

PRESENTATION AS PROOF:  
THE LANGUAGE OF ARABIC RHETORIC

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Abstract. This paper summarizes the results of a linguistic analysis of several persuasive texts in contemporary Arabic. The texts are characterized by elaborate and pervasive patterns of lexical, morphological and syntactic repetition and paraphrase. Repetition is shown to provide far more than ornamental intensification in Arabic prose; rather, it is the key to the linguistic cohesion of the texts and to their rhetorical effectiveness. In contrast to Western modes of argument, which are based on a syllogistic model of proof and made linguistically cohesive via subordination and hypotaxis, Arabic argumentation is essentially paratactic, abductive and analogical. It persuades by making its argumentative claims linguistically present: by repeating them, paraphrasing them, and clothing them in recurring structural cadences. I suggest that this mode of argumentation is a corollary to the cultural centrality of the *lughah* (*the Arabic language*) in Arab-Islamic society.

1. Introduction.<sup>1</sup> I recently received a call from someone who had heard about my work on Arabic persuasive language and wanted to know more about it. My caller introduced himself with an Arab name, and although his English was fluent I could detect a slight Arabic accent. He began the conversation by mentioning who had referred him to me and describing his research in an area related to mine. Anticipating that he would want offprints and references but being unprepared for the call, I began slowly to phrase my response: his work sounded interesting, I was glad he had called, and I would be glad to . . . . But before I was able to continue, my caller began again. Once again he told me who had given him my name, and once again he told me how similar his work was to mine. Before the conversation ended with my giving him the references and agreeing to send him the things he wanted, he had rephrased his story several more times, and I was only with difficulty keeping myself from laughing — laughing not at him, but because of the wonderfully ironic nature of the whole interaction. His request for information about how Arabs convince people was a perfect example of how Arabs convince people: namely, by repeating. Metalinguistic remarks like "Listen, you're doing it yourself" have a way of bringing conversations to an abrupt end in embarrassed self-consciousness, so I said nothing about my observations. But if I had thought of it at the time, I would have liked to remind my caller of an Arabic proverb one of my informants told me. The proverb goes *kieratu*

al-takrār bi-taṣlīm al-ḥimār, and what it means is *Enough repetition will convince even a donkey*.

In this paper I will examine this kind of persuasiveness. I will describe some of the linguistic and cultural factors that call forth and condition the sort of rhetorical strategy which my unwitting telephone informant used; the strategy of persuading by repeating, rephrasing, clothing and reclothing one's request or claim in changing cadences of words. I will call this rhetorical strategy presentation, and look at when and how presentation can be proof. In particular, I will talk about Arabic, a language in which even the most formal written discourse is characterized by presentation as proof.

The scholarly context of this study is in two areas of research in the ethnography of speaking: the study of rhetorical discourse in non-Western languages, and the cross-linguistic study of the nature and function of repetition. Research in the first of these areas includes, for example, Ethel Albert's (1972) study of Rundi "logic, rhetoric, and poetics" and Charles Frake's (1969) analysis of Yakan litigation. Studies of repetition include those by Fox (1971, 1974) on parallelism in Rotinese ritual language, Bricker (1974) on Zinecanteco semantic couplets, and Gossen (1974) on couplets and parallel syntax in Chamula speech. Scherzer (1974) discusses repetition in Cuna curing chants, and Sebeok (1960) notes the cohesive function of repetition in Cheremis poetry.

I will attempt to tie together these two areas of research — the study of rhetoric<sup>2</sup> and the study of repetition — by examining the mechanism by which repetition can be used to persuade, and the linguistic and cultural context in which repetition is used rhetorically. Specifically, I will examine repetition in Arabic persuasive discourse. After describing the multiple and multi-level patterns of repetition by which this genre of discourse is structured, I will make use of the notion of rhetorical presentation to show how repetition works as a persuasive device. Finally, I will attempt to suggest why Arabs persuade by repeating, drawing on facts about Arabs' view of their language — the lughah — and the centrality of the lughah, the word, the form of discourse in the Arab ecology of speaking.

