



Al-Jahiz's Linguistic Vision: between Traditional Heritage Referentiality and Modern Linguistic Concepts

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Abstract:

Al-Jāḥiẓ is one of the most prominent figures in Arabic linguistic thought. In his works, he presents an integrated vision of language, its functions, and the foundations of linguistic analysis, in a way that makes it possible to understand the classical linguistic heritage within the horizon of contemporary linguistics. This paper focuses on the major linguistic issues in *al-Jāḥiẓ*'s works, especially the nature and functions of language, the impact of context and situation on discourse interpretation, communicative and persuasive mechanisms, style and eloquence, and the relationship between language and thought.

The study also examines how some of *al-Jāḥiẓ*'s insights converge with modern linguistic principles such as pragmatics, discourse analysis, argumentation theory, and cognitive linguistics, while highlighting areas of convergence and divergence between the classical tradition and contemporary linguistic scholarship. It concludes that *al-Jāḥiẓ*'s linguistic vision does not merely constitute a classical legacy but rather a conceptual foundation that can be fruitfully employed in modern linguistic studies, thereby underscoring the central role of the Arab-Islamic heritage in enriching contemporary linguistic theory.

Keywords: al-Jāḥiẓ; linguistic vision; linguistic heritage; pragmatics; communication; argumentation...

Introduction

Al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 255 AH) is one of the leading Arab thinkers who approached language as both a mental and social phenomenon. In his seminal work *al-Bayān wa al-tabayīn (The Book of Eloquence and Exposition)*, he articulates a profound linguistic outlook grounded in intelligibility, lexical choice, harmony between wording and meaning, and careful attention to context and communicative situation (al-Jāḥiẓ, 1960). This study aims to analyze his linguistic method, to foreground its main features, and to document them through his primary works (al-Jāḥiẓ, 1938; Benani, 2001).



The research further seeks to examine *al-Jāḥiẓ*'s linguistic–methodological approach as a pioneering Arab thinker, particularly through analyzing his major works, which reveal that he developed a linguistic vision built on exposition, intelligibility, contextualization, and communication.

For *al-Jāḥiẓ*, language is a social phenomenon grounded in interaction between speaker and hearer and in the surrounding circumstances. The paper highlights the value of his contributions to the early formulation of pragmatic, semantic, and phonetic principles that remain relevant to many modern and contemporary linguistic studies (Ben Yamna, 2008; Bouguerra, 2006).

The study shows that *al-Jāḥiẓ* elaborated a solid linguistic theory premised on exposition, intelligibility, and context. He grasped at an early stage the deep relationship between wording and meaning, and the role of gesture, sound, and environment in shaping discourse (*al-Jāḥiẓ*, 1960). Through this analysis, it becomes apparent that *al-Jāḥiẓ* laid the foundations of an integrated linguistic method that anticipates many core principles of modern linguistics (Benani, 2001; *al-ʿUmari*, 1999).

On this basis, *al-Jāḥiẓ*'s linguistic method rests on a vision that treats language as a **communicative and pragmatic act**, whose central function is intelligibility and the conveyance of meaning. He is among the earliest scholars to conceptualize language as a **social and contextual act**, rather than a mere collection of isolated lexical items.

He argues that meanings reside in the mind and that the speaker's task is to select the appropriate wording in light of situation, audience, and environment (*al-Jāḥiẓ*, 1960). He is also among the forerunners in thinking about the relationship between **wording and meaning**, insisting that meaning is primary while wording serves it, and that the value of speech lies not in ornamentation but in its capacity for clear exposition (Benani, 2001).

Moreover, *al-Jāḥiẓ* affirms that the meaning of speech changes with changes in situations, and that gesture, movement, and tone are integral to expression. For him, they constitute a parallel language that may exceed verbal language in expressive power.

Al-Jāḥiẓ relates language to society, claiming that diversity in tongues, performance, and eloquence is a consequence of differences in temperament and environment. He criticizes artificiality and obscure vocabulary, since the ultimate purpose of speech, in his view, is intelligibility (*al-Jāḥiẓ*, 1960; Bouguerra, 2006).

