

# 1 Introduction

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## 1.1 Overview

The ‘science of meanings’, *‘ilm al-ma‘ānī* in Arabic and *‘ilm-i ma‘ānī* or simply *ma‘ānī* in Persian, is a branch of the study of eloquence (*balāġat*). As a discipline, it has a long history in the traditional knowledge system of many Islamic societies. It is the study of the appropriateness of an utterance and its parts with the speaker’s intent, and the context in which it is used. One of its basic assumptions is that the skilful use of syntax imparts subtle meanings beyond the literal value of a sentence. Tools such as ellipsis, word order shifts, or emphasis are critical in this regard. The speaker’s intended meaning should be recovered based on clues provided by the context, beyond the actual wording. The science of meanings, then, is broadly concerned with how ideas are effectively expressed through grammatical structures. Although some of its findings are similar to those of pragmatics and semantics, it has no precise equivalent in English.

The Persian science of meanings owes terminology, approach, and much of its content to its Arabic parent. However, it gradually distanced itself from its origins and developed independently. While drawing illustrative examples from literary texts, mostly poetry, scholars show how linguistic efficiency works in Persian. Nowadays, the science of meanings in Iran, besides being a set of knowl-

edge taught at university level, has increasingly become a tool for researchers to analyse Persian literature. The corpus of classical Persian poetry provides a treasure of eloquence that scholars fruitfully explore through the discipline's lenses.

This book examines the Persian science of meanings as it is reflected in a selection of textbooks published in Iran over the last hundred years. It consists of eleven chapters. Chapter 1 provides historical background and a review of the secondary literature. It also outlines the aims and scope of the study. Chapter 2 explains a number of notable terms in use in Persian textbooks of the science of meanings. Each of the chapters 3 to 10 deals with a traditional unit of the discipline. Chapter 11 draws some conclusions, including a tentative evaluation of the merits and limits of *ma'ānī* in analysing Persian classical poetry.

Limited research on the Persian science of meanings has been published outside Iran. Benedikt Reinert reports that the Persian scholars engaged in the Arabic science of meanings had no interest in adopting the *ma'ānī* conceptual framework to the analysis of Persian language and literature (Bonebakker, Reinert, *EL*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. "*al-ma'ānī wa-l-bayān*"). Natalia Chalisova (2009, 161) and Geert J. van Gelder (2009, 134-5) express similar remarks. Paul E. Losensky (1997) reveals some fascinating insights on how Persian *ġazals* are possibly informed by *ma'ānī* vocabulary and concepts.

Larger studies have appeared in European languages on the Arabic science of meanings, the ancestor of the current Persian science. The rigorous Bohas, Guillaume, Kouloughli (1990, 118-36) is arguably the best general presentation. Udo Gerald Simon (1993) provides a detailed translation and study of the *ma'ānī* section of *Miftāḥ al-'ulūm* by al-Sakkākī, while Herbjørn Jenssen (1998) offers some preliminary explorations on al-Qazwīnī's works on *ma'ānī*. Kees Versteegh (1997, 115-26) contextualises the role of the science of meanings within the larger framework of the Arabic linguistic tradition. Further substantial linguistic remarks appear in Firanescu 2009 and Larcher 2013. Meanwhile, Lara Harb (2020, 233-51) approaches the science of meanings in terms of aesthetic experience. An account of Arabic rhetoric with examples in Modern Standard Arabic is offered by Hussein Abdul-Raof (2006, 97-195). Finally, Basil Hatim (1997) and Khalid Yahya Blankinship (2019) draw in part on *ma'ānī* principles when discussing contrastive text linguistics and problems of translation, respectively. In general, however, as Jenssen (1998, 1-13) observes, Western scholarship has understudied the science of meanings as compared to the other branches of the study of eloquence.

Among the many comprehensive Persian textbooks available, notable works on which I conducted my study include Āhanī 1978 (a revised edition based on Āhanī 1960); Aḥmadniẓād 2003; Āq-Iwlī n.d.; Humāyī 1991 (a reprint of his 1966 lecture notes on *ma'ānī*); Kazzāzī

1991; Rağā'ī 1961; Riḍānīzād 1988; Šamīsā 1994; Zāhidī 1967. The works mentioned above are the main source of the illustrations I give in this monograph. In addition, I have also benefitted from Aḥmad Sulṭānī 2005; 'Alawī Muqaddam, Ašrafzāda 1997; Ğāhidğāh, Riḍā'ī 2012; Murādī, Yūsufī, Ni'matī 2016; Raṅğbar 2006; Şādiqiyān 2003; Şafā 1952; Tāğidīnī 2012; Tağlīl 1983; Taqawī 1939.

