

## The Evolution of Balaghah: From Pre-Islamic Rhetorical Practices to Post-Qur'anic Systematization in the Abbasid Era

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### Abstract

*Balaghah is a fundamental discipline in Arabic linguistics and Qur'anic studies that plays a crucial role in understanding linguistic beauty, semantic precision, and effective communication. This article examines the historical development of balaghah from the pre-Islamic period to the Abbasid era using a library research method with a historical-descriptive approach. The findings indicate that balaghah practices existed prior to Islam through poetry and oratory traditions and developed rapidly after the revelation of the Qur'an to explain its linguistic inimitability. The systematic formulation of balaghah reached its maturity with Abdul Qahir al-Jurjani through the sciences of ma'ani, Bn ayan, and badi'.*

### Keywords

Balaghah; Qur'anic studies; Arabic rhetoric access



## I. Introduction

The pre-Islamic Arab society, prior to the revelation of the Qur'an, demonstrated remarkable linguistic proficiency. This expertise is evident in their mastery of composing and reciting highly captivating poetry. It is widely acknowledged that the Jāhiliyyah Arabs possessed a sophisticated level of literary knowledge. One of their common practices in refining linguistic skills was the organization of regular gatherings, where poets performed and conveyed specific messages through carefully selected diction and expressive linguistic structures in their poetry.

The existence of balāghah predates the revelation of the Qur'an and continued to develop further with its advent. The refinement and aesthetic beauty of language have remained enduring subjects of scholarly inquiry, producing a wealth of evocative and meaningful expressions within literary traditions, particularly following the revelation of the Qur'an, which became a major source of inspiration for linguistic elegance and nobility. As a driving force in the development of language, the Qur'an itself was acknowledged by poets for its unparalleled linguistic excellence. This elevated linguistic quality elicited responses from Arab society, leading them to challenge and attempt to rival the Qur'an; however, such attempts ultimately failed. The study of the historical development of balāghah is therefore of great importance, especially in light of the growing tendency among contemporary speakers to favor colloquial ('āmiyyah) over Classical Arabic (fuṣḥā), which embodies the foundational principles of balāghah.

### 1.1 Balāghah in Arabic Linguistics and Qur'anic Studies

Balāghah occupies a central position in Arabic linguistic studies as it is directly related to the ability of language to convey meaning accurately, beautifully, and contextually. It does not merely concern aesthetic aspects of language but also emphasizes communicative effectiveness, particularly the appropriateness of expression in relation to the context of discourse. In Qur'anic studies, balāghah serves as a scientific tool for

understanding the depth of meaning and the distinctive stylistic features of divine revelation, which cannot be matched by human expression.

Both classical and contemporary scholars affirm that balāghah functions as a bridge between linguistic structure and meaning, enabling interpretations that go beyond literal understanding. Consequently, balāghah plays a significant role in the development of Qur'anic exegesis (tafsir), Arabic linguistics, and Islamic intellectual thought more broadly.

### **1.2 The Historical Roots of Balāghah in the Jāhiliyyah Period**

Prior to Islam, balāghah had not yet emerged as a systematically structured discipline. Nevertheless, linguistic practices reflecting its principles were already evident in poetry and oratory (khiṭābah). Jāhiliyyah poetry demonstrates a high level of linguistic mastery, characterized by the use of figurative language, analogies, and powerful as well as persuasive structures.

Scholars of Arabic literature argue that the rhetorical abilities of pre-Islamic Arabs developed naturally through oral traditions and inter-tribal competitions. This linguistic sensitivity later enabled them to recognize the superiority of the Qur'anic language upon its revelation, while also perceiving the fundamental differences between divine discourse and human literary works.

### **1.3 The Qur'an as a Catalyst for the Development of Balāghah**

The revelation of the Qur'an brought significant transformations to the study of the Arabic language. With its unique stylistic features, the Qur'an challenged the established literary traditions of the Arabs and prompted scholars to seek systematic explanations for its linguistic inimitability (i'jāz al-Qur'an). The effort to understand this inimitability became one of the primary driving forces behind the emergence of balāghah as a more rigorous field of study.

