

The Pragmatic Foundations of Al-Jāḥiẓ's Theory of Communication : A Reappraisal in the Light of Contemporary Pragmatics

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Abstract

Contemporary linguistic research has shown increasing interest in revisiting the Arabic linguistic heritage to uncover its contributions to the foundations of modern linguistic theories, particularly pragmatics. Within this context, the present study examines Al-Jāḥiẓ's (159–255 AH / 776–869 CE) pragmatic conception of communication, considering him one of the foremost scholars of the Arabic linguistic tradition who developed a comprehensive account of communicative processes and the functions of discourse long before pragmatics emerged as an independent field of inquiry. The study aims to identify the pragmatic foundations underlying Al-Jāḥiẓ's theory of communication and to analyze its core concepts in light of contemporary pragmatic theory, with particular emphasis on the components of the communicative act, context, intentionality, situational appropriateness, the relationship between speaker and hearer, and the effectiveness of discourse in achieving communicative purposes. Adopting a descriptive-analytical approach, the study is based on a close reading and analysis of Al-Jāḥiẓ's texts in comparison with key concepts in modern pragmatics. The findings reveal that Al-Jāḥiẓ articulated a coherent model of communication grounded in the integration of discourse components with contextual determinants, highlighting the centrality of intentionality, contextual appropriateness, and audience awareness. These principles demonstrate significant conceptual affinities with several foundational assumptions of contemporary pragmatics.

The study concludes that re-examining the Arabic linguistic heritage from a pragmatic perspective not only underscores its intellectual originality but also enriches contemporary

linguistic scholarship by revealing the historical depth of pragmatic thought within the Arabic linguistic tradition.

Keywords: Al-Jāhiz; Pragmatics; Communication Theory; Context; Intentionality; Arabic Linguistic Heritage.

Introduction

Linguistic communication occupies a central position in contemporary linguistic research, serving as the framework through which the relationship between language and its users is understood and the mechanisms underlying discourse production and interpretation across diverse communicative contexts are examined. In this respect, modern pragmatics has redirected linguistic inquiry from the study of abstract linguistic structures to the investigation of language in use, emphasizing the communicative act, context, intentionality, and the interaction between speaker and hearer as fundamental components in the construction of meaning and the achievement of communicative effectiveness.

These concerns, however, are not exclusive to contemporary linguistic theory. A close examination of the Arabic linguistic tradition reveals an early awareness of the nature of discourse, its communicative functions, and the decisive role of contextual and intentional factors in meaning construction. Among the most prominent contributors to this intellectual tradition is Al-Jāhiz (159–255 AH / 776–869 CE), whose writings present a remarkably coherent account of linguistic communication. His analyses encompass the components of the communicative act, the functions of *bayān* (eloquent expression), contextual appropriateness, and the dynamic relationship between speaker and hearer, thereby offering a theoretical vision that extends beyond conventional rhetorical analysis toward a comprehensive understanding of discourse as communicative action.

Against this background, the present study re-examines Al-Jāhiz's theory of communication through the lens of contemporary pragmatics. It seeks to identify the conceptual foundations of his communicative thought and to explore its points of convergence with the core principles of modern pragmatic theory, without assuming a direct historical influence or imposing contemporary theoretical constructs upon classical Arabic texts. Rather, the study adopts a critical and contextualized reading intended to uncover the linguistic insights embedded in the Arabic intellectual heritage and to highlight their relevance to the historical development of pragmatic thought.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to reassessing the linguistic value of the Arabic scholarly tradition through a systematic analysis of Al-Jāhiz's writings. By illuminating the sophistication of his reflections on communication, the study demonstrates the enduring relevance of Arabic linguistic thought and its potential contribution to contemporary pragmatic research, thereby fostering a more inclusive understanding of the history and development of linguistic theory.

1- Conceptual Framework

A rigorous examination of any scholarly topic requires the establishment of a clear conceptual framework, as concepts constitute the methodological foundation upon which analysis and interpretation are constructed. Conceptual clarification not only defines the scope of the inquiry but also ensures analytical precision by minimizing ambiguity and preventing

terminological overlap. Accordingly, the explicit definition of key concepts represents an essential methodological step rather than a merely formal requirement.

The present study is primarily grounded in two central concepts **pragmatics** and **communication** which provide the theoretical basis for its analytical framework. Defining these concepts requires consideration of two complementary dimensions. The first examines their linguistic meanings as the semantic basis from which their subsequent conceptual development emerged. The second explores their terminological meanings as established in linguistic and rhetorical scholarship, thereby providing a coherent conceptual foundation consistent with the objectives and analytical orientation of the present study.

1.1 The Concept of Pragmatics

Defining the concept of **pragmatics** constitutes a fundamental methodological step in the present study, given the diversity of intellectual traditions that have contributed to the development of the term and the multiplicity of perspectives through which it has been interpreted. Accordingly, its conceptual clarification requires distinguishing between two complementary levels: its lexical meaning in Arabic and its terminological significance in contemporary linguistic scholarship.

The Arabic term **tadāwuliyyah** (pragmatics) is derived from the verb *tadāwala*, which originates from the trilateral root (*d-w-l*). Classical Arabic lexicographers associate this root with two principal semantic fields: **movement and transfer**, and **weakness or relaxation**. The former, however, is the predominant meaning in Arabic lexicography, as it conveys the notions of circulation, exchange, succession, and the transfer of something from one party to another.

In *Maqāyīs al-Lughah*, Ibn Fāris (d. 395 AH / 1004 CE) "explains that the root (*d-w-l*) fundamentally denotes movement and transfer, describing the circulation of something among different individuals¹". This lexical interpretation is further reinforced by later lexicographers. Al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538 AH / 1144 CE), in *Asās al-Balāghah*, relates the root to the alternation of states and the successive transfer of power or possession, while Ibn Manẓūr (d. 711 AH / 1311 CE), in *Lisān al-‘Arab*, "adds the notion of cyclical movement, emphasizing that fortunes, possessions, and even days circulate among people over time²". Likewise, *Al-Qāmūs al-Muḥīṭ* associates the concept with reciprocal exchange and successive circulation among different parties.

Taken together, these lexical accounts demonstrate that the root (*d-w-l*) revolves around the interconnected notions of **circulation, exchange, succession, and cyclical movement**. These semantic features subsequently provided the conceptual basis for the technical meaning of **pragmatics**, whereby the circulation of objects was extended metaphorically to the circulation of discourse among participants in communicative interaction, with meaning emerging through language in use and within specific contextual settings.

