Prelude

The field of the Arabic language known as balagha (eloquence and rhetoric) started as a spirit without a definite name or formal description, and in time became something rigorously defined and delineated but lacking in its initial dynamic aesthetic spirit, until eventually seeing some degree of revival in modern times. This story covers fifteen centuries, starting in Arabia, but eventually spreading as far as central Asia and Andalusia. In the course of this journey across space and time, we will see the field described by multiple names (bayan, fasaha, balagha and others), and developing in several separate currents, before these are eventually brought to a confluence, and the field takes a steady-state shape comprising three sub-disciplines: ma`ani (linguistic pragmatics / semantics), bayan (imagery and figurative language) and badi` (rhetorical embellishments). As for the leading characters of this story, we will meet folk as diverse as Caliphs and imams, philologists and theologians (including Sunnis, Shi`is and Mu`tazilis), as well as poets and secretaries. So, won’t you join us on this fascinating odyssey?
The prodigy ("al-Nabigha") Ziyad al-Dhubyani (d. 18 BH / 604 C), a renowned pre-Islamic poet, used to set up a red tent in the marketplace of `Ukaz, where poets would come and present their poetry to him for praise, criticism, and adjudication. Arabic poetry appears to have emerged quite suddenly in the sixth century CE, and was already very sophisticated by the time of the Prophet Muhammad. Poets would sometimes think about and refine their poems over an entire year (such poems were termed hawliyyat), and there were literary fairs and contests that drew poets from all over Arabia. The Prophet himself is reported to have appreciated good poetry. There were clearly aesthetic criteria that the Arabs had for judging poetry in this early period, but they were not yet formal or documented.

Eloquence and sophistication have long been valued in Arabic, as they have been in other languages, but the emergence of balagha as a technical term and as a formal subject of study was a gradual development, involving a confluence of several currents in earlier scholarship, the earliest of which is probably this endeavor of poetry criticism. Into the midst of this milieu, which valued and delighted in poetry, emerged then the Qur’an, with an innovative literary style that did not conform to the conventions of Arabic poetry or prose, and yet was beautiful and powerful. The Quran posed a challenge to the Arab literary connoisseurs and artists to imitate it, declaring that their inability to do so proved the Quran’s divine origin. This theological concept of inimitability of the Quran would, in time, influence the development of balagha, as we pick up on later.

The Prophet said,

إنَّ اللهَ بعني خاتمًا و أعطيت جوامع الكلم و خواتمه

“Verily, God has sent me as a seal, and I have been given conciseness of speech and its seals…”

[Narrated in Abu Dawud’s Marasil]

The Prophet made a clear distinction between the Quran (believed to be God’s words brought to him by the angel Gabriel, and covered by the challenge of inimitability), and his own words which, even when they related to religious matters, were not claimed to be inimitable in their style. Nevertheless, he did value eloquence and effective communication. Some of his sayings are succinct yet profound in meaning, and he declared this ability to be a divine blessing (even if not a miracle). Imam Nawawi’s (d. 676/1278) famous compilation of 40 Hadiths was an attempt to collect some of the most important such sayings. Other hadiths indicate that the Prophet also paid attention to word choice, disapproving of saying things in a way that could lead to misunderstanding, or have a negative psychological effect.
After the Prophet’s death, the concern for language remained strong. The fourth caliph `Ali (d. 40/661), in particular, had a reputation for eloquence, and two centuries later al-Sharif al-Radiyy (d. 406/1015, Twelver Shi`i scholar and poet) attempted to compile what he could find of Imam `Ali’s sermons, letters and other words in the book *Nahj al-Balagha* (‘The Peak of Eloquence.’) Although the subsequent the Umayyad dynasty (41/662 -132/750) certainly had its demerits, decline of the Arabic language was not among them. Among the skilful orators of this period were Zayd ibn al-Husayn (a descendant of the Prophet), the famous ascetic Hasan of Basra (d. 110/728), and the notorious tyrant Hajjaj ibn Yusuf (d. 95/714). Mu`tazilite theologian Wasil ibn `Ata’ (d. 131/748) was unable to pronounce the ‘r’ sound, due to a speech impediment, but was so skillful with the language that he managed to speak eloquently without using any r-containing words! The Umayyad era was also one of territorial expansion (leading to cultural exchange) and intellectual maturation. The marketplaces of Mirbad and Kunasa, in the garrison cities of Basra and Kufa respectively, became sites for literary presentation, just as `Ukaz had been in the pre-Islamic (Jahiliyya) period.