2. The texture of Arabic repetition. Inherent in any attempt to discuss linguistic research on long blocks of discourse is the problem of how to present the data, which is (a) usually lengthy and unwieldy, and (b) in many cases of little use anyway to an audience of people who do not know the language in question. This study is no exception. The Arabic texts on which my analysis is based comprise well over seven thousand words, and even an excerpt long enough to give the reader a sense of the texture of the prose would take several pages of transcription, glossing, and translation. I will try to make the best of this situation by including Arabic examples where they are not prohibitively long, and, for the rest, referring the reader to the longer study (Koch 1981) where the texts all appear in full, and

to his own imagination.

The texts in question<sup>3</sup> are all in Modern Standard Arabic, the contemporary literary dialect. All were written in the second half of this century, and all are by writers who are widely known and widely thought to be lucid and persuasive. All but one are on political topics, specifically the topic of Arab nationalism, a hotly debated issue.

Linguistically, the first thing one notices about these texts is that they are highly and complexly repetitious. Repetition occurs on all levels and in a number of guises. The writers make frequent use of lexical couplets like al-ta'yīdu wa-al-musāʿadatu *aid and assistance* or al-wahmu wa-al-xayālu *illusion and imagination*: pairs of words coordinated with *and* which are nearly or completely synonymous. Unlike English couplets such as "aid and abet" or "ways and means," Arabic couplets are the result of a still-productive rule, and many are nonce forms.

Many lexical couplets are also morphologically parallel; that is, they have in common one of the multitude of internal vowel, gemination, or prefixation patterns which characterize the Semitic root-and-pattern morphological system. Examples are yuhaddidu wa-yuxattitu *defines and delimits* (both Form II verbs from doubled roots), or al-taxrību wa-al-tadmīru *destruction and demolition* (both Form II verbal nouns). Morphological parallelism is also common in syntactically parallel constructions, where the morphologically parallel items may not be synonyms. Item (1) is an example.

- (1) fī 'awāxiri al-qarni al-θāmina ʿašara  
wa-'awā'ili al-tāsiṣa ʿašara  
*at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth*

Here 'awāxiri *end* and 'awā'ili *beginning* share the same diptotic broken plural pattern.

Before returning to the sort of syntactic parallelism in which the parallel words in (1) are embedded, let me mention a second widespread kind of repetition on the morphological level. This is the repetition of morphological roots, such as is seen in examples (2) and (3).

- (2) mimmā yadullu dalālatan qāṭiṣatan ʿalā 'anna-hu...  
*one thing which indicates a decisive indicating*  
*[indicates decisively] that he...*
- (3) li-'anna al-'ahdāṯa al-siyāsiyyata...ḥadaṯat...  
*because the political occurrences...occurred...*

The underlined portion of example (2) is what is called a cognate accusative: a common construction in which a verb is modified by a phrase consisting of its own verbal noun plus an adjective. In example (3) the subject of the clause and the verb are both from the same root, ḥ-d-ṯ. There are many other examples of this kind of thing, which, incidentally, is something English writers are taught to avoid. (For example, the preceding sentence should probably be revised so as to avoid having "thing" and "something" so close.)

Turning to units larger than single clauses, we find once again both repetition of form and repetition of content: parallelism and paraphrase. The syntactic parallelism in the texts is of two kinds. Example (4) shows the kind of tight, exact parallelism throughout entire clauses which is characteristic of sections of the text which list examples or details. This I call "listing parallelism."

- (4) *ḡalla al-'almānu munqasimīna bayna*  
*remained the Germans divided between*
- ṡaṡarāti al-duwali wa-al-duwaylāti al-*  
*tens the states and the small-states the*
- mustaqillati, wa-ḡalla al-ṡulyānu*  
*independent and remained the Italians*
- muwazzaṡīna ṡalā ḡamāni waḡadātin siyāsiyyatin,*  
*distributed among eight units political*
- wa-al-būlūniyyūna maḡsūmīna bayna ḡalāḡi*  
*and the Polish divided among three*
- duwalin qawīyyatin, wa-al-yūyūslāfiyyūna*  
*states powerful and the Yugoslavs*
- xāḡiṡīna 'ilā ḡukmi dawlatayni ṡaḡīmatayni.*  
*subject to rule two-states great*