Despite the relative clarity of its lexical origin, the terminological definition of **pragmatics** remains far from straightforward. The concept has evolved within multiple intellectual traditions including semiotics, philosophy of language, linguistics, rhetoric, sociology, and logic each emphasizing different dimensions of linguistic communication. Consequently, pragmatics has acquired a variety of definitions reflecting these diverse theoretical orientations³. Broadly speaking, two major conceptions of pragmatics can be

identified. The first emerged within **semiotics**, where pragmatics is understood as the study of the relationship between signs and their users in communicative contexts. The second developed within **philosophy of language** and modern **linguistics**, where pragmatics focuses on language in use and investigates how meaning is constructed through contextual factors, communicative intentions, and the interaction between speakers and hearers. It is this latter linguistic conception that provides the theoretical foundation for the present study.

Although **pragmatics** has become a well-established field within contemporary linguistic research, reaching a universally accepted definition remains challenging due to the diversity of intellectual traditions that have shaped its development and the multiplicity of theoretical perspectives associated with it. This conceptual diversity stems primarily from the interdisciplinary nature of pragmatics, which draws upon analytical philosophy, semiotics, psychology, sociology, and linguistics⁴, thereby enriching both its theoretical foundations and its scope of application. Furthermore, the emergence of different pragmatic frameworks has led scholars to define the discipline from the perspective of their respective theoretical orientations.

One of the earliest and most influential definitions was proposed by **Charles William Morris** (1938), who situated pragmatics within the broader framework of semiotics and defined it as the branch concerned with the relationship between signs and their users. In Morris's view, "pragmatics extends beyond the study of spoken language to encompass the interaction between sign systems and their interpreters within communicative contexts⁵".

As linguistic inquiry evolved, however, pragmatics gradually developed into a distinct branch of linguistics concerned specifically with **language in use**. From this perspective, pragmatics investigates linguistic phenomena as they occur in authentic communicative situations, focusing on the relationship between linguistic form and contextual interpretation. Rather than limiting itself to lexical meanings or grammatical structures, it examines how meaning is constructed through context, communicative intentions, shared knowledge, "and the dynamic interaction between speakers and hearers. For this reason, the most widely accepted characterization of pragmatics in contemporary linguistic scholarship is that it is **the study of language in use**. This definition captures the essence of the discipline by viewing discourse as ⁶" a communicative practice whose interpretation depends not only on linguistic form but also on contextual conditions, speakers' intentions, and the circumstances surrounding the communicative act.

The evolution of **pragmatics** within contemporary linguistic theory reflects the diversity of approaches that have sought to define its scope and analytical function. Philippe Blanchet, for instance, conceives pragmatics as the study of language in discourse, emphasizing those features that confer its communicative character. This perspective underscores that the analysis of language in use cannot be separated from its syntactic and semantic dimensions; rather, these components operate in an integrated manner within communicative interaction, since deficiencies in linguistic structure inevitably affect communicative effectiveness and meaning construction⁷. A comprehensive synthesis of the major conceptions of pragmatics is provided by Kent Bach, who traces the theoretical development of the discipline through several influential perspectives. Beginning with Morris's characterization of pragmatics as the study of the relationship between signs and their users, Bach highlights the distinction between pragmatics

and semantics, the latter being primarily concerned with the relationship between signs and what they denote. He then discusses Robert Stalnaker's "tripartite distinction between syntax, semantics, and pragmatics, according to which pragmatics investigates speech acts and the contexts in which they are performed⁸". Bach further considers Jerrold Katz's distinction between semantic and pragmatic interpretation, Gerald Gazdar's emphasis on the contextual determination of pragmatic function, and Ruth Kempson's differentiation between semantics as the study of sentence meaning and pragmatics as the study of how sentence meaning is employed in actual communicative situations.

Despite their theoretical differences, these perspectives converge on a common assumption: pragmatics extends beyond the analysis of linguistic form and conventional meaning to investigate language as it is used in context, taking into account speakers' intentions, shared knowledge, and the contextual conditions governing communicative interaction. Within the Arabic linguistic tradition, Ṭāhā 'Abd al-Raḥmān sought to conceptualize pragmatics from the perspective of Arabic intellectual heritage, "defining it as the study of the various forms of communication and interaction among participants in discourse⁹". His formulation highlights interaction as a fundamental prerequisite for successful communication and emphasizes that meaning emerges through the reciprocal engagement of discourse participants.

Similarly, Maḥmūd Aḥmad Naḥlah "associates pragmatics with speaker intention and the inferential processes through which hearers recover intended meaning. From this perspective, ¹⁰" pragmatics investigates how interlocutors interpret meanings that extend beyond the literal content of utterances. For example, the statement "*I am thirsty*" may function not merely as a description of a physical state but as an indirect request for a glass of water. Such examples illustrate that pragmatic interpretation depends on contextual inference rather than on literal linguistic meaning alone. Taken together, these definitions reveal a broad consensus that **context, communicative intention, and speaker–hearer interaction** constitute the fundamental principles of pragmatic analysis. Pragmatics may therefore be understood as the branch of linguistics that examines how meaning is constructed through language in use by integrating linguistic form with contextual, cognitive, and interactional factors¹¹.

From its lexical meaning, the Arabic term **tadāwuliyyah** has become the most widely accepted equivalent of the English term **pragmatics**, as it conveys the notions of circulation, interaction, exchange, and participation in discourse. Like many linguistic concepts introduced into Arabic from Western scholarship, however, the term has generated considerable terminological debate. Various equivalents have been proposed, including **instrumentalism**, **utilitarianism**, and **pragmatism**, while some scholars have preferred to retain a transliterated form of the original foreign term. For example, Maḥmūd Farraj 'Abd al-Ḥāfiẓ adopted the term *barāghmātiyyah* (pragmatism) in his Arabic translation of George Yule's *The Study of Language*. Nevertheless, **tadāwuliyyah** has become the dominant term in contemporary Arabic linguistic scholarship. This preference is largely attributed to Ṭāhā 'Abd al-Raḥmān, who argued that it more accurately reflects the conceptual scope of **pragmatics**¹², since it encompasses the notions of practice, interaction, and communicative exchange while maintaining a semantic connection with the Arabic concept of meaning (*dalālah*). By contrast, 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Ḥāj Ṣāliḥ proposed the expression **phenomena of communication** (*ẓawāhir al-takhāṭub*),

emphasizing the continuity between contemporary pragmatics and the rich communicative insights found in the classical Arabic linguistic tradition.