The Prophet ﷺ said:

لا يقولون أحذكم حديث نفسي ولكن ليقل لفيست نفسي

‘Let not any of you say, ’I am foul;’ rather, he should say, ’I am nauseous.’

The word حديث (‘foul’) carries possible connotations of evil, and is therefore stronger than is needed to convey someone simply feeling physiologically queasy.

[Narrated in Bukhari’s Sahih]
Secretaries and Stallions: The Second and Third Centuries

The increased mingling of Arabs and non-Arabs spawned fruitful cultural exchange, but also rivalries motivated in part by each linguistic group’s fear of dilution and loss of their own languages’ purity. In the meantime, the conduct of official state business began to be more sophisticated, and the political stability and prosperity witnessed in this time allowed for further systematization of knowledge. All of these historical developments had their reverberations in the field of balagha in the 2nd and 3rd centuries.

A major impetus to the development of balagha came from the official government secretaries (kuttab) who emerged as a distinct professional group during this time. These secretaries needed to use refined and ornamental language in official documents, and were also in contact with the poets of their time. As a result, they were able to master the arts of style and diction. Manuals for secretaries therefore started to be produced, such as Ibn Qutayba’s (d. 276/889) Adab al-Katib (The Secretary’s Etiquettes), and ‘Abdul-Rahman al-Hamadhani (d. 327/939) al-Alfaz al-Kitabiyya (‘The Secretarial Words,’ a compilation of synonyms and eloquent expressions useful for secretaries and others wanting to write eloquently).

“I have not found a better approach to eloquence than that of the secretaries, for they have sought out those words [of good meaning] that are neither too sophisticated and unfamiliar, nor vulgar and inferior.”

-- al-Jahiz, belletrist and polymath, (d. 255/869)

Philologists also contributed to the documentation of eloquence, but cast a wider net than merely serving secretarial needs. Baghdadian grammarian Tha’lab’s (d. 291/914) al-Fasih (‘The Eloquent’) was not only a collection of eloquent words and expressions, but also drew attention to inelegant utterances and common errors (vulgarisms), and Ibn al-Sikkit’s (d. 244/848) Islah al-Mantiq (‘Rectification of Speech’) was similarly an encyclopedia of correct and eloquent expression. One motivating factor for such compilations by philologists was their awareness of the declining purity of people’s Arabic, as Arabs were influenced by their interactions with other ethnic groups, many of whom themselves started to speak Arabic.
Another genre that emerged during this time was a formal literary criticism of poetry, and it drew the attention of both philologists and secretaries. The former (philological strand) includes the book *Fuhulat al-Shuʿara‘* (‘The Poetic Geniuses,’) by the Basran poetry expert and voyaging researcher of philology al-Asma‘i (d. 216/831). The book evaluates the productions of a number of pre-Islamic and Islamic poets on the basis of both style and meaning, before judging whether or not each poet qualifies to be called an expert (*fahl*, literally: a stallion that has reached its fourth year).

Qudama ibn Jaʿfar’s (d. 337/948) *Naqd al-Shiʿr* (‘Poetry Criticism’) and Ibn Tabataba’s (d. 322/934) *ʻIyar al-Shiʿr* (‘The Gauge of Poetry’) are prominent representatives of the secretarial thread of poetry criticism. A third thread of the genre is inspired by Aristotle’s *Poetics*, which had already been translated into Arabic by this time, and would soon be commented on by Arab philosophers such as Ibn Sina (d. 428/1037). However, it would not be until later, in the Maghrib (Muslim West), that individuals like the Andalusian Hazim al-Qartajanni (d. 684/1286, who was born and raised in Cartagena, Spain, then moved to North Africa after his city fell to the Castillians) attempted to apply these Hellenistic principles of analysis and critique to Arabic literature.