This monograph, as far as I can ascertain, may be one of the first attempts from outside Iran to consider the Persian science of meanings in its own right. It is a preliminary study and will not exhaust all the possible grounds for investigation. Nevertheless, I hope it can improve understanding of a Persian literary practice that has received little attention in Western scholarship. Before entering into the details of this study, it will be helpful to discuss the history of the science of meanings. This will help to understand how the discipline has evolved from the study of Arabic linguistic expressions to its current shape.

## 1.2 Historical Background

In the rich intellectual environment that emerged in the Islamic world, reflection on the concept of *balāğat* 'linguistic efficiency, eloquence' occupies a prominent place. As the tenth-century philologist Abū Aḥmad al-'Askarī had argued in his *Risāla fī l-tafḍīl bayna balāğatay al-'arab wa-l-'ağam* (Epistle on the Assessment of the Relative Merits of Arabic and Persian Eloquence), eloquence was not limited to one language over another (al-'Askarī 2006, 76-7). Nevertheless, while the study of the Arabic language and its means of eloquence was a priority for many scholars, Persian works on rhetoric remained sparse. The study of Arabic *balāğat* gradually developed into three canonical branches, each with its own specificities. When it reached its final form, the study of Arabic eloquence included the science of meanings ('*ilm al-ma'ānī*), and the two sciences called '*ilm al-bayān*' and '*ilm al-badī'*'. While '*ilm al-bayān*' studied figurative language (including metaphor, simile, analogy, metonymy, and allusion), '*ilm al-badī'*' enumerated various figures of speech intended for embellishment (such as paronomasia, antithesis, and so on).

Many scholars contributed to the development of the Arabic science of meanings. The forerunner of many ideas that later shaped the discipline was a Persian grammarian, 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Ğurğānī (d. 1078), whose Arabic work *Dalā'il al-i'ğāz* (Proofs of the Inimitability) is considered a landmark in Arabic linguistics. Since it was common for non-Arabs to be involved in Arabic language studies, many of the later authors who elaborated on al-Ğurğānī's findings had Iranian or Turkish backgrounds. Moreover, it is probably the Persian theologian and grammarian al-Zamaḥşarī (d. 1144) who is the first to

provide written evidence for the identification of *ma'ānī* and *bayān* as two distinct disciplines (*'ilm*) in rhetorical studies (Smyth 1993, 109).

The most seminal contribution, however, is attributed to the Khorezmian scholar al-Sakkākī (d. 1229). He gave the Arabic science of meanings a near-final arrangement. His encyclopaedia of language and literary sciences, *Miftāḥ al-'ulūm* (The Key to the Sciences), marked the beginning of the tradition. Al-Qazwīnī (d. 1338) condensed the third part of al-Sakkākī's work into an eight-part summary entitled *Talḥīṣ al-Miftāḥ* (The Résumé of the *Miftāḥ*) and a larger version called *al-Īdāḥ* (The Clarification). The abridgement eventually was better received than its source and became a standard textbook (Smyth 1993). It was at this point that the science of meanings reached its definitive taxonomy. In addition, al-Qazwīnī's work was the basis for many commentaries and glosses. Particularly influential are the commentaries by al-Taftāzānī (d. 1390), *al-Muḥtaṣar* (The Short Commentary) and *al-Muṭawwal* (The Long Commentary), and the *Hāṣiya* (Marginal Glosses) by al-Sayyid al-Šarīf al-Ġurġānī (d. 1413).<sup>1</sup>

Over the course of time, the works building on Sakkākī's and al-Qazwīnī's legacy entered the *syllabus* of Islamic higher education held in the *madrasas*. It is not surprising to find the science of meanings, a discipline connected to language and the production and reception of utterances, in the context of Islamic education. The works mentioned above were all drawing illustrative examples from the Qur'ān and, in addition, from Arabic poetry. Larcher (2013, 188) notes that:

the Arabic linguistic tradition has two aspects: one literary and the other hermeneutic. On its hermeneutical side, it thus intersects with the religious (i.e., theologico-juridical) sciences.