This diversity of terminology reflects differences in conceptual emphasis rather than disagreement over the substance of the discipline. Despite variations in nomenclature, these proposals converge in viewing pragmatics as the study of language as communicative action, focusing on the interaction between discourse participants and the decisive role of context and communicative intention in the production and interpretation of meaning. Although pragmatics emerged as an independent field of inquiry during the twentieth century, its intellectual foundations can be traced back to classical Greek philosophy. Early reflections on language and its use can be found in the works of Socrates, Aristotle, and the Stoics, before these ideas gradually evolved within modern philosophy and eventually crystallized into a distinct theoretical framework through the combined contributions of linguistics, philosophy of language, anthropology, psychology, and sociology¹³.

The Emergence and Development of Pragmatics

Pragmatics emerged as an independent field of inquiry during the second half of the twentieth century, particularly from the 1950s onward, "when linguistic research increasingly shifted its focus from abstract structural analysis to the study of language in use. Nevertheless,¹⁴" the intellectual foundations of pragmatics extend much further back, drawing upon a rich tradition of philosophical and linguistic thought that gradually shaped its theoretical principles and analytical methods.

The historical development of pragmatics reflects a gradual transition from a branch of semiotics to an autonomous discipline within linguistics. In Charles William Morris's semiotic framework, pragmatics constituted one of the three principal components of the general theory of signs, alongside syntax and semantics, and was concerned with the relationship between signs and their users in communicative contexts. This conception built upon the semiotic philosophy of Charles Sanders Peirce and was subsequently influenced by the pragmatist philosophy associated with William James before becoming firmly established within modern linguistic inquiry as a framework for investigating language in use¹⁵.

As pragmatic research expanded, the field evolved through several complementary linguistic approaches, most notably **Conversation Analysis**, **Text Analysis**, and **Discourse Analysis**, all of which developed in close connection with Halliday's **Functional Grammar** (1985). These approaches broadened the scope of pragmatics beyond the study of sign-user relations to encompass the production and interpretation of discourse, the communicative functions of language, and the interaction between discourse participants within specific contextual environments¹⁶. Further theoretical developments were proposed by scholars such as Hanson, Jean Cervoni, and Françoise Armengaud, who organized pragmatic inquiry into two broad orientations: **the pragmatics of formal languages** and **the pragmatics of natural languages**. The former examines the relationship between utterances and the contexts in which they are produced, drawing upon the philosophy of language and the works of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Robert Stalnaker. The latter focuses on natural language as a medium of social interaction and investigates how meaning is constructed in authentic communicative situations. Armengaud also distinguished between **the pragmatics of enunciation** and **the**

pragmatics of utterance forms. The first emphasizes linguistic action as communicative practice, drawing on Wittgenstein's language games as well as the Speech Act Theory developed by J. L. Austin and John Searle. The second concentrates on the linguistic form of utterances and the contextual meanings associated with those forms, thereby contributing to the development of what later became known as **Integrated Pragmatics**¹⁷.

This historical trajectory demonstrates that pragmatics did not emerge as a fully developed discipline overnight. Rather, it evolved progressively through the interaction of philosophy, semiotics, and linguistics until it became one of the principal branches of contemporary linguistic research devoted to the study of language in use, the relationship between discourse and context, and the mechanisms through which meaning is constructed in human communication. In an attempt to unify the diverse orientations within pragmatics, **Hanson** proposed a classification centered on the pivotal role of context in the interpretation of linguistic phenomena. He distinguished three major pragmatic orientations¹⁸.

- The first focuses on the contextual elements surrounding communicative interaction, particularly deictic expressions whose interpretation depends on temporal, spatial, and personal reference. This approach examines how linguistic expressions derive their meaning from the circumstances of their use rather than from their lexical content alone. It is represented in the works of scholars such as **Charles Sanders Peirce, John Searle, and Émile Benveniste.**
- The second orientation investigates the relationship between the utterance and its contextual environment by distinguishing literal meaning from communicative meaning. Rather than treating the utterance as an isolated linguistic structure, it emphasizes the shared assumptions and background knowledge that enable interlocutors to infer intended meanings. This perspective encompasses **Paul Grice's Cooperative Principle and Conversational Maxims, Oswald Ducrot's theory of discourse, and John Searle's felicity conditions,** all of which highlight the contextual constraints governing successful communication.
- The third orientation is devoted to **Speech Act Theory**, viewing utterances as communicative actions whose force and interpretation are determined by the contextual conditions under which they are produced. From this perspective, linguistic expressions acquire their communicative value not merely through their propositional content but through the actions they perform within specific communicative situations.

Within this framework, Hanson assigns particular importance to **deixis**, considering it one of the primary mechanisms through which discourse is anchored in context. He identifies three fundamental deictic categories¹⁹: **the speaker ("I"), the place of utterance ("here"), and the time of utterance ("now").** These expressions do not possess fixed referential meanings; rather, their interpretation varies according to the communicative situation in which they occur. Deictic expressions may be explicitly encoded in linguistic structure or remain implicit, requiring contextual inference for their interpretation. This observation underscores the decisive role of context in the construction and interpretation of meaning.

Following Austin's pioneering work, **Jean Cervoni** further systematized pragmatic theory by distinguishing three complementary perspectives.

- The first, represented by **Oswald Ducrot**, explores the relationship between what is explicitly stated and what remains implicit, emphasizing presupposition and implicit meaning (*sous-entendus*) as essential components of discourse interpretation.
- The second perspective, associated with **Alain Berrendonner**, revisits Austin's claim that "to say something is to do something." Berrendonner argues that performative utterances do not necessarily accomplish material actions; rather, they substitute linguistic acts for physical actions, thereby assigning language a symbolic performative function.
- The third perspective, proposed by **Robert Martin**, maintains that pragmatics should not be confined to the analysis of isolated sentences but should instead investigate the utterance as part of a broader discourse. Meaning, from this viewpoint, emerges within textual and contextual structures rather than from individual sentences considered independently²⁰.