The first attempt to systematically discuss and document the field of *balagha* also came during this period. The belletrist, Muʿtazilite (‘rationalist’) theologian and polymath Abu ʿUthman al-Jahiz (d. 255/869) wrote a lengthy work entitled *al-Bayan wal-Tabyn* (‘Expression and Elucidation’), in which he gave a taxonomy of human expression (including writing, gesturing and speaking), as well a wide range of topics including: the relative rise and fall of oration and poetry, the merits of the secretaries, errors and defects in speech, the different types of words and of speakers, the meaning of eloquence, the eloquence of the Quran, the origin of language, and a refutation of the *shuʿubi* (a pro-Persianate cultural movement of the time) attempts to discredit Arabic.
Conceits and Quran: The Third and Fourth Centuries

The third and fourth centuries saw two developments that were significant for the history of *balagha*. These were independent – one theological, the other non-religiously literary – but coincidentally fall on opposite sides of the line drawn by the question, “When does too much of a good thing become bad?”

In the literary arena, this period sees the rise of the *badi`* (literally: ‘novelty’) movement in poetry. Early `Abbasid poets such as the Iraqi Muslim ibn al-Walid (d. 208/824) tried to embellish their poetry with abundant use of ingenious literary devices and techniques (literary *conceits*), to the extent that it was often perceived as forced and artificial. Ibn Qutayba had already seen the start of such affectedness, along with lack of proper literary qualifications, in the middle of the previous (2nd-) century. Aside from a natural distaste for such unnaturalness, the critics were likely also reminded of a hadith criticizing those who talk excessively, and with unnatural airs and arrogance:

> The Prophet ﷺ said,
> "Verily, among the dearest of you to me, and the closest seated to me of the Day of Resurrection, are those of good moral character. And verily, the most hateful of you to me, and the farthest seated from me on the Day of Resurrection, will the garrulous, the grandiloquent, and the orotund.”
> [Narrated by Tirmidhi, who graded it as a hasan hadith]

Thus, we have `Abdullah ibn al-Mu`tazz (d. 296/909, the `Abbasid belle-lettrist and caliph who ruled for just one day before being assassinated), writing his *Kitab al-Badi*’ to show that such embellishing devices were not invented by new movement of `Abbasid poets. To the contrary, he showed, these can be found even in pre-Islamic poetry and the Quran, the difference being that the ‘new age’ poets made excessive use of such embellishments, resulting in their poems being of inferior quality.

> “In this book of ours, we have set forth what we have found – in the Quran, the language, the hadiths of God’s Messenger, the sayings of the Companions and the Bedouins and others, and the speech of the ancients – of the type of speech that the Moderns call *badi*. [We have done this] so that it can be known that Bashshar [ibn Burd], Muslim [ibn al-Walid], Abu Nuwas, and those of their ilk, were not the first to know this art. It is merely that (*badi*) was used profusely in their poetry, and this was known in their lifetimes, and so this label was applied to them. Then, after them Aws al-Ta’i became obsessed with it, to the extent that he was overwhelmed by it....and used it abundantly, excelling in some cases and doing deplorably in others, and this is the consequence of excessiveness and the fruit of prodigality. [In the past] a poet would only mention one or two distichs of this sort in a poem, or one might read several of his poems [in their entirety] without finding a distich of *badi*’ therein, for this [sort of embellishment] was deemed pleasing from them if they produced it once in a while, and its prestige would increase when it was interspersed [in this way].”
Ibn al-Mu`tazz’ book also appears to have been the first attempt to systematize the study of *badi`*, which would eventually become one of the three sub-disciplines in the study of *balagha*. He listed five rhetorical embellishments:

1. *Isti`ara* (‘Metaphor’)
2. *Tajnis* (Consonance)
3. *Mutabaqa* (Contrast)
4. *Radd al-Kalam `ala ma taqaddamaha* (Epanalepsis)
5. *al-Madhhab al-Kalami* (Rational Persuasion)

Nevertheless, he sagely commented that, “The embellishments of [speech] are many, and no scholar should claim to have exhaustively listed them all.” Indeed, later rhetoricians emended his list, with some of them reaching over a hundred different embellishing devices!

