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Title of research article

# German Orientalism and the Foundations of Arabic Linguistic Studies: Franz Rosenthal as a Case Study and His Intellectual Influence on Noam Chomsky

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**Abstract**

This study explores the intellectual trajectory of German Orientalism and its pivotal role in the development of Arabic linguistic studies, focusing on the works of Franz Rosenthal as a central model. German engagement with the Arabic intellectual tradition can be traced back to the Crusades, when European scholars first encountered Arabic manuscripts and scientific knowledge. Over the centuries, this engagement evolved into a systematic and scholarly discipline, wherein German orientalists devoted themselves to collecting, translating, and critically analyzing classical Arabic texts. Franz Rosenthal (1914–2003), one of the most influential orientalists of the twentieth century, distinguished himself through his contributions to Arabic philology, literature, and historical scholarship. His seminal works—including *A Grammar of Biblical Aramaic*, *Knowledge Triumphant*, and his translation of Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddimah*—demonstrate not only linguistic mastery but also a profound respect for Arab intellectual heritage.

This paper aims to highlight Rosenthal's scholarly efforts within the broader framework of German Orientalism and to investigate how his approaches shaped subsequent debates in modern linguistics. Of particular importance is the intellectual intersection between Rosenthal's philological precision and Noam Chomsky's theoretical advances in generative grammar. While their fields and methods differed significantly, Rosenthal's rigorous treatment of language as both a cultural and structural phenomenon created pathways that resonated with Chomsky's universalist vision of grammar. Through this comparative lens, the article situates Rosenthal's scholarship within both the Orientalist tradition and the global discourse on language, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the cross-cultural transmission of linguistic knowledge.

The study concludes that German Orientalism, exemplified by Rosenthal, not only preserved and disseminated Arab linguistic heritage but also indirectly contributed to the paradigmatic shifts in modern Western linguistic theory, including those advanced by Chomsky.

## Introduction:

While French and English Orientalism were among the earliest Orientalist schools, German Orientalism followed

916 – www.imcra.az.org, | Issue 11, Vol. 8, 2025
German Orientalism and the Foundations of Arabic Linguistic Studies: Franz Rosenthal as a Case Study and His Intellectual Influence on Noam Chomsky
Djilali Faci

in their footsteps, with its figures showing interest in studying the heritage created by the Arabs throughout history. The contributions of the Germans in editing, publishing, and translating Arabic and Islamic heritage exceeded those of others before them in terms of precision, objectivity, and scholarly integrity. To achieve this, they were keen to learn the Arabic language and study its literature.

## 1. The Beginning of German Interest in Arabic Heritage:

The earliest roots of contact between the Germans and the Arab-Islamic East can be traced back to the days of the Second Crusade (1147–1149 CE). The Germans participated in pilgrimages to the Holy Land alongside the Flemish, Frisians, Normans, English, and Scots. They described those lands and brought back aspects of their civilization upon returning home. Monks also participated in translation from Arabic in Andalusia.[1]

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, there was an intention to establish chairs for the study of Eastern languages in Germany, concurrent with the late founding of German universities compared to the rest of Europe. However, the sixteenth century marked the most important stage in the history of German Orientalism, as Oriental studies then received clear attention through the scholarly efforts of German figures who played a foundational role in these studies, known as professors of Eastern languages. Initially, their work focused on teaching Hebrew to theology students, with lectures on the interpretation of the Torah. Alongside this, instruction in Arabic, Syriac, and other Semitic languages began.[2]

In this century, German orientalists relied on the manuscripts of Guillaume Postel (1510–1581 CE) in their study of Eastern languages. Notable among them was Jacob Christmann (1554–1613 CE), who established a chair for the Arabic language at the University of Heidelberg. He recognized the close connection between Arabic and other sciences such as medicine and astronomy, translating *The Book of Astronomy* by Ahmad ibn Kathir al-Farghani (d. 347 AH), compiling a brief catalog of Arabic manuscripts acquired by a German nobleman during that period, writing a treatise on teaching Arabic script, and collecting some verses of the Gospel translated into Arabic for reading practice.[3]