These various perspectives demonstrate that contemporary pragmatics did not evolve as a single unified theory but rather as an interdisciplinary field drawing upon analytical philosophy, linguistics, and philosophy of language. Each of its foundational concepts emerged from a distinct intellectual tradition. **Speech Act Theory**, for example, developed within the framework of analytical philosophy through the work of **J. L. Austin** and **John Searle**, whereas **Conversational Theory** was established through the contributions of **Paul Grice**. Together, these theoretical developments laid the foundations of modern pragmatics as the branch of linguistics concerned with explaining how meaning is constructed through language in use within authentic communicative contexts²¹.

1.2 The Concept of Communication

Before examining the insights of early Arab scholars, foremost among them **al-Jāhiz** into the nature of communication, it is essential to clarify the concept itself from both its lexical and conceptual perspectives. The Arabic term **tawāṣul** (communication) derives from the triliteral root (*w-ṣ-l*), "which conveys the meanings of connection, linkage, continuity, succession, and transmission, standing in contrast to separation and disjunction²²".

Classical Arabic lexicography consistently associates this root with the notions of joining and reaching. In *Lisān al-ʿArab*, Ibn Manẓūr defines *waṣl* as the opposite of separation (*faṣl*), explaining that something is said to be *connected* when it remains uninterrupted, while *tawāṣul* denotes the opposite of estrangement or rupture. These lexical meanings indicate two complementary dimensions of communication. The first concerns the establishment of a connection between two or more parties, thereby overcoming separation and discontinuity. The second refers to attaining a specific objective or successfully conveying a message. Consequently, communication is not merely an act of linking participants but a purposeful process directed toward the realization of a communicative goal.

The semantic richness of the root (*w-ṣ-l*) is further reflected in its derived morphological forms. The intensive form **waṣṣala** (Form II), as illustrated in the Qur'anic verse, "Indeed, We have repeatedly conveyed the Word to them so that they might take heed" (Qur'an 28:51),

conveys the ideas of emphasis, continuity, and deliberate transmission. Morphologically, this pattern suggests an action performed with intensity, repetition, and intentionality, thereby highlighting the sustained effort involved in ensuring that the intended message reaches its recipients.

Likewise, the reciprocal form **tawāṣala** (Form VI) expresses mutual participation and interaction, emphasizing that communication is inherently reciprocal rather than unilateral. This meaning is reflected in classical Arabic poetry, where communication is portrayed as a shared activity sustained through continuous interaction between interlocutors. Such linguistic evidence demonstrates that reciprocity and participation constitute intrinsic features of the Arabic conception of communication, a perspective that closely anticipates modern theories of communicative interaction²³.

The Terminological Concept of Communication

Beyond its lexical meaning, **communication** occupies a central position in both linguistics and sociology, where it is generally understood as a dynamic process of interaction through which meanings are produced and exchanged between interlocutors. From a linguistic perspective, communication has been defined as a verbal exchange in which a speaker produces an utterance directed to another participant who is expected either to receive the message or to respond to it explicitly or implicitly, depending on the communicative situation. This definition emphasizes the interactive nature of verbal communication, viewing it as an intentional process aimed at conveying information, expressing ideas and emotions, and establishing meaningful interpersonal interaction.

From a sociological perspective, **Charles Horton Cooley** conceives communication as the fundamental mechanism through which human relationships are established and developed. According to Cooley, communication encompasses all symbolic systems through which meanings are transmitted across space and preserved over time. It therefore extends beyond spoken language to include facial expressions, bodily movements, gestures, vocal intonation, written texts, and every technological medium that facilitates the transmission of messages, from traditional means of communication to modern communication technologies²⁴.

Cooley's conception broadens the scope of communication from a purely linguistic phenomenon to a comprehensive social process. Communication is thus understood as a multidimensional activity involving linguistic, psychological, and social components that collectively enable individuals to exchange meanings, negotiate relationships, and sustain social interaction. This broader understanding provides an appropriate theoretical foundation for examining communication as an integrated process rather than merely the transmission of linguistic messages. Based on the foregoing discussion, communication may be understood as fulfilling two fundamental functions²⁵. The first is a **cognitive function**, through which knowledge is generated, transmitted, and shared, thereby expanding individuals' understanding and facilitating the circulation of information. The second is a **communicative and affective function**, which seeks to establish and strengthen interpersonal relationships by enabling individuals to express ideas, emotions, and attitudes in ways that promote social cohesion and mutual understanding.

From another perspective, communication may also be viewed as a social activity involving two or more participants whose interaction is governed by the conventions of the language they employ and directed toward the organization and coordination of human relationships. In this regard, **Umberto Eco** conceives linguistic communication as an ongoing social process that extends far beyond verbal language to encompass a wide range of human behaviors, including gestures, facial expressions, gaze, bodily posture, and the physical distance between interlocutors. Accordingly, verbal and non-verbal communication should not be regarded as separate systems; rather, they function as complementary components of a unified communicative process in which meaning is jointly constructed²⁶. The foregoing perspectives demonstrate that communication is a multidimensional phenomenon integrating linguistic, cognitive, psychological, and social dimensions. It is neither limited to the transmission of information nor confined to the exchange of linguistic messages; instead, it constitutes a dynamic process through which meaning is negotiated, interpersonal relationships are established, and social interaction is sustained.

This comprehensive understanding provides an appropriate theoretical framework for interpreting **al-Jāhiz's** conception of communication. Although articulated centuries before the emergence of modern communication theories, his analysis reflects a remarkably integrated vision of communicative interaction, one that recognizes the central role of context, participant interaction, intentionality, and the diversity of communicative means in the production and interpretation of meaning. Consequently, many of the principles that underpin contemporary pragmatic and communication theories can be identified, in embryonic form, within **al-Jāhiz's** intellectual legacy.

2. Linguistic Communication in Western Linguistics

In Western scholarship, the concept of **communication** gained increasing prominence from the mid-twentieth century onward, when it came to be regarded as a fundamental social activity intrinsically linked to humanity's need for language. Within the structural linguistic tradition, **Ferdinand de Saussure** conceived language as a system of signs whose primary function is to facilitate communication. According to his semiological model, communication is achieved through the structural relationship between the **signifier** and the **signified**, whereby the acoustic image is associated with a corresponding mental concept²⁷. This perspective established the principle that linguistic communication depends on the interaction between signs and meanings within an organized semiotic system.