I. Forms of Linguistic Thought in *al-Jāḥiẓ*

1. The Problem of Wording and Meaning

Moḥammed Ṣeghir Benani explains that *al-Jāḥiẓ* did not actually change his position on wording and meaning, as might be inferred from the account of *Abū ʿAmr al-Shaybānī*. Rather,



he shifted the focus from verbal expression to other signifying systems: gesture, finger reckoning, writing, and *naşba* (situational indication).

In other words, he moved from purely verbal denotation to gestural, symbolic, stylistic, and even situational denotation, in which the signifier may be absent while the signified stands alone without any external linguistic sign (Benani, 2001, p. 24).

Al-Jāhiz holds that wording and meaning are not indissolubly bound: the same wording may be detached from one meaning and acquire another in order to fit the syntactic structure.

Similarly, signs and expressions take on different meanings depending on the writer's deployment. The writer can construct an utterance with an apparent meaning and a deeper meaning that the reader can uncover only through interpretive effort, often via figurative and symbolic language such as metaphors, allegories, and similes (Benani, 2001).

For *al-Jāhiz*, *tabyīn* (exposition) is concerned with the description of linguistic relations that occur in the observable world and bring together speaker and addressee, transforming mere clarity into eloquence and mere speech into a message. This message involves delivery, reception, symbols, implicit connections, and considerations of circumstance and context, all of which contemporary linguistics—especially pragmatics and discourse analysis—has sought to detail (Benani, 2001, p.17).

Thus, wording must be consonant with lexical choice in order to preserve the rhetorical balance of speech. Linguistic terminology in many disciplines is in fact grounded in the precise determination of wording and general meaning, whether at the level of the individual word or the sentence as a whole—an essential condition for accurately transferring a text from one language to another.

Al-Jāhiz famously states: “Meanings are strewn along the road; both non-Arabs and Arabs, nomads and townspeople, know them. The real issue is to establish proportion, to choose the wording, to ensure ease of articulation, copious style, sound natural disposition, and good composition” (al-Jāhiz, 1938, p.142). Lexical choice, in this sense, consists in the meticulous selection of terms and expressions.

Copious style and sound natural disposition refer to the aesthetic and harmonious relationship between wording and meaning, which must be woven into a coherent fabric of discourse. *Al-Jāhiz*, citing *Bishr ibn al-Mu‘tamir*, explains:

“A meaning does not become noble simply because it belongs to the elite, nor does it become clear by belonging to the common stock of meanings. Nobility depends on correctness and the attainment of benefit in conformity with circumstance and with what each situation demands by way of discourse” (Benani, 2001, p. 20).



Here, *al-Jāhiz* does not separate wording from meaning except to affirm the specificity and refinement of the Arabic language. Meanings are, in principle, shared, but wording is restricted and particular.

The “problem” of wording and meaning thus lies in the general principle of fitting word to purpose: each kind of discourse calls for its own set of meanings that correspond to its articulated expressions.

2. Speech (*kalām*) in *al-Jāhiz*’s Perspective

Al-Jāhiz maintains that there is no value in speech that fails to indicate the intended meaning or to point to the underlying aim and central point of the discourse:

“There is no good in speech that does not indicate your meaning, and does not point to your intention, to the main pillar to which you aim, and the purpose you seek. It was said to him: What if the listener grows weary of the elaboration which you claim is due to that situation? He replied: If you give every situation its due, fulfill what is required by the management of that situation, and satisfy those who recognize the rights of speech...” (al-Jāhiz, 1960, p.46).

Here *al-Jāhiz* insists on the necessity of carefully weaving wording and meaning and selecting them in such a way that they rise to the level of the communicative situation. The “situation of speech” is inseparable from the wording, the meaning, and the writer’s skill in harmonizing them.

Whoever contemplates the nature of speech, its genesis and evolution, and its relation to human beings from the beginning of creation until it became a tool of rhetorical governance over the world and over discourse, will find that *al-Jāhiz* encapsulated all of this in his two works *al-Bayān wa al-tabyīn* and *al-Ḥayawān*. In doing so, he drew extensively on the Qur’ān, thereby becoming one of the earliest representatives of theological and linguistic schools rooted in the Qur’anic text (Benani, 2001, pp.17–18).