In this respect, it seems that people from different backgrounds could approach the science of meanings in different ways. While al-Sakkākī was concerned mainly with literary aspects, later scholars also had a professional interest in law. The understanding of the speaker's intention was essential to legal theorists (Yunis Ali 2000, 1) as much as for Arabic rhetoricians.

As many scholars suggest, Iranians initially seemed uninterested in writing in Persian on the subject, let alone applying the science of meanings to the Persian language.<sup>2</sup> The process by which *ma'ānī*

<sup>1</sup> Several papers and monographs recount the origins and developments of the Arabic science of meanings. In addition to those already mentioned in § 1.1, see Smyth 1993 and 1995.

<sup>2</sup> See Bonebakker, Reinert, *EP*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. "*al-ma'ānī wa-l-bayān*"; Chalisova 2009, 161; van Gelder 2009, 134-5.

came to be applied to the Persian language was not linear. The first works written in Persian were the result of a process of translation from Arabic to Persian. They were bilingual works based on the long tradition of Arabic sciences of eloquence. Treatises such *Anwār al-balāġa* (The Lights of Eloquence) by Muḥammad Hādī Māzandarānī (d. 1721) showed shifts in the language: the theoretical part was written in Persian, but the illustrative examples were still in Arabic (cf. Māzandarānī 1997). According to our present knowledge we should assume that educated Iranians studied the science of meanings primarily in connection to the Arabic language.

A few exceptions exist in the periphery of Persianate societies. In India, some Persian-writing authors have left valuable evidence of their interest in *maʿānī*. In a Persian manual of letter-writing, *Manāẓir al-inšāʾ* (The Aspects of Composition), the Deccan vizier Maḥmūd Gāwān (d. 1481) regrets that:

spreading the dress of the principles of *ʿilm al-maʿānī* is too large for the small stature of this treatise.<sup>3</sup>

Although he missed the opportunity to display his mastery in the science of meanings, his words seem to suggest that he could at least imagine writing in Persian about the subject. A few centuries later, the Indian philologist Sirāġ al-Dīn ʿAlī Ḥān Ārzū (d. 1756) was the first to accomplish this task. His treatise *Mawhibat-i ʿuẓmā* (The Great Gift) is a comprehensive exposition of the *maʿānī* methods applied to Persian poetry. Judging from the known copies of the work, the treatise had a limited circulation but as the first Persian work in this field it has gained relevance recently (cf. Šamisā's preface to Ārzū 2002, 18).

The science of meanings has undergone a renewal in Iran over the last hundred years. With the secular reform of education and the establishment of universities, Persian textbook production improved. The newly established Persian language and literature courses also forced Iranian academics to rethink the scope of their teaching, including how to teach the science of meanings. They replaced the old Arabic masterpieces with new, specially designed, Persian textbooks. The need to provide textbooks suitable for the new situation was a significant driver of change (Šamisā 1994, 21-2). For the first time, scholars added Persian examples alongside Arabic ones.<sup>4</sup> In addition to these bilingual works, also monolingual manuals began to appear. In 1952, Ḍabīḥullāh Šafā (d. 1999) had dispensed entirely with Arabic examples in a short textbook. A few years later, Ġalāl al-Dīn Humāyī (d. 1980) felt the urgency of rethinking the Persian

<sup>3</sup> Flatt 2019, 183 fn. 62 (English translation). See also Gāwān 2002, 61 (Persian text).

<sup>4</sup> For example, Āq-Iwlī n.d.; Taqawī 1939; Āhanī 1960; Raġāʾī 1961; Zāhidī 1967.

science of meanings on its own terms. He designed a bilingual textbook in which the theory is given in Persian and the examples are both in Arabic and Persian. In addition, he added separate sections to discuss specific features of the Persian language that had no parallels in Arabic (Humāyī 1991, 15-16).