The communicative dimension of language received further elaboration within the functionalist tradition, particularly through the work of **Roman Jakobson**, who regarded communication as the fundamental purpose of linguistic activity. Building on this premise, Jakobson formulated his influential model of verbal communication, identifying six constitutive factors: the **addresser**, the **addressee**, the **message**, the **context**, the **contact**, and the **code**²⁸. Each of these components corresponds to a distinct communicative function. The **emotive function** is centered on the speaker, the **conative function** is directed toward the addressee, the **poetic function** focuses on the message itself, the **referential function** relates language to its contextual reality, the **metalingual function** concerns the linguistic code, and the **phatic function** serves to establish, maintain, or verify the communicative channel between

interlocutors. Collectively, these functions demonstrate that communication is a multidimensional process in which linguistic meaning emerges through the interaction of several interdependent components rather than through isolated linguistic forms.

Beyond linguistics, semiotics expanded the scope of communication by extending the study of signs beyond verbal language to encompass all symbolic systems operating within social life. From this perspective, communication is understood not only through linguistic signs but also through the broader network of verbal and non-verbal sign systems that shape human interaction. Within semiotic theory, two major perspectives emerged regarding the primary function of language. The first considers communication to be the essential purpose of language, a position defended by scholars such as **Georges Mounin**, **Éric Buysens**, and **Luis Prieto**. The second emphasizes the semantic dimension of language²⁹, maintaining that the production and organization of meaning constitute its primary function, a perspective most notably represented by **Roland Barthes**.

Despite their different theoretical orientations, these approaches converge in recognizing that language cannot be adequately understood as an autonomous formal system detached from its users. Rather, it functions as a dynamic communicative practice through which meanings are produced, interpreted, and negotiated within specific social and cultural contexts. This theoretical development provides an important point of comparison with the communicative insights articulated by **al-Jāhiz**, whose conception of language similarly extends beyond its structural properties to encompass its communicative, social, and contextual dimensions.

3. Linguistic Communication in the Arabic Intellectual Tradition

Classical Arab scholars possessed a profound awareness of the communicative function of language and its central role in human interaction. Language was not viewed merely as a means of transmitting information but as an effective medium through which speakers expressed their thoughts, intentions, and identities while enabling listeners to interpret and respond to discourse. In this sense, language constituted both a cognitive and a social instrument that reflected the cultural and intellectual identity of the community and facilitated mutual understanding among its members.

This awareness is evident in the considerable attention devoted by Arab scholars to the study of eloquence, rhetoric, and linguistic expression;"Their concern extended beyond the formal structure of language to encompass its communicative effectiveness and its capacity to achieve intended purposes in diverse communicative situations. Such an orientation reveals an ³⁰ early recognition that successful communication depends not only on linguistic form but also on the appropriate use of language in context. Within this intellectual framework, **Ibn Jinnī** (322–392 AH / 941–1002 CE) offered one of the earliest and most influential definitions of language, describing it as "**sounds through which every people express their purposes.**" This concise definition highlights the inherently communicative nature of language, presenting it as the principal medium through which human intentions are expressed and conveyed. Language, therefore, is understood not simply as a collection of sounds or lexical items but as an organized system that enables speakers to articulate their thoughts accurately and allows hearers to comprehend and interpret those thoughts effectively.

Ibn Jinnī's conception anticipates several principles emphasized in contemporary linguistic and pragmatic theories. By defining language in terms of its communicative purpose rather than its structural composition alone, he implicitly recognizes that the primary function of language lies in facilitating interaction, transmitting meaning, and achieving mutual understanding among individuals and communities. This functional perspective reflects the remarkable depth of the Arabic linguistic tradition and provides an important foundation for understanding the communicative theory that would later be developed more systematically by **al-Jāhiz**.

From its earliest stages, **Arabic rhetoric** devoted considerable attention to the communicative dimensions of discourse and to the analysis of texts, regarding them as fundamental to both effective expression and the interpretation of meaning. This tradition recognized that discourse cannot be adequately understood in isolation from the circumstances in which it is produced. Rather, successful interpretation requires careful consideration of the communicative context (*maqām*), the surrounding circumstances, and the speaker's communicative intention. Every utterance is shaped by its context and reflects the purpose underlying its production; consequently, textual analysis necessitates examining the contextual, intentional, and linguistic factors that collectively determine meaning. Within this intellectual framework, language is conceived as an intentional communicative act governed by purpose. This perspective is clearly articulated by **Ibn Khaldūn** (732–808 AH / 1332–1406 CE), who defines language as *"the speaker's expression of his intention, and that expression is a linguistic act arising from the intention to convey speech."*³¹ This definition emphasizes that speech originates from the speaker's communicative intention and is directed toward conveying a particular message. Accordingly, understanding intention constitutes an indispensable prerequisite for interpreting discourse and uncovering its intended meaning.

Ibn Khaldūn further maintains that successful communication depends on the speaker's possession of a linguistic competence—whether innate or acquired—that enables the effective expression of intended meanings. Language, therefore, is not merely a collection of linguistic forms but a communicative faculty through which speakers transform intentions into meaningful discourse that can be accurately interpreted by their interlocutors.

In light of this conception, the rhetorical analysis of discourse requires consideration of several interrelated dimensions. These include the communicative context (*maqām*) and the circumstances surrounding the utterance, the speaker's communicative intention and objectives, the rhetorical and stylistic devices employed in constructing the discourse, and the speaker's awareness of the persuasive and communicative effects of linguistic expression. Together, these dimensions reveal that the Arabic rhetorical tradition approached discourse as an integrated communicative phenomenon in which meaning emerges through the interaction of context, intention, linguistic form, and interpretation.

Remarkably, these principles correspond closely to many of the foundational assumptions of contemporary pragmatics. The centrality accorded to context, intentionality, and the relationship between linguistic expression and communicative purpose demonstrates that classical Arabic rhetorical thought anticipated several concepts that would later become fundamental to modern theories of language use and discourse analysis. Ultimately, the Arabic

rhetorical tradition sought to achieve a harmonious balance between linguistic form and communicative content while remaining attentive to context (*maqām*) and the circumstances surrounding discourse. Its ultimate objective was to produce effective and persuasive communication capable of expressing the speaker's intention and accomplishing the intended communicative purpose.

