be explained later.

2. Ibn Qutaybah, theologian and writer of *'adab* "literature" born in Kufa (A.H. 213/828 A.D.), died in Baghdad (A.H.276/889 A.D.). In his book entitled *Talqīn al-muta'allim fanna l-naḥw* he states very clearly that *-nī* is the 1st p. sg. suffix pronoun in accusative "*manṣūb*" and he was the first to explain explicitly, in the chapter devoted to the particles, that this *nūn* induces *naṣb* "accusative" in the verbs, analyzing the sentence: *'ataytu li-takruman-ī* "I came so that you could honor me".

li- "in order to", a purposive particle, is part of those subordinating conjunctions that cause purposive *naṣb* mood followed by the dependent imperfect verb. It often introduces a subordinate clause in order to clarify reason, purpose or action, denoted by the verb preceding it, *'ataytu*, or to indicate *irāda* "desire". Ibn Qutaybah adds also that the meaning of *li-* has the same meaning of *kay*, both particles causing *naṣb* mood (subjunctive) depending on the verb and having *fatha* as a sign (Ibn Qutayba 1986: 158; Sadan 2012: 262-270, 59-72).

6. Modern opinions

The majority of contemporary grammarians hold that *nūn* is for protection *al-wiqāyah*, while the *yā* pronoun of the 1st p. sg. is a "speaker" in the accusative "*manṣūb*" and genitive cases. Other scholars reject this opinion and support the following theses:

1. Some believe that *nūn* is just a pronoun, on the basis of its common use with the first personal pronouns *'anā* and *naḥnū*, and the second person pronouns *'anta*, *'anti*, *'antumā*, *'antum* and *'antunna*. What follows are only appendages; they are not part of the original structure, but are modifier elements for declining (e.g. 1st p. sg.) and are appointed to denote a particular implication.

2. Another opinion is that *nūn* is to prevent confusion between the *yā* of the 2nd p. sg. fem (subject suffix) and the *yā u an-naḥsi* "the *yā* of the speaker". For instance: *'ḍrib-ī-nī* "hit me-fem.", *'ḍrib-nī* ("hit me-masc."). If *nūn* were omitted from the last verb, it would become *'ḍrib-ī*. This is the opinion of Kušuk, who does not agree with the concept of *al-wiqāyah*. He absolutely rejects the idea that *nūn* "protects" the verbs from *kasra*, giving some examples ending with *kasra* not using *nūn*: *taḍribīna* "you (fem.) hit", *'ḍrib-ī al-walada* "hit (fem.) the boy". So, in his vision, the concept of protection is not

accurate and he believes that *nūn* with *yā* is simply an accusative suffix pronoun and not only a consonant (Kušk 2010: 267-268).

3. Sībawaihi's opinion is that *nī* is a morpheme that indicates the speaker, 1st p. sg., refusing to call it *nūn al-wiqāyati*. Ğabur (1980: 70-ff.) is one of the modern grammarians who agree with Sībawaihi's opinion.

According to the majority of Arab grammarians the verb accepts all the endings of the cases except *kasra*, (the mark of the oblique “*mağrūr*” case), to avoid similarity with the nouns. Nevertheless, we have the examples: *ʾiḍribī*, *taḍribīna*, respectively meaning “you hit” imperative 2nd p. sg. fem. and “you are hitting” 2nd p. sg. fem.

In sum, I do not believe the *nūn* is for *wiqāyah*. Furthermore, based on the order of the historical occurrence of the Semitic languages texts, there are two pronouns:

1. The *nī* is the 1st p. sg. suffix pronoun in accusative.
2. *yā* is the 1st p. sg. suffix pronoun in oblique.

7. Views of Western linguists

According to Nöldeke the verb or the active participle may take a pronominal object which is marked by the ending “-*nī*” (Nöldeke 1895). Bravmann considers the suffix “-*nī*” directly following the governing verb represented by the suffix of the 1st p. sg. The pronominal suffix of the 1st p. sg. in the Semitic languages appears in two forms.⁸ In the case where the suffix is added to a noun (that is, in case of the possessive suffix or genitive suffix), its form is *-ī*; in the case where it is added to a verb (that is, in the case of object suffix or accusative suffix), it appears under the form *-nī* or *-nīya*, the later form in poetry, or *-nīyah* with the “*h* silence” in pause. However, the forms of the pronominal suffixes of the 1st p. sg. *-īya* and *-nīya* are still in use under certain phonetic-morphological circumstances. Cf. for instance, as far as the possessive suffix is concerned, cases like *ʾaṣā-ya* “my stick”, *fi-yya* “in me”, *ʾala-yya* “on me”, etc. but also in the case of the object-suffix, the original form of the suffix, that is, the form with the terminal vowel *a*, is still in use in cases where the suffix is directly followed by vowelless consonant of a subsequent word. Besides, *ʾaʿtā-nīya l-kitāba* “he gave me the book”, is a structure in use. In cases where the second object of such a sentence is not represented by a noun, that is, in cases where the idea to be expressed is “he gave it to me” instead of “he gave me the book”, the ordinary form of expression is: *ʾaʿtā-nī-hi* for a more original form *ʾaʿtā-nī-hu*. However,

⁸ On this phenomenon, see also Barth (1913: 36-40) and Fischer (1972: 127).

just as the phrase *'aṭā-nī l-kitāba* represents a later development instead of the original form *'aṭā-niya l-kitāba*, thus also *'aṭā-nī-hi* represents a later development (Bravmann 1977: 183-184).

In Qur'ānic Arabic we can find both forms, as in the following verses:

الَّذِي خَلَقَنِي فَهُوَ يَهْدِينِ وَالَّذِي هُوَ يُطْعِمُنِي وَيَسْقِينِ وَإِذَا مَرِضْتُ فَهُوَ يَشْفِينِ وَالَّذِي يُمِيتُنِي ثُمَّ يُحْيِينِ

“Who created me, it is He who guides me, and provides me with food and drink, and when I get sick, it is He who cures me, who will make me die, then He will bring me to life” (Qur'ān 26: 78-81).

Therefore:

First form -ni	Second form -nī
يَهْدِينِ	خَلَقَنِي
يَسْقِينِ	يُطْعِمُنِي
يَشْفِينِ	يُمِيتُنِي
يُحْيِينِ	

Finally, I have found in the dialect of the Zaubā' tribe of Iraq the trace of the first shape as *yudrban* “he beats me”.⁹

8. Conclusions

In combination with verbs, the personal suffix, the 1st p. sg. -nī works as an object, but non-protective or supporting.

I believe that many phenomena of Arabic grammar should be reviewed. Its terms and concepts should be corrected based on newly found Semitic texts and archaeological excavation which leads us to new developments in our understanding. Therefore, some linguistic aspects of Arabic grammar are still in need of more research or review.

This can contribute to understanding languages in all their aspects. This plays an important role in the interpretation of many phenomena, including social, anthropological, historical, and linguistic ones, through the contribution of epigraphists and linguists. However, each new discovery of

⁹ To get a clear picture of the syntactic structure of the object suffix (1st p. sg.) -nī, in Arabic dialects and other Semitic languages, see Retsö (1988) and Wilmsen (2011).

archeological transcriptions provides us with updates and new sources to help us to re-draw the picture correctly.

Undoubtedly the other Semitic languages untied the knots of many ambiguous problems; for instance, the Akkadian and Ugaritic tablets have clarified many phenomena related to the Arabic language.

Abbreviations

acc.	accusative
fem.	feminine
masc.	masculine
p.	person
perf.	perfect
sg.	singular

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