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Key Figures in The Science of Arabic Balagha

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Abstract: Balagha (البلاغة), the Arabic science of rhetoric and eloquence, is a profound discipline that explores the power and beauty of language. Far from being a mere collection of stylistic rules, it is a comprehensive system for understanding how to use language effectively to convey meaning, evoke emotion, and persuade an audience. Rooted in the rich tradition of Arabic literature and the theological necessity of understanding the Qur'an, Balagha is an essential component of Islamic studies and a cornerstone of Arabic literary criticism.

Introduction: Balagha (البلاغة), the Arabic science of rhetoric and eloquence, is a profound discipline that explores the power and beauty of language. Far from being a mere collection of stylistic rules, it is a comprehensive system for understanding how to use language effectively to convey meaning, evoke emotion, and persuade an audience. Rooted in the rich tradition of Arabic literature and the theological necessity of understanding the Qur'an, Balagha is an essential component of Islamic studies and a cornerstone of Arabic literary criticism.

The term Balagha literally means "to reach," and it refers to speech that effectively "reaches" its intended recipient. This concept is built upon three foundational branches:

1. 'Ilm al-Ma'ani (علم المعاني): The Science of Semantics and Syntax This branch is concerned with the meaning and purpose of sentences and the proper use of grammatical forms. It teaches how to construct a sentence that is appropriate for a specific context and audience. For example, a speech directed at a group of children would use simpler words and shorter sentences than a scholarly address. This science is about the precision of expression and the strategic use of language

to suit the situation.

2. 'Ilm al-Bayan (علم البيان): The Science of Expression and Figurative Language This is perhaps the most well-known aspect of Balagha. It deals with the various ways to convey a single meaning through different rhetorical devices. Key figures of speech studied in this branch include:

- o **Tashbih (التشبيه):** Simile, the comparison of two things using a particle like "as" or "like."
- o **Majaz (المجاز):** Metaphor and figurative language, where a word or phrase is used to mean something other than its literal meaning.
- o **Kinayah (الكناية):** Metonymy, the use of a related word or phrase to stand in for a concept, such as saying "the people of the sword" to mean "soldiers."

3. 'Ilm al-Badi' (علم البديع): The Science of Embellishment and Stylistics This branch focuses on the aesthetic and beautifying aspects of language. It deals with devices that add elegance and rhythm to speech and writing. These can include:

- o **Jinas (الجناس):** Paronomasia or a pun, using words that are similar in sound but different in meaning.
- o **Saj' (السجع):** Rhyming prose, which adds a musical quality to a text.
- o **Tabaq (الطباق):** Juxtaposition of opposites, creating a powerful contrast (e.g., "darkness and light").

The origins of Balagha can be traced back to the pre-Islamic era, with the flourishing of oral poetry and the emphasis on eloquence. However, the formalization of Balagha as a science was a gradual process spurred by two major factors: the advent of Islam and the translation movement of the Abbasid Caliphate.

- **The Qur'an:** The divine inimitability (i'jaz) of the Qur'an served as a major catalyst for the development of Balagha. Early Muslim scholars sought to understand and articulate the miraculous nature of the Qur'anic text, which they saw as unparalleled in its eloquence and rhetorical power. This theological pursuit laid the groundwork for the systematic study of Arabic rhetoric.

- **Early Figures and Texts:** Some of the most influential early works and figures in the development of Balagha include:

- o **Al-Jahiz (d. 868 CE):** A prominent figure of the Abbasid era, his works such as *Kitab al-Bayan wa al-Tabyin* ("The Book of Eloquence and Elucidation") are considered foundational texts that explored the principles of effective communication and expression.
- o **Ibn al-Mu'tazz (d. 908 CE):** His work *Kitab al-*

Badi' is significant for being one of the first to specifically categorize and analyze rhetorical devices.

- o **'Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjani (d. 1078 CE):** Al-Jurjani is widely regarded as one of the greatest figures in the history of Arabic rhetoric. His seminal works, *Asrar al-Balagha* ("The Secrets of Eloquence") and *Dalail al-I'jaz* ("The Proofs of Inimitability"), revolutionized the field by moving beyond mere categorization to a deeper analysis of the psychological and aesthetic effects of rhetorical figures.

