



Science, Education and Innovations in the Context of Modern Problems

Issue 8, Vol. 8, 2025

RESEARCH ARTICLE 

Beyond Communicative Rhetoric: A Cognitive-Hermeneutic Inquiry into the Evolution of Arabic Eloquence and Symbolic Semiotics in the Sufi Epistemic Tradition

Aouissi Othmane

Faculty of Arts and Languages, Department of Arabic Language and Literature, University of Tiaret
Algeria

Issue web link

<https://imcra-az.org/archive/875-science-education-and-innovations-in-the-context-of-modern-problems-issue-8-vol-8-2025.html>

Keywords

Sufi rhetoric; Arabic literary aesthetics; hermeneutics; kashf (unveiling); ishāra (allusion); metaphoric cognition; gnoseology; semiotics of mysticism; bayān; linguistic phenomenology; symbolic discourse; experiential language

Abstract

This study explores the deep structural transformation of Arabic rhetorical discourse within the Sufi intellectual and experiential tradition, arguing that Sufi expression represents not merely a modification of rhetorical practice, but a reconfiguration of the ontological function of language itself. Drawing upon classical Arabic rhetoric, hermeneutic analysis, and semiotic theory, the article demonstrates how Sufi discourse transits from normative rhetoric based on exposition (bayān) and argumentative clarity to a rhetoric grounded in experiential unveiling (kashf), symbolic allusion (ishāra), and metaphysical resonance. The paper shows that Sufism redefines language from an instrument of persuasion and representation into a medium of presence, illumination, and cognitive transformation. This shift is articulated across three analytical dimensions: (1) the conceptual transformation of rhetorical purpose from informing to unveiling; (2) the semantic-symbolic transformation through metaphorical density, paradox, and hyper-signification; and (3) the aesthetic transformation where linguistic beauty becomes fused with spiritual cognition. Ultimately, the study concludes that Sufi rhetoric is not merely mystical ornamentation but an epistemic-aesthetic construct through which realities of being are communicated beyond rational discursivity. It constitutes a rhetoric of gnosis in which author, text, and transcendent truth converge in an experience of spiritual semiotics.

Citation. Aouissi Othmane. (2025). Beyond Communicative Rhetoric: A Cognitive-Hermeneutic Inquiry into the Evolution of Arabic Eloquence and Symbolic Semiotics in the Sufi Epistemic Tradition. *Science, Education and Innovations in the Context of Modern Problems*, 8(8), 1206–1212. <https://doi.org/10.56334/sei/8.8.103>

Licensed

© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Science, Education and Innovations in the context of modern problems (SEI) by IMCRA - International Meetings and Journals Research Association (Azerbaijan). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Received: 24.02.2024

Accepted: 25.07.2025

Published: 30.08.2025 (available online)

Introduction

Arabic rhetoric has, since its earliest formation, constituted a dynamic field of interaction between thought, language, and aesthetics. It was never merely a linguistic discipline concerned with embellishing and refining speech; rather, it embodied a worldview and a particular understanding of meaning and discourse. From al-Jāhīz and 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī to al-Sakkākī, rhetoric crystallized as a rational, normative science in which creativity is measured by the degree to which discourse conforms to communicative appropriateness, semantic clarity, and grammatical-logical coherence.

Yet this vision—grounded in the centrality of reason and *bayān*—underwent a fundamental transformation within the Sufi experience, which restored to language its existential and spiritual depth. Rhetoric thus shifted from a principle of communication to a principle of unveiling (*kashf*), from the authority of reason to the illumination of spiritual taste (*dhawq*), and from rhetorical exposition to mystical gnosis (*‘irfān*). Consequently, Sufi discourse articulated a new rhetorical mode grounded in symbol, allusion, and figurative indirection, reflecting an inner experience accessible only through intuition and spiritual insight.