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Johann Jacob Reiske (1716–1774 CE) devoted his life to learning Arabic and studying the history of Islamic civilization. He wrote a general study on Islamic history, published excerpts from *Majma' al-Amthal* by al-Maydani, part of the *Diwan* of al-Mutanabbi, and edited the *Mu'allaqa* of Tarafa ibn al-'Abd with the commentary of Ibn al-Nahhas.[4]

By 1818, the University of Bonn was founded, and Wilhelm Freytag Georg was appointed professor of Eastern languages. He produced an Arabic–Latin dictionary still in use in academic circles, edited and published *Diwan al-Hamasah* by Abu Tammam with al-Tabrizi's commentary and translated it into Latin, published *Al-Burda* by Ka'b ibn Zuhayr with a Latin translation, and issued a manuscript on the description of Palestine and the Levant by al-Sharif al-Idrisi, as well as *Mu'jam al-Buldan* by Yaqut al-Hamawi in six volumes with indexes and appendices.[5]

Heinrich Leberecht Fleischer (d. 1888 CE) founded the German Oriental Society, modeled after the French Asiatic Society and the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain. Many of his students were active in it, dedicating themselves to the scientific study of Arabic heritage, publishing its treasures, and continuing research in institutes and universities. It issued periodicals, held annual academic seminars, and contributed to publishing major works, such as Ibn Ya'ish's commentary on *Al-Mufassal* (d. 643 AH), Ibn 'Aqil's commentary on the *Alfiyyah* (d. 769 AH), and a translation of *Kitab Sibawayh* (d. 180 AH) with al-Sirafi's commentary (d. 368 AH).[6]

The German Oriental Society also established branches named Institutes of Oriental Antiquities, Institutes of Oriental Studies, and specialized libraries.

In Istanbul, Hellmut Ritter (d. 1971 CE) founded the Islamic Library for German Orientalists in 1918, focusing on editing Islamic—especially Arabic—texts. Its publications reached twenty-three books, including *Al-Wafi* by Salah al-Din al-Safadi (d. 764 AH) and *Mashahir 'Ulama' al-Amsar* by Muhammad ibn Hassan al-Dhabi (d. 230 AH).[7]

## 2. Franz Rosenthal:

Franz Rosenthal (d. 2003 CE) was a German-American orientalist of global renown, whose extensive contributions to the study of Arabic language, literature, and Islamic history had a significant impact on Orientalist scholarship.

917 – www.imcra.az.org, | Issue 11, Vol. 8, 2025
German Orientalism and the Foundations of Arabic Linguistic Studies: Franz Rosenthal as a Case Study and His Intellectual Influence on Noam Chomsky
Djilali Faci

He was born in Berlin, Germany, to a Jewish family in 1914. He joined the University of Berlin in 1932, studying classical and Eastern languages and civilizations. His professors included Carl Heinrich Becker, Richard Rudolf Walzer, and Hans Heinrich Schaeder. He earned his doctorate in 1935 with a dissertation on Palmyrene inscriptions under Schaeder's supervision.

Rosenthal left Germany in December 1938, moving to Sweden, then England, before relocating to the United States in 1940 to join the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, Ohio. He became a U.S. citizen in 1943 and worked during the war translating Arabic for the Office of Strategic Services in Washington.

After the war, he returned to Hebrew Union College, later joining the University of Pennsylvania in 1948 to teach Arabic. In 1956, he was appointed professor of Semitic languages at Yale University, where he remained until becoming professor emeritus in 1985. He died in 2003.

## 3. His Works in Arabic and Islamic Studies:

Rosenthal's works were characterized by prolific output, variety of subjects, and depth of analysis, all driven by a desire to understand Arabic language, literature, and Islamic history.

In history, he edited Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddimah* (d. 808 AH) and published it in three volumes, most recently issued in 2022 by Markaz Turath for Research and Studies, translated by Ahmad al-Adawi.

In the first section of the work, he examined Ibn Khaldun's biography and key stages of his life, especially his political career in both the Maghreb and the Mashriq during a critical political period. The second section discussed the content of the *Muqaddimah*, while the third dealt with the text's history, the manner in which Ibn Khaldun composed it, and a study of several manuscripts he personally examined. Rosenthal also reviewed editions of the *Muqaddimah* in both the Arab and European worlds critically, addressing earlier translations in various languages and explaining his reasons for producing a new translation.

