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Classical Arabic is considered conservative among both the Semitic languages and variants of Arabic. Many Arabists consider it the most archaic form of Arabic and even the source of some of the modern dialects. The most archaic features of the language are its consonantal inventory and its nominal inflection (case system). Indeed for the most part these features are not attested in the modern dialects, which are considered by many linguists innovative.

In this paper I will discuss several morpho-syntactic features in modern Arabic dialects, which are not found in Classical Arabic. I will show that these features date back to earlier phases, namely before the split of the Arabic sub-branch, and were lost in the Classical language. The data presented in this paper strongly suggests that some dialects preserved important archaic features where the Classical language innovated. In other words, we cannot assume a-priori that Classical Arabic is conservative; rather, the relative archaism of any Arabic feature needs to be evaluated compared with evidence from other Semitic languages. I argue, therefore, that Classical Arabic existed in tandem with some of the existing dialects but is unlikely to be their source. I further discuss the role of standardization and prestige in preserving archaisms in non-standard variants.