

**THE CONCEPT OF 'KALIMA' AND THE METHODOLOGY OF SYNTACTIC ANALYSIS IN
CLASSICAL ARABIC LINGUISTICS**

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Abstract: *This article examines the fundamental branches of Arabic linguistics—semantics, morphology, and syntax—and the linguistic nature of the "word" (kalima) as their primary object of study. The study provides a comparative analysis of the definitions of "word" proposed by classical scholars Siraj al-Din al-Sakkaki and Ibn Hisham al-Ansari. Specifically, it explores the semantic layers of terms such as lafz, qawl, and mufrad, as well as phonetic variations in Arabic dialects within the context of the literary language and the Qur'an. A central focus of the research is al-Sakkaki's innovative methodological approach to syntactic analysis, characterized by his unique terminology: al-Qabil, al-Fa'il, and al-Athar. The author substantiates the interdependent relationship between morphology (Sarf) and syntax (Nahv) based on the perspectives of both classical and contemporary grammatical schools. This article serves as a theoretical and practical resource for researchers of Arabic grammar and Orientalists.*

Keywords: *sentence, word, utterance (lafz), signifier, inflection (i'rab), syntax, syntactic transformation.*

Arabic linguistics is categorized into several branches depending on the specific level at which the concept of the "word" is analyzed. The sub-discipline that examines the word from a semantic perspective is 'ilm al-dalala (Semantics); the branch investigating word formation is 'ilm al-sarf (Morphology); the study of etymology and derivation is known as 'ilm al-ishtiqāq (Derivation); and the analysis of words within a sentence structure is governed by 'ilm al-nahw (Syntax). Beyond these primary divisions, Arabic linguistics encompasses specialized sub-branches that facilitate a profound understanding of the word's essence. Their function is not limited to the rule-based application of words but extends to the deep investigation of semantic relationships.

Specifically, the auxiliary department that studies the application of rules to reach the morphological essence of a word within a sentence is 'ilm al-sarf al-tatbiqi (Applied Morphology). The field that practically applies syntactic rules to uncover the fundamental semantic meaning of a word is 'ilm al-nahw al-tatbiqi (Applied Syntax). Furthermore, the

intersection where syntax and semantics converge within a sentence is referred to as 'ilm ma'ani al-nahw (Semantic Syntax). The central object of study for both primary and auxiliary branches is the word.

In human communication and discourse, the sentence performs the most vital function. Thought is composed of sentences, and sentences are composed of words. Consequently, the word serves as the masdar (source/origin) of grammatical construction; it is the essential primary medium in linguistic exchange and general discourse.

A word is the vocal representation of a concept regarding an object or phenomenon in objective reality. This concept is the mental reflection of that object or phenomenon within the consciousness. As a linguistic unit, a word possesses the capacity to convey meaning, which arises from its intrinsic connection to entities and events. This connection is established through the reflection of reality in the human mind. Thus, the word is the smallest unit of speech that possesses its own phonological system, signifies a particular meaning, and functions within various grammatical roles.

Classical Arabic linguistics offers profound scholarly insights into the word and its function within a sentence. In this regard, the views of the scholar Siraj al-Din Abu Yaqub al-Sakkaki are particularly significant. Sakkaki provides the following definition:

"The word is a discrete utterance (lafz) established to convey a specific meaning." كلمة

In Arabic, the term kalima (كلمة) admits three phonetic variations. The pronunciation kalimatun is characteristic of the literary language and the dialect of the People of Hijaz; it is also the form utilized in the Holy Qur'an. In the Tamim dialect, however, it is pronounced as kilmatun or kalmtun.

The term kalima serves as the singular form of kalim (كلم), denoting a "specific word." A distinguishing feature of kalim is that it represents a unit consisting of at least three words, even if the semantic meaning remains incomplete (e.g., In qama Zaydun — "If Zayd stands"). In contrast, kalima refers to just one of those individual components.

The term lafz (لفظ) literally denotes a pronounced sound or a collection of sounds. Classical linguists bifurcate lafz into two categories:

1. Mawdu' (موضوع): An utterance that conveys a designated meaning.
2. Muhmal (مهملة): A phonetic utterance that lacks a designated meaning.