*The Germans were still divided among tens of states and independent small states, and the Italians were still distributed among eight political units, and the Poles divided among three powerful states, and the Yugoslavs subject to the rule of two great states.*

The other kind of parallelism seems to have a slightly different function. One example is the following:

- (5) *fa-kāna min al-ṡabīṡiyyi 'an tanṡa'a*  
*so was among the natural that arise*
- al-fikratu al-qawmiyyatu, wa-tatarasraṡa*  
*the idea the nationalistic and grow*
- wa-tataqawwā bi-surṡatin kabīratin fī*  
*and become-powerful with speed great in*
- al-bilādi al-'almāniyyati, baṡda al-nakabāti*  
*the lands the German after the misfortunes*
- allatī tawālat ṡalay-hā xilāla tilka al-*  
*which came upon them during those the*
- ḡurūbi. wa-kāna min al-ṡabīṡiyyi 'an*  
*wars and was among the natural that*
- yantaṡira fī-hā "al-'īmānu bi-waḡdati al-*  
*spread in them the belief in unity the*
- 'ummati al-'almāniyyati," wa-kāna min al-*  
*nation the German and was among the*

tabīʿiyyi	'an	yadfaʿa	hāḍā	al-'imānu
natural	that	compel	this	the belief
mufakkirī	'almāniyā	wa-sāsata-hā	'ilā	
intellectuals	Germany	and leaders her	to	
mukāfahati	al-nazaʿati	al-'iqlīmiyyati...		
combating	the tendencies	the regional		
bi-kulli	quwwatin	wa-ḥamāsin.		
with all	power	and zeal		

So it was natural that the nationalistic idea should arise and grow and become powerful with great speed in the German lands after the misfortunes which came upon them during those wars. And it was natural that "the belief in the unity of the German nation" should spread in them and it was natural that this belief should compel the intellectuals of Germany and her leaders to combat the regional tendencies...with all power and zeal.

While there is a great deal of similarity among the three elements following the three occurrences of kāna min al-ṭabīʿiyyi, the parallelism is not as complete as that in example (4). Semantically, the three elements in (5) have a kind of cumulative effect. Each one builds on the previous one: the idea of nationalism arose and grew, this growth led Germans to believe in German unity, and this belief led them to combat regionalism. The passage is about the creation of intellectual momentum, and the parallelism and lexical echoing create a sort of momentum in the text which reflects its content. This sort of parallelism might be called "cumulative parallelism."

Paraphrase, or repetition of content, occurs at all levels throughout the text. We have seen examples, above, of single-word paraphrase in lexical couplets; one also finds paraphrased phrases and clauses. One particularly striking kind of paraphrase, which occurs frequently, is what I call "reverse paraphrase," or paraphrase in which the same action or event is described from two opposing perspectives.

Reverse paraphrase seems to be one of the most frequent and most basic mechanisms in the statement of an argumentative thesis, and it occurs even in the most stripped-down, summary arguments. Item (6) is an example of one such summary. In it, the author presents the argument of another writer, Antun Saʿada, in order to later demolish it.

(6)	'inna	al-miḥwara	al-'asāsiyya	allaḍī
	( <u>'inna</u> )	the axis	the basic	which
	tadūru	hawla-hu	'ārā'u	'antūn
	revolve	around it	opinions	Antun
				Saʿada
	wa-taʿālīmu-hu,	tartakizu	ʿalā	al-zaʿmi
	and teachings his	rests	on	the claim
	al-tālī:	'al-sūriyyūna	'ummatun	tāmmatun,
	the following	the Syrians	nation	complete

qā'imatun bi-nafsi-hā."  
standing by self its

"wa-al-'ummatu al-sūriyyatu laysat juz'an min  
and the nation the Syrian is-not part of

al-'ummati al-ṣarabiyati."  
the nation the Arab

*The basic axis around which revolve the opinions of Antun Saṣada and his teachings rests on the following claim: "The Syrians are a complete nation, standing by itself." "And the Syrian nation is not a part of the Arab nation."*

The two clauses in quotation marks are probably not direct quotations; this author, like many, tends to use punctuation according to very flexible rules, and there are no footnotes or other attribution. It is most likely that the author is summarizing Saṣada's argument. In any case, this is a very compact statement of an argumentative thesis, by far the most compact in the whole corpus of texts. Still, it consists of two clauses, conjoined with *and*, which are paraphrastic. The first tells what Syria is (a separate nation), the second what it is not (part of the Arab nation). This is a prototypical example of reverse paraphrase. Because it is maximally concise, it is probably as close as possible to the template form for argumentative claims.