Iranian scholars claim that the development of a Persian science of meanings resulted from the separation of Arabic and Persian *curricula* and the decline of Arabic proficiency among students (cf. Āhanī 1978, *alif*; Šamīsā 1994, 21-2). Whatever the cause, the promotion of Persian examples opened up new ways of writing about the subtleties of the Persian language. Today, a tendency to focus on Persian poetry prevails. This was the result of pioneering efforts in the past. Aesthetic evaluation (*zībāšīnāhtī*, or *zībāšīnāsī*) goes hand in hand with linguistics (*zabānšīnāsī*) in the contemporary framework of the Persian science of meanings (Kazzāzī 1991, 9-11; Rañjbar 2006, 7).

The Persian science of meanings is still evolving. On the one hand, the consideration of specific Persian features is growing. On the other hand, more papers analyse the literary production of Persian poets in *ma'ānī* terms (for example, Ğamālī 2009; Kārdgar 2016). Moreover, the attention to linguistics and pragmatics is partly reshaping the discipline in Iran. In the last thirty years, it has not been uncommon for Persian studies to mix traditional terminology with references to the theories of John Langshaw Austin (Šamīsā 1994, 40-3) or Roman Jakobson (Šamīsā 1994, 43; Ğihād 2008; Šāliḫī, Dākīrī 2015).<sup>5</sup>

### 1.3 Aims and Scope of the Study

Based on my examination of a number of Persian textbooks, I have attempted to provide an outline of the Persian science of meanings. My aim is to sketch the contents, clarify the jargon, and give a preliminary assessment of how the Persian science of meanings works. I will also explore the relationship of the discipline to the Arabic model and to the poetic heritage as a repertory of linguistic facts.

I will limit my presentation to what is inside the perimeter of the Persian science of meanings proper. I do not specifically cover aspects historically intertwined with the Arabic science of meanings, such as logic, Qur'ānic exegesis, or legal aspects.<sup>6</sup> Intersections between the science of meanings and other branches of rhetoric are

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<sup>5</sup> On a similar eclectic approach in modern Arabic rhetorical manuals, see Scholz 2019.

<sup>6</sup> On pragmatics in the wider realm of medieval Islamic law and theology, see Yunis Ali 2000.

not covered.<sup>7</sup> Also, I will not evaluate contemporary attempts to situate the science of meanings within a broader framework. Neither will I suggest how the science of meanings provides helpful insights into issues in modern linguistics and pragmatics.

The research I undertook had three aims. First, I tried to clarify the sense of the original taxonomies and to facilitate the understanding of the rich terminology of the discipline. Second, I tried to identify some of the critical points that scholars have had to face in order to adapt the Arabic science of meanings to Persian. In this regard, I limited the comparison to selected controversial issues and highlighted some opposing viewpoints among Iranian scholars. Third, I selected a number of Persian illustrative examples from the textbooks. This provided material for reflection on how Iranian scholars understand the subtle meanings conveyed by the Persian language.

One of my concerns is understanding how the Persian science of meanings correlates with or differentiates from the Arabic model. Superimposing Arabic schemes onto Persian has often proved problematic. Some critical points also exist in the case of the science of meanings. The structural difference between Arabic and Persian prevents a perfect overlap of theories. To appropriately fix the terms of comparison, it would be helpful to clarify that, by Arabic model, I intend the traditional Arabic science of meanings, whose main protagonists and works I briefly mentioned in the historical overview. The intended comparison opposes a body of knowledge almost fixed by the fourteenth century to more recent speculations. Although I occasionally have found contemporary Arabic works cited in Persian manuals,<sup>8</sup> their impact on Iranian scholars seems limited. For drawing comparisons to the Arabic science of meanings, my main reference is then the fourteenth-century commentary *al-Muṭawwal* by al-Taftāzānī. In addition, to better understand the Arabic discipline, I considered Persian manuals dealing with Arabic and Persian and examined secondary studies published in European languages.