- o **Al-Sharif al-Radi (d. 1015 CE):** Although not a rhetorician in the formal sense, his compilation of the sermons, letters, and sayings of Ali ibn Abi Talib into a book titled *Nahj al-Balagha* ("The Peak of Eloquence") created a masterpiece that has served as a practical model for the study of Balagha for centuries.

These historical works, among many others, demonstrate that Balagha evolved from a natural appreciation for beautiful language into a sophisticated scientific and philosophical inquiry. It is a discipline that continues to be studied and taught in the Arab world, providing a unique lens for appreciating the profound artistry of Arabic and its rich literary heritage.

Abdul Qahir al-Jurjani (d. 1078 CE) was a scholar who is widely regarded as the most influential figure in the history of Arabic rhetoric and literary criticism. He transformed Balagha from a simple classification of figures of speech into a sophisticated, philosophical science. His two major works, *Asrar al-Balagha* and *Dalail al-I'jaz*, are considered foundational texts that redefined the field.

Before al-Jurjani, Balagha focused on individual rhetorical devices like similes and metaphors. Al-Jurjani argued that the true power of eloquence lay not in these isolated figures, but in the *nazm* (نظم), or the "arrangement" and "composition" of words and sentences. He proposed that the beauty and effectiveness of speech came from how a speaker or writer ordered their words to convey a specific meaning and emotional effect. This was a radical shift from focusing on the parts to understanding the whole.

He explained his theory through a famous analogy: the individual words of a sentence are like the beads of a necklace; their beauty is not in the beads themselves, but in how they are arranged to create a pleasing and coherent whole. This concept of *nazm* became the central pillar of his rhetorical theory, providing a framework for analyzing why some texts, particularly the Qur'an, were more eloquent than others.

1. Asrar al-Balagha (The Secrets of Eloquence)

In this book, al-Jurjani primarily dealt with 'Ilm al-Bayan (the science of figurative language). He explored the

psychological and aesthetic effects of figures of speech, moving beyond simple definitions to explain why a particular metaphor or simile was more effective than another. He demonstrated that figures of speech were not mere ornaments but tools for shaping meaning.

He analyzed concepts like *tashbih* (simile) and *isti'ara* (metaphor) in great depth. For instance, he showed that a metaphor's power comes from its ability to evoke an image in the mind of the listener, rather than just stating a fact. This work laid the groundwork for a more nuanced and appreciative study of literary and rhetorical devices.

2. *Dalail al-I'jaz* (The Proofs of Inimitability)

This is considered al-Jurjani's most important work. Here, he applied his theory of *nazm* to the supreme example of eloquence in the Arabic tradition: the Qur'an. He argued that the miracle of the Qur'an's inimitability (*I'jaz al-Qur'an*) was not due to its use of strange or uncommon words, but rather in its perfect and unparalleled arrangement of familiar words.

Al-Jurjani meticulously analyzed the syntactical choices in the Qur'an, demonstrating how changes in word order, verb forms, and other grammatical structures created profound and powerful rhetorical effects that were impossible to imitate. *Dalail al-I'jaz* established the scholarly method of using rhetorical analysis as a tool for understanding and appreciating the Qur'an's unique literary style.

Al-Jurjani's work had a profound and lasting impact on Arabic rhetoric. His theory of *nazm* was a revolutionary concept that shifted the focus of *Balagha* from form to meaning and from words to their arrangement. Later scholars like al-Sakkaki and al-Qazwini, while codifying and systematizing *Balagha* into the three-part structure used today, built directly upon al-Jurjani's foundations. His works remain essential for anyone seeking a deep understanding of Arabic rhetoric and its philosophical underpinnings.

Mahmud al-Zamakhshari (d. 1144 CE) was a renowned Khwarazmian scholar of the Arabic language, theology, and literature. While he didn't write a specific, dedicated treatise on *Balagha*, his profound influence on the science of Arabic rhetoric is undeniable, primarily through his monumental Qur'anic commentary, *Al-Kashshaf*.

Al-Zamakhshari's most famous work, *Al-Kashshaf* an *Haqa'iq al-Tanzil* ("The Revealer of the Truths of Revelation"), is a voluminous commentary on the Qur'an that became a cornerstone of Arabic rhetorical studies. Written from a Mu'tazilite theological perspective, it systematically analyzed the Qur'an's

linguistic and stylistic features, demonstrating its miraculous inimitability (*I'jaz al-Qur'an*) through the principles of rhetoric.