Ibn al-Mu`tazz’ pioneering study of *badi`* in poetry prompted works by numerous other writers, among which Abu Hilal al-`Askari’s (d. 395/1005) *Kitab al-Sina`atayn* (‘The Two Crafts,’ i.e. poetry and prose) is noteworthy for broadening the scope of the discussion to prose. Another development in prose, slightly later than the *badi`* movement in poetry, but roughly parallel in its nature, was the emergence of the *maqamat* genre. Pioneered by Badi’ al-Zaman al-Hamadhani (d. 398/1008), the *maqamat* works comprise a series of picaresque short stories that are amusing, but also use language that is highly sophisticated (even to the point of being artificial, and opaque and obscure to the average reader).

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“If the student of Arabic fails to pursue [the study of *balagha*] .... then it erases all his excellences and obscures all his virtues. [This is] because if he cannot distinguish - between superior and inferior statements, beautiful and ugly expressions, unique and insipid poetry - then his ignorance will become evident and his inadequacy manifest. Furthermore, if he intends to compose a poem, or pen an epistle, while having missed out on this knowledge [of *balagha*], he will mix the clear with the murky and the precious with the worthless.  

– Poet and belletrist Abu Hilal al-`Askari (d. 395/1005) *Kitab al-Sina`atayn*  

So, far we have seen the poetic, philological and secretarial currents of scholarship that dealt with various aspects of what would become the field of *balagha*. The fourth and fifth centuries witnessed the start of a synthesis and systemization of the discipline. Mu’tazilite theologian al-Rummani (d. 384/994), in his *Nukat fi l`jaz al-Quran* (‘Issues concerning the Inimitability of the Quran’), observed
that *balagha* is one aspect (among seven) of the miraculous inimitability of the Quran, and he also identified and defined some rhetorical figures.

“*Balagha* is not [merely] conveying understanding of the meaning, for the [same] meaning might be conveyed by two speakers, one of whom is eloquent and the other inarticulate. Nor is *balagha* [merely] having the word correspond to the [desired] meaning, for one might have a word correspond to the [desired] meaning and yet [the word might be] inferior and abhorrent, or repulsive and strained. Rather, *balagha* is conveying the meaning to the heart [of the listener] in the most beautiful form of wording... So, the highest level of *balagha* belongs exclusively to the Qur’an...and incapacitates both the Arabs and non-Arabs.”

– Abul-Husayn ‘Ali ibn ‘Isa al-Rummani (d. 384/994), Mu’tzilite theologian

Others followed his lead, including the renowned Ash‘ari theologian al-Baqillani (d. 403/1013), who further explored the eloquence of the Quran in his *i’jaz al-Quran*, a book that also drew on the earlier poetry criticism works of Qudama, Ibn al-Mu‘tazz, al-‘Askari and others.

According to al-Baqillani (d. 403/1013), his predecessor Ash‘ari theologians mentioned three main aspects of the Quran’s miraculousness:

1- That it includes news [prophesying] about the unseen
2- That it was known about the Prophet’s condition that he was unlettered, unable to write nor knowing how to read.
3 – That it is unique in its composition, amazing in its structure, surpassing in its eloquence, to the extent that one can thereby know the incapacity of creatures in [matching] it.

These theological works were the start of the eventual synthesis that would bring together the earlier disciplines, but are original enough to constitute a new sub-genre of *balagha* : the theological.
Synthesis and Consolidation: The Fifth and Sixth Centuries

“For the [scholars of rhetoric], [nazm] was analogous to weaving, manufacturing, goldsmithing, building, embroidery, decoration, and [arts] like that, which require parts to be considered with each other, in order that the placing of each in its [particular] position is for a reason that necessitates it being there, to the extent that if it were placed in a different position, it would not be valid.”

- Persian-Arab rhetorician `Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjani (d. 471/1078), Dala‘il al-I`jaz

