

Arabic Commonality Theory and the Distribution of Sounds: A Study in Classical Arabic Phonetics

Ahmed Bounif

University Center of El Bayadh, Algeria. Email: a.bounif@cu-elbayadh.dz
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Abstract

Sounds, when joined together, form vocabulary, and this formation and composition occur as a result of a specific arrangement. This is why it is said that sound is the instrument of articulation, the essence upon which segmentation relies, and through which composition exists. The movements of the tongue do not become speech, whether metrical or prose, except through the manifestation of sound. Letters do not become words except through segmentation and composition. Therefore, we sometimes prefer rhyme in prose, and at other times we bind ourselves to rhymes and the establishment of meter, because through our speech we seek to convey benefit to the absent, the present, the current, and the past.

In this intervention, we will attempt to examine the problematic boundaries of the concept of the Arabic theory of commonality. Then, what is the importance of this theory, given that the limits of Arabic letters are well known to the general public and specialists? Furthermore, why are some sounds more

frequently circulated in speech than others?

Keywords: theory of commonality, sounds, letters, composition, substance.

Introduction

Time grows narrower in its gatherings, leaving me only the path of beginning.

Ibn Jinni dedicated his book *Al-Khasa'is* (The Characteristics) to the most honorable classification in the science of the Arabs through analogy and observation, gathering evidence within it. He deposited the secrets of this noble language—its characteristics of wisdom and the ties of perfection and craftsmanship—in his book *Sirr Sina'at Al-Irab* (The Secret of the Craft of Syntax). He compiled the unique aspects of the Basran and Kufan schools, delving into their finest details and nuances, arguing and justifying. Perhaps through this study, and specifically in this era, we can grasp something of Arabic, which we believe is incumbent upon us in a time of linguistic impurity among speakers of the most honorable language, Arabic.

In what follows, I will attempt to reach the conclusion of the research through the following stages:

1. The Arabic letter: its points of articulation, its significations, and the difference between it and sound.
2. Arabic letters and the theory of commonality: concept and statistical reading.
3. Root letters and branch letters (the approved and the disapproved).
4. Ibn Jinni speaks, mentioning an account from the masters of Arabic and based on their standards, saying: "And I followed every letter of it with what I narrated from the masters of our companions and their elites..., and I mention the conditions of these letters in their points of articulation and paths, the division of their categories, and the rulings of their voiced and voiceless sounds" (Ibn Jinni, 2008, pp. 16–17). Ibn Jinni mentions the rest of the rulings on attributes and conditions, thus emulating Sibawayh in what he presented in *Al-Kitab* (Sibawayh, 2009, Vol. 4, p. 572), specifically the chapter on assimilation (Idgham). In it, he discusses the number of Arabic letters, their points of articulation, their voiceless and voiced nature, and the conditions and differences of their voiced and voiceless sounds (Sibawayh, 2009, Vol. 4, p. 572). Ibn Jinni dedicated a chapter to each letter, detailing its conditions and its usage in speech (Ibn Jinni, 2008, Vol. 1, p. 17), because mentioning the letters in composition, as he points out, leads to the comprehension of the

entire language, which is difficult or impossible for Arabic.

1. Points of Articulation or Positions

Linguistic sound is a phenomenon shared by an organic physiological element, which linguists called the point of articulation (makhraj) or the position of the sound, and a psychological-physical element known as the attribute (sifah) (Darrar, 2006, p. 49). The latter (the attribute) cannot be perceived except through the realization of the former (the point of articulation).

The discussion of the point of articulation leads us to delve into an important duality for which Ibn Jinni also provided justifications: the duality of sound (sawt) and letter (harf).

4. Sound and Letter

Ibn Jinni states: "Know that sound is an accident ('arad) that comes out with the breath, elongated and continuous, until it encounters segments in the throat, mouth, and lips that bend it from its extension and elongation; the segment, wherever it occurs, is called a letter" (Ibn Jinni, 2008, Vol. 1, p. 19). From this definition or description, we extract four elements: sound, breath, segment, and letter. Sound does not flow without breath, and "because the breath coming from the chest, which is the vehicle of sound, is held back if the speaker's reliance is extended to the point of articulation of the letter, since reliance on a position in the throat and mouth holds the

breath even if there is no sound" (Al-Astarabadi, 1975, Vol. 3, p. 209). Al-Radi, in this context, did not mention the lips as Ibn Jinni did when he clarified that the reliance is in the throat, mouth, and lips. Does this not show the high level of taste and delicate sense of Ibn Jinni? Perhaps Al-Radi alluded to the lips implicitly when he mentioned the mouth, for we have previously stated that the applications of this science are precise. As for where the resonance of the sound is, that is the segment; meaning that the point of opposition (closure or opening) is what determines the point of articulation of the desired letter, as the organs of the vocal tract adopt certain muscular positions, and the points of articulation of the letters occur according to this description (Zwayn, 1986, p. 64).