In *Al-Kashshaf*, al-Zamakhshari did not simply comment on the meaning of verses; he meticulously unpacked the grammatical nuances, syntactical structures, and rhetorical figures used. He focused on the three main branches of *Balagha*, using them as tools to interpret the divine text:

- **'Ilm al-Ma'ani (The Science of Semantics and Syntax):** Al-Zamakhshari excelled at explaining why certain words or grammatical constructions were used in specific contexts. He showed how a change in word order or a different grammatical form could dramatically alter the meaning and rhetorical effect of a verse. His analysis was so precise that later grammarians and rhetoricians adopted his approach.

- **'Ilm al-Bayan (The Science of Figurative Language):** He masterfully highlighted the use of figurative language, such as similes (*tashbih*), metaphors (*majaz*), and metonymies (*kinayah*), within the Qur'an. He explained how these rhetorical devices conveyed deep theological and moral meanings in a concise and powerful manner.

- **'Ilm al-Badi' (The Science of Embellishment):** While less of a focus, al-Zamakhshari pointed out instances of stylistic embellishments, demonstrating the artistic beauty and elegance of the Qur'anic text.

Al-Zamakhshari's approach was revolutionary. He treated the Qur'an as a unified literary text where every word and structure was deliberately chosen for a specific rhetorical purpose. His commentary provided a rich source of examples and a practical methodology for applying the principles of *Balagha*.

Although Al-Kashshaf was criticized by some orthodox scholars for its Mu'tazilite theological underpinnings, its linguistic and rhetorical analysis was universally praised and adopted. Later scholars, like Siraj al-Din al-Sakkaki and Jalal al-Din al-Qazwini, drew heavily from his work. They extracted and systematized the rhetorical principles found in *Al-Kashshaf*, integrating them into the formal structure of *Balagha*.

Al-Zamakhshari's work is a testament to the idea that *Balagha* is not an abstract theory but a practical tool for understanding and appreciating the eloquence of language. His legacy continues to be studied and debated, and *Al-Kashshaf* remains a foundational text for anyone interested in the intersection of linguistics, rhetoric, and Qur'anic exegesis.

Siraj al-Din al-Sakkaki (d. 1229 CE) was a central Asian scholar of the Arabic language whose work, particularly his book *Miftah al-Ulum* ("The Key to the Sciences"), was

a turning point in the field of Arabic rhetoric, or Balagha. While earlier scholars like al-Jurjani had established key concepts, Sakkaki systematized and codified the discipline, effectively creating a standardized framework that would be taught for centuries.

Al-Sakkaki's masterpiece, Miftah al-Ulum, is a comprehensive compendium that covers the major disciplines of the Arabic language. It is divided into three parts:

- **Part One:** Deals with morphology (Sarf).
- **Part Two:** Focuses on syntax (Nahw).
- **Part Three:** This is the most famous part and is dedicated to Balagha.

Prior to al-Sakkaki, the sciences of Balagha were studied, but not always with a clear, standardized structure. Sakkaki's genius was in organizing the field into the three sub-disciplines that are still used today:

- **'Ilm al-Ma'ani (The Science of Semantics and Syntax):** Sakkaki categorized the causes of linguistic errors into three types: those related to the individual word, the compound structure, and the semantic appropriateness of the composition. He provides a logical and structured approach to understanding how to construct sentences that are appropriate for a given context.
- **'Ilm al-Bayan (The Science of Figurative Language):** Building on the work of al-Jurjani, Sakkaki provided a clear taxonomy of rhetorical devices like simile (tashbih), metaphor (majaz), and metonymy (kinayah). He established a clear distinction between these figures of speech, making them easier to understand and apply.
- **'Ilm al-Badi' (The Science of Embellishment):** Although earlier rhetoricians had discussed some rhetorical embellishments, Sakkaki was one of the first to treat this as a separate and distinct sub-discipline. He cataloged and explained the various stylistic devices that add beauty and elegance to language, such as paronomasia (jinas) and rhymed prose (saj').

Al-Sakkaki's approach was heavily influenced by the theory of Nazm (speech composition) developed by al-Jurjani, which sought to explain the miraculous inimitability of the Qur'an through its unique structure and style. Sakkaki's work is often described as an "organon," or a logical instrument, for Arabic rhetorical systems, akin to how Aristotle systematized Greek philosophy.