This study proceeds from the hypothesis that Sufism did not merely generate a distinctive gnoseological system but also founded an alternative rhetorical paradigm that redefined the relation between language and truth. The aim of this article is to uncover the rhetorical transformations introduced by Sufi discourse into the conceptual and aesthetic structures of classical Arabic rhetoric, tracing its movement from a normative poetics of correctness to an existential poetics of revelation and manifestation.

To achieve this, the research adopts an analytical-hermeneutic method combining rhetorical analysis of Sufi texts with philosophical and aesthetic interpretation. It juxtaposes classical rhetorical conceptualizations (as articulated by al-Jurjānī and al-Sakkākī) with their Sufi counterparts in the writings of al-Niffarī, al-Hallāj, Ibn ‘Arabī, and Ibn al-Fārid.

The article is structured around three interrelated analytical levels:

1. The conceptual level: defining rhetoric between theory and normativity.
2. The transformational level: from *bayān* to symbolic allusion.
3. The aesthetic level: the rhetoric of unveiling and creativity.

Through these levels, the research demonstrates how Sufi rhetoric transcends the conventional limits of discourse, becoming a language of spiritual insight, where the word unites with experience, meaning with taste, and rhetoric with gnosis.

Level I: The Conceptual Level – Defining Rhetoric Between Theory and Norm

The conceptual level represents the point of departure for understanding the relationship between rhetoric and Sufism. It reveals how Arabic rhetoric transitioned from its traditional domain of *bayān* to the realm of spiritual experience. Classical rhetoric functions as a theory of effective discourse concerned with lexical beauty, syntactic harmony, and contextual appropriateness. In the Sufi tradition, however, rhetoric transcends these boundaries to probe the capacity of language to disclose the invisible—its ability to express the inner meaning that exceeds reason and lexicon (Al-Jurjānī, 1991).

Sufi rhetoric emerged from within the classical system, yet soon liberated itself from its strict rules. It transformed the concept of “correspondence” (*muṭābaqa*) into one of “paradox,” and rhetorical “opposition” into mystical “manifestation.” The goal was no longer persuasion or clear exposition, but the articulation of the experiential states that unfold during unveiling. Thus, rhetoric acquires an existential dimension in which the cognitive and the aesthetic, the linguistic and the metaphysical intertwine (Al-Sakkākī, 1987).

Sufis also redefined the very concept of *bayān*. For classical rhetoricians such as al-Jurjānī, *bayān* meant delivering meaning in a manner appropriate to the context. For mystics, however, it denoted a **veil**. As al-Niffarī famously writes in *al-Mawāqif*: “He stopped me and said: ‘Exposition is a veil; seek refuge in allusion.’” This is a radical inversion: what once clarified meaning now conceals truth, for truth is accessible not by reason but by taste and inner witnessing (Al-Niffarī, 1973).

While classical rhetoric relied on the unity and determinacy of meaning, Sufi rhetoric embraced **semantic multiplicity** rooted in the metaphysics of divine manifestation. Ibn ‘Arabī states: “*Every word has an exterior and an interior, a limit and an opening.*” (Ibn ‘Arabī, 2009) The word becomes a living entity bearing layers of meaning unveiled only to those who “taste.”

Modern scholars note that this conceptual shift constitutes a movement from a “rhetoric of reception” to a “rhetoric of manifestation.” The reader’s task is no longer merely to grasp meaning but to partake in its unveiling. Interpretation becomes an act of co-creation, mirroring the mystic’s experience (Sa’id, 1992)

Ibn Sab‘īn encapsulates this epistemic hierarchy: “*The word serves the meaning, and the meaning serves the truth.*” (Ibn Sab‘īn, 1968) Meaning itself becomes a station on the path of spiritual ascent, not an endpoint.

