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THE FORMATION OF ARABIC MORPHOLOGY (SARF) AND ITS EARLIEST SOURCES

Abstract. *Sarf (morphology) is the science that studies the rules governing how the structure of words changes in order to convey specific meanings. Within this field, terms such as sarf, tasrif (inflection), and ishtiqaq (derivation) are used. The science of sarf primarily deals with nouns and verbs. The subject matter of sarf is Arabic words and how they change form to express meaning. It also examines transformations involving weak letters and similar linguistic phenomena. According to historical narrations, the first person to address this science was 'Ali ibn Abi Talib. Some sources also mention Mu'adh ibn al-Harra as one of the earliest founders of the science of sarf.*

Keywords: *sarf, tasrif, the emergence of sarf, teaching of sarf, Arabic morphology, ishtiqaq, linguistic derivation.*

INTRODUCTION

The terms sarf and tasrif converge linguistically around the concepts of 'changing' and 'turning.' In the lexicon, the meaning of tasrif is described in nearly identical terms: the transfer of something from one state to another, from one form to a different form (Ibn Manzur, 1999:189). For example, the expression 'he transformed the thing' (sarafa al-shay') means he changed it. When one says 'he inflected the thing' (sarrafahu), one understands it to mean he turned it from one direction to another and put it into practice. Accordingly, tasrif is the transformation of a single root and its transfer to another form.

The term sarf shares this sense: it denotes the return of something away from its own direction. Lexicographers emphasize that the linguistic basis of both sarf and tasrif is change. Our own scholars, in their works, accepted this meaning and shaped the terminological sense around precisely the change of the asl (root) and its transference to various states.

Since sarf and tasrif both denote change and turning, the following questions arise: Are they synonyms of each other? Why is the word tahwil (turning) preferred over taghyir (changing)? Some scholars have preferred tahwil because it carries the sense of moving a thing from one place to another. For example, one moves the letters ḍ-r-b (ض-ر-ب) to forms such as ḍaraba, yaḍribu. The relationship between these two concepts is one of general to specific (al-Taftazani, 1983:26).

Why has the term tasrif rather than sarf been more widely chosen? According to al-'Izzi, because this science involves a great many changes and operations (tasarrufat), the form taf'il (تفعيل) which expresses exaggeration and multiplicity was selected.

MAIN PART

Although earlier scholars used tasrif and sarf with a single meaning, in reality these two concepts differ from each other both in terms of derivation (ishtiqaq) and in their terminological sense. In technical usage: Sarf is the science that is concerned with the structure of a word, studying whether the letters within it are original or augmented, whether they are sound or contain a weak letter ('illa), and similar matters. Tasrif in technical usage is the transfer of a word from one form to another that is, its inflection (al-Nahar, 2009:90).

Later scholars, though they considered sarf and tasrif to be identical terms, Sibawayhi's views differ from this position. In his understanding: sarf represents the theoretical dimension of the science, while tasrif represents its practical dimension. He understood tasrif as the formation of new word forms that the Arabs themselves did not use, on the basis of patterns they did employ. This reveals that tasrif carries the sense of 'practice and skill' that is, we learn through rules how to form words that the Arabs themselves did not produce.

The term sarf is divided into two parts: practical terminology and scholarly terminology. Practical terminology is the transfer of a single root to various forms in order to achieve the desired meanings for example, transforming a masdar into the form of an ism fa'il (active participle) or ism maf'ul (passive participle). These meanings can be achieved only through this method. Scholarly terminology is the science of the principles and rules that teaches the states of word forms not involving syntactic changes (Rida, n.d.).

The term *sarf* frequently appears alongside the term *ishtiqaq* (derivation). As emphasized in Ibn Malik's work *al-Tashil*: «*Sarf* is a broader concept than *ishtiqaq*, for forming a word of the pattern *ja'far* from *ḍaraba* is called *tasrif* but not *ishtiqaq*. *Ishtiqaq* is specific to those word-formation patterns that the Arabs themselves left behind.» In terminological usage, *ishtiqaq* is the derivation of one word form from another, provided that there exists between the two words a unity in meaning, in original letters, and in structural composition (root order), and that the second word expresses the original meaning along with an additional specific meaning for example, deriving *ḍarib* (striker) from *ḍaraba* (to strike) (al-Suyuti, 1986:246).

According to another definition, *ishtiqaq* is the extraction from a given word of another word that is structurally consistent with it and the direction of that word towards a meaning that corresponds to it. Thus, the field of investigation in *ishtiqaq* consists of studying the root of a word in its various manifestations.

Ishtiqaq is the change of a word's form for a lexical or semantic purpose. This definition corresponds directly to the definition of *sarf* itself. As the author of *al-Tasrih* states: «*Sarf* is the change of a word form for a lexical or semantic purpose.»

