

Speech and Writing in Medieval Arabic Linguistics: The Classifications of Al-Jāḥiẓ and Ibn Wahb Al-Kātib

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ABSTRACT

Purpose and problem: This article analyses two classifications produced by medieval Arabic scholars: the five modes of signification in al-Jāḥiẓ's *Kitāb al-bayān wa-l-tabyīn* and the four modes in Ibn Wahb al-Kātib's *al-Burhān fī wujūh al-bayān*. Such classifications are usually read within the history of rhetoric. This article shows that they answer a different question altogether: through what material medium does meaning travel from a speaker to a listener? Seen in that light, the two classifications stand closer to modern linguistics than to the later Arabic science of tropes.

Method: The defining passages of the two works were read closely; the distinguishing criteria of each mode were drawn from the wording of the texts themselves; the two lists were compared criterion by criterion; and the outcome was set against modern orality–literacy theory.

Results and conclusion: Three findings emerged. First, al-Jāḥiẓ treats writing not as a copy of speech but as its equal: “the pen is one of the two tongues.” Second, Ibn Wahb takes a different route. He turns the modes into an ordered sequence and defines writing by what it does: writing reaches the person who is distant and absent. Third, orality–literacy theory can be applied to the Arabic material only after three corrections. The general conclusion is that the spread of writing in Arabic culture did not displace speech; the two shared the work between them and coexisted for a very long time.

Keywords: Semiotics of writing; orality and literacy; medium of communication; medieval Arabic linguistic thought; al-Jāḥiẓ; discourse studies; oration (*khiṭāba*); epistle (*risāla*)

1. INTRODUCTION

A person conveys a thought to another in one of two ways: by speaking or by writing. The observation is ordinary enough; the questions behind it are not. Is a spoken word the same phenomenon as a written one? What changes in a text when it passes from speech into script?

Modern scholarship has debated these questions at length, but the answers usually rest on twentieth-century theory. Medieval Arabic scholars, however, had worked out an answer of their own eleven centuries earlier. Specialists in Arabic linguistics and literary studies have almost always examined that answer inside rhetoric, the art of oratory and the science of *balāgha*, treating it as an early form of *‘ilm al-bayān*.

Recent Arabic scholarship has begun to question this placement. Abū Ṭālib (2016) sets al-Jāḥiẓ's list beside Ibn Jinnī's types of signification, while al-‘Umarī (1999: 191-194) shows that in al-Jāḥiẓ the cognitive and the persuasive functions of *bayān* have not yet separated, so that reading him through the later theory of tropes is an anachronism. What has not been examined systematically is the possibility that both classifications answer a question of an entirely different order.

Neither al-Jāḥiẓ nor Ibn Wahb al-Kātib singles out tropes as a separate category. These two celebrated scholars are answering a different question: through what material medium does meaning travel from a speaker to a listener? Three further questions follow.

1. **Question 1:** On what basis are the two classifications built: on the content of signs, or on the material medium through which meaning is transmitted?
2. **Question 2:** What criteria do the two texts use to separate the acoustic medium from the graphic one, and how do these criteria change from the earlier classification to the later?

3. **Question 3:** How far does the orality-literacy conception advanced by Ong (2002) fit this material, and what corrections does the Arabic evidence require of it?

The field in which the difference can be shown in practice is the transition in Arabic prose from the spoken *khiṭāba* to the written *risāla*. The criteria drawn from the two classifications are tested on that material in the sections that follow.

2. METHOD

2.1. *Materials*

The study rests on two primary sources. The first is the theoretical opening of al-Jāḥiẓ's (d. 255/868) *Kitāb al-bayān wa-l-tabyīn*, cited from the edition of 'Abd al-Salām Muḥammad Hārūn. The second is Ibn Wahb al-Kātib's (fourth/tenth century) *al-Burhān fī wujūh al-bayān*, published under the editorship of Aḥmad Maṭlūb and Khadīja al-Ḥadīthī (1967); the edition of Ḥifnī Muḥammad Sharaf (1969) was also used. These two works were chosen because each sets out the means of expression as a precise and closed list. Such lists are not incidental remarks made in passing but statements of a considered theoretical position, and no other work of the period presents the means of expression with comparable precision and system.