In its early stages, discussions on balāghah were dispersed across works on tafsir, literature, and theology. Figures such as al-Jāḥiẓ and Ibn Qutaybah began to articulate ideas concerning the beauty and rhetorical power of the Qur'anic language, although these had not yet been formulated into a standardized theoretical framework. This period can thus be regarded as a transitional phase from intuitive linguistic practice to more systematic rhetorical analysis.

### **1.4 The Systematization of Balāghah in the Abbasid Era**

The rapid intellectual development during the Abbasid period created a conducive environment for the emergence of balāghah as an independent scientific discipline. The peak of its systematization was achieved through the contributions of 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī, who introduced the theory of naẓm. This theory emphasizes that linguistic beauty does not reside in individual words, but in the relationships between meanings and the arrangement of words within sentence structures.

Al-Jurjānī's ideas provided a strong conceptual foundation for the subsequent development of balāghah. His contributions were further refined by later scholars, leading to the formal classification of balāghah into three primary branches: 'ilm al-ma'ānī, 'ilm al-bayān, and 'ilm al-badī'. This tripartite framework became the standard structure in classical balāghah studies and continues to be widely used to this day.

### 1.5 Research Position and Gap

Previous studies have generally examined balāghah either from a theoretical perspective or in terms of its application in the Qur'an, often in isolation. However, research that traces the historical and continuous development of balāghah from its early linguistic practices in the Jāhiliyyah period, through the influence of the Qur'an, to its systematization during the Abbasid era remains relatively limited. Therefore, a descriptive-historical approach is essential to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamic evolution of balāghah.

The Arabic language holds a central position in Islamic civilization as the language of the Qur'an. The Arabs were known for their linguistic eloquence long before the revelation. The descent of the Qur'an further reinforced the urgency of linguistic studies and gave rise to balāghah as a scientific discipline aimed at understanding the inimitable nature of divine language.

## II. Research Methods

This study employs a library research method with a descriptive-historical approach. The data are derived from both classical and contemporary literature relevant to the study of balāghah. This approach is selected due to the historical-descriptive nature of the research, which aims to elucidate the evolution of balāghah through the analysis of primary and secondary texts, without involving empirical field data.

## III. Discussion

### 3.1 Phases in the Development of Balāghah

The essence of balāghah had already developed significantly prior to the revelation of the Qur'an and continued to advance thereafter. The elegance and refinement of language constitute an inexhaustible field of study, giving rise to numerous beautiful and meaningful expressions within Arabic literary traditions. As interactions between Arabs and non-Arabs expanded alongside the advancement of Islamic civilization, the need to formalize the principles of linguistic eloquence became increasingly urgent. This necessity arose because non-Arab communities were generally unable to fully appreciate the beauty and sophistication of the Arabic language without clear standards or frameworks, particularly in their efforts to understand the inimitability of the Qur'an.

Accordingly, the development of balāghah can be categorized into several historical phases:

#### a. The Initial Phase

In essence, balāghah had long been inherent in Arab society; however, its emergence as a more structured field of study is often associated with the period of Abū 'Ubaydah. He was of Jewish descent, born in Bajarwān, Persia, and studied under prominent scholars such as Yūnus ibn Ḥabīb and Abū 'Amr ibn al-'Alā'. Some scholars argue that the study of balāghah began with his work on *Majāz al-Qur'an*. Others, such as Shawqī Dayf, maintain that balāghah originated in the pre-Islamic period through poetic practices among Jāhiliyyah poets, who exchanged and evaluated their compositions, thereby disseminating rhetorical awareness.

A notable narration regarding Abū 'Ubaydah's motivation in writing *Majāz al-Qur'an* recounts a question posed by Ibrāhīm ibn Ismā'īl concerning the Qur'anic description of the *zaqqūm* tree, whose fruit is likened to devils' heads. The question challenged how such a comparison could evoke fear when people had never seen devils'

heads. Abū ‘Ubaydah responded that the Qur’an communicates in accordance with the linguistic conventions familiar to its audience, similar to how Imru’ al-Qays likened his enemies to devils in his poetry. This illustrates how early linguists interpreted Qur’anic verses by analyzing their stylistic features and relating them to established Arabic poetic expressions.