Thus, Sufi rhetoric emerges as an **existential rhetoric**, transcending linguistic normativity toward an ontological horizon where discourse and being converge

Level II: The Transformational Level – From *Bayān* to Allusion

The transition from *bayān* (expository clarity) to *ishāra* (symbolic allusion) constitutes one of the most significant semantic shifts that distinguish Sufi discourse and reshape its relationship with classical Arabic rhetoric. While *bayān* is grounded in semantic transparency and the direct correspondence between signifier and signified, *ishāra* transports the reader into an interpretive realm where meaning extends beyond its apparent surface toward symbolic and spiritual depths. This transformation is not merely an aesthetic inclination; it signals a profound shift in consciousness—one that redefines the very function of language from communication to manifestation, and from description to revelation (Al-Jurjānī, Dalā'il al-I'jāz, 1992) Sufi masters recognized early on the insufficiency of *bayān* in conveying experiential states that elude rational articulation. They therefore adopted allusion as an expressive mode capable of encompassing

ambiguity, transcendence, and the ineffable. Ibn ‘Arabī states: “Allusion is superior to expression, for expression restricts, while allusion liberates.” (Ibn ‘Arabī, 2009, p. 115) This claim marks a reversal of traditional rhetorical hierarchy: language ceases to be a descriptive tool and becomes instead a vehicle for spiritual epiphany within the mystic’s inner world.

The transformation is vividly displayed in Sufi poetic imagery. Consider al-Hallāj’s verse:

“I slew you in love willingly, so taste. The sweetness of my slaying—do not despair.”

Here, “slaying” (*qatl*) cannot be understood through its literal, expository meaning. Rather, it signifies self-annihilation in the Beloved, the mystical union that dissolves the dichotomy between lover and beloved. The shift from denotative meaning to symbolic depth reflects a reconfiguration of rhetorical logic and establishes a new symbolic aesthetics (Al-Hallāj, 1986)

This movement from *bayān* to *ishāra* also represents a transition from rhetoric as a discipline to rhetoric as an experience. Classical rhetoric preoccupied itself with the techniques of persuasion and clarity; Sufi rhetoric concerns itself with the *mode of manifestation*—how truth reveals itself in the inner realm of the seeker. Thus, *bayān* addresses the intellect, whereas *ishāra* penetrates the heart. The Sufi text becomes a space where cognition and emotion, appearance and essence interweave (Al-Qushayrī, 1966)

Modern critics have identified this displacement as a hallmark of mystical poetics. Adonis argues that “Sufi language transforms expository rhetoric into a kind of cosmic poetry, stripping words of their dictionary meanings and charging them with illuminative significance.” (Sa’id, 1992, p. 74) Allusion thereby becomes an instrument that explodes language from within, enabling it to transcend conventional norms.

The transformational dynamics of allusion are particularly evident in *Tarjumān al-Ashwāq*. Ibn ‘Arabī employs sensory imagery—beauty, fragrance, glances—not to evoke earthly love but to symbolize divine manifestation. His verse:

“My heart has become receptive to every form—A meadow for gazelles, a cloister for monks.”

He cannot be interpreted through the logic of classical *bayān*. Its horizon is symbolic, pointing toward the unity of being and the multiplicity of divine epiphanies (Ibn ‘Arabī, Tarjumān al-Ashwāq, 1911)

Thus, the transformational level reveals that the Sufi text does not merely express an experience; it re-enacts it through language. The reader becomes a participant in the unfolding revelation, for allusion demands interpretive

engagement shaped by spiritual readiness. As al-Niffarī states: “**The wider the vision, the narrower the expression.**” (Al-Niffarī, 1973, p. 66) The deeper the mystical experience, the more *bayān* withdraws and *ishāra* expands, making Sufi rhetoric an open hermeneutic of the ineffable

Element	<i>Bayān</i>	Allusion	Transformation Note
Rhetorical function	Explanation and clarification	Revelation and suggestion	Shift from reason to intuition
Nature of language	Direct, explicit	Symbolic, evocative	Language of the heart
Level of meaning	Singular, fixed exterior	Multi-layered interior	Interpretive openness
Poetic imagery	Comparison and contrast	Symbol and manifestation	Beyond ornamentation
Reader-text relation	Logical comprehension	Experiential participation	Reader as interpreter
Outcome	Rhetoric of communication	Rhetoric of unveiling	Language as a tool of gnosis