Secondary Arabic sources were drawn on only where the principal passages needed explanation or clarification: al-Qalqashandī for the terminology of written discourse as it later took shape (al-Qalqashandī 1913: 35-58); Ṣafwat (1937) for the earliest corpus of epistles; Ḍayf for the division of Arabic artistic prose into oration and chancery writing (Ḍayf 1983: 15) and for the growth of secretarial practice; and al-Jundī for evidence that writing was known in the Jāhiliyya and for the range of its use (al-Jundī 1966: 203-221).

2.2. *Theoretical basis*

Two concepts carry the argument. A medium is the physical environment in which a sign is realised, either sound or script. A mode of expression is the linguistic shape adapted to that

environment. The distinction matters because when the medium changes, the mode of expression changes with it. In face-to-face communication, meaning is carried not by words alone but also by tone of voice, facial expression, gesture and the situation itself. In writing these resources are absent, and their work must be done instead by the choice of words, the construction of sentences and the internal ordering of the text. Ong (2002) puts the point more sharply still, reading writing not as a neutral device for transferring speech to paper but as a technology that restructures thought. Bakhtin (1986: 61-62) explains the same process in terms of genre: complex written genres absorb simple oral ones and rework them.

2.3. Procedure

The analysis proceeded in four stages. First, the defining passages of the two works were read closely and the lists extracted verbatim. Second, the distinguishing criteria of each mode were identified: what its medium is, whether it is transient or durable, and whether the participants must share a place. This was done on the evidence of the texts themselves rather than of later commentary. Third, the two lists were compared criterion by criterion and the outcome tabulated. Fourth, the criteria so obtained were set against Ong's theory and against the studies of Schoeler (2008), Qutbuddin (2024) and Jones (2012), and every point of divergence was recorded as a required correction.

Arabic authors and titles are given in a single system of transliteration in the running text and in the reference list alike. Arabic quotations appear in the original script, accompanied by transliteration and translation. All translations from Arabic are my own.

3. RESULTS

3.1. *Al-Jāḥiẓ's definition of bayān*

Al-Jāḥiẓ opens the theoretical section of *Kitāb al-bayān wa-l-tabyīn* with an unexpected definition. He does not ask what *bayān* is; he asks what *bayān* does.

(1)

البيان اسم جامع لكل شيء كشف لك قناع المعنى، وهتك الحجاب دون الضمير، حتى يفضي السامع إلى حقيقة... لأن مدار الأمر والغاية التي إليها يجري القائل والسامع إنما هو الفهم والإفهام.

al-bayānu ismun jāmi ‘un li-kulli shay’ in kashafa laka qinā ‘a l-ma ‘nā, wa-hataka l-ḥijāba dūna l-ḍamīr, ḥattā yufḍiya l-sāmi ‘u ilā ḥaqīqatih... li-anna madāra l-amri wa-l-ghāyata llatī ilayhā yajrī l-qā ‘ilu wa-l-sāmi ‘u innamā huwa l-fahmu wa-l-ifhām.

Bayān is a collective name for anything that uncovers the substance of meaning for you, lifting its veil and disclosing the inner thought, so that the listener may reach its reality... because the pivot of the matter, and the end toward which speaker and listener alike are running, is nothing other than understanding and making understood. (al-Jāḥiẓ 1985: 1, 75-76)

Two features of this definition bear on Question 1. It is oriented toward the listener: the measure of success is understanding, not formal correctness. And it privileges no medium: whatever achieves the aim counts as *bayān*. These two features are precisely what allow the list that follows to place vocal and non-vocal signs in a single series.