These texts also show that *al-Jāhiz* built his linguistic theory upon the human and animal tongue alike, grounding the problem of wording and meaning in phonetic realization. Many researchers argue that, unlike later critics, *al-Jāhiz* does not take sides exclusively with wording or meaning, but views both as mutually inseparable dimensions of speech.

Al-Jāhiz states:

“I heard Abū Dāwūd ibn Ḥarīz say, when something of the mention of sermons, of polishing speech and abbreviating it, and of the difficulty and awe of that position was brought up: ‘Summarizing meanings is gentleness; reliance on obscure expression is incapacity; departing from the basis upon which speech is built is prolixity. The head of eloquence is natural talent; its pillar is practice; its wings are familiarity with speech; its adornment is correct inflection; its splendor lies in choosing words...’ And of the best that



we have selected and recorded: speech does not deserve the name of eloquence until its meaning races with its wording and its wording with its meaning, so that the wording is not earlier to the ear than the meaning is to the heart” (al-Jāhiz, 1960, p. 20, p. 45).

From these statements, it becomes clear that al-Jāhiz devoted great attention to the **duality of wording and meaning** as the source of all speech and all branches of knowledge. Eloquence consists precisely in the felicitous selection and harmonious matching of wording and meaning in the mold of discourse. Speech must not be vulgar or plebeian; instead, it should reflect the highest standards of linguistic purity and rhetorical elegance.

3. The Notions of *Saddī* and *Nayrī* in al-Jāhiz

Moḥammed Ṣeghir Benani notes that the notions of *saddī* (warp) and *nayrī* (weft) are borrowed from the craft of poetry in classical Arabic rhetoric, particularly in the writings of al-Jāhiz, who depicts the poetic text as a woven fabric made of longitudinal threads (warp) and transversal threads (weft) that bind together in the knots of discourse, just as threads are intertwined in a textile (Benani, 2001, p.64).

This metaphor is closely tied to the classical art of composing poetry in both vertical (monorhyme) and horizontal (interlinear) dimensions.

Poets carefully select words and expressions with great precision and artistry, ensuring that the progression of the text remains coherent and homogeneous. Poetry, in this sense, emerges as one of the most formally organized types of discourse in terms of lexical arrangement and syntactic structure.

Al-Jāhiz further stresses that eloquence requires discrimination, method, arrangement, and training, as well as the perfection of “instrument” and craftsmanship, ease of articulation, clarity of pronunciation, and precise metrical balance:

“Eloquence needs discernment and governance, ordering and discipline, perfection of the instrument and mastery of the craft, ease of articulation, clarity of enunciation, perfection of letters, and maintenance of proportion. Speech needs sweetness just as it needs grandeur and gravity, and that is among the most effective means of winning hearts, bending necks, and beautifying meanings. Wāṣil [ibn ‘Aṭā’] recognized that nothing can stand in for complete exposition” (al-Jāhiz, 1960, p.7).

Thus, the beauty of speech lies in the refined selection of wording and meaning, which guarantees good composition and ease of pronunciation, enabling the listener or reader to savor the text.

Al-Jāhiz illustrates this with an intricate analogy:

He likens it to the process whereby a skilled craftsperson is asked to describe or demonstrate the weaving of an ornamented silk brocade, so that one may directly perceive how the threads move back and forth, how far each stretches lengthwise and crosswise,



and in what order each stage of the weaving unfolds. Only then can the observer appreciate the precision of the craft and the mark of mastery (al-Jāhiz, 1960, p.27).

Al-Jāhiz's distinction between the saddī (paradigmatic) dimension and the *nayrī* (syntagmatic) dimension—terms later elaborated by ‘*Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī*—corresponds, in modern linguistics, to the vertical axis of lexical selection (*paradigmatique*) and the horizontal axis of syntactic combination (*syntagmatique*) (Benani, 2001, p. 27, p.48). These concepts are directly related to contemporary textual linguistics and discourse analysis.