In addition, he authored *A History of Muslim Historiography*, translated by Salih Ahmad al-'Ali and reviewed by Muhammad Tawfiq Husayn, published by Maktabat al-Muthanna in Baghdad in 1963 in cooperation with the Franklin Printing and Publishing House. This work examined various historical texts, including:[8]

- *Al-Mukhtasar fi 'Ilm al-Tarikh* by al-Kafiji (d. 879 AH)

- *Al-I'lan bi-l-Tawbikh liman Dhamma al-Tarikh* by al-Sakhawi (d. 902 AH)

- *Al-Jawahir wa-l-Durar* by al-Sakhawi

- An excerpt from *Al-Qawl al-Munbi 'an Tarjamat Ibn 'Arabi* by al-Sakhawi

- *Inba' al-Ghumr bi-Abna' al-'Umr* by Ibn Hajar (d. 852 AH)

- A chapter from *Miftah al-Sa'adah wa-Misbah al-Siyadah* by Tash Kubri Zadah (d. 968 AH)

On research methodology, Rosenthal presented *The Methods of Muslim Scholars in Scientific Research*, covering topics such as documentation and memorization, manuscript hunting, rules for correcting texts and respecting narration, collation, marginalia problems, forgery and literary theft, and many other subjects.[9]

His book *Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam* discusses in its first chapter, "Knowledge Before Knowledge," that little can be said about knowledge in pre-Islamic Arabia, where an initial concept of knowledge as the gradual acquisition of material information existed. Over time, this was replaced—or merged—with the idea of knowledge as varying degrees of perception, and eventually the view of knowledge as the highest and truest form of truth emerged. When the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ came, he shaped the concept into a fundamental tool and a divine revelation goal, paving the way for the sanctity of knowledge, which became a hallmark of Islamic civilization.[10]

918 – www.imcra.az.org, | Issue 11, Vol. 8, 2025
German Orientalism and the Foundations of Arabic Linguistic Studies: Franz Rosenthal as a Case Study and His Intellectual Influence on Noam Chomsky
Djilali Faci

In the second chapter, "Knowledge in the Revelation," Rosenthal emphasizes that doubts about knowledge vanish when approaching the Qur'an, which he describes as truly the bright light of history. He notes that the Prophet's concept of knowledge set Islamic intellectual life on a path from which it never deviated, with later influences rarely adding new ideas to the Prophet's intellectual framework or changing its course.

In the third chapter, "The Word 'Ilm," Rosenthal observes that in Islamic literature it is often difficult to determine whether the term refers to both worldly and religious knowledge, or religious knowledge alone; likewise, whether it means abstract knowledge or a specific branch of learning. He notes that for Muslims, such distinctions rarely held the same importance as they did for non-Muslims, which is a distinctive feature of the Muslim concept of knowledge and their view of its singular form as truly representing abstract knowledge.

In Chapter Four, "Definitions of Knowledge," he saw that definitions and examples held a significant place in Islam, in agreement with the ancient and simple Arab concept of knowledge. They were needed both in philosophy and in philology. Sufism, with its constant commissioning of terms for meanings and meanings for terms, was especially fond of them. Such definitions always provide a useful review of the various prevailing opinions on any given issue. Explanation and elaboration are necessary to understand these definitions correctly, yet they often remove the haze of confusion that arises from trivialization, presenting many definitions of knowledge in Islamic thought.

As for Chapter Five, "Knowledge is Islam (Theology and Religious Knowledge)," he saw that the modern treatment of knowledge served two purposes: the first—and more important—was to clarify the correct method and teaching approaches to be followed in the study of hadiths, and the second was to highlight the essential relationship between knowledge and faith in the true religion, since knowledge was considered an essential part of it. For scholars of hadith, knowledge was the key to both theorizing and practice in Islam. He added that knowledge and faith were equated in the Qur'an, yet later generations of Muslim thinkers did not neglect to delve into and debate this equality, as it was necessary to verify whether knowledge and faith truly corresponded, and to define the best way to describe the relationship between them. This involves a debate between rational or materialist modes of knowledge and understanding, and irrational or metaphysical ones. In his view, the divine attribute of knowledge, as well as the two names "ʿAlīm" (All-Knowing) and "ʿĀlim" (Knower) among the Most Beautiful Names of God, cannot be separated from His other attributes and names.