In this way, we observe the convergence of three terms: *sarf* general rules and theory; *tasrif* the process of word derivation; and *ishtiqaq* the transfer of a form into other forms with differing patterns. In conclusion, there is no scholarly obstacle to including *ishtiqaq* within *tasrif*, since *ishtiqaq* is in essence the transformation of a word form (al-Handawi, 1989:20).

Sarf (morphology) is the science of the rules that teaches how the structure of a word changes in order to express a particular meaning. That is, through this science, the various changes that occur when Arabic words shift from one state to another are carried out. The science of *sarf* investigates how Arabic words are formed in accordance with the intended meaning (Muhammad Muhyi al-Din, 1959:5).

The subject matter of *sarf* is individual (*mufrad*) Arabic words: it studies how they are formed to express meaning, or the accidental (*'arid*) states that occur within them. This includes stating whether the letters of a word are original or augmented, as well as identifying elision (*ḥadhf*), soundness (*ṣaḥiḥ*), the presence of a weak letter (*i'lal*), substitution (*ibdal*), and similar states.

As Hadi al-Nahar sets out in his work, sarf is divided into two parts: the subject of the first part is the general laws applicable to meaningful phonological units morphological units that may constitute the word itself or a component preceding, embedded within, or following it; it also studies the originality of a letter, its elision, transposition, metathesis, assimilation (idgham), soundness, weak-letter alternation, diminutive formation, broken plural (taksir), the dual, and the plural. The subject of the second part is the transformation of a single root into many words with different meanings that share common features in their base sense. This includes transforming a masdar into active participle, passive participle, noun of place, noun of time, dual, plural, and so forth (al-Nahar, 2009:90).

The science of sarf pertains to nouns that are declined and verbs that are conjugated. The occurrence of certain relative pronouns (ismu mawsul) and demonstrative pronouns in the dual, plural, and diminutive forms is merely formal and not genuine. The benefit of sarf is to protect against error in individual words and to observe the rules of the Arabic language in writing (al-Hamawi, n.d.:49).

At this point we may summarize that, in the view of morphologists, tasrif (morphological change) consists of the following elements:

– Investigating the states of Arabic words nouns, adjectives, sound and weak (mu'tal) verbs as well as things analogized from patterns of Arabic speech.

– Forming words that the Arabs did not use on the model of words they did use. For example, if one wishes to form a word from *ḍaraba* (ضَرَبَ) on the pattern of *ja'far* (جَعْفَرُ), one says *ḍarbab* (ضَرَبَب). The very act of adapting the movements of the letters of *ḍaraba* to the movements of *ja'far* constitutes *tasrif*.

– Transferring a word from its original form into another form. This encompasses linguistic analogy (*qiyas*), *ishtiqaq*, and specific morphological chapters such as *i'lal*, *ibdal*, augmentation, elision, and assimilation.

The science of sarf is one of the sciences of the rules of the Arabic language. It was not initially formed as an independent discipline; rather, research pertaining to sarf was conducted within the framework of *nahw* (syntax) research, because at the outset the sciences of the Arabic language were not separated from one another and their chapters and topics had not yet been clearly delimited.

The history of the emergence of sarf may be divided into two stages.

Stage One: Before Sibawayhi's al-Kitab

The first stage begins before Sibawayhi wrote al-Kitab and continues until that work appeared. It is not known precisely who spoke about certain topics of sarf during this period; however, narrations mention that the first person to speak about this was 'Ali ibn Abi Talib. Other narrations state that the first person to investigate this science was Mu'adh ibn Muslim al-Harra. According to some contemporary researchers, 'Ali ibn Abi Talib was the first to notice the errors that certain people made in word forms, and he composed a chapter or two on word structure, laying the foundation of sarf.

Narrations also present Mu'adh ibn al-Harra as the first founder of sarf. Mu'adh was born in the era of 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan and died in the year 187 AH. His status as the founder of sarf rests on the following narration recorded by al-Suyuti: «While Abu Muslim (the teacher of 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan) was seated in Mu'adh's presence, he heard him disputing with a man. Mu'adh asked him: 'How would you form the ya fa'il, if'al pattern from ta'uzzuhum azzan (تُؤزَّهُمُ أَرَا)?'» Al-Suyuti comments on this narration: «All of this was mentioned by al-Zubaydi. On this basis, I consider Mu'adh to be the one who first laid the foundation of sarf» (al-Hadisi, n.d.:28).

Among the earliest works bearing the title Tasrif mentioned in the sources are the following:

- Kitab al-Tasrif by Abu Hasan Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn Kaysan (d. 120 AH).
- Kitab al-Tasarif by al-Maktimi (d. 125 AH).
- Kitab al-Tasrif by al-Mukhtaf (d. 125 AH).
- Al-Tasrif by 'Ali ibn Mubarak al-Ahmar al-Kufi (d. 194 AH).
- Kitab al-Tasgir, Kitab al-Waqf wa-l-Ibtida' al-Kabir, and Kitab al-Afrad wa-l-Jam' by Muhammad ibn Hasan al-Ru'asi, nephew of Mu'adh al-Harra.