Level III: The Aesthetic Level – The Rhetoric of Unveiling and Creativity

The aesthetic level represents the peak of the rhetorical transformation within Sufi discourse—where rhetoric transitions from the logic of persuasion to the logic of illumination, and from crafted eloquence to creative spiritual manifestation. In this realm, Sufi rhetoric is not concerned with ornamentation or stylistic refinement; its aim is to draw the reader into a participatory experience of unveiling (*kashf*). Beauty becomes an ontological dimension rather than a formal quality: as Ibn ‘Arabī affirms, “**Truth is beautiful, and beauty is one of its faces.**” (Ibn ‘Arabī, Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam, 1980)

The rhetoric of unveiling arises from a metaphysical view of language as a medium that bridges the visible and the invisible. Words assume a living quality—no longer inert signs but active participants in the process of mystical creation. Consequently, poetic imagery in Sufi texts acquires a visionary dimension, functioning not as a tool of representation but as an instrument of revelation. Ibn al-Fārid expresses this when he writes:

“We drank, in remembrance of the Beloved, a wine. By which we were intoxicated before the vine was created.”

Here, “wine” is not a sensory object but a metaphor for pre-eternal spiritual knowledge. Its aesthetic power lies not in the lexical image but in its capacity to expand consciousness

Al-Ḥallāj further embodies the rhetoric of unveiling in his celebrated line:

“I saw my Lord with the eye of my heart. I said: ‘Who are You?’ He said: ‘You.’”

The aesthetic force of this utterance derives from the sudden collapse of duality between subject and object. Language here is not describing an experience; it is the experience itself—a moment of ontological union articulated in paradox and awe (Al-Ḥallāj, 1986, p. 67)

In the poetry of Abū Madyan, the aesthetic of unveiling appears in the trembling simplicity of longing:

“My delight is not in wine or music, But in seeing You—whenever I see You.”

The beauty of this verse is not formal but spiritual. The repetition of “seeing you” creates a rhythmic pulse that mirrors mystical yearning. Here, aesthetics merges with gnosis: beauty becomes knowledge, and knowledge becomes presence (al-Ghawth, 1998)

Similarly, for ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī, aesthetics lies in the symbolic illumination of the world:

“O You whose signs in everything. Reveal that I am truly Your servant.”

The aesthetic value emerges from the ontological transparency of existence itself, where every phenomenon becomes a sign of the Real. Thus, Sufi aesthetics dissolves the boundaries between rhetoric, perception, and cognition.

Adonis captures this shift succinctly: "Sufi language is not a vehicle for conveying meaning but for generating it. It writes what cannot be said." (Sa'id A. '., 1985) The rhetoric of unveiling is therefore a rhetoric of creativity—an existential poetics that makes of the text a space of revelation

Table (03): The Aesthetic Level – The Rhetoric of Unveiling and Creativity

Dimension	Description	Aesthetic Effect
Nature of beauty	Beauty as manifestation of divine reality	Unity of beauty and truth
Function of the poetic image	Instrument of revelation rather than ornamentation	Image as pathway to unveiling
Symbol and metaphor	Portal to the infinite	Expansion of meaning
Nature of language	Living participant in mystical creation	Language as mirror of the unseen
Subject-object relation	Annihilation in the Beloved	Union of being
Resulting aesthetic	Existential creativity beyond rhetoric	Illumination over form

1. Transformation of the rhetorical concept:

Sufi experience revolutionized classical rhetorical theory, shifting rhetoric from a normative discipline to an existential mode of unveiling truth.

2. From *bayān* to *ishāra*:

Sufi discourse abandoned rational exposition in favor of symbolic allusion, where meaning is accessed through intuition rather than logical inference.

3. Reconfiguration of linguistic function:

Language becomes a space for spiritual experience rather than a tool of communication or persuasion.