In the aforementioned definition, the scope of the term lafz (utterance) is transitioned from a general to a specific context. The subsequent application of the phrase mawdu'a lil-ma'na (stipulated for a meaning) specifically denotes an utterance that conveys a distinct semantic value (while lafz is a generic term for any utterance, lafza refers to a single unit of speech). The inclusion of the term mufrada (singular/individual) in the definition signifies that the constituent letters of a word do not independently represent the word's overall meaning. For instance, the letter zay in the name Zayd does not symbolize the individual Zayd; rather, it is the holistic synthesis of the three letters that constitutes the signifier. The 14th-century Arab grammarian, Abu Muhammad ibn Hisham

al-Ansari, defines the word as follows: "A word is a singular/individual utterance conveying a meaning" (al-kalimatu qawlun mufradun). Al-Ansari's definition is notably precise and concise. It is well-established that in the Arabic language, the term *kalima* can also be applied to a sentence or a complete discourse. For example, in Surah al-Mu'minun (verses 99–100), we read: "My Lord, send me back that I might do righteousness in that which I left behind." No! It is only a word (*kalima*) he is saying... Similarly, in the Hadith literature, *kalima* is employed with the meaning of *jumla* (sentence/proposition). The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) stated: "The most truthful word (*kalima*) spoken by a poet is the word of Labid." This refers to the poem by Labid ibn Rabi'a, which begins: "Verily, everything besides Allah is transient, And every bliss shall, without doubt, vanish." In technical terminology (*istilah*), *kalima* is a word possessing a holistic meaning. The term *qawl* used in this definition differs from *lafz* in that *qawl* exclusively denotes an utterance that signifies a meaning. Semantically, *lafz* is more distant from *kalima* than *qawl*. Had the term *lafz* been utilized, it would have been necessary to append the qualifying phrase *mawdu'a lil-ma'na*. The scholar, prioritizing brevity (*mukhtasar*), opted for *qawl*. Furthermore, the term *mufrad* in this context serves the same semantic function as the previously mentioned *mufrada*. A word is composed of phonetic sounds that collectively convey meaning. A sound in isolation does not constitute a word; rather, the meaning of a word is the conceptual content manifested through these sounds. Thus, a word represents an inseparable synthesis of meaning and sound—internal (semantic) and external (formal) dimensions—while simultaneously possessing specific grammatical attributes.

As previously noted, the linguistic discipline concerned with the study of words within the structure of a sentence is referred to as *Nahw* (Syntax). In examining the primary focal points of the science of *Nahw*, it becomes evident that the perspectives of classical linguists are both comprehensive and sophisticated.

Arabic grammar encompasses two expansive divisions, categorized according to the linguistic level at which a word is analyzed. These two branches have evolved within Arabic linguistics as mutually indispensable sciences. The system of rules governing the interrelation of words and the syntactic transformations that occur therein is defined as the science of *Nahw*; due to its paramount significance, it has been established as a distinct field of study.

In the second section of his seminal work, *Miftah al-Ulum*, al-Sakkaki provides an in-depth exploration of this science, organizing and elucidating its themes through a unique methodology. This distinctiveness is clearly reflected in his definition of *Nahw*. The scholar posits the following:

"It must be understood that *Nahw* is the science directed toward comprehending the construction of speech to convey original (authentic) meaning, in accordance with the established measures derived from the definitive structural patterns of Arabic speech. Furthermore, it involves understanding the laws built upon this foundation. Proficiency in

this science is essential to safeguard against errors in the mandatory rules of sentence construction."

In contrast, Mustafa al-Ghalayini, a prominent contemporary linguist, offers a more concise definition of the discipline:

"Today, I'rab (inflection) is a science linked to Nahw through specific methodologies, by which the states of Arabic words are discerned in terms of their declinability (mu'rab) or indeclinability (mabni)."