3.2. The five modes and their criteria

(2)

جميع أصناف الدلالات على المعاني من لفظ وغير لفظ خمسة أشياء لا تنقص ولا تزيد: أولها اللفظ، ثم الإشارة، ثم العقد، ثم الخط، ثم الحال التي تسمى نisba.

jamī ‘u aṣṣnāfi l-dalālāti ‘alā l-ma ‘ānī min lafẓin wa-ghayri lafẓin khamsatu ashyā ‘a lā tanquḥu wa-lā tazīd: awwaluhā l-lafẓ, thumma l-ishāra, thumma l-‘aqd, thumma l-khaṭṭ, thumma l-ḥālū llatī tusammā niṣba.

All the classes of signification of meanings, whether by utterance or by something other than utterance, are five, neither fewer nor more: first the utterance, then the gesture, then the numerical sign, then the script, then the state that is called *niṣba*.” (al-Jāḥiẓ 1985: 76-80)

The list is closed, and deliberately so. “Neither fewer nor more” is not ornament but a theoretical claim that the inventory is complete. Applying the procedure described above yields the following picture. *Lafz* is realised through sound and is transient; it requires the listener to be present. *Ishāra* is realised through sight and is likewise transient; being seen is necessary, being heard is not. *‘Aqd* converts quantity into a conventional numerical sign. *Khaṭṭ* inscribes meaning in a durable trace and cancels the requirement of presence altogether. *Niṣba* is the state of the object itself: it signifies without a word and without a gesture.

Three criteria therefore run through the list: whether the medium is acoustic or visual; whether the expression is transient or durable; and whether the participants must share a place. What the classification does not do is equally instructive for Question 1. It does not sort signs by degree of resemblance, and it does not divide discourse into genres.

3.3. *The status of writing*

Within the same section al-Jāḥiẓ pauses over writing. Having cited the Qur’ānic verse on the pen, he closes with a brief conclusion.

(3)

ولذلك قالوا: القلم أحد اللسانين.

wa-li-dhālika qālū: al-qalamu aḥadu l-lisānayn.

And for that reason they said: the pen is one of the two tongues.

(al-Jāḥiẓ 1985: 77-78)

The element that deserves particular attention here is the dual form of the word for tongue, *lisānayn*. Writing is not called a copy of speech, nor its auxiliary, but one of two linguistic instruments of equal standing. At the same time al-Jāḥiẓ records that their functions are not identical: sound works when the participants share a situation, whereas writing reaches the person who is distant and not present.

3.4. *Ibn Wahb al-Kātib's classification*

The second classification comes from *al-Burhān fī wujūh al-bayān*. For a long time this work was published under the title *Naqd al-nathr* and attributed to another Arabic philologist, Qudāma b. Jaʿfar. Twentieth-century textual scholarship corrected the attribution, and both modern critical editions treat the question of authorship as settled (Ibn Wahb al-Kātib, 1967, 1969).

(4)

البيان على أربعة أضرب: بيان الاعتبار، وبيان الاعتقاد، وبيان العبارة، وبيان الكتاب الذي يبلغ من بُعد وغاب.

al-bayānu ʿalā arbaʿ ati adrub: bayānu l-iʿtibār, wa-bayānu l-iʿtiqād, wa-bayānu l-ibāra, wa-bayānu l-kitābi lladhī yabluḡhu man baʿuda wa-ghāb.

Bayān is of four kinds: the *bayān* of observation, the *bayān* of inner conviction, the *bayān* of verbal expression, and the *bayān* of writing, which reaches the one who is distant and absent.” (Ibn Wahb al-Kātib, 1969, p. 26)

Ibn Wahb removes gesture and the numerical sign from al-Jāhīz’s list as independent modes and puts in their place the mental stage that precedes speech. The four kinds consequently form not a simple list but a chain: first the visible state of things, then the ripening of a thought in the heart, then its utterance through the tongue, and finally its commitment to writing. Two consequences of this arrangement are important. Writing is no longer one of five modes but the last link of a chain. And it is defined not by its medium but by its function, as that which “reaches the one who is distant and absent.” The definition, in other words, is not about the medium itself but about the problem the medium solves.

3.5. *Comparing the two classifications*

Placing the two lists side by side brings the operative criteria into view. The comparison is set out in Table 1.