Since the discussion revolves around the point of articulation and position, it is appropriate to present the concept of the point of articulation and define its terms.

B. The Point of Articulation and Its Terminology

The point of articulation (makhraj) of a letter is the place where the letter is generated and emitted. This is because the linguistic sound, which is the letter, is generated when the exhaled air (whether vibrating or not) encounters an obstruction or a narrowing at any point in its path extending from the larynx to the lips (Jabal, 2012, p. 52). This is what Ibn

Jinni referred to when he explained sound as an accident ('arad), and an accident is that which appears and emerges (Ibn Manzur, 2008, Vol. 3, p. 377).

Al-Khalil was among the first to "taste" the letters to identify their points of articulation, introducing several terms, including:

Origin (Al-Mabda'): The origin of the letter, which is its point of articulation.

Domain (Al-Hayyiz): This is the point of articulation for several homogeneous letters (Al-Farahidi, 2003, Vol. 1, p. 41).

Path or Course (Al-Madraj or Al-Majra): This is the path of the letter's air after its emission. They may be used in the sense of the point of articulation. If we project some meanings onto the word (makhraj), we find that makhraj with a short 'a' on the 'm' (fatha) means the relied-upon or natural position from which the letter is emitted. As for it with a short 'u' (damma, mukhraj), it means the position from which the speaker can emit the letter by choice and deliberately, even if it is not the natural, relied-upon point of articulation. Thus, opening the 'm' (makhraj) is more precise, which is the view taken by some modern scholars (Jabal, 2012, p. 52).

Ibn Jinni likened the vocal tract to a flute (nay) in the difference of the resonances of the alphabet letters based on the difference of their segments, and compared it to the string of a lute. By this representation, he aimed for

accuracy and approximation of the melody present in the craft of sound. Among the justifications Ibn Jinni provided, for example, regarding someone who worships Allah on a "harf" (edge/margin), meaning without permanence. He justified this by saying that the one who worships Allah on a harf is unstable in his religion. This instability is represented by a lack of firmness, lack of tranquility, and lack of solid insight. This instability is paralleled by a positional instability represented by his reliance on the edge (harf) of his religion, not being centered in it, like someone who is on the edge of a mountain and the like (Ibn Jinni, 2008, Vol. 1,

p. 28), meaning on its brink. Harf can be the limit of something, its direction from one side, and its aspect from another. Among the facets he justified in the recitation "Al-Malak" (The Angel) meaning angels; the singular angel substitutes for the group of angels. Similarly, the word harf may occur in the position of letters (huruf), which is a group. Also, from common speech "the dinar and the dirham destroyed people," meaning dirhams and dinars. Ibn Jinni's justifications for these letters are presented in the following table, accompanied by an analytical reading of the data:

1.2 The Letter, Its States, and Justifications

No.	State of the Word Harf	Examples	Justifications
01	The limit of a thing and its sharpness	Spicy (harrif) food, meaning its sharpness	Increase in its sharpness and heat
02	Deviated (inharafa)	So-and-so deviated from me	Placed a limit between me and him through isolation
03	On the edge of his religion	You are but on an edge (harf)	Unstable, not tranquil, lacking solid insight, like one on the edge of a mountain, i.e., in doubt.
04	Letters of speech and its aspects	The edges (huruf) of a thing and its surrounding sides	Harf is a limit between two recitations, its direction, and aspect; we say so-and-so's harf in recitation and his huruf.

05	Particles of meaning	Particles of meaning are letters (huruf) like min (from), fi (in), qad (already), hal (do/is), bal (rather).	Because they come at the beginnings and ends of speech mostly, they became like edges and limits.
06	Sharpness	With a sharp-edged tool; a lean (harf) she-camel	For its sharpness, containing heat and burning; i.e., lean, so its sides became defined by leanness and emaciation.
07	Transition from one state to another	Transitioned from fatness to emaciation as if she is the edge of a mountain.	Meaning it shifted from one state to another in its intensity and hardness.
08	Deviation and inclination	Probing a wound; Distortion (tahrif) in speech	Meaning looking into its depth or dimensions; Changing its meaning.
09	Water flow	Deviated, and the water flowed away from it	It did not remain straight, so it could settle on it.