Consequently, Nahw (Arabic syntax) is defined as the discipline that investigates the rules governing the functional integration of words within a sentence. The primary objective of this science is not merely the identification of grammatical correctness or error, but rather the systematic facilitation of word participation based on the intrinsic linguistic paradigms of the language.

The depth and comprehensiveness of the scholar's definition are evident in the phrase: "conforming to the measures derived from the final, definitive conclusions drawn from the speech of the Arabs." No linguistic phenomenon occurs in isolation from its native speakers. Arabic is no exception; it is discernible from the definition that Nahw is a synthesis of laws and regulations predicated on the relational dynamics of words, aimed at conveying precise meaning within a discourse.

Following the definition, al-Sakkaki employs a logical methodology to delineate the foundational elements of this study—a stylistic approach seldom encountered in the works of other grammarians. He entitles the subsequent section: "The Second Chapter: On the Elements Required in Nahw" (ذلك في إلهيه ف تقر ما ضبط في الثاني الفصل). In this chapter, he logically categorizes the fundamental syntactic terms according to their functional roles as follows: "The objective of this chapter is manifested through three elements: al-Qabil (the recipient/acceptor), al-Fa'il (the agent/actuator), and al-Athar (the trace/effect)."

These terms serve as a vivid reflection of the scholar's unique pedagogical style, as they were not utilized in this specific nomenclature prior to his work. Al-Sakkaki elucidates this distinction himself:

"I have consolidated this objective into three chapters. The first is designated as al-Qabil (the recipient), which our colleagues [preceding grammarians] traditionally termed al-Mu'rab (the declinable word). The second pertains to al-Fa'il (the agent), which our colleagues referred to as al-'Amil (the regent/governing factor). The third concerns al-Athar (the trace), which they termed al-I'rab (inflection/desinential morphology)."

This nomenclature represents the scholar's original contribution to the field and is noteworthy for its foundation in profound scientific perspectives. These views are systematically linked to the syntactic functions of words within a sentence, the realization of syntactic roles upon them, and the subsequent morphological or structural transformations resulting from these functions. According to the representatives of the Basra school of linguistics, a word performing a specific syntactic function is termed 'āmil

(the regent or cause), whereas al-Sakkaki defines it as al-fā'il (the agent/doer). One reason for Sakkaki's choice of this terminology is to capture the reader's attention, as the subject of a verbal predicate sentence is also designated by the same term. Consequently, the reader must distinguish between these two distinct terminological applications in context.

The terms coined by al-Sakkaki, much like those of the Basra school, are equally applicable to both nouns and verbs. In his seminal work, Sibawayh categorized nouns using a unique terminological framework: nouns that undergo declension (inflection) are termed al-asmā' al-mutamakkinah (declinable/flexible nouns), while those that remain indeclinable are referred to as al-asmā' ghayr al-mutamakkinah (indeclinable/inflexible nouns). This classification was also subsequently adopted by Umar ibn Muhammad al-Shalawbin.

The scholar initiates the discourse by explicating the syntactic changes occurring within words. The chapter dedicated to this subject is entitled: "Chapter One: On al-Qābil (the Recipient) or al-Mu'rab (the Declinable)." In this section, he elucidates the phenomena of declension and indeclinability, emphasizing that the identification of one necessarily facilitates the distinction of the other.

Ultimately, the science of Nahw (syntax) investigates the word within the structural framework of the sentence. This discipline analyzes how words combine to form grammatically correct utterances and examines the mechanisms of their interrelation. Nahw focuses on the syntactic relationships between lexical units and the underlying rules of structural formation.

Contemporary linguists conceptualize morphology (sarf) and syntax (nahw) under a unified framework, treating them as a single, cohesive discipline. Within this paradigm, the science encompassing both domains is broadly termed Grammar (النحو). This field comprises two fundamental areas of study:

1. Sarf (الصَّرف) — Morphology: The study of word forms, their internal structures, and their transformations based on morphological patterns.
2. Nazm (النَّظْم) — Syntax: The study of the grammatical relationships between words and the systematic organization of structural linkages within a sentence.

To substantiate this integration, consider the following example:

كَتَابًا قَارِيٌّ زَيْدٌ (Zaydun qāri'un kitāban) – "Zayd is reading a book."