The scene was now ripe for a final synthesis, that very soon started to take shape. Ibn Sinan al-Khafaji (d. 466/1073), a Shi‘ite philologist, poet and litterateur) was aware of the theological, philological, grammatical and literary-criticism strands of scholarship on balagha, but observed that each of them was limited in its scope. He therefore wrote a book Sirr al-Fasaha (‘The Secret of Eloquence’) that was intended to bring together all these aspects. But the major credit for synthesizing balagha and harmonizing its different strands goes to `Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjani (d. 471/1078), a Persian grammarian and Ash`ari theologian who lived and died in Gorgan, near the south-east banks of the Caspian Sea. Jurjani asserted that speech acquires eloquence and beauty when it has secondary meanings (meanings that are not obtained merely from the words); for example, the statement that a woman “often naps in the morning,” might have embedded in it the secondary meaning that she is well-off and has servants who take care of her household chores, leaving her free to nap. Regarding the the eloquence of the Quran in particular, he observed that the concept of nazm (how different components of the speech are coordinated to give a coherence that is striking in its beauty) is central to understanding nature of its unrivalled beauty. He authored two books on balagha: Dala‘il al-I`jaz (‘The Indications of Inimitability’) and Asrar al-Balagha (‘The Secrets of Eloquence’), in which he laid the groundwork for systematizing `ilm al-ma`ani (linguistic pragmatics) and `ilm al-bayan (figurative language and imagery) respectively. These two fields became central to the consolidated field of balagha, to which badi` (rhetorical embellishments) was later added as a third. Jurjani can rightly be considered as the founder of the formal discipline of balagha, and his influence and legacy were central to the trajectory of balagha after him.
Among those influenced by Jurjani about a half-century later was a man who hailed from over a thousand kilometers to the northeast, in the Central Asian oasis of Khwarazm. The Mu‘tazilite theologian al-Zamakhshari (d. 538/1143) wrote a work of tafsir that attempted to apply Jurjani’s principles to explore _balagha_ aspects of the Quran and its inimitability. Zamakhshari’s was the first _balagha_-focused tafsir, and he entitled it _Al-Kashshaf ‘an Haqa’iq al-Tanzil wa-‘Uyun al-Aqwil fi Wujuh al-Ta’wil_ (‘The Revealer of the Realities of the Revelation and the Choice Statements on the Ways of Interpretation.’) Despite the fact that it included Mu‘tazilite theological positions, it continues, to this day, to be valued even by Sunnis for its _balagha_ content.

Shortly after Zamakhshari, Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 606/1210), the renowned exegete, philosopher and Ash‘ari theologian, wrote a useful abridgement _Nihayat al-Ijaz fi Dirayat al-I’jaz_ (‘The Ultimate Brevity in the Understanding of Inimitability’) of Jurjani’s two seminal works that is more accessible to those who do not have the time or expertise to dive directly into Jurjani’s writings.
Stasis and Stagnation: The Seventh to Fourteenth Centuries

In the 7th/13th century, the Mongols were ravaging the Islamic heartland, eventually sacking Baghdad and destroying many of its books in 656/1258. Around the same time, the western realms witnessed the decline and defeat of many Muslim states in seventh-century Spain. Andalusian poet Salih al-Rundi (d. 684) wrote a famous elegy to his homeland, the opening lines of the poem saying,

For everything, once it has reached is peak, there’ll be decline,
Let not the human be beguiled, then by a lifestyle fine.

Similarly and perhaps not entirely coincidentally, for balagha the seventh and eighth centuries brought a crowning synthesis, but also the onset of decline.

The crowning systematization occurred in Central Asia, at the hands of Yusuf al-Sakkaki (d. 626/1229), a Khwarazmi scholar of the Arabic language. Sakkaki wrote a compendium of the major disciplines of Arabic entitled Miftah al-`Ulum (‘The Key to the Disciplines’), which he divided into three sections: morphology (sarf), syntax (nahw) and balagha respectively. The balagha section was a digest of Jurjani’s work on ma’ani and bayan, plus a section on badi` (rhetorical embellishments). Jurjani himself had discussed some rhetorical embellishments, but had not treated badi` as a separate sub-discipline. It was thus Sakkaki who pioneered the division of balagha into three sub-disciplines, which after him became the standard taxonomy, and his book became a standard reference. Jalal al-Din al-Qazwini (d. 739/1338, ‘the orator of Damascus’) wrote an abridgement of it (Talkhis al-Miftah, ‘The Summary of the Key’) which along with his al-Idah fi `Ulum al-Balagha (‘The Elucidation of the Disciplines of Balagha’, intended as a commentary on the Talkhis), came to be widely studied and taught. Many subsequent scholars wrote commentaries on the Talkhis, one prominent example being Taftazani’s (d. 793/1390) Mutawwal (“The Protracted”). Suyuti’s (d. 911/1505) 1,006-line didactic poem `Uqud al-Juman fi `Ilm al-Ma`ani wal-Bayan was a versification of the contents of the Talkhis, and is still taught today in some traditional seminaries in the Muslim world.