Against this intellectual background, **al-Jāḥiẓ** (159–255 AH / 776–869 CE) occupies a distinguished position in the history of Arabic linguistics and rhetoric. Long before the emergence of modern linguistic theories, he developed a remarkably sophisticated understanding of verbal communication by examining the conditions governing discourse and the factors that determine its effectiveness. He recognized that communication is not a spontaneous linguistic event but a structured process whose success depends on the interaction of several interrelated components. These include the speaker, the hearer, the communicative context, the surrounding circumstances, and the message itself, each contributing to the successful realization of communicative intentions.

Al-Jāḥiẓ further argued that linguistic expression cannot be separated from the context in which it is produced. Rather, the meaning and effectiveness of discourse emerge from the dynamic interaction between linguistic form and contextual conditions. This insight places communicative intention and contextual appropriateness at the center of his linguistic thought and anticipates one of the fundamental principles of contemporary pragmatics: that meaning is constructed through language in use rather than through linguistic forms considered in isolation. Within this framework, al-Jāḥiẓ regarded the **communicative function**—namely, the successful realization of the intentions of both speaker and hearer—as the cornerstone of the communicative process. In his view, communicative purpose governs the organization of linguistic structures and determines the selection of appropriate expressive strategies in accordance with the demands of the communicative situation. Consequently, speakers choose between direct and indirect forms of expression according to contextual requirements and the intended effects of their discourse.

A central concept in al-Jāḥiẓ's communicative theory is **bayān** (eloquent expression or exposition), a notion whose meaning varies according to its context of use. In its broadest sense, *bayān* encompasses the diverse means through which meaning is communicated, extending beyond verbal language to include all expressive signs capable of conveying ideas. In this respect, al-Jāḥiẓ's conception closely resembles what is now understood as **semiotic communication**, in which meaning is transmitted through multiple sign systems rather than through linguistic signs alone. In a narrower sense, however, *bayān* refers specifically to linguistic expression, which al-Jāḥiẓ regarded as the most refined and effective medium for revealing the contents of the mind, the intentions of the soul, and the thoughts of the heart³².

Accordingly, *bayān* should be understood as an operational communicative process rather than merely a rhetorical ornament or stylistic category. Its essential function lies in establishing mutual understanding between interlocutors by transforming internal meanings into intelligible discourse. Whether realized through linguistic or non-linguistic means, *bayān* serves as the principal mechanism through which communication is achieved, linking speaker and hearer in a process of meaning construction based on clarity, intentionality, and contextual appropriateness.

From this perspective, al-Jāḥiẓ's theory of *bayān* transcends the traditional boundaries of rhetoric and approaches a comprehensive theory of communication. By integrating intention, context, signs, linguistic expression, and audience reception within a unified explanatory framework, he formulated a communicative vision that remarkably anticipates many of the principles that would later become central to modern pragmatics, discourse analysis, and communication theory.

Al-Jāḥiẓ discusses the functions of discourse within a conceptual framework in which the notions of **bayān** (eloquent expression), the hierarchy of speech, and the contextual conditions surrounding the communicative situation are closely intertwined. In his view, *bayān* is not a single-dimensional concept; rather, it performs two complementary communicative functions, reflecting the complexity and multidimensional nature of discourse³³.

The first of these is the **cognitive function**, whereby *bayān* serves as a means of producing understanding and facilitating the transmission of knowledge. This function is particularly evident in al-Jāḥiẓ's treatment of **oratory (khiṭābah)** as one of the highest forms of eloquent discourse. The orator represents the ideal speaker who carefully constructs speech to achieve clarity, precision, and persuasive effectiveness. Such discourse relies on the deliberate use of argumentative strategies and persuasive techniques designed to communicate ideas convincingly and establish their validity before the audience.

Within the Arabic intellectual tradition, theologians (*mutakallimūn*) made significant contributions to the development of argumentative theory by formulating methodological principles governing reasoning and persuasion. Al-Jāḥiẓ himself preserves a number of these principles in the celebrated **Ṣaḥīfat Bishr ibn al-Mu'tamir**, presenting them as practical guidelines for the construction of effective discourse. These principles became an integral component of the Arabic rhetorical tradition, whose primary objective is to enable audiences to recognize the means through which speech achieves eloquence and persuasive force. This conception is succinctly expressed in al-Jāḥiẓ's well-known statement: "**The essence of eloquence lies in insight into argument and knowledge of the proper occasions for its use.**"³⁴ This formulation encapsulates two complementary dimensions of rhetorical competence: mastery of persuasive reasoning and awareness of the appropriate circumstances in which arguments should be presented. Persuasion, therefore, depends not only on the strength of evidence but also on the speaker's ability to adapt discourse to the communicative context and the expectations of the audience.

Accordingly, effective communication requires a balanced integration of argumentative knowledge and contextual judgment. The persuasive power of discourse derives not merely from the logical force of its arguments but equally from the speaker's ability to determine the appropriate time, place, and manner of presenting them. This interaction between argumentation and context constitutes one of the defining characteristics of Arabic rhetorical thought and anticipates a central principle of contemporary pragmatics: that communicative success depends on the contextual appropriateness of linguistic choices as much as on their semantic content.

Viewed from this perspective, al-Jāḥiẓ's rhetorical theory extends beyond stylistic analysis to offer a functional account of discourse grounded in communication, persuasion, and audience reception. His treatment of *bayān* reveals an early awareness that effective discourse is

achieved through the integration of knowledge, argumentation, intentionality, and contextual adaptation—principles that continue to occupy a central place in modern theories of pragmatics, rhetoric, and discourse analysis.

The second function of *bayān* is **understanding and making understood** (*al-fahm wa al-ifahām*). In al-Jāḥiẓ's thought, *bayān* constitutes one of the foundational principles of communication and persuasion, for it determines the extent to which communicative interaction succeeds between speaker and hearer. He regards *bayān* as the central objective toward which both participants in the communicative act are directed, since it governs the clarity, intelligibility, and effectiveness of discourse. Regardless of its purpose or content, no utterance can fulfill its communicative function unless it enables the hearer to grasp the speaker's intended meaning accurately. In this sense, *bayān* functions as the process through which concealed meanings are disclosed and the barriers to understanding are removed, allowing the recipient to apprehend the intended message.