If the morphological status of the word qāri'un (قَارِيٌّ) as an active participle (ism al-fā'il) is not identified, it becomes difficult to accurately discern the syntactic function of the word kitāban (كِتَابًا). Consequently, the study of morphology is essential not only for understanding word forms but also for the precise comprehension of syntactic meanings. In essence, without identifying the morphological structure of qāri'un, the syntactic role of kitāban remains ambiguous. This demonstrates that the morphological form of a word serves as a prerequisite for determining its syntactic function.

Historically, classical Arabic grammarians did not strictly bifurcate nahw and sarf. This integrated approach is evident in seminal classical works that remain authoritative today,

most notably in *Al-Kitab* by Sibawayh (Amr ibn Uthman ibn Qanbar Abu Bishr, 765–796), where both disciplines are explored as an inseparable whole.

Furthermore, the eminent linguist Abu al-Fath Uthman ibn Jinni (941–1002) argued that the study of morphology should precede the study of syntax. In his work *Al-Munsif* (a commentary on Al-Mazini's *Al-Tasrif*), he posits that morphology is the science of understanding the inherent state of a word—its constituent letters and their distinctions—prior to any relational changes. Conversely, syntax deals with the variable states of words, specifically their inflectional endings (*i'rab*).

He illustrates this with the following examples:

- بَكْرٌ قَامَ (Qāma Bakrun)
- بَكْرًا رَأَيْتُ (Ra'aytu Bakran)
- بِبَكْرٍ مَرَرْتُ (Marartu bi-Bakrin)

In these instances, the inflectional markers (*'alamāt al-i'rab*) of the word *Bakr* change due to the influence of a governing agent (*'āmil*), while the remaining letters and vocalizations of the word remain constant. Ibn Jinni concludes that mastering morphology is a prerequisite for syntax, as it is logically impossible to study the variable conditions of a linguistic unit without first understanding its fixed, fundamental structure.

Syntax is the primary linguistic field dedicated to the study of the sentence (proposition), as it investigates the grammatical relationships between constituent lexemes within phrases and sentences.

When a lexeme enters a sentence structure, it acquires syntactic significance. Specifically, it fulfills a distinct syntactic function, acting as both a recipient of grammatical dependencies from other lexemes and a governor that exerts influence over them. For instance, designating a lexeme as a subject (\$S\$) inherently implies the existence of a predicate (\$P\$), establishing a defined grammatical relationship between the two. Other syntactic components, such as objects and modifiers, operate under this same structural principle.

Consequently, syntax does not concern itself with the phonetic structure, morphological constitution, or the inherent lexical meanings of lexemes in isolation. Rather, it examines the lexeme as a functional unit of speech (a sentence component) that executes a specific communicative operation.

Fundamentals of Syntactic Analysis (*I'rab*)

The most critical stage in syntactic analysis is determining the part of speech (i.e., its morphological category) of a given lexeme. The semantic interpretation of the entire sentence—and the ultimate accuracy of the analysis—consequently depends on this initial identification.

The categorization of the Arabic lexeme is strictly confined to three primary grammatical classes: the *ism* (encompassing nouns, adjectives, adverbs, and pronouns), the *fi'l* (the verb, denoting action or state), and the *harf* (particles: including prepositions, conjunctions, and clitics). A lexeme is invariably situated within one of these three

domains. Consequently, within the framework of morphological analysis, the fundamental inquiry must always be: "What is the morphological nature of this lexeme? Is it a noun (ism), a verb (fi'l), or a particle (harf)?"

This inquiry holds significant pragmatic weight in syntactic application, as the determination of the word class serves as the foundational premise for all subsequent analytical procedures.

The rationale behind this is that if a lexeme is identified as a harf (particle), it is classified as mabni (indeclinable), characterized by a fixed morphological form. Accordingly, it occupies no specific i'rab (syntactic position or grammatical case) within the sentence structure. That is to say, its terminal phoneme or desinence remains invariant and it does not function as a distinct syntactic constituent subject to grammatical inflection.

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