During this phase, terminologies associated with balāghah were still inconsistent and lacked standardized definitions. For instance, Abū ‘Ubaydah used the term *majāz* to refer broadly to the method by which the Qur’an conveys meaning, which differs from its later technical definition as figurative expression. Other terms he employed include *kināyah*, *ijāz bi al-ḥadhf*, *taqdīm*, *ta’khīr*, and *tashbīh*. The general characteristics of this phase include the absence of systematic classification, inconsistent terminology, overlap with other disciplines, and the lack of clear distinctions among the three major branches of balāghah (*ma‘ānī*, *bayān*, and *badī‘*).

### **b. The Phase of Refinement (350-450 H)**

The characteristics of the initial phase continued into this period of refinement. However, a more balanced integration of Qur’anic studies, linguistics, and literature began to emerge. Scholars started organizing their works into distinct sections addressing balāghah, the Qur’an, and other disciplines, particularly among theologians.

During this phase, theological discourse expanded significantly, with balāghah maintaining a dominant role due to its close connection with the analysis of Qur’anic language and its inimitability. One prominent figure, ‘Alī ibn ‘Īsā al-Rummānī of the Mu‘tazilite school, identified seven aspects of the Qur’an’s inimitability: (1) its rhetorical excellence, (2) its unmatched nature despite strong incentives to imitate it, (3) its universal challenge, (4) diversion (*ṣarfah*), (5) its disclosure of the unseen, (6) its comparison with the miracles of previous prophets, and (7) its deviation from conventional Arabic prose and poetry. In the study of balāghah, al-Rummānī focused on ten key aspects, including *ijāz*, *tashbīh*, *isti‘ārah*, *ta’līq*, *fawāṣil*, *tajānus*, *taḍmīn*, *taḥrīf*, *mubālaghah*, and *ḥusn al-bayān*.

In summary, while balāghah, Qur’anic studies, and literature were still intertwined during this phase, the distribution of focus became more balanced. Nevertheless, terminologies had not yet achieved fixed or stable definitions and remained relatively general.

### **c. The Stabilization Phase (450–600 H)**

‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī played a pivotal role in establishing balāghah as a mature and independent discipline through his seminal works *Dalā’il al-Ijāz* and *Asrār al-Balāghah*. Affiliated with the Ash‘arite theological school and Shāfi‘ī jurisprudence, he passed away in 471 H.

While earlier phases had already addressed aspects of *ma‘ānī*, *bayān*, and *badī‘*, these remained fragmented and lacked a cohesive framework. Al-Jurjānī systematized and refined these elements into a structured discipline. He formally classified balāghah into three major branches: *ma‘ānī*, *bayān*, and *badī‘*. His primary focus lay in the development of *ilm al-ma‘ānī* through his theory of *naẓm*, which posits that the inimitability of the Qur’an resides in the arrangement and interrelation of meanings within syntactic structures rather than in isolated words.

In his exploration of syntax, al-Jurjānī elaborated on concepts such as *taqdīm*, *ta’khīr*, *ta’rīf*, *tankīr*, *dhikr*, *waṣl*, *faṣl*, and *qaṣr*. His ideas significantly influenced later scholars, including Abū Ya‘qūb al-Sakkākī (d. 626 H), author of *Miftāḥ al-‘Ulūm*. Although al-Sakkākī adopted many of al-Jurjānī’s ideas, his work largely reformulated

them with limited conceptual expansion. Consequently, this period also witnessed a degree of stagnation in the development of balāghah.

### 3.2 Balāghah before the Revelation of the Qur'an

After mastering *naḥw* and *ṣarf*, the study of balāghah becomes essential, as it explains how language can be crafted to achieve aesthetic value, contextual meaning, and a profound impact on audiences. Without an understanding of balāghah, the meanings and subtleties of the Qur'an would be difficult to comprehend.

The Arabs had already achieved a high level of linguistic proficiency long before the revelation of the Qur'an, as evidenced by their eloquence in Jāhiliyyah poetry. Balāghah, alongside other linguistic sciences such as *naḥw*, *ṣarf*, and *ishtiḳāq*, had long been integral to Arab life.

Arabic literature flourished in the pre-Islamic period through various forms of poetry and prose. One notable phenomenon was the organization of *aswāq adabiyyah* (literary markets), where poets showcased their works. Eloquence and rhetorical skill were highly valued, often determining social status and leadership potential within tribes. Poets skillfully employed diction and structure to create compelling meanings and strong impressions, even using their literary expertise as a source of livelihood. Thus, the foundations of balāghah were already evident in pre-Islamic linguistic practices.