Accordingly, *bayān* represents the vital force that animates discourse and transforms linguistic expression into effective communication. Genuine communication, in al-Jāḥiẓ's view, is achieved only when discourse successfully fulfills the dual function of enabling understanding and facilitating mutual comprehension. This explains why he devoted substantial attention to the concept throughout *al-Bayān wa al-Tabayīn*, presenting it as the central pillar upon which communicative interaction rests and the principal means through which failures of understanding may be overcome. Every act of *bayān* is therefore conceived as an unveiling of meaning and a disclosure of what lies hidden within the speaker's intention until the hearer arrives at a clear and accurate understanding³⁵.

Al-Jāḥiẓ further emphasizes the comprehensive nature of *bayān*, describing it as an all-encompassing concept that includes every means capable of expressing meaning and revealing communicative intention, regardless of the medium or type of evidence employed. Consequently, the success of communication depends not on the particular form of expression but on the extent to which both speaker and hearer achieve mutual understanding. Any communicative means that clarifies meaning and enables accurate interpretation therefore falls within the scope of *bayān*, making understanding and intelligibility the fundamental criteria by which communicative effectiveness is ultimately measured.

A close examination of al-Jāḥiẓ's writings reveals that this communicative function operates across different levels of discourse. At its most basic level, effective communication requires speech to be clear, accessible, and readily comprehensible. As al-Jāḥiẓ succinctly observes, **"The share of eloquence required is that the hearer should not suffer from the speaker's failure to explain, nor the speaker from the hearer's failure to understand."**³⁶ This statement underscores that linguistic effectiveness begins with clarity and intelligibility, ensuring that communication proceeds without ambiguity or unnecessary complexity.

Yet *bayān* extends beyond ordinary clarity to encompass the aesthetic dimension of discourse, where eloquence combines intellectual persuasion with artistic excellence. Al-Jāḥiẓ's citation of **Ṣaḥīfat Bishr ibn al-Mu'tamir** illustrates this broader conception, demonstrating that eloquence does not reside in obscure vocabulary or excessive ornamentation, but rather in the harmonious integration of elegance, simplicity, and precision. Truly eloquent discourse conveys

profound meanings through expressions that remain accessible to both specialists and the general public while remaining appropriate to the communicative context. In this way, linguistic beauty is inseparable from communicative effectiveness, and rhetorical excellence is ultimately measured by the speaker's ability to achieve understanding, persuasion, and contextual appropriateness simultaneously.

From this perspective, al-Jāḥiẓ's conception of *bayān* transcends its traditional rhetorical significance and emerges as a comprehensive communicative principle. By making intelligibility, contextual adaptation, and audience comprehension the primary criteria of successful discourse, he anticipates one of the central assumptions of modern pragmatics: that the value of linguistic expression lies not in its formal elegance alone but in its capacity to produce shared understanding between interlocutors within specific communicative contexts.

At this point, **Bishr ibn al-Mu'tamir** emphasizes that the true excellence of eloquence lies in correctness, usefulness, and the ability to adapt discourse to the demands of the communicative situation. For him, rhetorical success depends upon the speaker's capacity to select expressions that are appropriate to the context while combining clarity with refinement. He further stresses that the speaker should possess mastery of both spoken and written expression, choosing a balanced style that avoids both excessive simplicity and unnecessary complexity. The accomplished rhetorician is therefore one who can communicate profound ideas in language that remains accessible to ordinary audiences without sacrificing intellectual depth or stylistic elegance. In this way, eloquence achieves its highest purpose by establishing effective communication between speakers and audiences of different intellectual backgrounds.

From this perspective, the second function of *bayān* is closely associated with the hierarchical levels of discourse and with the adaptation of linguistic expression to achieve specific communicative effects. Whether the intended goal is persuasion, emotional influence, or intellectual guidance, successful communication depends upon selecting forms of expression that correspond to the requirements of the communicative situation. This function is therefore inherently context-dependent, requiring careful consideration of the circumstances surrounding the discourse in order to ensure that the intended effect is successfully realized.

Accordingly, al-Jāḥiẓ's conception of *bayān* reveals a multidimensional communicative framework in which cognitive, rhetorical, and pragmatic functions operate simultaneously. Knowledge transmission, persuasive effectiveness, and contextual appropriateness are not treated as separate dimensions but as mutually reinforcing components of successful communication. This integrated vision demonstrates al-Jāḥiẓ's profound understanding of discourse as a context-sensitive communicative activity in which meaning, persuasion, and audience reception are inseparably linked.

Viewed in this light, al-Jāḥiẓ's rhetorical thought extends beyond the traditional boundaries of classical Arabic rhetoric and anticipates key principles of contemporary pragmatics and communication theory. His emphasis on contextual appropriateness, audience awareness, communicative intention, and the functional adaptation of discourse closely parallels modern conceptions of communicative competence, confirming the originality and enduring relevance of his contribution to the study of language and communication.

Al-Jāhīz reformulated the notions of **effectiveness** and **utility** in language, considering them the ultimate objectives of linguistic communication. In his view, the highest standard of eloquent expression lies in correctness and the attainment of beneficial outcomes. From this perspective, speech and action converge in their communicative purpose, as linguistic expression acquires a functional and instrumental character whose success depends upon rhetorical skill and mastery. This conception appears to have been inspired, at least in part, by al-Jāhīz's reflection on the Qur'ānic mode of communication, where linguistic structures and layers of meaning are integrated with exceptional precision. The Qur'ānic discourse exemplifies a model in which eloquence generates conviction, captivates the intellect, and exerts a profound influence on the human mind and emotions. Consequently, rhetoric is conceived as the discipline that provides the linguistic and stylistic means through which discourse achieves communicative effectiveness and practical utility. If language possesses such communicative properties, the speaker, as the principal agent in the communicative process, necessarily assumes a central role in ensuring the success of communication.

Al-Jāhīz's theory of communication therefore accords particular importance to the **speaker**, whom he regards as the active agent governing the communicative process. Central to this conception is the existence of a shared communicative code between speaker and hearer. Effective discourse requires the speaker to address people according to their intellectual capacities, social positions, and situational circumstances. The eloquent orator, in al-Jāhīz's view, is one who adjusts linguistic expression to the characteristics of the audience and the demands of the communicative situation. This principle eventually develops into a general communicative rule linking discourse to what al-Jāhīz variously describes as **maqām** (context), **mawḍiʿ** (appropriate occasion), and **ḥāl** (circumstantial condition). Within this framework, he identifies two fundamental principles governing communicative effectiveness.

