

From Arabic Literary Criticism to Language Assessment

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Abstract

My research explores the knowledge and application of language assessment as demonstrated by classical Arab linguists, grammarians, and literary critics. These scholars did have standards and criterion by which they judged various works of literature. These standards were not identical and were not used by all critics in the same way. Instead, there is some kind of selectivity and flexibility in the process of assessment. Some of them focused on certain aspects of the language usage in one particular poem, and some focused on other levels of poetics and aesthetics.

Keywords: Arabic literary criticism, Classical Arabic, language assessment, linguistics, applied linguistics, language standards

1. Introduction

Language proficiency is a very important medium to assess both the acquisition and the progress of the language learning process. Modern linguists use terms such as “level,” “language levels,” “advanced” or “beginner.” These terms suggest a range between two poles: a lower one, where the learner is not yet a master of the language, and a higher one which is the target that the speaker or the writer aspires to achieve. The question is: what is the criterion that can be applied to describe someone as eloquent and well-versed in Arabic. Also, does Arabic linguistic tradition have these terms or this kind of assessment?

This assessment is based on the concept of what is called “the level,” or the language level that can be described (in the Arabic classical labels) as eloquent, fluent, or beginner. These labels were used, I believe, to categorize the language competence and performance as assessed by the one who gives his or her judgment.

The heritage of Arabic language and literature shows that various kinds of assessment were established even in pre-Islamic times. Even though planted in the middle of the desert, away from established centers of civilization, the pre-Islamic Arabs did not live without a culture. One of their famous cultural fairs was called *Suq 'Uqaz* (or *Uqaz Market*) where poetry was recited and criticized. Literary critics agree that this poetry reflects the intellectual, psychological, and social condition of the Arabs. However, assessment of this poetry, as expressed by the market's visitors, also shows the opinions and arguments spoken and recorded by both the audience and critics. In this context, the critic is another poet with some authority enabling him to be a judge and to assess another poet. Giving a preference of one poet over another, as the critic usually does, implies that the acclaimed poet is better than the one he was compared to, and the same applies to individual poems. These judgments of preference were taken seriously and that is why they are still recorded. We can also say that these judgments were highly considered and valued regardless of the standards used by the critic or the genre of the literary product, which was mainly poetry.

My research explores the assumed knowledge and application of language assessment as demonstrated by classical Arab linguists, grammarians, and literary critics. These scholars did have standards and criterion by which they judged various works of literature. These standards were not identical and were not used by all critics in the same way. Instead, there is some kind of selectivity and flexibility in the process of assessment.

Some of them focused on certain aspects of the language usage in one particular poem, and some focused on other levels of poetics and aesthetics. Moreover, these Arab critics cared more about the collective rather than the individual production of the poet. They also had set particular categories by which they designated those who could be a source of authentic Arabic usage and those who lacked such authenticity.

At the time Islamic civilization began to flourish, there existed cultural activities and books starting to be written and circulated. Arab critics compiled books to continue the process of language assessment. This gesture implies that they wanted the reading public to be informed of how language should be used and who should be its source of authority. In addition to demonstrating linguistic maturity, these books show the great interest and vast scholarship in Arabic language that some Arab scholars possessed in their field. They also reflect these scholars' deep understanding and analysis of the linguistic phenomena and their awareness of the development of language. In their opinions, they demonstrate knowledge of the different ways of saying particular expressions, the dialects and their origins, and the spelling and meaning of words whether in poetry or in prose. These judgments are usually followed by some explanation and justification.

Modern Arabs use different terminology than the ancients did; some of the popular words used in Modern Standard Arabic for assessment include: fluent, knowledgeable in language, excellent, very good, good, acceptable/beginner, intermediate, advanced. Classical Arab critics, on the other hand, used their own terms to assess the language performance, using terms such as "correct/standard," "more correct," "weak," "irregular". They adopted their criterion based upon and informed by a higher model of Arabic usage.

2. Arabic Literary Criticism

2.1 Ibn Sallām (847 AD)

Ibn Sallām (847 AD), in his book, *Ṭabaqāt fuḥūl al-shu'arā'*, which is more about critiquing poetry than examining language or grammar, attempts to categorize poets into "*Ṭabaqāt*" levels. In his introduction he explains his methodology:

By providing details about renowned pre-Islamic and Muslim poets, we put them in the positions they deserve, citing our reasons for such evaluation. We do so according to what was said about the poet by the (literary or language) scholars. After all, some people who knew the poetry and those who specialized in narrating it disputed many poets. That is why some learned experts, whose specialty is in poetry and Arabic language, needed to give their opinion. They were motivated by a situation where poetry narrators sought their own speculations and the tribes wanted only what fitted their desires (of fame). It is common that people trust the narrated poetry from periods not contemporary to us, and that is why we only selected forty majestic and famous poets. Then, we combined those of them whose poetry was similar and came up with ten levels, four in each level, equivalent and identical.¹

What Ibn Sallām does here is to divide poets according to the language production and put them in different levels with various categorizations based on eloquence, grammar or language usage.