Notwithstanding the achievements in consolidation and epitomization, balagha in the post-Zamakhshari era generally entered a stage of stasis, and even stagnation, with many later writers effectively trying to reduce it to a set of mechanical rules similar to grammar, and continuing to parrot the illustrative examples mentioned in the seminal works, without attempting to apply the principles to other texts. Scholarly efforts were mostly confined to summarizing earlier works, which is not without benefit, but with little new ground being broken, balagha lost its dynamic character. This retreat of scholarly endeavor into preservation mode is certainly comprehensible in light of the socio-political upheavals that affected much of this period, and indeed it was prominent across other Islamic disciplines at the time. While the summary-text (mukhtasar) was not a new phenomenon (in fiqh, for example, they existed as early as the 3rd century, with Muzani’s summary of Shafi`i’s legal rulings being an early example), it was in the 7th – 8th centuries that the art of synopsis and condensation reached its peak. While the resulting texts certainly demonstrate that a lot of time and skill were expended to produce them, and they can serve as valuable memory aids for the contours of a discipline, nevertheless, there were debates over the value of such super-summaries. The Mukhtasar Khalil, a Maliki summary text by the erudite Maliki jurist Khalil ibn Ishaq (d. 776) is particularly notorious for the terseness of its language, often to the point of opacity. The Mukhtasar Khalil contains 400,000 legal determinations condensed into less than 300 pages, and it remains a central pedagogical work for Maliki law, but it is not easily decipherable without explanation, and many
commentaries have been written for it. A translation of the first few lines is presented below, and it is clearly not a “short and easy introduction to the Islamic rules on purification.” Hattab (d. 954), a famous commentator on Khalil’s mukhtasar, devoted several pages to unpacking and explaining these few lines:

“Lesser intangible impurity, and the legal ruling of tangible impurity, are lifted by al-
mutlaq (unqualified) [water], which is that to which the name “water” applies without any stipulation, even if it be collected from dew, or it melted after having been frozen, or was the left-over after drinking by a animal or ritually impure woman or man, or the left-over after the washing of the latter two, or a large quantity contaminated by filth that does not change it[s characteristics] or is such that one is uncertain whether the agent of change is detrimental [to purity], or....”

– Khalil ibn Ishaq (d. 776), Mukhtasar

Ibn Khaldun, the famous Sevillian historian and sociologist (d. 808/1406) was among those who were critical of the mukhtasar enterprise, expressing his thoughts in a chapter of his Muqaddima (Prolegomena) entitled, “Excess of Summarized Texts in the Disciplines is Detrimental to Learning”.

“Many of the later scholars applied themselves to summarizing the ways and paths of knowledge, becoming enamored with that. On that basis, they [began] laying out a summarized curriculum in every discipline, [each] comprising an enumeration of the issues and evidences, with terseness in words but stuffing those few [words] with many meanings of the discipline. That became detrimental to eloquence, and difficult to understand.”

-- Ibn Khaldun, Sevillian historian and sociologist, (d. 808/1406)

We do find breaths of fresh air in this period, with scholars whose works are exceptions to the norm of stasis and stagnation. Thus, even though Razi did merely summarize Jurjani’s books, the latter were difficult to approach, and so his summary was useful. Razi himself was a polymath and independent thinker, whose own tafsir explores many of the subtleties of Quranic diction. Another refreshingly non-typical figure in the Zamkhsharian legacy is the Zaydi imam Yahya ibn Hamza al-‘Alawi (d. 745/1344), whose work al-Tiraz li-Asrar al-Balagha wa ‘Ulum Haqa’iq al-I‘jaz (‘The Embroidery in the Secrets of Eloquence and the Disciplines of the Realities of Inimitability’) was intended to refine the material and present it in easily-accessible explanation and arrangement. His work is also unique in that he illustrates the principles of balagha with many text-snippets beyond the handful of examples that most writers were simply echoing from one another.