In Chapter Six, "Knowledge is Light (Sufism)," the author found it easy to sense the authority of the concept of knowledge in the works of Ibn ʿArabī, as in Sufism as a whole. Despite the Sufis' opposition to both juristic and theological thought and their views on knowledge, and their rejection of any rational definition of knowledge, they found themselves, throughout their history, obliged in one way or another to revere both, and also to view Sufism primarily as a methodological science, with other aspects such as gnosis and enlightenment coming second.

Rosenthal then addressed in Chapter Seven, "Knowledge is Thought (Philosophy)," the duality of theology and the Sharia, concluding that both were pillars of Islam, and that it could be said theology and the Sharia laid down the structural boundaries that distinguished Muslim society from others. What is noteworthy is that both were considered, above all, sciences, and that people chose to add the word "ʿilm" (knowledge) to each. Scholars—in the view of the representatives of theology and the Sharia first, and of Muslims in general later—were those belonging to the educated classes, who regulated the religious affairs and the civil aspects of political life. Yet this was not merely knowledge of facts, but knowledge based on a demonstrable epistemic foundation.

Rosenthal also stated in Chapter Eight and final chapter, "Knowledge is Society (Literature)," that the relationship between knowledge and action, and its effects on the life of the individual, represents the true measure of the value of any society. Another relationship that shapes human civilization, more formal and more narrowly defined, is that between knowledge and education. This relationship in Islam is characterized by a combination of knowledge and literature on one hand, and of knowledge, teaching, and study on the other. Knowledge was considered the result of study and education in all its aspects. Therefore, it was expected that knowledge, and also the root ʿ-l-m, would be central to systematic educational writings in Islam. The influence of knowledge on literary works is not entirely clear, owing to the broad range of meanings of the word "adab" itself. The man of letters was the educated man; what matters here is to what extent this equated to "knower" or "scholar."

In addition, there are other works of his related to the Arab and Islamic heritage. Their titles are:

919 – www.imcra.az.org, | Issue 11, Vol. 8, 2025
German Orientalism and the Foundations of Arabic Linguistic Studies: Franz Rosenthal as a Case Study and His Intellectual Influence on Noam Chomsky
Djilali Faci

Sci. Educ. Innov. Context Mod. Probl.| ISSN p (e): 27900169; 27900177

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- The Concept of Freedom in Islam before the 19th Century

- The Translation of al-Ṭabarī's History into English

- A Study on Humor and Jokes in Early Islam

- Hashish in Medieval Islamic Society

- Sweeter than Hope: Complaint and Hope in Medieval Islam

- Gambling in Islam

- Suicide in Islam

- The Individual versus Society in Islam

### 4. Between Rosenthal and Chomsky:

As previously mentioned, Franz Rosenthal studied under many professors at the University of Berlin, including Carl Heinrich Becker, Richard Rudolf Walzer, and Hans Heinrich Schäder. When he settled in America, he began teaching Arabic. Many researchers have mentioned that Noam Chomsky became acquainted with Arabic grammar through his studies with Rosenthal. We can list these testimonies as follows:

### 4.1. Mazen al-Waʿr's Interview:

Mazen al-Waʿr conducted an interview with Chomsky on January 31, 1980, and sent its text for publication in the Algerian Linguistics Journal. He mentioned among the reasons for sending what he had recorded from this interview that he had heard ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Ḥāj Ṣāliḥ (d. 2017), when he was a student of his at the University of Damascus, say that Chomsky was somewhat influenced by the Arab linguistic tradition.

