



THEORY, FOUNDATIONS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF TEXTUAL CRITICISM: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF UZBEK AND ARABIC TRADITIONS

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Abstract. *This article provides a scientific analysis of the theoretical foundations, object, and subject matter of textual criticism (tekstologiya), as well as its comparative stages of development within Uzbek and Arabic cultural traditions. The study traces the mutual influence between ancient Turkic inscriptions and the Arabic manuscript arts of the Islamic civilisation period, examines the strict structural principles of text composition, and illuminates both traditional and contemporary methodologies in the study of manuscripts. Special attention is devoted to three core scholarly methods – attribution, athetesis, and conjecture – and to the emerging role of digital textual criticism and NLP algorithms in the analysis of manuscript traditions. The article argues that the Uzbek and Arabic textual criticism traditions are not separate phenomena but complementary layers of a single, centuries-long scholarly heritage centred in Central Asia.*

Keywords: *textual criticism; tekstologiya; literary source studies; Arabic manuscript tradition; Yollug' Tigin; colophon (khatm al-kitab); attribution; athetesis; conjecture; digital textual criticism; NLP algorithms; Central Asia.*

INTRODUCTION

Textual criticism (tekstologiya) is one of the most complex and foundational branches of philology and historical science. It encompasses the theoretical and practical dimensions of restoring the authentic text of written monuments, studying their historical evolution, and preparing them for scholarly-critical publication. As defined in the scholarly literature, textual criticism is the intricate discipline that studies the texts of literary, historical, and scientific works and ancient documents on the basis of primary sources and prepares them for future generations (Sodiqov, 2017:3). The

discipline thus occupies the intersection of philology, historiography, codicology, and palaeography – a position that grants it unique methodological breadth and makes it indispensable for any serious engagement with pre-modern written culture.

The emergence and development of textual criticism is inseparably linked to the history of writing itself. As human intellectual capacity evolved, writing systems progressed through successive stages: from pictographic (image-based) writing to logographic, hieroglyphic, and finally the most refined phonographic stage (Sirojiddinov, 2022:4). Long before the medieval period, the ancient territory of Turan (present-day Central Asia) hosted flourishing centres of culture and learning in which multiple independent writing systems – Khwarezmian, Sogdian, Pahlavi, Bactrian – were simultaneously in use. The earliest written text specimens recognised by scholarship, the so-called “Old Letters” dated to the early fourth century CE, demonstrate that the tradition of textual criticism in this region predates the Islamic period by centuries (Sirojiddinov, 2022:4).

The present article aims to analyse the Uzbek and Arabic textual criticism traditions comparatively, to illuminate the principal methodological tools of the discipline, and to demonstrate the potential of digital textual criticism as a complement to classical scholarship.

METHODS

The study employs historical-comparative, descriptive-analytical, and source-critical methods. The primary sources drawn upon are the scholarly works of Sodiqov (2017), Sirojiddinov (2022), Habibullayev (2000), Is’hoqxon Ibrat (1912), and Sirojiddinov et al. (2022). The comparative analytical framework encompasses ancient Turkic inscriptions, Islamic-era manuscripts, and contemporary NLP algorithms, treating them as sequential stages of a continuous methodological tradition rather than discontinuous phenomena.

RESULTS

The ancient roots of Turkic textual criticism. In tracing the formative history of Uzbek textual criticism, the chronology of the earliest stone inscriptions is of paramount significance. The most ancient representative of the discipline is the writer and historian Yollug’ Tigin, who was not merely a “badizchi” (stone engraver) but a major scholar

who professionally engaged with the reconstruction and logical editing of written texts (Sirojiddinov, 2022:5). Analysis of historical sources reveals that when Yollug' Tigin incorporated crucial passages from the Kül Tigin inscription (732 CE) into the text of the Bilge Khagan inscription (735 CE), he maintained constant attention to logical and epistemological coherence – in effect articulating the strict principles of historical text composition for the first time in Central Asian intellectual history. This precedent established the primacy of ideational consistency and internal coherence as foundational criteria of textual work.

The role of contact between Turkic peoples and neighbouring civilisations in the development of book-making technologies and text structure was equally significant. The outstanding tenth-century Turkic scholar Sengi Seli Tug'ung, in translating the Buddhist monument “Altun Yaruq” (Golden Radiance) from Chinese into Uyghur, compared available versions in multiple languages and supplied passages missing in the Chinese text, successfully applying in practice the principle of constructing a “composite text” (Sirojiddinov, 2022:6). This approach anticipates, in important respects, the collation methods that would later be systematised within Islamic manuscript scholarship.

The arrival of Arabic and Islamic manuscript traditions. By the medieval period, Uzbek and broadly Central Asian textual criticism had been elevated to an entirely new scholarly level. As noted in the scholarly literature, the strict principles, structural rules, and norms of textual criticism entered the Turan region in organic unity with Islam and the Arabic script (Sirojiddinov, 2022:6). Within Islamic culture, a distinctive architectural structure for text composition and the organisation of manuscripts was developed and standardised across the Muslim world.

According to this tradition, every work – regardless of whether secular or religious in character – was required to open with the basmala, hamd (praise of the Creator), na't (blessings upon the Prophet), and dedication (to whom the work was composed), constituting a fixed literary-scholarly canon. These elements serve today's textual critics as the primary attributive indicators for identifying the period and social milieu in which a work was composed. Equally significant was the rise of the art of copying (calligraphy) to a high level of refinement, and the establishment of the convention of writing a special “colophon” (khatm al-kitab, tammat) at the conclusion of a work – recording the date of completion and the name of the copyist – which functioned as a

distinctive mechanism for guaranteeing original authorship and the integrity of the text.