Reading the table: These concepts and terminologies appeared scattered, and sometimes lengthy, which requires us not to alter them much, as that would disrupt the concept Ibn Jinni intended. What we point out through this table is that sound is a variable phonetic unit, while the letter is a fixed mental image.

2. Arabic Letters and the Theory of Commonality

Ibrahim Anis mentioned a theory about the frequency ratios of letters in Arabic speech, calling it the theory of commonality. Its premise is that linguistic sounds that are

commonly used in circulation are more prone to evolution than others, and the extent of commonality may reach the point of falling out of speech entirely (Anis, 2008, pp. 219–225). Among the results of this theory is that L (ل), M (م), and N (ن), which are phonetically considered semi-vowels, and W (و) and Y (ي), which are half-vowels, experience phonetic shifts not merely for ease, but also due to commonality. The phenomenon was statistically analyzed from the Holy Quran, measured against a thousand consonant sounds. The results are shown in the following table:

2.1 Table of Frequency of Arabic Sounds

No.	Sound	Frequency	No.	Sound	Frequency	No.	Sound	Frequency
01	ل (L)	127	10	ك (K)	41	19	خ (Kh)	10
02	م (M)	124	11	ر (R)	38	20	ص (S, emph.)	08
03	ن (N)	112	12	ف (F)	38	21	ش (Sh)	06
04	ء (Hamza)	72	13	ق (Q)	23	22	ض (D, emph.)	05
05	هـ (H)	56	14	س (S)	20	23	غ (Gh)	05
06	و (W)	52	15	د (D)	20	24	ث (Th)	05
07	ت (T)	50	16	ذ (Dh)	18	25	ز (Z)	04
08	ي (Y)	45	17	ج (J)	16	26	ط (T, emph.)	04
09	ب (B)	43	18	ح (H, pharyn.)	15	27	ظ (Dh, emph.)	03

With the components of the table:

Ibn Jinni pointed to the sequence of letters in their ranks of progression, meaning the succession of their positions from the throat to the lips, evidenced by his saying: "This is the arrangement of the letters based on their taste and ascent, and it is the correct one. As for their arrangement in Kitab Al-'Ayn, there is error and confusion in it, contradicting what we previously presented of what Sibawayh arranged, and his followers followed him on, which is the correct view whose validity is attested by the contemplative" (Ibn Jinni, 2008, Vol. 1, p. 59).

He says in an earlier passage: "If we have compiled the presentation of the alphabet letters according to what is in people's hands of

the famous composition, I mean other than the arrangement of points of articulation, mentioning them letter by letter" (Ibn Jinni, 2008, Vol. 1, p. 58). As for compiling them based on points of articulation, he says: it is clearer in explanation, then we later return to extrapolating them based on the composition: A, B, T, Th.

It is evident from the two statements that his reasoning for Al-Khalil's compilation and arrangement containing error and confusion points to the point of contention regarding the letter 'Ayn (ع). Why didn't Al-Khalil start with the Hamza? It is the deepest letter in the throat according to the arrangement and assertion of his student Sibawayh, but according to his own

assertion when he said: "And the Hamza in the air did not have a domain to be attributed to" (Al-Farahidi, 2003, Vol. 1, p. 03). "And this arrangement, as you see, is hardly known to any of the general practitioners of the language, according to his saying; as for the specialists, they are not of one accord regarding that arrangement" (Ibn Jinni, 2008, Vol. 1, p. 19).

Meaning they disagreed with him, whether by advancing or delaying. I would like to point out here that Al-Khalil counted the vocabulary of Arabic, thereby preparing a known, classified material for the linguists who came after him and compiled dictionaries. He achieved this by being guided to the method of permutation (taqlib), through which he could distinguish the used (musta'mal) from the neglected (muhmal) (Al-Farahidi, 2003, Vol. 1, p. 04). While we discuss the permutation that Al-Khalil first unveiled, we must not forget Ibn Jinni, who dedicated a large chapter to derivation (ishtiqaq) in his book *Al-Khasa'is*. He even started with the chapter "Discourse on the Distinction between Speech (Kalam) and Saying (Qawl)" (Ibn Jinni, 2008, Vol. 1, p. 19). He mentioned the conditions of the morphological variations of the root "Q, W, L" and its derivation. Thus, the two men meet at a major chapter of the language, namely derivation, and Ibn Jinni's "Royal Morphology" (Al-Tasrif Al-Muluki) is the best evidence of what we say. As for the disagreement in arrangement, it centers around

the Hamza.