The fifth question in this interview was about Chomsky's view of the efforts of Arab linguists in linguistics in earlier times. Chomsky replied: "Before I began studying general linguistics, I worked on some research related to Semitic linguistics. I still remember studying the *Ājurrūmiyya* many years ago—I think more than thirty years—and I studied this with Professor Franz Rosenthal."[11]

### 4.2. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Ḥāj Ṣāliḥ's Testimony:

ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Ḥāj Ṣāliḥ delivered a paper at a symposium on the development of linguistics in the Arab world organized by UNESCO in Rabat from April 1 to 11, 1987. The paper is included in his book *Research and Studies in Arabic Linguistics*, in which he confirmed that Chomsky received his knowledge of the Arabic language from Rosenthal, saying: "We must draw the attention of our fellow linguists to the fact that [Chomsky] learned much about Arab linguistic theories and concepts, through his study of Hebrew grammar as formulated by Jewish rabbis in the Middle Ages, as well as through his study of the *Ājurrūmiyya* with his teacher Rosenthal."[12]

### 4.3. Ḥilmī Khalīl:

Ḥilmī Khalīl (d. 2010), in his translation of John Lyons' *Chomsky's Linguistic Theory*, conveyed Chomsky's statement mentioned by Mazen al-Waʿr in his previous interview[13], and in turn confirmed Chomsky's close association in his youth with the Arabic language and its grammar, just as he was closely connected with the Hebrew language.

### 4.4. ʿAbduh al-Rājiḥī's Lecture:

ʿAbduh al-Rājiḥī (d. 2010) gave a public lecture at the Literary Club in Riyadh, in which he mentioned Chomsky's influence by Arabic grammar. This prompted Ḥamza Qablān al-Muzainī to contact Chomsky. Al-Muzainī, a

920 – www.imcra.az.org, | Issue 11, Vol. 8, 2025
German Orientalism and the Foundations of Arabic Linguistic Studies: Franz Rosenthal as a Case Study and His Intellectual Influence on Noam Chomsky
Djilali Faci

professor of linguistics at King Saud University in Riyadh, had made scholarly efforts in translating Chomsky's works into Arabic. He published the correspondence in *Al-Riyadh* newspaper.

Al-Muzainī said: I sent him a letter asking about what I had heard from Dr. ʿAbduh al-Rājiḥī, who confirmed in a public lecture at the Literary Club in Riyadh that Chomsky had studied Arabic grammar, and that—in al-Rājiḥī's view—he had studied Sībawayh's *Kitāb*, and read the studies of the German linguist von Humboldt, who knew Arabic grammar. Al-Rājiḥī also confirmed that there was an Arab researcher, Dr. Yūsuf ʿAwn, who taught Chomsky Sībawayh's *Kitāb*.

Chomsky responded to al-Muzainī's questions in a letter dated May 28, 1989, saying in the part relevant to this topic:

"You ask about the influence of traditional Arabic grammar on my method of studying language. Most of what you have heard is partially correct, except for that which concerns von Humboldt, whose works I did not read until the 1960s. My father was a scholar of medieval Hebrew grammar, and he produced the standard edition of the grammar book authored by [the Andalusian Jewish grammarian] David Qimḥi. I was well acquainted in my early youth with my father's works, and at that time I also studied a little of the historical studies on the grammar of Semitic languages. The influence of Arabic grammar [on Hebrew grammar] was great, as is well known. This context had a direct and significant influence on my early studies. In fact, my undergraduate and master's theses, which I completed at the University of Pennsylvania on the morphophonemic systems of Modern Hebrew, were greatly influenced by these studies, and were partly modeled on concepts taken from historical Semitic linguistics and traditional grammar. These two theses were the earliest models of contemporary generative grammar, although they were not published until years after they were completed.

When I entered the University of Pennsylvania in 1945, I immediately began studying Arabic with Giorgio Levi Della Vida, who was a very distinguished Arabist. After Della Vida retired, I studied with Franz Rosenthal. With Rosenthal I took one semester of Arabic, and I was the only student in that class. In it, I studied with him Sībawayh's *Kitāb*, and perhaps this is the basis of the rumor you heard [that someone taught Chomsky Sībawayh's *Kitāb*]. Zellig Harris, under whom I studied [linguistics], had completed his major works in historical Semitic linguistics, and I had also studied what he wrote on this subject. It is always difficult to trace such matters precisely, but there are certainly strong possibilities for such influence."[14]

Chomsky also wrote to him in a letter dated December 17, 1990, after al-Muzainī had sent him a copy of the translation of his book *Language and Problems of Knowledge*, including the following text:

"Although in an early period of my life I knew enough Arabic to be able to understand what was published in a newspaper or novel (my actual study, however, was limited to pre-Islamic poetry and the grammatical works written in the eighth century CE [second century AH]; perhaps here I am referring to Sībawayh's *Kitāb*), that was forty years ago, and now I do not trust my knowledge [of Arabic]. But I will lend the book [the translation] to one of my colleagues or friends [to read it]."