Hadith scholarship and critical textual methodology. The greatest advance in textological and source-critical methodology within Arabic-Islamic civilisation occurred in direct connection with the science of hadith and Islamic jurisprudence. The practice of subjecting reports and narrations to comparative and logical verification, and of rigorously classifying hadiths according to their chain of transmission (sanad) and textual content into categories such as sahih (authentic), hasan (good), and da'if (weak), produced an incomparably rigorous critical orientation within source studies (Sirojiddinov, 2022:7). In this context, extraordinary vigilance was exercised towards textual variants, on the understanding that the alteration of a single word or letter could transform an entire legal ruling. It was precisely on this scholarly-methodological foundation that the major works of figures such as Imam al-Bukhari and Burhanuddin al-Marghinani – fellow countrymen of Central Asian origin – underwent extensive textual treatment and were transmitted across centuries in complete copies or in independently structured fascicles.

Text architecture and scholarly methods. With the growth in size of major scientific and religious works during the medieval period, the traditional design of the manuscript page underwent fundamental transformation. The practice emerged of placing two distinct works, or a text together with its extended commentary, on a single page: the author's original text was placed within a ruled frame called the "jadval," while the commentaries and glosses added by later scholars were positioned in the "hashiya" (margin) section of the folio (Sirojiddinov, 2022:7–8). This page architecture – simultaneously preserving the original and its scholarly accretions – represents one of the most elegant solutions in the history of book design.

Studying works of such complex structure in contemporary Uzbek and Arabic textual criticism requires specialised practical methods. The method of *attribution* serves to identify definitively the author of an anonymous or damaged text, while *athetesis* – when a given work has been historically attributed to the wrong author – separates it from a foreign text through scholarly evidence and refutes the spurious authorship (Habibullayev, 2000:39). Furthermore, the process of restoring words and letters dropped, obscured, or corrupted by careless copyists over the long textual history of a work, on the basis of the work's overall logic, is called *conjecture* (Habibullayev,

2000:40). These three methods – attribution, athetesis, and conjecture – constitute the methodological core of textual criticism as practised in both the classical and contemporary periods.

Palaeography and digital analytical algorithms. Knowledge of the history of ancient scripts and of the specific characteristics of manuscripts is an inseparable component of palaeography within textual criticism. The Uzbek Enlightenment scholar Is'hoqxon Ibrat, in his celebrated 1912 work “Jomi’ ul-Khutut” (A Collection of Scripts), produced a profound scholarly analysis of the ancient origins and graphic systems of dozens of scripts including Arabic, Syriac, and Hebrew (Is'hoqxon Ibrat, 1912:249). This work remains one of the earliest systematic comparative palaeographical studies produced in Central Asia.

By the twenty-first century, the comparative study of classical manuscripts has migrated entirely from traditional methods to computer technologies and artificial intelligence. In digital textual criticism, modern NLP (Natural Language Processing) algorithms – including Cosine Similarity and Jaccard Similarity – are effectively employed to rapidly identify lexical and semantic discrepancies between two or more copies of a work and to calculate the degree of textual similarity in percentage terms (Sirojiddinov et al., 2022:138). These computational tools do not replace classical palaeographical analysis; rather, they complement it, enabling scholars to process manuscript corpora at a scale and speed that would have been impossible by manual means alone.

DISCUSSION

The results of the analysis confirm that the Uzbek and Arabic textual criticism traditions are not separate phenomena but two complementary strata of a unified scholarly heritage. The first stratum – the tradition of textual logical coherence from the era of the ancient Turkic inscriptions – placed ideational consistency and epistemological connection at the forefront of textual work. The second stratum – the norms of hadith scholarship and manuscript arts in the Islamic period – established rigorous critical methods of textual verification and a unified architectural structure for the manuscript page. The convergence of these two traditions in Central Asia produced a distinctive textual criticism school of which the scholarly significance has not yet been fully appreciated in international philological literature (Sirojiddinov, 2022; Sodiqov, 2017).

The integration of digital textual criticism opens new possibilities for this tradition. NLP algorithms identify lexical and semantic discrepancies between manuscripts within seconds; however, it is their application in combination with traditional palaeographical analysis that yields the highest results (Sirojiddinov et al., 2022:180). The transfer of attribution, athetesis, and conjecture methods to the digital environment constitutes an important step towards elevating Uzbek textual criticism to international standards and making the scholarly study of ancient manuscripts more accessible to a global research community.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the Uzbek and Arabic textual criticism traditions rest upon ancient conventions that have been organically intertwined with one another across centuries. The tradition of textual logical coherence from the era of Yollug' Tigin merged with the norms of hadith scholarship and manuscript arts in the Islamic period to produce a distinctive textual criticism school in Central Asia. Today, integrating this rich theoretical heritage with computational linguistics and NLP algorithms will render an incomparable service both to elevating Uzbek textual criticism to international standards and to transmitting the monuments of the distant past to future generations without error (Sirojiddinov et al., 2022:138; Sodiqov, 2017:3). The further development of this integrated approach represents one of the most promising directions in contemporary Uzbek philological science.

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