4. Surface Structure and Deep Structure in al-Jāhiz

Al-Jāhiz anticipates, in an implicit way, the distinction between surface structure and deep structure. He writes:

“By whatever means you attain intelligibility and clarify the meaning, that is exposition in that context. Know—may God protect you—that the rules governing meanings are not like those governing words, for meanings are spread without limit and extend without end; the names of meanings, however, are restricted, counted, finite. All types of signification of meanings, whether verbal or non-verbal, are five in number, neither more nor less: first, wording; then gesture; then finger reckoning; then writing; then the situation which is called naṣba. Naṣba is the indicative state that stands in place of all those forms” (al-Jāhiz, 1960, p.31).

Naṣba here is a concept whose dimensions can only be understood by analogy with the notion of zero in mathematics, functioning as a signifying state devoid of explicit verbal signifiers. *Al-Jāhiz* defines it as a state that “speaks without wording and points without the hand”—that is, a signified without a verbal signifier and a meaning without articulated speech (Benani, 2001, p.19).

By contrast, ‘*aqd* (finger reckoning) refers to arithmetical counting on the fingers and constitutes a form of numerical signification. Each of these five forms—wording, gesture, finger reckoning, writing, and *naṣba*—differs in its structure and signifying mechanism, yet all are subsumed under the general concept of *bayān* (exposition) (al-Jāhiz, 1960).

Al-Jāhiz's conceptualization of *bunyah* (structure) draws upon the metaphor of architectural design: just as the classification and deployment of building elements create an edifice, so too does the organization of these five types of signs create a layered structure of meaning.

Some modern scholars have argued that this anticipates the later distinction between surface and deep structures in linguistics, whereby the observable wording corresponds to surface structure, while the underlying network of meanings and situational indications corresponds to deep structure (Benani, 2001; al-‘Umari, 1999).



II. Forms of Pragmatic Thinking in al-Jāhiz

1. The Centrality of *Bayān* (Exposition) and Communicative Purpose

Bayān (exposition) is one of the core concepts of classical Arabic rhetoric, concerned with the relationship between discourse and its producer across varying contexts.

Al-Jāhiz is regarded as one of the most important Arabic rhetoricians and a founding figure of Arabic rhetoric in general. He devoted sustained attention to defining the concept of *bayān* in *al-Bayān wa al-tabyīn*, closely associating his entire linguistic project with it (al-Jāhiz, 1960; Ben Yamna, 2008).

He defines *bayān* as follows:

“Bayān is a comprehensive name for everything that lifts the veil from meaning and removes the curtain from the inward thought, so that the listener reaches its essence and grasps its product, whatever form that exposition may take and whatever the genre of the evidence. For the core of the matter and the ultimate goal toward which speaker and listener strive is understanding and intelligibility. By whatever means you attain intelligibility and clarify the meaning, that is bayān in that context” (al-Jāhiz, 1960, p.79).

Thus, *al-Jāhiz* links the notion of *bayān* with the fundamental communicative goal of discourse, namely understanding and intelligibility. *Bayān* is realized when internal meanings are unveiled from the mind and rendered accessible through the appropriate wording.

The properties of understanding and intelligibility relate both to the speaker and to the listener: the speaker’s task is to realize linguistic intention by achieving intelligibility through all the resources of *bayān*, while the listener’s task is to achieve understanding.

Accordingly, the essential property of *bayān* for al-Jāhiz is the realization of optimal communication, a hallmark explicitly shared with modern pragmatics, which defines itself as the study of language use in context in order to achieve effective communication (Ben Yamna, 2008; Bouguerra, 2006).

2. Pragmatic Dimensions: Situation, Context, and Communicative Roles

Al-Jāhiz further clarifies the communicative function of *bayān* by situating it within a framework that anticipates many elements of modern communication models. He emphasizes that the meanings dwelling in people’s minds remain hidden until they are expressed by speech and usage:

“The meanings existing in people’s breasts, conceived in their minds, stirring in their souls, connected with their thoughts, and arising from their reflection, are hidden, obscure, remote, and wild. A person does not know another’s inward thought... nor can one convey the psychological needs that press upon one’s soul except by means of another [i.e., language]. Only their mentioning them, informing about them, and using them brings those meanings to life. These factors are what bring them closer to understanding



and make them manifest to reason and transform the hidden among them into something visible...” (al-Jāḥiẓ, 1960, p.75).