2.2 Ibn Qutībah (885 AD)

Ibn Qutībah (885 AD) was closer to evaluation and classification than Ibn Sallām. To him, the concept of evaluation was clear and express as he says, "I have reflected on poetry carefully and found four genres: One genre of beautiful words and good meanings. Another genre of beautiful and graceful words but if you examine it you will not find any meaningful sense. A further genre of beautiful meanings but poor words. A last genre of poor meanings and poor words."² If a researcher wants to compare between Ibn Qutībah's classification and what happens today in language study and analogy, it would be found that Ibn Qutībah had made analogy on a work of language and applied the so-called scale or yardstick in Applied Linguistics. Figure 1 (page 6) illustrates the correlation between Ibn Qutībah's classification and common language classifications.

In this resemblance, I do not purport that Ibn Qutībah's language opinion is similar to nowadays, or that the latter genre is equivalent to a beginner level. Yet, I wanted to bring into view that the concept of evaluation and classification in the light of the scale was somehow apparent to Ibn Qutībah. It is more likely similar to language study and analogy today.

¹ *Ṭabaqāt fuḥūl al-shu'arā'* 1/23,24

² *Al-Shi'r wa-al-Shu'arā'*, 1/64 – 69

2.3 Ibn Fāris (1005 AD)

If Ibn Qutībah adopted fine quality as a yardstick of meanings and words, then Ibn Fāris (1005 AD) counted on clarity and ambiguity as scales of language evaluation and classification. He singled out one chapter (Chapter of Language Classes) in which he says that clear language is what every listener, who is familiar with the Arab plain language, could understand. Yet, ambiguous language derives ambiguity from its strange words or common words. Ambiguity comes when a speaker makes a sign to a story that he does not make clear. It is ambiguous because it is not confined to the same speech of utterance. It would be ambiguous even though its words are conceivable. Ambiguity could come from common words. Therefore, all language in the Book and Sunna as well as the Arab poems and otherwise would be under this classification.³

Ibn Fāris considered language as a means of communication. For the communication process to be free of any mistakes and to fulfill the appropriate conditions, clarity level must be high. The clearer the language, the more the communication and further extended and higher the language performance standard. However, ambiguous and equivocal language precludes understanding without an expounder or an unmistakable context. Ibn Fāris once again confirms it in his comment on language definition: “Some people alleged that language is what is heard and comprehended like ‘Zaid stood and Amru went.’ Some people said, ‘Language is composed and indicative letters of a meaning.’ To us, both allegations are close because a comprehended speech of utterance is most likely composed and indicative letters of a meaning.”⁴

2.4 Ibn Rashīq (1064 AD)

Ibn Rashīq (1064 AD) divided Arab language into two genres: prose and verse. For each genre, he ascribes three levels:

- Good,
- Medium, and
- Poor.

Both genres meet in worthiness and are equal in value. No genre is better than the other. Poetry was apparently judged in denomination because each verse is traditionally better than each prose in genre.⁵

The details given by Ibn Rashīq for the levels of language performance including prose and verse are probably closer to the present language evaluation. The same terms and scale of evaluation are applied. Consider the concepts of “quality” and “poorness” as two ends and limits of language evaluation and the corresponding commonly known language classification. Figure 2 (page 6) illustrates this correlation between Ibn Rashīq’s classification and common language classifications. Nevertheless, the use of poorness by Ibn Rashīq lends to his scales a judicious nature and appreciative aspect; otherwise, not involved in the common language classification.

Beyond doubt, a language standard has been established in scholars’ minds, i.e. high perfection and adeptness. Scholars used to dwell on them and use them in their judgments and classification of each language specimen or widespread work of language whether prose or verse. When you see a grammarian or a linguist taking up a line of poetry and finding faults and errors with the poet or finding it a poor, irregular or strange language, then the judgment of this grammarian or linguist would be more likely referenced to a well-considered evaluation and scientific analogy on a language standard thought to be perfect and complete. Consequently, this grammarian or linguist has assumed it as a scale or a model. As the poet was inconsistent or in prejudice with this scale or fell short of it, this scholar criticized, corrected or denied such verse because it is far below that high model.