To summarize, then, the texts I have examined are characterized by repetition on all levels: phonological, morphological and lexical, syntactic, and semantic. We have seen both repetition of form and repetition of content. The repetition is cohesive, rhythmic, and rhetorical: persuasion is a result as much, or more, of the sheer number of times an idea is stated and the balanced, elaborate ways in which it is stated as it is a result of syllogistic or enthymematic "logical" organization. The discourse is highly paratactic and polysyndetic: ideas flow horizontally into one another. To paraphrase a comment made by Tannen (1980:7) about fiction, "(the discourse) has as its goal not the convincing of the reader through logical argument, but instilling in the reader a sense of identification with its point of view."

3. Repetition and rhetoric: the creation of presence. In almost all discussions of parallelistic, repetitive discourse, reference is made to the essentially "oral" nature of this way of speaking. Walter Ong, who is identified with the oral-literate distinction, correlates nonperiodic, "adding" style with oral composition (1971:33), and says that "unsubstantiated" claims are characteristic of the writing of students from oral ghetto cultures (1978). Ochs (1979:73) points out the high degree of parallelism in unplanned, spoken discourse. Turner (1973:71) says that "early and popular writing in any country is close to spoken style, with loose, paratactic sentences . . ."

But while the Arabic discourse we have examined has features that have been identified with orality (as opposed to literacy) and with speaking (as opposed to writing), it is neither oral nor spoken, even in an abstract sense. All of the authors of the corpus are highly literate, well-educated writers. One might argue that Arabic argumentative style has its roots in the oratory of an oral culture, and that it is therefore somehow "oral." However, by this criterion even the writing of Aristotle, whom Ong would probably consider the apogee of literateness, would have to be called "oral." Neither are the texts in the corpus spoken or unplanned; it is hard to imagine anyone producing the sort of balanced complexity or elaborate parallelism we have seen without careful planning.

Repetition and parallelism have also been identified with poetic discourse. Bauman (1977:16) says that parallelism is one of the features that have been found to "key" (establish the metacommunicative frame for) artistic verbal performance. Stankiewicz (1960:72-73) claims that poetic discourse is characterized, among other things, by its emphasis on form as opposed to content. Hymes (cited by Bright, 1981) has shown how the line and verse structure in Chinook poetic texts is correlated with introductory particles and parallelism.

The Arabic texts in the corpus are not poetry, however. While they certainly share certain features with texts in other cultures which have been labelled "poetic," and while they are historically related to the semi-poetic genre called *sajʿ*, (the balanced, rhymed style of archaic Arabic oratory), they are not poetic in an emic sense. That is, no Arab would call them poetry; they are prose. As Bright (1981) has pointed out, it may in fact be begging the question to even use the categories "poetry" and "prose" in describing the discourse of another culture, since these may turn out to be Western, non-universal categories. Perhaps all literature in some cultures is poetic, or perhaps none is.

Yet there is a difference between argumentative discourse of the Arabic sort and Western argumentation, not only a formal difference but also a rhetorical one. If the classifications [oral vs. literate] and [poetic vs. non-poetic] are not the best ways of capturing this distinction, perhaps another approach would be more illuminating. Dichotomies of all kinds should be approached with the utmost caution; dichotomizing in itself is a rather Western thing to do, and certain dichotomies can be intellectually dangerous, as Said (1978) has demonstrated with respect to the dichotomy Oriental vs. Occidental.

Ultimately, argumentation has to do with truth; argument rests on established truths, and truth emerges through argument. But arguments can be related to truths in different ways. Some truths, in some situations, are clear, universally accepted (in the particular universe of discourse), and close to the surface. The purpose of argumentation in these cases is simply to convey the truth; to make a potentially available truth actually available to the hearer. This kind of argumentation can be called