References to the 'Arabic linguistic tradition' (elsewhere, 'linguistic tradition') should be understood as the linguistic thinking of Arabic-writing individuals who lived in the vast areas of the Islamic societies. In this multilingual milieu, one of the issues scholars had to tackle was whether language sciences would fit languages outside Arabic. Traditional linguistic studies conducted in Arabic in Iranian areas could be understood as part of a language acquisition pro-

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<sup>7</sup> On interactions with *bayān*, see Šamīsā 1994, 14-16. For an interesting account of terminology common to *ma'ānī* and earlier Persian works on *badī'*, see Isfandiārpur 2004, 267-80.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Raṅḡbar (2006, 142), who designed a textbook aimed at students of Arabic language, Persian language, and theologico-juridical studies, declares he had quoted many Arabic examples from al-Sayyid Aḥmad al-Ḥāsimī's *Ġawāhir al-balāġa*.

gram or, perhaps, as study of literary or hermeneutical theories of language. Even though al-Qazwīnī explicitly maintained that the science of meanings pertained to the Arabic language,<sup>9</sup> Persian was only one of the languages that have been studied and described according to the principles of *ma'ānī*. Twentieth-century scholars sometimes expressed dissatisfaction with the panorama of Persian textbooks, which they claimed were often Persian translations of Arabic content (Āhanī 1960, n.p., *pīšguftār*; Humāyī 1991, 15-16, 21), with Persian examples added sporadically (Šamīsā 1994, 22). Scholarly criticism shows the eagerness for the independent development of the discipline: the methods and basic tenets could apply to both Arabic and Persian language, but the results should be calibrated to the language under study.

Many terms in the science of meanings are derived from a long tradition of Arabic grammatical thought, while others are related to stylistics. Since the jargon is largely based on Arabic loanwords, there is a great deal of overlap between Persian and Arabic terminology. Persian scholars themselves tend to preserve the original Arabic vocabulary. An exception is Mīr Ġalāl al-Dīn Kazzāzī, who systematically translated the Arabic terminology into Persian, sometimes leaving the Arabic technical term in brackets (cf. Kazzāzī 1991).

I have selected some illustrative examples given in the manuals and reproduced them in this monograph for three key reasons. First, examples reproduce a typical feature of how Persian textbooks explore the topics. Manuals, in fact, alternate conceptual frameworks and illustrative examples. Second, only through examples do Persian manuals show exactly where eloquence lies in a literary text. Definitions are generally short, and are only clarified by the examples of lines taken from the premodern Persian poetry that occupies much of the textbooks. Third, the absence of poetic examples in some places in the manuals clearly shows how challenging it was for scholars to reconfigure an Arabic science into Persian. Purpose-built sentences replace poetry where necessary.

Since poetry may violate the rules of syntax, the reader will probably find it striking how lines from premodern Persian poetry appear to illustrate the pragmatics and semantics of the Persian language. Another paradox is that the terminology of the science of meanings suggests the idea that utterances are snippets of actual speech in an authentic setting. But a phrase in the poetry of the ancient past may no longer be conversational today. Moreover, when it comes to

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<sup>9</sup> In *Talḥiṣ al-Miftāḥ*, al-Qazwīnī defines the science of meanings as “the science through which one knows the various existing patterns [(*aḥwāl* ‘states’)] of Arabic speech [(*al-laḥẓ al-‘arabī*)] by means of which it meets the requirements of each situation” (Bonebakker, Reinert, *EL*<sup>2</sup>, s.v. “*al-ma’ānī wa-l-bayān*”. See also Jenssen 1998, 61). This definition was later adopted by al-Taftāzānī 1911, 33-4.



lines of poetry, the context in which the poet places his poetic persona is largely fictitious. In what sense, then, is classical Persian poetry still perceived as immersed in a context? Some final remarks on these questions will be made in the conclusion.

In this outline, examples are given in transcription and translation. In correspondence with the examples, I have included a footnote with three references: the Persian textbook offering the quotation, the original work from which the quotation was taken, and the adopted English translation if not my own. The translation of poetry is a delicate and demanding craft. For this reason, in many cases, I have relied on previous English translations rather than providing my own. Sometimes, however, the English rendering deviates from the Persian syntax to such an extent that the translation shows no evidence of the intended point. In these cases, I have preferred to adapt the published translation or to translate the text into my own words.

Finally, a note on transcription is appropriate. The romanisation system adopted here for Persian and Arabic does not necessarily represent modern Persian pronunciation. This system is better suited to premodern Persian poetry. I have also opted for a system that makes Arabic loanwords as transparent as possible. Arabists who do not know Persian, but are interested in *ma'ānī* in general, will face fewer obstacles in this regard.