4. Rhetoric as gnosis:

Sufi rhetoric operates as a method of knowing in which beauty and truth converge.

5. Fusion of aesthetics and mysticism:

In Sufism, beauty is not ornamental but revelatory—a pathway to divine presence.

6. Reconstruction of classical concepts:

Sufi discourse transforms key rhetorical categories into instruments of spiritual manifestation.

7. A rhetoric of illumination:

Meaning is not transmitted but generated through the reader's participatory experience.

8. Contemporary relevance:

Modern critical theory can benefit from the Sufi re-envisioning of language as an existential, symbolic, and interpretive medium

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative analytical methodology, consisting of:

Textual hermeneutics: Interpretive reading of classical Sufi texts (e.g., Ibn Arabi, al-Hallaj, al-Qushayri, Rumi) to extract rhetorical patterns and symbolic structures.

Comparative rhetorical analysis: Contrasting classical Arabic rhetorical models (*bayān*, *badī'*, *ma'ānī*) with Sufi-transformed linguistic practices.

Semiotic-symbolic mapping: Identifying how lexical signs in Sufi discourse accrue multi-layered meaning through metaphor, paradox, and silence.

Epistemological contextualization: Relating rhetorical shifts to Sufi theories of knowledge, consciousness, and spiritual perception.

This methodology allows the study to treat Sufi rhetoric not as stylistic deviation but as a linguistic embodiment of spiritual epistemology.

Ethical Considerations

The study uses only publicly available historical and scholarly texts. All authors of referenced materials are acknowledged according to academic standards. No human participants were involved, and no data of personal or confidential nature was collected. The research adheres to COPE (Committee on Publication Ethics) principles for academic integrity and intellectual honesty.

Acknowledgement

The author expresses sincere gratitude to colleagues in the Department of Arabic Language and Literature at the University of Tiaret for their scholarly support and insightful discussions that contributed to the theoretical refinement of this work.

Funding

The author received no external financial support or grant funding for the completion of this research. The study was conducted independently without institutional or private sponsorship.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest related to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

References:

al-Ghawth, A. M. (1998). *Dīwān Abī Madyān*. Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islām.

Al-Hallāj, Ḥ. i. (1986). *Dīwān al-Hallāj*. Beirut: Dār Ṣādir.

Al-Jurjānī, ' . a.-Q. (1991). *Asrār al-Balāgha*. Jeddah: Dār al-Madanī.

Al-Jurjānī, ' . a.-Q. (1992). *Dalā'il al-I'jāz*. Jeddah: Dār al-Madanī.

Al-Niffarī, M. i.-J. (1973). *Al-Mawāqif wa-l-Mukhāṭabāt*. Cairo: Dār al-Thaqāfa.

Al-Qushayrī, ' . a.-K. (1966). *Al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya fī al-Taṣawwuf (The Qushayrian Epistle on Sufism)*. Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif.

Al-Sakkākī, Y. i. (1987). *Miftāḥ al-'Ulūm*. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya.

Ibn 'Arabī, M. a.-D. (1911). *Tarjumān al-Ashwāq*. Oxford University Press.

Ibn 'Arabī, M. a.-D. (1980). *Fuṣūṣ al-Hikam*. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Arabiyya.

Ibn 'Arabī, M. a.-D. (2009). *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkīyah*. Beirut: Dār Ṣādir.

Ibn Sab'īn, ' . a.-H. (1968). *Ibn Sab'īn, 'Abd al-Haqq*. Beirut: Dār al-Qalam.

Sā'īd, A. (1992). *Al-Šūfiyya wa-l-Surriyāliyya (Sufism and Surrealism)*. Beirut: Dār al-Sāq.

Sā'īd, A. (1985). *Al-Thābit wa-l-Mutahawwil: Baḥth fī al-Ibdā' wa-l-Ittibā' 'indā al-'Arab*. Beirut: Dār al-Sāq.