Here *al-Jāḥiẓ* identifies **expression** and **use** as the mechanisms that activate meanings and assign them specific linguistic, rhetorical, and persuasive functions (Bouguerra, 2006, p.177). In this perspective, the concept of **communication** (*tablīgh*) must satisfy both formal and semantic conditions if it is to fulfill the aims of *bayān* and thus achieve understanding and intelligibility.

He writes: “In proportion to the clarity of the indicative signs, the correctness of the gestures, the excellence of brevity, and the precision of approach, the meaning becomes manifest. The clearer and more eloquent the indication, and the more evident and luminous the gesture, the more beneficial and effective it is” (al-Jāḥiẓ, 1960, p.75).

For this reason, he opens his work by seeking refuge from verbosity and loquacity as well as from inarticulateness and muteness—traits that undermine *bayān*.

In addition to defining *bayān* as the core of the communicative process, al-Jāḥiẓ does not neglect the various elements of communication that modern linguistics calls “components of the communicative act”:

- The speaker (*qā’il*), who corresponds to the initiator, the rhetor, or the addresser.
- The listener (*sāmi*), who corresponds to the receiver or addressee.
- “Everything that removes the veil” (*kull shay’ kashafa laka qinā’ al-ma’nā*), which corresponds to the message.
- The “evidence” (*dalīl*), which corresponds to the channel or code.
- The “goal toward which the speaker strives,” which is understanding, intelligibility, and impact (Ben Yamna, 2008, p. 50).

On this basis, al-Jāḥiẓ posits understanding and intelligibility as necessary preconditions for communicative effect. It is inconceivable, he argues, that a listener could be influenced by an opaque discourse whose meaning remains inaccessible.

3. Verbal and Non-Verbal Signs: Gesture as Language

Al-Jāḥiẓ insists that the realization of understanding is achieved not only through verbal means but equally through non-verbal, gestural means. Accordingly, he limits the types of significations of meanings—verbal or non-verbal—to five: wording, gesture, finger reckoning, writing, and *naṣba*.

This indicates that his concept of discourse extends beyond the purely linguistic to include non-linguistic and paralinguistic forms, as well as both written and spoken modes.

Al-Jāḥiẓ integrates these diverse forms to achieve *bayān* in its fullest sense, stating that “good gesture with hand and head is part of the perfection of good *bayān* with the tongue” (al-Jāḥiẓ, 1960, p.79).



This broad conception leads him to pay careful attention to the expressive, behavioral, and social dimensions that accompany linguistic action, anticipating modern concerns with non-verbal communication and multimodal discourse analysis (Ben Yamna, 2008).

4. Context, Audience, and the Pragmatics of Appropriateness

Another central pragmatic dimension in *al-Jāḥiẓ*'s thinking is his emphasis on the characteristics of wording and meaning in relation to the states and expectations of listeners. He stresses that speech varies with the audience and the circumstances of utterance:

"The speaker ought to know the ranks of meanings and to balance them against the ranks of situations, so that he gives each class of those meanings its appropriate speech and each situation its suitable discourse. Thus he distributes the ranks of speech over the ranks of meanings, and the ranks of meanings over the ranks of situations, and the ranks of listeners over the ranks of those situations" (al-Jāḥiẓ, 1960, pp. 138–139; al-'Umari, 1999, pp.139–140).

In this definition, the concept of **situation** (*maqām*) encompasses:

- **Ranks of listeners**, where al-Jāḥiẓ distinguishes between different groups such as theologians, grammarians, the general public, and the elite.
- **Ranks of situations**, referring to the circumstances of speech, which cause meanings to vary depending on the occasion of utterance.

Al-Jāḥiẓ builds his understanding of the relationship between understanding and persuasion on this duality of situation and discourse and ties it to the notion of measure and adequacy, which he formulates as the need to balance the ranks of meanings with the ranks of audiences and contexts (Bouguerra, 2006, p.178).