3. Examples

Many examples include but are not limited to “comparative adjectives” which cannot be applied on colors like white and black. Consider what grammarians said about this line of poetry by Ibn al-Sarrāj (where he recited poetry to some people):

[الرجز]
يا ليتني متلك في البياض أبيض من أخت بني إياض
(Rajas)

³ Al-Ṣāḥbī, 40, 41, 42

⁴ Al-Ṣāḥbī, 48

⁵ Al-‘Umdah, 1/19, 20

I wish I were like you in whiteness, whiter than the sister of Ebadh People.

“It is badly versed; and an irregular line and speech with a lowest source are not an authority of the originally agreed in language, grammar and jurisprudence.”⁶

Nonetheless, scholars did not disregard this ideal model thought to be perfect and complete without considering the earlier greatness of its advocate. Is the language of pre-Islamic or early Islamic ages the objective that every Arabic speaker should attain and command where nobody could possibly criticize his language? al-Jurjānī (1078 AD) believes that when some people are earlier in time, it does not mean that their language is entirely a pure and sheer prototype of judgment vis-à-vis a speaker’s language. On the contrary, it could involve so many mistakes.

The same applies to prose and verse.⁷ He says:

But for the pre-Islamic people were very early and people deemed them as models, great figures and authorities, you would find a lot of their poetry imperfect and despicable. If you nevertheless browse the grammarian’s argument as once possible demanding moderation when activities are successive and once again, by adoption, closeness and other similar sought excuses and change of narration when argument is limited; and if you discover their ulterior ends and strived hard as the heart may bear witness that its motif and drive in the high exaltation of the earlier personality and his pretended triumph is what belief anteceded and the self got used to it.⁸

Yet, this opinion does not seem accurate. Perhaps, al-Jurjānī viewed the poetry of early poets with an eye of a 14th century man.

He does not ascribe any favor to early poets due to their interesting creativity or high quality literature. He attributes a lot of it to their earliness and the favorable judgment of people towards them. Yet, this is rather unfair.

al-Suyūfī (1505 AD) thinks that a fluent Arab might utter a colloquial word. He earmarked a chapter to define eloquence and another chapter to define Arab mistakes.⁹

Ibn Jinnī (1001 AD) advocates a different opinion and view in the case of early poets and whether mistake and rhythm affect or decline their language standard. Ibn Jinnī designates a part in title “What an Arab utters contrary to the public.” He says:

If anything is generally accepted, the Arab condition and utterance should be considered. If a man is fluent in everything otherwise, he is characterized by, and if his utterance is scalable but he intended it only this way, then it is better to have favorable judgment towards him, and not to deem him incorrect. If it is said how could he do it and it is not justifiable for him to extemporize a language of his own? The reply would be that it could happen to him through an old, past, desolate and obliterate language.¹⁰

Yet, if he utters anything otherwise not in consistence with the generally agreed, while no analogy or usage supports his speech, Ibn Jinnī thinks that a man’s speech must be refuted because in no reasonable way the object could be indicative or the predicate could be genitive or the adjunct could be nominative simply because it is contrary to analogy and usage altogether.¹¹

al-Jurjānī explains the reason why language levels are variable between people in some forms of language performance including poetry and oratory. It is questionable and arguable. However, he referred it to aptitude, sharp talent and disposition:

You know that Arabs are common in language and tongue, and they are similar in logic and expression too. A tribe is preferable to another by its eloquence.

⁶ Al-Usūl fī al-naḥw, 1/104, 105

⁷ Like saying هذا جحرٌ ضبٌّ خربٍ “This is a desolate lizard’s burrow”. Many think it is immeasurable irregular or mistaken. Anyone who speaks in a similar way is incomparable with the Arab speech; see “Al-Khaṣā’is” 1/191, 192.

⁸ Al-Wasā’at, 14, 18

⁹ Al-Muzhir, 1/184, 2/494

¹⁰ Al-Khaṣā’is 1/385, 386

¹¹ Ibid, 1/387

A tribal man is found a burst poet, while his cousin, next-door and close to his tent rope neighbor tearful and irrefutable. You would find a poet more poetic than another, and an orator more eloquent than another. It is but sharp talent, disposition, cleverness and aptitude!¹²

Another indication of their variable language performance and evaluation of people's language according to their familiar scales is the speech of Abu Amru bin Al Alaa about Himyar people: "Neither the language of Himyar people and Yemen far reaches today is our tongue nor their Arabic is ours."¹³ He thinks that the language standard of Himyar people and Yemen is different from the language level on which linguistic evaluation is based. He suggests the difference and dissimilarity but he in no sense declines such language.