The second stage begins after Sibawayhi completed al-Kitab. In the course of systematizing the sciences of the Arabic language and defining their rules, he also gathered morphological questions within the general body of the text. However, he did not separate nahw (syntax) from sarf, recitation variants (qira'at), and phonetics. Nevertheless, it may be said that Sibawayhi collected morphological material in a distinctive and differentiated

section of his work. This shows that, even though he did not explicitly designate these materials as ‘a science other than nahw,’ morphological material was distinct from syntactic material in his view. The work al-Kitab is the earliest authored work in which morphological questions and topics were incorporated, even if Sibawayhi did not organize them into interconnected and separate chapters as later scholars did.

After Sibawayhi, numerous works devoted to the investigation of sarf began to be written. Among the most important books on this subject is al-Tasrif by Abu ‘Uthman al-Mazini (d. 249 AH / 863 CE). This work has survived to the present day and is regarded as the earliest extant source that identifies sarf as a separate object of investigation (al-Hadisi, n.d.:31).

Among the other works written on sarf up to the end of the fourth Islamic century are the following:

- al-Tasrif: ‘Ali ibn Hasan al-Ahmar (d. 194 AH / 810 CE).
- al-Tasrif: Abu Zakariyya Yahya ibn Ziyad al-Farra’ (d. 207 AH / 822 CE).
- al-Tasrif: Abu al-Hasan Sa’id ibn Mas’ada al-Akhfash al-Awsat (d. 210 AH / 825 CE).
- al-Abniya wa-l-Tasrif: Abu ‘Umar al-Jarmi (d. 225 AH / 840 CE).
- al-Tasrif: Abu al-’Abbas Muhammad ibn Yazid al-Mubarrad (d. 285 AH / 898 CE).
- al-Tasrif: Abu Ja’far Ahmad ibn Muhammad al-Tabari (304 AH / 916 CE).
- al-Tasrif: Abu al-Hasan Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn Kaysan (d. 320 AH / 932 CE).
- Ghayth al-Tasrif: Hasan ibn Ahmad ibn ‘Abdallah al-Baghdadi (d. 360 AH / 971 CE).
- al-Takmila: Abu ‘Ali al-Farisi (d. 377 AH / 987 CE).
- al-Tasrif: ‘Ali ibn ‘Isa al-Rummani (d. 384 AH / 994 CE).
- [object Object],[object Object],[object Object],[object Object]
- Mukhtasar al-Tasrif: Ibn Jinni.
- Muqaddimat Abwab al-Tasrif: Ibn Jinni.
- Jumal Usul al-Tasrif: Ibn Jinni.
- al-Tasrif al-Muluki: Ibn Jinni.
- Sirr Sina’at al-I’rab: Ibn Jinni.

CONCLUSION

The science of Arabic morphology (Sarf) represents one of the most fundamental and intellectually sophisticated disciplines within the Islamic linguistic tradition. This article

has examined the terminological boundaries of sarf, tasrif, and ishtiqaq, demonstrating that while these terms are often used interchangeably in later scholarship, they are in fact distinct in both their etymological bases and their technical applications. Sarf denotes the theoretical framework of the discipline; tasrif refers to the practical process of word transformation; and ishtiqaq constitutes a subset of morphological derivation concerned specifically with word forms that the Arabs themselves attested.

The subject matter of Sarf the investigation of how Arabic words are structured, how their letters are classified as original or augmented, and how they change form to convey specific meanings establishes it as an indispensable instrument for the correct reading, analysis, and composition of Arabic texts. Its two-part division, as formulated by al-Nahar and others, captures both the general laws of morphological units and the practical transformation of roots into the full paradigm of derived forms.

Historically, the emergence of Sarf as an independent science proceeded through two identifiable stages. The first, predating Sibawayhi's al-Kitab, is characterized by isolated beginnings attributed to figures such as 'Ali ibn Abi Talib and Mu'adh ibn al-Harra, the latter recognized by al-Suyuti as the true founder of the discipline. The second stage, inaugurated by Sibawayhi's systematic if still undifferentiated treatment of morphological material, produced a succession of independent works culminating in al-Mazini's al-Tasrif (d. 249 AH), the earliest extant monograph devoted exclusively to the science. The fourth century AH then witnessed a remarkable florescence of morphological scholarship, above all in the encyclopaedic contributions of Ibn Jinni.

Taken together, the terminological precision, the clarity of subject matter, and the well-documented historical trajectory of Sarf confirm its status not merely as an auxiliary branch of grammar but as an autonomous and theoretically coherent science one whose mastery remains essential for anyone engaged with the Arabic language at a scholarly level.

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