First, the principle of communicative adequacy. The speaker's linguistic resources must be proportionate to the meanings intended, the characteristics of the audience, and the communicative situation. Al-Jāhīz writes that *"the speaker should know the value of meanings, balance them against the capacities of the listeners and the circumstances, assigning to every category of audience its appropriate discourse and to every situation its proper occasion."* This principle requires speakers to calibrate their discourse according to differences in audience knowledge, social standing, and contextual demands. At the same time, communicative success depends equally on the hearer's willingness to engage with the discourse. Al-Jāhīz therefore maintains that attentive listening is an indispensable condition for successful communication, observing that *"if the listener is not more eager to listen than the speaker is to speak, the speaker cannot attain the full effectiveness of his discourse, and the deficiency in understanding will be proportional to the deficiency in listening."* Communication is thus conceived as a cooperative process in which both speaker and hearer share responsibility for the successful transmission of meaning.

Second, the principle of intentionality. Al-Jāhīz emphasizes the speaker's awareness of rhetorical strategies, communicative purposes, and audience expectations. Successful discourse depends upon deliberate lexical selection and the careful organization of expression so that linguistic form remains fully aligned with communicative intention and contextual requirements.

Effective speech preserves the intended meaning, conveys it with clarity and precision, and remains appropriate to the circumstances in which it is produced. It avoids both artificiality and superficiality, thereby ensuring that discourse achieves its intended persuasive and communicative effects. Consequently, eloquence requires not only linguistic competence but also a sophisticated awareness of communicative goals and contextual appropriateness.

Within this communicative model, the **hearer** occupies an equally indispensable position. Al-Jāhiz considers the recipient to be a fundamental component in the construction of discourse, insisting that the speaker must continually take into account the audience's condition, level of understanding, and communicative needs. The form and content of discourse should therefore be adapted to the functional demands of the situation and to the characteristics of those for whom it is intended. This perspective reveals a remarkably early awareness of what contemporary linguistics identifies as audience-oriented communication and contextual adaptation.

Al-Jāhiz also devotes considerable attention to the **message** itself, emphasizing the necessity of achieving harmony between wording and meaning. The effectiveness of discourse depends upon the close correspondence between linguistic expression and intended meaning, since this harmony enables discourse to reveal what is hidden, clarify communicative intentions, and remove ambiguity. The balance between expression and meaning therefore constitutes one of the essential foundations of effective *bayān* and one of the principal determinants of persuasive communication.

Finally, al-Jāhiz sought to define the essential characteristics of eloquent discourse by establishing multiple criteria through which rhetorical excellence may be evaluated. At the heart of these criteria lies the careful selection of linguistic expression, which enables him to distinguish between two modes of language use: ordinary social communication and artistic rhetorical discourse. His primary concern is with the latter, whose expressive and aesthetic qualities transcend mere intelligibility to achieve both intellectual persuasion and aesthetic delight. In this respect, al-Jāhiz's analysis anticipates important insights developed in modern stylistics, where rhetorical effectiveness is understood as the product of the dynamic interaction between linguistic form, communicative purpose, and audience reception.

In this context, **al-Jāhiz** devoted considerable attention to the concept of **maqām** (communicative context), demonstrating a profound awareness of its decisive role in the communicative process. For him, the effectiveness of discourse is inseparable from its appropriateness to the circumstances in which it is produced. This perspective is encapsulated in the well-established Arabic rhetorical maxim, "**For every context there is an appropriate discourse,**" which expresses the intrinsic relationship between linguistic formulation and communicative situation. The selection of words and rhetorical strategies is therefore governed not by abstract linguistic rules alone but by the specific conditions and requirements of each communicative event.

From this perspective, al-Jāhiz's contribution extends beyond the traditional scope of Arabic rhetoric. His analysis offers a remarkably comprehensive account of linguistic communication in which meaning emerges through the dynamic interaction between discourse, context, speaker, and audience. This integrated vision anticipates several concepts that would later occupy a central place in modern pragmatics, discourse analysis, and communication

theory, underscoring the enduring significance of his intellectual legacy within the history of linguistic thought.

Conclusion

This study has sought to re-examine the theory of communication in the Arabic intellectual tradition through an analytical reading of al-Jāḥiẓ's linguistic thought, with particular emphasis on the pragmatic dimensions underlying his conception of discourse and *bayān*. The findings demonstrate that al-Jāḥiẓ did not conceive of language as a purely formal system; rather, he understood it as a purposeful communicative activity governed by intentionality, shaped by contextual conditions (*maqām*), and evaluated according to its ability to achieve mutual understanding between speaker and hearer.

The analysis further reveals that al-Jāḥiẓ's communicative model is built upon an integrated interaction among the principal components of communication—the speaker, the hearer, the message, the communicative context, and the various means of *bayān*. These elements function collectively to construct meaning and realize communicative intentions, reflecting an early awareness of the inseparable relationship between language, context, and language use.

The study also demonstrates that al-Jāḥiẓ's concept of *bayān* extends far beyond its conventional rhetorical interpretation to encompass a comprehensive theory of communication embracing both linguistic and non-linguistic modes of signification. This broader conception is reflected in his classification of the five means of *bayān*—**verbal expression (lafẓ), gesture (ishārah), counting or symbolic notation (‘aqd), writing (khaṭṭ), and contextual indication (naṣbah)**—which together constitute an inclusive framework for the production and transmission of meaning.

Furthermore, the analysis identifies significant points of convergence between several aspects of al-Jāḥiẓ's communicative thought and principles that later became central to modern pragmatics and communication theory, particularly with regard to intentionality, contextual appropriateness, audience-oriented discourse, and communicative effectiveness. These convergences do not imply direct equivalence between classical and contemporary theories; rather, they illustrate the richness of the Arabic linguistic tradition and its capacity to engage in meaningful dialogue with modern linguistic scholarship.

In conclusion, al-Jāḥiẓ formulated a coherent communicative vision in which rhetorical, linguistic, and pragmatic dimensions operate as complementary components of a unified theory of discourse. His conception of communication places mutual understanding at the heart of linguistic activity and offers a remarkably sophisticated framework for interpreting discourse in relation to context, purpose, and audience. Reconsidering this intellectual legacy through the lens of contemporary linguistics not only deepens our understanding of the Arabic rhetorical tradition but also contributes to broader comparative research on the history of linguistic and communicative thought.

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