Table 1. *Criteria in the two medieval Arabic classifications*

<i>Criterion</i>	<i>Al-Jāhiz (five modes)</i>	<i>Ibn Wahb (four modes)</i>
Basis of the classification	Medium of the sign and conditions of reception	A chain running from perception to writing
Modes listed	<i>laf</i> □, <i>ishāra</i> , <i>‘aqd</i> , <i>khaṭṭ</i> , <i>ḥāl</i> (<i>niṣba</i>)	<i>i’ tibār</i> , <i>i’ tiqād</i> , <i>‘ibāra</i> , <i>kitāb</i>
Mental stage	Absent	Present as an independent stage (<i>i’ tiqād</i>)
Place of writing	Equal to sound (“one of the two tongues”)	Last link of the chain; defined by its reach to the absent
Gesture and numeral	Independent modes	Subsumed under <i>ḥāl</i>
General orientation	Descriptive	Functional

The criterion that this comparison brings forward, whether the addressee is present or at a distance, is preserved in later Arabic scholarship as well. When al-Qalqashandī distinguishes *kitāba*, *inshā’*, *tarassul* and *tawqī’*, he separates them not by subject matter but by addressee and situation (al-Qalqashandī 1913: 35-58). The earlier discussion in Ibn Wahb proceeds on exactly the same basis (Ibn Wahb al-Kātib 1967: 191, 193).

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. *Redistribution of the functional load*

The criteria identified above have a direct consequence for language. When a communicative task moves from the acoustic medium to the graphic one, the resources of voice, gesture and situation fall away, and their share of the meaning must be carried by the choice of words, the construction of sentences and the ordering of the text. It follows that in a culture only now moving into writing, the earliest written texts will retain the marks of oral performance, such as formulae of address, *saj’* and parallel constructions, repetitions and rhetorical questions, even after the performance itself has gone. The earliest Arabic epistles confirm this (Ṣafwat 1937). What Ong called oral residue is, in linguistic terms, precisely this.

4.2. *Ong's theory and three necessary corrections*

Ong (2002: 31-77) ties the distinctive features of oral speech to the conditions under which it operates. In a spoken exchange the listener cannot turn back and re-read a thought as one does on a page. Oral speech therefore develops devices that help to deliver a thought and to lodge it in the listener's memory: simple sentences arranged in sequence, ready-made phrases and formulae, and repetition. Tried and familiar ways of putting things are preserved rather than replaced. Thoughts tend to be expressed in connection with a particular person, event or situation rather than in abstract terms. The immediate contact between speaker and listener makes the speech emotional and affecting. Memory too adapts to practical need: what is required and repeatedly used is what is best retained. None of this is accidental; it follows from the conditions and possibilities of spoken exchange.

All of these features can be observed in the earliest forms of Arabic prose as well. Four of Ong's observations bear directly on the present material: his remarks on the patterns that aid memory (Ong 2002: 34-35), on the conservative character of oral tradition (pp. 40-41), on writing's early use for administrative rather than creative ends (pp. 84-85), and on the effect of writing upon human thought (pp. 80-82).

In answering Question 3, however, Ong's theory cannot be applied to early Arabic prose without qualification. Three corrections must be made before it is used.

4.2.1. *First correction: Literacy in the Jāhiliyya*

Ong's notion of primary orality cannot be applied in full to the Arabs of the Jāhiliyya. They knew writing and used it for commercial documents, treaties and certain letters (al-Jundī 1966: 203-221; Schoeler 2008: 16). The question here is therefore not whether writing existed at all, but in which domains it was used.

4.2.2. *Second correction: Writing and religion*

In the wider spread of writing, the religious factor mattered more than the administrative one. The recording of the Qur'ān raised

the standing of writing considerably. It did not, however, abolish the tradition of oral delivery and memorisation; on the contrary, the oral and the written forms complemented each other for a long time (Schoeler 2008: 18). For this reason Ong's model of a step-by-step passage from orality to literacy does not fully account for a situation in which both forms are present at once.

