



THE SUBJECT, TERMINOLOGY, AND FORMATION HISTORY OF ARABIC MORPHOLOGY (SARF)

<https://doi.org/10.57033/mijournals-2026-3-0103>

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Received: 15-03-2026

Accepted: 28-03-2026

Published: 13-04-2026



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Abstract. *This study explores the origins and historical development of the science of Sarf (morphology) as a cornerstone of Arabic linguistics. It examines the process through which Sarf emerged as an independent discipline from Nahw (syntax), pioneered by scholars such as Mu'adh al-Harra and Abu Uthman al-Mazini. The article provides a comparative analysis of the Basra and Kufa linguistic schools, focusing on their distinct approaches based on qiyas (analogy) and sama' (auditory tradition). Furthermore, the significant role of Mahmud al-Zamakhshari and Mawarannahr scholars in systematizing morphological rules and creating classical pedagogical texts is scientifically substantiated.*

Keywords: *Sarf, morphology, Arabic language, Basra school, Kufa school, scholars, tasrif.*

INTRODUCTION

The science of Sarf (morphology), regarded as one of the cornerstones of Arabic linguistics, occupies a distinct place in the intellectual history of Islamic civilization. This discipline studies the internal structure of Arabic words, the laws governing their transformations, and the derivation of new meanings. The formation of Sarf was not merely a linguistic process; it arose as a necessity driven by the need to protect the text of the Holy Quran from linguistic corruption (lahn) and to systematize the rich capacities of the Arabic language.

From a linguistic perspective, the word sarf derives from the Arabic root ṣ-r-f (ص-ر-ف), carrying the meanings of «to change,» «to turn,» or «to deflect» (al-Farahidi, 1988:12). In terminological usage, as defined by the great scholar Ibn

al-Hajib, Sarf is the science that studies the states of word roots that are not related to the change in the final letter (i'rab), as well as the conditions of those roots themselves.

The foundation of Sarf rests on the system of wazn (measure or pattern). Scholars determined that the majority of Arabic words are built on three-letter roots and adopted the pattern fa-'ala (ف-ع-ل) as the standard measure. This system makes it possible to distinguish original letters from augmented (additional) letters within a word, as well as to analyze phonological alternations.

MAIN PART

This science initially developed alongside Nahw (syntax). In the middle of the first Islamic century, as Islam spread widely and various peoples became Arabized, linguistic errors began to multiply. The Arabic grammatical tradition founded by Abu al-Aswad al-Du'ali (d. 69 AH) originally regulated the changes at the end of words; over time, however, the question of how words themselves are formed also became urgent.

At that period, both disciplines were referred to under the general designation 'ilm al-nahw or 'ilm al-lugha. Only subsequently, as the scope of research expanded, did morphological rules begin to emerge as an independent discipline (Usmonova & Yuldashev, 2025).

Historical sources most frequently cite Mu'adh ibn Muslim al-Harra (d. 187 AH / 803 CE) as the first scholar to distinguish Sarf as an independent science. Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti in his work *Al-Mazhar* refers to Mu'adh al-Harra as the founder of this discipline. Mu'adh al-Harra was a representative of the Kufa school and began teaching the rules of word formation separately from Nahw.

However, the first complete works expounding morphological rules in a systematic and scholarly form belong to representatives of the Basra school. Khalil ibn Ahmad al-Farahidi analyzed the structure of word roots in his lexicon *Kitab al-'Ayn*, while his student Sibawayhi devoted a substantial portion of his monumental work *al-Kitab* to morphological questions (Sibawayhi, 1982:45).

The rivalry between the Basra and Kufa linguistic schools served as a major stimulus for the development of Sarf. These two schools are distinguished by their methodological approaches:

The Basra School relied on logical analogy (qiyas). In generalizing linguistic rules, its members accepted only data heard (sama') from pure Arab tribes and rejected rare or anomalous (shadhhdh) forms.

The Kufa School was more flexible, being inclined to accept any form found in everyday Arab speech as a valid rule. Its members paid great attention to poetry and to various dialects (The Emergence of the Kufa School, 2025:3).

The principal morphological disagreements between the two schools may be summarized as follows:

Issue	Basra School Position	Kufa School Position
Root of the word ism (noun)	Derived from s-m-w (elevation/height)	Derived from w-s-m (mark/sign)
Verb and masdar (verbal noun)	The masdar is primary; the verb is derived from it	The verb is primary; the masdar is derived from it
The form af'ala (أَفْعَلًا)	In expressions of wonder (ta'ajjub), it is regarded as a past tense verb	In expressions of wonder (ta'ajjub), it is regarded as a noun

The complete separation of Sarf from Nahw is associated with the name of Abu Uthman al-Mazini (d. 249 AH). His work Al-Tasrif is the first independent book devoted exclusively to morphology. Al-Mazini systematized word-formation processes with mathematical precision.

Abu al-Fath Uthman ibn Jinni, who lived in the fourth century AH, elevated this science to a new level. In his works Al-Munsif (a commentary on al-Mazini's work) and Al-Khasa'is, morphology was connected to phonetics and linguistic philosophy (Ibn Jinni, 1999:67). Ibn Jinni developed the theory of «major derivation» (al-ishtiqaq al-akbar), attempting to demonstrate that all words composed of the same letters share a common underlying meaning.

The role of scholars who emerged from our homeland in the development of Sarf is immeasurable. In particular, Mahmud al-Zamakhshari became known to the world through his work Al-Mufasssal. In its day, this work attained the status of a «constitution» of Arabic grammar. He presented all grammatical categories according to the divisions of noun, verb, and particle, and arranged the rules of Sarf with exceptional logical order (Arab filologiyasi, 2021:72).

Furthermore, the commentaries on morphology by scholars such as Sayyid Sharif al-Jurjani and Sa'd al-Din al-Taftazani served for centuries as the principal textbooks in madrasas. In contemporary Uzbek Oriental studies, the textbook Arabic Grammar

by Ne'matulloh Ibrohimov and Muhammadjon Yusupov is an outstanding example of scholarly explication of classical Sarf traditions in the Uzbek language (Ibrohimov & Yusupov, 1997:216).

CONCLUSION

Sarf is not merely a collection of theoretical rules; it is the most important instrument for the analysis of texts. The root-pattern system of the Arabic language makes it possible to generate thousands of words from a single root. For example, from the root k-t-b (ك-ت-ب) one can derive كَتَبَ (he wrote), كِتَاب (book), مَكْتَب (office/desk), and كَاتِب (writer) and it is precisely Sarf that explains the laws governing this derivation (Ermatova, 2025).

In conclusion, the formation of Sarf represents the Arabic language's process of self-understanding. The path initiated by Mu'adh al-Harra reached maturity in the works of such brilliant scholars as Sibawayhi, al-Mazini, Ibn Jinni, and al-Zamakhshari. This discipline demonstrated that Arabic is not merely a means of communication but an intellectual system governed by precise, mathematical laws.

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