### 3.3 Balāghah after the Revelation of the Qur'an

Numerous scholars contributed to the development of balāghah after the revelation of the Qur'an. Among the most prominent were Abū Bakr 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī, known for his works *Dalā'il al-I'jāz* (focusing on *ma'ānī*) and *Asrār al-Balāghah* (focusing on *bayān*), and Abū Ya'qūb Sirāj al-Dīn Yūsuf al-Sakkākī, whose work *Miftāḥ al-'Ulūm* further contributed to the field.

### 3.4 The Development of Balāghah during the Umayyad and Abbasid Periods

#### a. The Umayyad Period

During the Umayyad period, significant developments in language were evident in the flourishing of *khiṭābah* (oratory), including speeches for political, ceremonial, and advisory purposes. Prominent orators of this era included Ṣaḥbān Wā'il, Ziyād, al-Ḥajjāj, Ghailān al-Dimashqī, al-Biṣrī, and Wāsil ibn 'Aṭā'.

In addition to oratory, poetry also experienced substantial growth, with poets competing to produce outstanding compositions. These developments contributed positively to the advancement of balāghah as a discipline. The emergence of various ideological and political factions further stimulated poetic production, including praise poetry and satire, thereby reinforcing the foundational principles of balāghah.

#### b. The Abbasid Period

The Abbasid period witnessed equally significant advancements in balāghah. Literary development extended beyond poetry to include prose, particularly scientific and translated works. According to Shawqī Dayf, this progress was driven by two main factors: the advancement of intellectual and civilizational life, and the emergence of two groups of scholars one focused on language and poetry, and the other on rhetoric, debate, legal reasoning, and expression.

Prose development during this era was marked by the emergence of scientific writing and the translation of foreign works in literature, politics, and philosophy. Ibn al-Muqaffa' (d. 143 H), for example, translated various Persian texts and introduced a new stylistic

approach known as *uslūb al-muwallad*, emphasizing precision in word choice and contextual placement to produce nuanced meanings.

During this period, *balāghah* became a well-established discipline with clearly defined terminologies. Scholars contributed significantly to its theoretical development, including al-Aṣma'ī, who introduced concepts such as *iltifāt*, *muṭābaqah*, *ṭibāq*, and *jinās*.

Overall, the development of *balāghah* can be understood through three major phases: the pre-Islamic phase, the refinement phase following the revelation of the Qur'an, and the stabilization phase during the Abbasid period. Key figures such as Abū 'Ubaydah, al-Rummānī, and 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī made significant contributions to the formulation and systematization of *balāghah* principles.

#### IV. Conclusion

*Balāghah* developed gradually and reached its maturity during the classical period of Islamic civilization. It plays a crucial role in Qur'anic studies and exegesis, particularly in understanding the linguistic inimitability of divine revelation. Fundamentally, *balāghah* had already existed during the Jāhiliyyah period, as evidenced by the eloquence of poets and the tradition of literary gatherings (*aswāq adabiyyah*) that served as platforms for refining linguistic expression.

Following the revelation of the Qur'an, the development of *balāghah* accelerated significantly, driven by the need to comprehend the inimitability of Qur'anic language as well as the increasing interaction between Arabs and non-Arabs. Its development can be categorized into three main phases: the initial phase, marked by Abū 'Ubaydah's study of *majāz al-Qur'an*, although terminology and structure remained inconsistent; the refinement phase (350-450 H), characterized by a more balanced treatment of *balāghah*, Qur'anic studies, and literature, as exemplified by al-Rummānī; and the stabilization phase (450-600 H), during which al-Jurjānī systematically classified *balāghah* into three major branches *ma'ānī*, *bayān*, and *badī'* despite a subsequent period of stagnation during the time of al-Sakkākī.

During the Umayyad period, the development of *balāghah* was largely driven by advancements in oratory (*khiṭābah*) and poetry. In contrast, the Abbasid period witnessed more rapid progress, supported by the flourishing of civilization, the translation of foreign works, and the establishment of more structured and systematic principles of *balāghah*.

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