2.2 The Hamza in the Concept of Ancient Phonetic Theory

Ibn Kaysan transmitted what Al-Suyuti narrated, saying: "I heard someone mention from Al-Khalil that he said: I did not begin with the Hamza, because it is subject to reduction, change, and deletion; nor with the Alif, because it does not occur at the beginning of a noun or verb word unless it is added or substituted" (Anis, 2008, p. 185). Thus, what does not settle on one state is like one who worships Allah on an edge (harf). Abu Hayyan said: "The Hamza is an emitted (mahtut) sound; it was named as such because its exit from the chest is like retching, so it requires the manifestation of a strong, intense sound, and hatt is sound with force." Ibn Manzur said: Al-Khalil said: "The Hamza is an emitted sound in the deepest part of the throat. If the Hamza is eased, it becomes breath transformed to the point of articulation of the Ha (هـ). Therefore, the Arabs found it lighter to introduce the Ha onto the cut Alif, such as *araqa* and *haraqqa*" (Al-Jalil, 2010, pp. 410–411). In light of these statements, we summarize the following:

Al-Khalil, with all his sensory capability and qualitative tasting of letters, counted the Hamza with the Alif, Waw, and Ya. His method of tasting was to produce the letter as a consonant and open his mouth with a Hamza. When he came to the sound of the Hamza, there were two Hamzas: a foundational Hamza and the Hamza intended to be tasted, so he felt

heaviness. Even if this is the actual situation, it is based on deduction (ijtihad), and not the whole truth. Otherwise, we pose the following two questions and leave them open: First, how could such a matter escape Al-Khalil, being who he is? The founder of the science and its primary pioneer. Second, how is the Hamza pronounced with a continuous, tasteful pronunciation mastered by reciters and memorizers? Otherwise, the Hamza exists, and it has never been absent from the Arabic letters.

This is regarding Al-Khalil. As for Sibawayh, he counted it from the deepest part of the throat along with the Alif and Ha. Ibn Jinni agreed with Sibawayh in his view and disagreed with Al-Khalil. I do not think Al-Khalil began with the 'Ayn except because it is clearer and stronger. What Ibrahim Anis went to (Anis, 2008, p. 111) is nothing but a descriptive comparison that requires scientific proof when he discussed the vowels (letters of prolongation), rejecting the accuracy of the narrative of Kitab Al-'Ayn which claims that the points of articulation for vowels are cavity-based and aerial.

Returning to the data of the table we provided based on the theory of commonality, Ibn Jinni mentions a Quranic example. He notes that the word "ista'u" (استاعوا) occurring in Surah Al-Kahf, its root is "istata'u" (استطاعوا). The Ta (ت) was deleted due to frequent use, and due to the proximity of the Ta to the Ta (ط) (Ibn Jinni, 2008, Vol. 1, p. 227). This original form is used. He says: Do you not see that there is another dialect in it, which is: "ista'tu" (استعت) by deleting the Ta (ط) just like deleting the Ta (ت), and a third dialect "asta'tu" (أسطعت), and a fourth "asta'tu" (أستعت)? This results in five dialects: istata'tu, ista'tu, ista'tu, asta'tu, and asta'tu (Ibn Jinni, 2008, Vol. 1, p. 228). After presenting evidence of commonality in usage, we shift the discussion to the branches derived from the roots.

3. The Branch Letters

These are the same ones mentioned by Sibawayh in Al-Kitab, and Ibn Jinni followed him on them in SIRR Sina'at Al-I'rab.

3.1 Table of Approved Branch Letters (Al-Fawzan, 1428 AH, pp. 50–53)

No.	Name of the Letters	Examples
01	The lightened Nun (Al-Nun Al-Khafifah), also called hidden	It is a quiescent Nun, like Al-Anfal, in kuntum.
02	The lightened Hamza (between and between)	It is not a fully realized Hamza, like

		yuman, bisa.
03	The Alif of velarization (Tafkhim) between pure Alif and pure Waw	Like Al-Salah (pronounced Salawat, Mishkawat).
04	The Alif of inclination (Imalah)	Majrayha, rahmah.
05	The Shin that is like a Jim	Ashdaq pronounced ajdaq.
06	The Sad that is like a Zay	Masdar.