We note in this interview Chomsky's mention of Sībawayh's *Kitāb*, without mentioning the *Ājurrūmiyya* as in Mazen al-Waʿr's interview, and between the two interviews—clearly—nine years had passed. Al-Muzainī posted on the X platform on September 5, 2019: "Today I sent a message to Chomsky asking him about what was stated in the interview by the late Mazen al-Waʿr, published in the Algerian Linguistics Journal, in which Chomsky was quoted as saying that he studied the *Ājurrūmiyya* with Rosenthal. He replied that this was not true and that he had not studied the *Ājurrūmiyya*, but had studied Sībawayh for four months with Rosenthal."[15]

In any case, these testimonies as a whole indicate, in general, Chomsky's familiarity with the efforts of Arab grammarians on one hand, and on the other, they confirm Rosenthal's standing and skill in Arabic studies. Whether he taught the *Ājurrūmiyya* as in Mazen al-Waʿr's account, or Sībawayh's *Kitāb* as in Ḥamza al-Muzainī's account, both indicate the extent of Rosenthal's familiarity with the issues of Arabic grammar.

## Conclusion:
This study arrived at the following results:

921 – www.imcra.az.org, | Issue 11, Vol. 8, 2025
German Orientalism and the Foundations of Arabic Linguistic Studies: Franz Rosenthal as a Case Study and His Intellectual Influence on Noam Chomsky
Djilali Faci

• The sixteenth century CE was the most important stage in the history of German Orientalism, as Oriental studies witnessed clear interest through the scholarly efforts of German figures who played a foundational role in these studies, and who were known as the professors of Oriental languages.

• Franz Rosenthal accomplished many and diverse works in various fields. He edited and published Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddimah* in three volumes, and authored a book titled *A History of Muslim Historiography*, translated by Saleh Ahmad Al-Ali, revised by Muhammad Tawfiq Hussein, and published by Al-Muthanna Library in Baghdad in 1963 in cooperation with the Franklin Printing and Publishing Institute.

• In the field of research methodology, he presented his book *The Methods of Muslim Scholars in Scientific Research*, in which he addressed various topics such as documentation and preservation, the search for manuscripts, the ethics of text editing and respect for narration, collation, the problem of marginalia, forgery, and literary plagiarism.

• As for his book *Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam*, Rosenthal discussed knowledge in the Arabian Peninsula before Islam, then knowledge in the Qur'an, the relationship between knowledge and faith, its relation to philosophy and literature, and concluded the book with a discussion of knowledge in the educational process.

• Rosenthal rendered great service in introducing the Western world to the Arab heritage in the fields of literature, history, and philosophy. Perhaps his greatest contribution was linking American researchers to the Arabic language, foremost among them Noam Chomsky.

## Acknowledgment

## Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest associated with this study.

## Funding

## Ethical Considerations

The study is based on secondary literature review and textual analysis. It does not involve human participants, personal data, or experimental procedures, and thus complies with the highest academic ethical standards.

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922 – www.imcra.az.org, | Issue 11, Vol. 8, 2025
German Orientalism and the Foundations of Arabic Linguistic Studies: Franz Rosenthal as a Case Study and His Intellectual Influence on Noam Chomsky
Djilali Faci

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923 – www.imcra.az.org, | Issue 11, Vol. 8, 2025
German Orientalism and the Foundations of Arabic Linguistic Studies: Franz Rosenthal as a Case Study and His Intellectual Influence on Noam Chomsky
Djilali Faci

Sci. Educ. Innov. Context Mod. Probl.| ISSN p (e): 27900169; 27900177

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¹⁴ Al-Riyadh newspaper, issue dated May 28, 1989.
¹⁵ Tweet published on September 5, 2019, at 9:33 PM.

924 – www.imcra.az.org, | Issue 11, Vol. 8, 2025
German Orientalism and the Foundations of Arabic Linguistic Studies: Franz Rosenthal as a Case Study and His Intellectual
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