Al-Sakkaki's Miftah al-Ulum wasn't just a book; it became the foundational textbook for the study of Balagha. Its systematic and logical structure made it an ideal teaching tool, and it had a profound impact on

later rhetoricians and their works:

- **Talkhis al-Miftah:** The most significant and widely studied work to emerge from the Miftah is the summary (Talkhis) written by Jalal al-Din al-Qazwini (d. 1338 CE). Al-Qazwini's abridgment of the Balagha section of Sakkaki's book became a standard text in its own right, and countless commentaries were written on it.
 - **Al-Idah:** Al-Qazwini also wrote a detailed commentary on his own Talkhis, titled Al-Idah fi Ulum al-Balagha ("The Elucidation of the Sciences of Balagha"). This work further popularized Sakkaki's framework and solidified his influence.
 - **Later Commentaries:** The influence continued with works like al-Taftazani's (d. 1390 CE) Mutawwal, which was a comprehensive commentary on al-Qazwini's Talkhis.
- Sa'd al-Din Mas'ud ibn Umar al-Taftazani (d. 1390 CE) was a brilliant polymath who made significant contributions to various Islamic sciences, including theology, logic, law, and rhetoric. In the field of Arabic Balagha, his most influential work is his comprehensive commentary on al-Qazwini's Talkhis al-Miftah, known as Al-Mutawwal.
- Al-Taftazani's Al-Mutawwal fi Sharh al-Talkhis ("The Lengthy Commentary on the Summary") is a monumental work that systematically expounds upon the principles of Balagha as laid out by al-Sakkaki and summarized by al-Qazwini. While al-Qazwini's Talkhis was a concise abridgement, al-Taftazani's Mutawwal unpacks every concept, provides extensive examples, and delves into the intricate nuances and scholarly debates surrounding each rhetorical device and principle.
- Al-Taftazani's approach in Al-Mutawwal is characterized by:
- **Comprehensive Elaboration:** He dissects the terse statements of Talkhis, explaining their underlying rationale and providing detailed justifications.
 - **Logical Rigor:** Being a master of logic, al-Taftazani applies a rigorous analytical framework to the study of Balagha, often presenting arguments and counter-arguments for various interpretations.
 - **Synthesizing Diverse Views:** He brings together the views of earlier rhetoricians, critically evaluating them and offering his own conclusions. This made Al-Mutawwal a repository of the accumulated knowledge of Balagha up to his time.
 - **Extensive Examples:** To illustrate rhetorical concepts, al-Taftazani draws examples not only from the Qur'an and Hadith but also from a vast array of Arabic poetry and prose.

Al-Mutawwal covers the three main branches of Balagha with extraordinary depth:

- **'Ilm al-Ma'ani (Semantics and Syntax):** Taftazani meticulously explains how the structure of a sentence (word order, definite/indefinite articles, etc.) impacts its meaning and rhetorical force.
- **'Ilm al-Bayan (Figurative Language):** He delves into the subtleties of tashbih (simile), isti'ara (metaphor), and kinayah (metonymy), distinguishing between various types and discussing their effects on the listener/reader.
- **'Ilm al-Badi' (Embellishment):** He thoroughly categorizes and explains the numerous devices that add beauty and artistry to language, such as jinas (paronomasia) and saj' (rhymed prose).

Al-Mutawwal quickly became, and remains to this day, one of the most authoritative and widely studied texts in the advanced study of Arabic Balagha. Its comprehensive nature and intellectual depth made it indispensable for scholars and students. It served as a primary textbook in madrasahs and Islamic universities across the Islamic world for centuries.

While it is a commentary, Al-Mutawwal is effectively an independent work that encapsulates the entirety of classical Arabic rhetorical theory. Al-Taftazani's clear, precise, and systematic exposition solidified the framework of Balagha established by al-Sakkaki and al-Qazwini, making it accessible and understandable to countless generations of students. His work is a testament to the intellectual rigor and analytical prowess that characterized Islamic scholarship in the post-classical period.

While some later critics have noted that Sakkaki's systematization may have, at times, led to a more mechanical and less aesthetic approach to rhetoric, his contribution to codifying the science of Balagha is undeniable. His work provided a clear and accessible framework that was essential for the formal education of generations of scholars in the Arab and wider Islamic world.

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