The 7th century also witnessed the emergence of the poetic genre of Badi’iyyat, poems that praised the Prophet Muhammad, but at the same time incorporated rhetorical embellishments, with each line typically illustrating a different rhetorical device. The most prominent pioneer of the genre was ‘Ali ibn’ Uthman al-Arbili (d. 670). Other famous badi’iyyat included those by Safiyy al-Din al-Hilli (d. 750), Suyuti (d. 911) and Aisha al-Ba’uniiyya (d. 922), and poems in the genre continued to be written into the modern era.
Encounter and Engagement with Modernity

"God has not confined knowledge, poetry and eloquence to one era to the exclusion of others, nor granted it exclusively to one people over others. To the contrary, He made it shared and apportioned amongst His servants in every era, and made [It so that] every old affair [was], in its [own] time, [regarded as] new."

-- Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889), Baghdadian litterateur theologian, and jurisprudent, al-Shi‘r wal-Shu‘ara‘ ("Poetry and Poets")

The early twentieth-century ushered in the modern era, in which the Arabs started to become more aware of modern Western intellectual and literary developments. It was also a time when Muslims began to reflect critically on their own scholarly heritage, with a view to identifying and understanding whether any part of it could have contributed to the (by then) pervading intellectual, material and political weakness and subjugation to European colonialism. Calls for and attempts at reform and revival emerged across the classical disciplines of Islam and the Arabic language.

Three Questions

In the field of balagha, the discussion was centered on three major questions:

i) Do discussions from medieval philosophy, theology, formal logic, dialectics and Islamic legal theory really belong in the books of balagha? There emerged the widespread sentiment that such discussions were alien to balagha proper, and that they unnecessarily complicated its study and distracted from its aesthetic essence.

ii) Does the discipline of balagha need to be updated by incorporating modern developments in fields such as psychology, music, pedagogy, sociology and European linguistics and literary theory?

iii) What changes are needed in how balagha is taught in the 20th century?

The answer to this is, of course, closely linked to how we answer the previous two questions. In 1939, `Ali al-Jarim (an Azhar-educated scholar, who went on to become Dean of Cairo University) and Mustafa Amin (an Egyptian educator) published al-Balagha al-Wadiha, a textbook that presented a simplified introduction to the classical sub-disciplines of balagha, doing away with obscure discussions from philosophy and logic, and also being selective in which topics/devices are included. The book was a great success, has been re-published many times, and continues to be used as high-school level textbook in the Middle East, and for introductory seminary courses for non-Arabs.
Three Approaches

Questions such as the above were debated vigorously on the pages of the *Risala* intellectual journal in mid-20th century Egypt, and the debates spawned several books, by both conservatives and progressives, discussing the issues in more detail. There emerged three broad attitudes or approaches.

a) **Conservatives**, who called for retaining the pre-modern scholarly tradition in *balagha*, and then building on it, arguing that meaningful revival should grown organically within the tradition and conform to its spirit. Dr. Ahmad Hasan Zayyat (d. 1968, his book *Difa` an al-Balagha* “Defense of Balagha” was published in 1945), for example, wrote that the European literary movements largely emerged as reactions to other phenomena in their own linguistic and cultural milieu, and therefore cannot simply be transplanted and grafted onto the Arabic language tradition. Some in the conservative camp, such as Dr. Munir Khalil Nada, see phenomena such as Arabic’s fall from being an international language, and the rise of Arabic free verse and other West-inspired genres, as symptomatic of the neglect of the indigenous *balagha* tradition.

b) **Progressives**, who called for jettisoning the indigenous tradition of *balagha*, and replacing it with new books based on modern Western theories and methods. Perhaps one of the more notorious representatives of this trend was Salama Musa (d. 1958, a pioneer of Egyptian socialism and promoter of colloquial dialectical Arabic), whose political views seem to have influenced his linguistic outlook, and whose own qualifications in Arabic were not rigorous. A contemporary, Dr. `Abbas `Aqqad (d. 1964), wrote that Musa's book *Al-Balagha al-`Asriyya* (“Contemporary Rhetoric”) proved that its author is non-Arab!

