

CLASSIFICATION OF LETTERS IN THE WORK "MIFTAHU-L-ULUM"

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Abstract: *This scholarly article examines the phonetic views of Abu Ya'qub al-Sakkaki as presented in his work Miftah al-'Ulum (The Key to the Sciences). This work stands as a rare and invaluable source on Arabic grammar, having been utilized for centuries as a primary textbook in madrasahs (Islamic schools). Al-Sakkaki's unique scholarly insights concerning the smallest units that constitute a word, namely the letters, have been acknowledged and commended by leading scholars in the field of linguistics.*

Keywords: *Abu Ya'qub al-Sakkaki, Miftah al-'Ulum, morphology (ṣarf), phonetics, consonants.*

INTRODUCTION

Numerous works dedicated to Arabic grammar have been authored by non-Arab scholars. One such work is Miftah al-'Ulūm (The Key to the Sciences) by the great polymath Abū Ya'qūb al-Sakkākī. This book quickly gained renown after its composition and became one of the principal textbooks in madrasahs where the Arabic language was taught. This article analyzes al-Sakkākī's views concerning the smallest constituent parts of speech—the letters (ḥurūf). Al-Sakkākī structured his work into sections, with topics further divided into chapters (or parts, abwāb) and sub-chapters (fuṣūl). Specifically, the section on Ṣarf (morphology) comprises three chapters, nineteen sub-chapters, and thirteen sub-categories (anwā').

Main Section. In the introduction to his part on morphology (sarf), Al-Sakkākī provides a detailed analysis of the letter, which is the smallest constituent unit of a word. Relying on the views of previous scholars, he categorizes the letters of the Arabic language and offers his own definitions for them.

1. Classification of Letters by Number and Sonority

Al-Sakkākī explicitly states the number of letters in the Arabic language, writing: "Know that there are 29 letters in the Arabic language, and they are divided into sonorous (al-ḥurūf al-majhūrah - الحروف المجهورة) and unsonorous (al-ḥurūf al-mahmūsa - الحروف المهموسة)." The famous linguists Sībawayhi and Maḥmūd al-Zamakhsharī also confirmed the number of letters in the Arabic alphabet to be 29. This classification, which considers alif and hamzah as distinct letters, serves as a refutation of those who hold the number of Arabic letters to be 28.

Sakkaki, concurring with Sibawayhi's theory, links voicing to the obstruction of breath during the articulation of a letter, and voicelessness to the free passage of breath.

He lists the group of voiced letters as follows: "The voiced (in my opinion) are: hamza (ء), alif (ا), qāf (ق), kāf (ك), jīm (ج), yā' (ي), rā' (ر), nūn (ن), ṭā' (ط), dāl (د), tā' (ت), bā' (ب), mīm (م), and wāw (و)."

For ease of memorization, he provides the following mnemonic sentence: " قدك أترجم و " (qaduka utarjimu wa nuṭāyibu), which roughly translates to: "(I will) translate according to your measure (standard) and we will make it good/pleasant."

Regarding voiceless letters, he states concisely: "those outside the voiced letters."

Many European scholars support these views of al-Sakkākī concerning voiced and voiceless consonants.

2. Classification Based on Pronunciation Feature

Sakkoqi asserts that there is another classification of letters: "If, during pronunciation, there is neither a build-up nor a release of breath (airflow), such letters are called 'Moderate Letters' (معتدلة)." ¹ He includes the following letters in this group: lām, mīm, yā, rā, wāw, ‘ayn, nūn, and alif. He explains this nomenclature by stating that these letters are positioned between the plosive and fricative letters. This specific naming convention is unique to Sakkoqi and is not found in the works of Sibawayhi or Zamakhshari.

Furthermore, Sakkoqi includes the letters hamza, jīm, dāl, kāf, qāf, ṭā, bā, and tā in the group of "Plosive Letters" (الحروف الشديدة), emphasizing that their pronunciation involves the obstruction of the airflow, resulting in an explosive release (plosion).

Regarding the "Fricative Letters" (الحروف الرخوة), which are the opposite of the plosive letters, he writes: "If the airflow is not obstructed and passes through freely as a continuous stream, these are the fricative consonants" ².

3. Classification Based on the State of the Tongue.

Sakkākī also categorizes the letters based on the state of the tongue: "Letters of Elevation" (الحروف المستعلية - al-Hurūf al-Musta‘liyah): These include the letters {ṣā}, {ḍā}, {ṭā}, {zā}, {ghā}, {khā}, and {qāf}. In the pronunciation of these letters, the back part of the tongue is raised towards the hard palate. "Letters of Depression/Lowering" (الحروف المنخفضة - al-Hurūf al-Munkhafiḍah): In the pronunciation of these letters, no elevation of the tongue towards the hard palate is observed. They are articulated "thinly" (non-emphatically). He also distinguishes the "Letters of Adhesion" or "Closure" (الحروف المطبقة - al-Hurūf al-Muṭbaqah), which are produced when the tongue fully covers the upper palate. This group includes the letters {ṣā}, {ḍā}, {ṭā}, and {zā}. He refers to all other letters, those not belonging to the Muṭbaqah group, as "Letters of Aperture" or "Opening" (الحروف المنفتحة - al-Hurūf al-Munfatiḥah).

4. The Places of Articulation of Letters

Sakkākī emphasizes the significance of letter characteristics in the process of word formation and provides detailed information on the makhārij (places of articulation) of the letters. Although this information is primarily important for the science of Tajwīd (elocution/proper recitation of the Quran), Sakkākī included it as an introduction to the science of Ṣarf (morphology/etymology). Relying on Sibawayhi, he enumerates 16 makhārij (places of articulation).

¹ MU – Imam Abū Ya‘qūb Yūsuf ibn Abī Bakr ibn Muḥammad al-Sakkākī. Miftāḥ al-‘Ulūm. Ankara, Milli Kütüphanesi. Manuscript No. 26 Hk 192. – 244 v., 4a

² MU – Imam Abū Ya‘qūb Yūsuf ibn Abī Bakr ibn Muḥammad al-Sakkākī. Miftāḥ al-‘Ulūm. Ankara, Milli Kütüphanesi. Manuscript No. 26 Hk 192. – 244 v.

The work *Miftāḥ al-‘Ulūm* (The Key to the Sciences) by Abū Ya‘qūb al-Sakkākī occupies a distinctive position among the sources of Arabic grammar due to its unique structure and profound academic approach. A particularly distinguishing feature of al-Sakkākī is his detailed analysis of letters (ḥurūf), the fundamental components of a word, before embarking on its morphological analysis (ṣarf). Unlike Sībawayhi³ and Maḥmūd al-Zamakhsharī⁴, al-Sakkākī introduces phonetic issues—specifically, the number, articulation points (makhārij), and classification of letters—at the beginning of his work, serving as a prolegomena to the science of morphology. This methodological approach allows the student to study the process of word formation step-by-step, starting from the phonetic characteristics of the letters. Al-Sakkākī's methodology demonstrates the comprehensive nature of his work and renders it more accessible to the learner. While his conclusions align with those of earlier scholars, his method of presentation is entirely novel and unique.

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³Abū Bishr ‘Amr ibn ‘Uthmān. *Kitāb Sībawayh. Juz' Rābi' (Part Four)*. – Cairo, 1988. 564 p.

⁴Maḥmūd ibn ‘Umar al-Zamakhsharī. *Al-Mufaṣṣal fī Ṣan‘at al-I‘rāb*. – Cairo, 2013. 395 p.