In discussing the qualities of wording and their suitability to audience states, he observes:

"Just as wording should not be vulgar, base, or plebeian, so too it should not be strange or barbarous—unless the speaker himself is a Bedouin Arab, for the barbarous speech of the desert is understood by barbarous folk just as the jargon of the marketplace is understood by marketplace people. People's speech comes in ranks just as people themselves do: there is grand and trivial speech, graceful and good speech, ugly and repugnant speech, light and heavy speech—and all of it Arabic" (al-Jāḥiẓ, 1960, p.144).

Here, *al-Jāḥiẓ* enumerates categories of wording—vulgar, base, plebeian, strange, barbarous, grand, trivial, graceful, good, ugly, repugnant, light, heavy—each with its own appropriate context. Although in principle speech should not be strange or barbarous, there are contexts where such diction is suitable, as when the speaker is a Bedouin Arab or when a specific social register is needed to achieve a desired rhetorical effect.



By mapping these categories of wording to social types—Bedouin, townspeople, marketplace folk, elites, and commoners—*al-Jāḥiẓ* offers an early sociolinguistic perspective, recognizing that linguistic variation mirrors social stratification.

His emphasis on correspondence between wording and situation, and between register and audience, is a clear precursor of modern pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and register theory (Ben Yamna, 2008; Bouguerra, 2006).

In line with this, *al-Jāḥiẓ* values Bishr ibn al-Mu‘tamir’s “sheet,” which encapsulates a set of rhetorical recommendations designed to cultivate communicative skill.

He further devotes a great deal of attention to the reception of discourse and to the production of effect upon the listener, thus approaching modern concepts of reader-response aesthetics and reception theory.

He notes, for instance, that the anecdotal sayings of Bedouins lose their charm if removed from their original situational and linguistic environment:

“If you change them by inflecting their endings and bring them out in the manner of the speech of the city-born and those of mixed dialect, they depart from that narrative form... Similarly, if you hear an amusing anecdote from the common people, beware of using inflected endings or choosing elegant words for it, for that spoils its charm and takes it out of its proper form and purpose, and removes from them their enjoyment of it and their delight in it” (al-Jāḥiẓ, 1960, pp.145–146).

Thus, the anecdote must be narrated with its original accent and phonetic characteristics to preserve its communicative and aesthetic effect—a strikingly modern insight into the importance of contextual fidelity.

Conclusion:

This study demonstrates that *al-Jāḥiẓ* was far more than an encyclopedic man of letters who recorded linguistic usages and styles. He was, in fact, the author of an early and coherent linguistic vision that anticipated many of the central concerns of modern linguistics.

Al-Jāḥiẓ offered a far-reaching conception of language as a dynamic social system grounded in human capacity for expression and innovation and intimately tied to the cultural and civilizational contexts in which it arises (al-Jāḥiẓ, 1960; Benani, 2001).

Speech, in his view, is a communicative act governed by situation, audience, and purpose. Its value depends on the sensitivity of performance and delivery, not merely on the correctness of grammatical structure.

His account of *bayān* elevates Arabic expression from the simple pairing of wording and meaning to a comprehensive human faculty of intelligibility that encompasses language, gesture,



sound, and movement. *Bayān*, for him, is a practiced capacity before it is a set of rules to be memorized (al-Jāhiz, 1960; Ben Yamna, 2008).

Al-Jāhiz's orientation toward pragmatic thinking profoundly shaped his understanding of discourse. He recognized the importance of context, the limits of the speaker, and the expectations of the addressee, linking language to its effectiveness in lived reality and to its persuasive and communicative functions.

He also treated language as a communicative, contextual act intertwined with social and environmental factors and subject to variation and change (Bouguerra, 2006; al-'Umari, 1999).

Al-Bayān wa al-tabyīn thus reveals that *al-Jāhiz* established a linguistic corpus with philosophical and pragmatic dimensions. Many of his ideas constitute the deep roots of later linguistic principles, particularly those that relate language to environment and conceive of discourse as a living social practice rather than as static text.

Al-Jāhiz therefore stands as enduring evidence of an Arabic intellectual genius that anticipated modern linguistic thought and opened broad horizons for linguistic inquiry that remain fertile for research and reflection today (Benani, 2001; Ben Yamna, 2008; Bouguerra, 2006).

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