c) **Reformers**, who believed that the best of both traditions (the indigenous and the modern Western) should be combined and brought into symbiosis. Two acclaimed and influential works from this camp are Ahmad Shayib’s (d. 1976) *al-Uslub* (“Style”, published 1939), and Dr Amin al-Khuli’s (d. 1966) *Fann al-Qawl* (“The Art of the Word”, published 1947). Shayib began his career as an elementary school teacher, gradually rising up the ranks to become a trustee and professor at King Fouad I University (despite his not having earned a doctorate), while al-Khuli was a a high-profile academic, a member of the Cairo Arabic Language Academy and also politically active.
Shayib and al-Khuli both probed the meaning and goals of balagha, and agreed on purging balagha of elements of alien fields (primarily philosophy). They also concurred that the classical balagha tradition had been mostly atomistic, devoting more attention to words and sentences than to larger units of text such as paragraphs, and that the latter aspects (macro-analysis) need today to be developed further. This call had already been made decades earlier by Jabr Dawmat (d. 1930, a Syrian Christian Arabophile, who was opposed to blind imitation modern Western ideas and goods), but Shayib and Khuli were able to elaborate it further.

Shayib, for instance, felt that the study of balagha has two major parts:

1- Style (uslub), which studies the components of speech (letters, words, sentences, paragraphs, expressions and images) in light of phonetics, psychology, musical theory and other disciplines that can be used to evaluate language as an artistic, literary creation. The three classical sub-disciplines of balagha are subsumed under this heading of Style.

2- Genres (funun), which studies the principles of the many genres of poetry and prose that exist in world literatures, such as “articles, orations, letters, dielactics, descriptions, elegies, stories, tragedies, allegories, and historical narrative.”

Shayib and Khuli also agreed that balagha could be enriched by incorporating elements of modern disciplines such as psychology and linguistics, viewing these fields as being the results of a natural progression in human knowledge, and thus not inherently foreign or “Western.”

Such reform projects have, for the most part, not been further elaborated to the extent needed for practical implementation, and their impact on the ground has therefore been limited.
Modern Rhetorical Exegesis

Another aspect of the modern revival of *balagha* are the attempts to restore its dynamism by exploring its application to texts outside the textbook examples. Tunisian scholar Tahir Ibn `Ashur’s (d. 1393/1973) monumental tafsir *Tahrir al-Ma`na al-Sadid wa-Tanwir al-`Aql al-Jadid min Tafsir al-Kitab al-Majid* (‘Releasing the Correct Meaning and Illuminating the New Intellect through Exegesis of the Majestic Book’) was the first major instance, since Zamakhshari (d. 538/1143), of an exegesis of the entire Quran through the specific lens of its rhetorical dimension. Ibn `Ashur’s tafsir is much larger than Zamakhshari’s, and goes much deeper into exploring the language of the Quran, but he has not exhausted the field by any means, as shown by the fact that numerous works have been produced subsequently exploring the *balagha* of specific suras in more depth than Ibn `Ashur.

Another noteworthy modern development has been the revival of exploration of the amazing style and beauty of the Quran. The Indian Muslim intellectual Hamid al-Din al-Farahi (d. 1349/1940) is the pioneer of the modern study of Quraanic thematic coherence and structure, which he termed its *nizam* (harking back to the much older term *nazm*), and his legacy was continued by his student Amin Ahsan Islahi (d. 1418/1997, a South Asian scholar who gave up a career in journalism to dedicate himself to Islamic studies), who applied it in his Urdu-language tafsir *Tadabbur-e-Quran*. More recently, Raymond Farrin (Professor of Arabic at the American University of Kuwait) and others have continued this discourse in English. This sub-discipline still has potential for much further study.
Epilogue

We have followed the odyssey of balagha over the seas of time, and seen various ways in which it was conceptualized and practiced along the way. Today, the practice of balagha is potentially in danger. In the middle of the last century, Dr. Ahmad Zayyat had proffered that balagha was declining under the pressure of the modern desire for quickness and immediacy, and the democratization of knowledge that allows anyone to speak, write and publish regardless of their qualifications. Today, over a half-century later, in the age of Twitter and blogs, these phenomena have only intensified. While the effective use of conciseness is certainly within the domain of balagha (any many a Twitter user delights in composing pithy messages no longer than 140 characters), nevertheless it does seem to be the case that fewer people nowadays are deeply engaged with literature and its aesthetics. It remains to be seen how these currents will play out in the long run, and what new winds might blow to modify the course of the balagha schooner as it advances into the misty waters of the future.
Appendix A: Historical Development of Balagha (Diagram)
Appendix B : Selected Further Readings

General Arabic Literature and Rhetoric


Quranic Rhetoric and Inimitability