4.2.3. *Third correction: The original function of writing*

The third correction is the most consequential. In the beginning, writing was not a means of bringing a text to a wide audience. As Schoeler (2008: 18) shows, the way poetry reached its public differed fundamentally from the recording of contracts and documents: the text circulated by being recited aloud, and this remained the usual practice long after written collections had begun to be compiled.

4.2.4. *The main implication*

The fact that a text has been written down does not automatically make it a written work. A speech delivered orally does not change its nature the moment it is put on paper; it remains speech that has been recorded.

For this reason it is not right to sort the earliest Arabic oratorical texts simply into oral and written. Qutbuddin (2024: 220) likewise treats early Arabic oratory as a blend of the two: these orations reached us on paper, she observes, but they were not created as written texts and stand between orality and writing, nearer the oral end. In Jones's (2012) monograph, sermon texts preserved from later periods are similarly seen as the product of an interaction between live performance and writing. In such texts, oral performance and written record are inseparable.

4.3. *Conditions of the shift to writing*

The factors at work in this process fall into two groups.

4.3.1. *General factors, common to many cultures*

1. the simplification of the script and of learning it;
2. cheaper writing materials;
3. the need to govern at a distance;

4. the requirement that sacred and legal texts be preserved unchanged;
5. instruction anchored in books, and the emergence of the notion of authorship.

4.3.2. *Factors specific to the Arabic setting*

1. The Qur'ānic factor. Its recording gave writing religious weight and standing, while oral recitation remained obligatory.
2. The expansion of the state. Written orders became the only practicable means of governing large territories, and an administrative style took shape (Ḍayf 1983: 108-109).
3. The *isnād* system. Reliability was tied not to a written copy but to an unbroken chain of oral hearing.
4. The poetic tradition. A powerful body of poetry transmitted orally through reciters was maintained.

4.3.3. *The general and the specific compared*

The general outcome is that writing detaches a text from its situation and makes it self-standing. A distance opens between author and reader, re-reading becomes possible, and the structure of the text grows stable. What is specific to the Arabic setting is the direction of the process. Writing is usually held to push speech aside; in the Arabic material the two divided the work between them and lived side by side for a long time. Writing served to store and transmit; oral performance served to authenticate, to confer authority and to persuade. The long survival of the marks of oral performance in early Arabic prose is explained precisely by this division of labour.

4.4. *Implications for khiṭāba and risāla*

The criteria identified here provide a consistent basis for distinguishing the two central kinds of early medieval Arabic prose. *Khiṭāba* and *risāla* are separated not by subject matter but by the conditions of their production and reception: whether the addressee is present or distant; whether the expression is transient or durable; and whether the resources of performance are available. The formal features shared by the two, such as

formulae of address, *saj*‘ and parallel constructions, are explained within the same framework: when the resources of performance disappear, their work moves inside the text. The historical and genetic relation between the two genres calls for a separate study in the source tradition and lies beyond the scope of this article.

4.5. *Limitations*

The analysis is confined to two primary texts and to the criteria they state openly; other works of the period may encode further criteria not visible here. A fuller account would require a quantitative comparison of securely dated oral and written corpora, which the present state of the edited material does not permit.

5. CONCLUSION

Medieval Arabic scholarship developed a clear theoretical view of the means of expression. The two classifications examined here may be regarded as two successive states of that view, and the difference between them shows how the social standing of writing, and the range of its use, widened over the third/ninth and fourth/tenth centuries.

The answer to the first and second questions is that both classifications are built on the medium of expression rather than on kinds of figurative meaning, and that in both of them the presence or distance of the participants emerges as a decisive criterion. Al-Jāhiz’s formula that “the pen is one of the two tongues” and Ibn Wahb’s definition of writing as that which “reaches the one who is distant” show this plainly.

As for the third question, Ong’s theory cannot be applied to the Arabic material directly; the three corrections set out above must first be taken into account. Only then do his views converge with the conclusions of Schoeler, Qutbuddin and Jones at a single point: the move to writing in Arabic culture was not the replacement of one medium by another but the sharing of functions between two media that existed side by side for a long

time. This also explains why the features of oral performance survived so long in the written texts of early Arabic prose.

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