Ibn Jinnī singled out a chapter on "not taking from city dwellers as taken from nomads"¹⁴ or preference of Quraish language to others due to its rhetorical and clear language.¹⁵ You can see the evaluation and taxonomy of languages in accordance with their different stylistic or vocal characteristics that are mostly attributed to the difference of geographic areas. The variation of language standards in addition to language characteristics themselves stems up in some aspects from the difference of space occupied by a given human group, whose individuals agreed to use a specific language pattern. It does not mean declining such language wholly or partially. It rather implies that scholars have added to the difference of language type and quality, subject to talent and disposition, the difference arising from the location occupied by the speakers of such language. Here, the difference of languages in the adjacent areas of other countries, foreign for example, can be considered differently as being less clear and refined than the language of a country where the people do not mingle with non-Arabs. Gulf States are just a good example, as one may count so many foreign words in their conversation due to their ceaseless communication with foreigners, and then the difference would be subject to the geographic area.

It is another piece of evidence to be considered. Scholars used to view people's language as variable in standards: difference of information levels and the language of books they wrote. Many books of grammar, linguistics, rhetoric and prosody were sometimes related to educational reasons. It perhaps makes us say that the writer viewed the difference of standards and made him write a book for a beginner reader and another one for a skillful reader of language and grammar.

It is worthwhile saying that scholars in their judgments and evaluation were—very often—tremendously fair, just and impartial. If a poet or a writer excelled in a certain art or did well in a certain purpose, they would praise his successful achievement and announce his failure. al-Aṣma'ī (828 AD) commented on the eminency of poets, "al-Nabigha, Aus, and Zuhair were not well-versed in the description of horses while Tufayl described them well and he is a poet laureate."¹⁶ He said of Ka'b bin Saad Al-Ghanwi, "He is not a poet laureate except in elegy."¹⁷ Al-Asmai indicates the variation of standards—though in meaning—of one speaker but on different occasions and purposes that required specific linguistic styles or contexts. Therefore, Tufayl was good at describing horses while al-Nabigha, Aus and Zuhair were not. It can be mostly attributed to expression, types and arts of speech. It is well known that a critic—generally—cannot interpret any text otherwise as not yielded by the language of such text.

Ibn al-Athīr (1233 AD) said, "Ibn al-Hariri, the man of assemblies (literally *maqamat*) was only good at them."¹⁸ So, he drew distinction between his mastery of *maqamat* and his failure in other language arts.

4. Conclusion

It was clear that the concept of language evaluation and the standards had been presenting itself to many linguists and grammarians. In their judgments and classification of their contemporary and earlier works of language, they adopted specific standards, common yardsticks and precise and objective rules even though they did not address individual language aspects or a linguistic skills as is done in present-day language assessment.

¹² Al-Wasāṭa, 23

¹³ Ṭabaqāt fuḥūl al-shu'arā', 2/5

¹⁴ Al-Khaṣā'is, 2/5

¹⁵ Al-Muzhir, 1/209, et al.

¹⁶ Fuḥūlat al-Shu'arā', 10

¹⁷ Ibid., 14

¹⁸ Al-Mathal al-sā'ir, 1/40

Moreover, they viewed the example of analogy and the model that they compare with every language activity as open to criticism. Nothing in its earliness or advancement precludes viewing and considering whether it is good or not.

It can be assuredly said that the concepts of standard and evaluation were evidently known to linguists and grammarians even though the denominations and motives are different and the forms are multiple. Yet, it is indicative of their insight, extensive knowledge, jurisprudence and foresight, as well as their participation in creating a sound and high-class language environment.

Figure 1

Ibn Qutībah's Classification	Common Language Classification
Genre of beautiful words and good meanings	Eloquent
Genre of beautiful words and poor meanings	Advanced
Genre of good meanings and poor words	Intermediate
Genre of poor meanings and poor words	Beginner

Comparison between Ibn Qutībah's classification and common language classification

Figure 2

Ibn Rashīq's Classification	Common Language Classification
Good	Advanced
Medium	Intermediate
Poor	Beginner

Comparison between Ibn Rashīq's classification and common language classification

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