Reading the components of the table:

We know that voiced sounds are almost equal to voiceless ones numerically, as voiced sounds are thirteen, plus the vowels including Waw and Ya, and voiceless sounds are twelve. This numerical balance is reflected by the reality of commonality in speech (boudenna2026,392). It is natural for voiced sounds to be predominant in our speech; otherwise, the Arabic language would

lose its resonant musical quality, which is itself a criterion by which we distinguish speech from silence, and voicing from whispering and secrecy. This was confirmed by induction, as one-fifth of speech is voiceless, and four-fifths are voiced (Anis, 2008, pp. 23–24). For these reasons, it is highly probable that the new sound is closer to being voiced than to being voiceless.

3.2 Table of Disapproved Branch Letters (Al-Fawzan, 1428 AH, pp. 50–53)

No.	Name of the Letters	Examples
01	The Kaf that is between Jim and Kaf	The solid Kaf, like kamal, jamal.
02	The Jim that is like a Kaf	Like rajul, rakul.
03	The Jim that is like a Shin	Ajdar, ijta'ma'u.
04	The weak Dad (between Dad and Zha)	Adarra, atarra.
05	The Sad that is like a Sin	Astafa for astafa, sabir, sabir.

06	The Ta (emphatic) that is like a Ta (regular)	Talib, talib, tala, tala.
07	The Zha that is like a Dhal	Zhalim, dhalim.
08	The Ba that is like a Mim (between Fa and Ba)	Istabraq, istafrah.

Reading the components of the table:

If there is an observation regarding the approved and disapproved branch letters, it is that Ibn Jinni followed Sibawayh's approach in enumerating and describing them without providing examples. The examples we extracted for them were mentioned by Ibn 'Usfur in his book *Al-Muqarrab* (Al-Fawzan, 1428 AH, p. 54).

These intermediate letters have been studied by some modern scholars. Among them is Tammam Hassan, who complained about the inadequacy of writing to express phonetic reality, saying: "The symbols of the Arabic alphabet are not sufficient in themselves to conduct a phonetic study... because the symbols of this alphabet are vastly inadequate from the perspective of defective letters (vowels), and slightly less inadequate from the perspective of sound consonants" (Darrar, 2006, p. 91). He did not stop there, but went on to create writing symbols of his own invention, though they did not gain fame or popularity.

And if there is any discussion about this, the Holy Quran suffices us as an inexhaustible resource and spring.

If we look closely at the approved branch sounds, we find each of these letters is between two strong root letters, because these sounds possess attributes of strength. For example, the Zay that is between Sad and Zay (masdar) is neither a pure Sad nor a pure Zay, as the cause of influence and being influenced occurs by virtue of adjacency.

In the adjacency of the voiceless Sad with the voiced Zay, there is an influence and reception of influence represented by the Sad losing part of its voicelessness, becoming voiced (Raffas, 2008, p. 167). From them branches out a single sound descending from the same point of articulation, and "the point of articulation of the branch is clear" (Al-Astarabadi, 1975, Vol. 3, p. 254), where the Zay loses part of its voicing influenced by the voicelessness of the Sad, while the Sad does not lose its attribute entirely due to acquiring some attributes of strength like velarization (itbaq) and elevation (isti'la'). This is a miraculous justification for the conflict occurring between root letters to generate branch letters. The six sounds were only approved because they came as branches for strong roots, and the eight were weakened only because they descended from the attribute of strength to weakness. For example, the Ta

(ط) which is like a Ta (ت): the Ta (ط) is a voiced, plosive, velarized, elevated letter that transformed into a voiceless, lowered Ta (ت). This conflict only happens as a result of adjacency and consequently influencing and being influenced. This is because Arabic letters are governed by a precise phonetic and expressive system, the adaptation of which is often hidden from scholars.

4. Conclusion

- Language is a human phenomenon distinguished from other phenomena by being an intrinsic creation of humans since their first existence, and the people of Arabic were people of eloquence and clarity.
- The rotation of Alif and Lam is frequent in Arabic because they are light and soft. The Alif is moist, and you do not find the Lam difficult for anyone. Between them is a kind of mutual compensation in our pronunciation of "Lam-Alif" and in the definite article "Al" (أل).
- The Mim and Nun are the most present letters in the endings of Quranic verses (fawasil) because they are nasal, melodious sounds.
- The Hamza has been and remains difficult in linguistic study, because it is a phonetic coloration that applies to all sounds.
- The approved and disapproved branch letters are letters with sounds but no written symbols.

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