

Ali Bin Abi Talib on Language Functions

Researcher.Rafed Khashan

Washington/USA

Abstract:

Functions of language is a relatively old topic that is intensively and extensively studied by linguists and language experts worldwide. The topic, however, seems to be associated with the work of modern functional scholars like Michael Halliday and Geoffrey Leech, and formalist linguists like Roman Jakobson, to name just a few. These scholars have a seminal impact on linguistics and their elucidation of language functions is still being applied in different social and technological fields as well as the field of speech pathology and artificial intelligence. At the same time, scholars of Arabic language and linguistics do not seem to bother to look for any elucidations of language functions within the vast philosophical, religious, and linguistic literature that have been passed on to them from generation to generation. This literature, and upon a closer inspection, is full of hints, signals, anecdotes, and sometimes astonishing descriptions of linguistic aspects and language functions. This is not to say that scholars have not worked on the works of Al-Khalil bin Ahmed Al-Faraheedi or Amr ibn Bahr Al-Jahidh, for example. On the contrary, the works of these and other scholars have been extensively investigated by language scholars across history. This is mainly because these works are directly dealing with language. This study purports to investigate Imam Ali bin Abi Talib's references to the functions that language serves on the personal and social level as explained in his important sermon of Wasilah. It is an invitation to Arab researchers to revisit the vast Arabic heritage in search of old wisdom for modern-day problems.

Keywords: Language, language functions, linguistics, Imam Ali

وظائف اللغة عند الإمام علي

الباحث رافد خشان

الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية/واشنطن

المخلص:-

يعد موضوع وظائف اللغة من المواضيع القديمة نوعاً ما والذي تناوله علماء اللغويات وخبراء اللغة في جميع أنحاء العالم بشكل مكثف وواسع . ومع ذلك ، يبدو أن الموضوع مرتبط بأعمال بعض العلماء الوظيفيين المعاصرين من أمثال مايكل هاليداي وجيفري لبيتش ، واللغويين الشكلانيين مثل رومان جاكوبسون، على سبيل المثال لا الحصر. هؤلاء العلماء لهم تأثير أساسي على علم اللغة ولا تزال شروحاتهم لوظائف اللغة مطبقة في مختلف المجالات الاجتماعية والتكنولوجية بالإضافة إلى مجال علم أمراض النطق والذكاء الاصطناعي. في الوقت نفسه ، لا يبدو أن دارسي وعلماء اللغويات العرب قد كلفوا أنفسهم عناء البحث عن أي توضيحات لوظائف اللغة في الأدبيات الفلسفية والدينية واللغوية الواسعة التي توارثناها من جيل إلى جيل. إن هذه الأدبيات ، عند فحصها عن كثب ، مليئة بالتلميحات والإشارات ، وأحياناً الأوصاف المذهلة للجوانب والوظائف اللغوية. هذا لا يعني أن العلماء لم يدرسوا أعمال الخليل بن أحمد الفراهيدي أو عمرو بن بحر الجاحظ، على سبيل المثال بل على العكس من ذلك ، فقد اشبع علماء اللغة العرب وغير العرب أعمال هؤلاء وغيرهم دراسةً وتفصيلاً عبر التاريخ وهذا يرجع إلى حقيقة أن هذه الأعمال تتعامل مباشرة مع موضوع اللغة وتراكيها بشكل رئيسي. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى التحقيق في إشارات الإمام علي بن أبي طالب إلى الوظائف اللغوية أو الوظائف التي تخدمها اللغة على المستوى الشخصي والاجتماعي كما هو موضح في خطبته المهمة التي تسمى خطبة الوسيلة وهي دعوة للباحثين العرب وغيرهم في استقصاء الموروث العربي اللغوي من أجل الكشف عن الخبايا اللغوية المتناثرة في أرجاءه لخدمة القضايا المعاصرة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اللغة، علم اللغة، وظائف اللغة، الامام علي.

Introduction:

Historically, Ali Bin Abi Talib (henceforth ABT) is one of the Prophet's successors, his cousin, confidant, and the one who accompanied the Prophet since childhood. However, this paper does not intend to delve into the polemical, historical, or ideological positioning of ABT in Islam. It seeks to highlight a very interesting reference to language functions in one of ABT's famous and longest sermons that is called *Khutbat Al-Wasilah* or "the Sermon of Functions." I choose to translate "*wasilah*" as "function" although the word "*wasilah*" has multiple senses including "function," "vehicle," "means," "supplication," and "intercession." *Wasilah* itself is also a rank in Paradise that is preserved to Prophet Mohammed, according to Islamic tradition (Al-Mu'jam Al-Waseet 2014:1032)

The sermon itself speaks about different ontological, philosophical, ethical, and religious issues that bear on man's position in the universe and the means of achieving perfection. The mention of language functions in this sermon positions language into the social and cosmological context of man's existence. In this sense, the sermon might be called "The Sermon of Means to Perfection" or "The Vehicle to Perfection," etc.

In this sermon, ABT speaks about achieving perfection through speech and silence. Among the things ABT surprisingly speaks about are the functions of language, which are a topic that does not represent a central issue for Arabs and Muslims in the sixth century. However, ABT is the first to establish Arabic grammar and the Arabic language rules through his teachings to Abu al-Aswad al-Du'ali (Al-Yassin 1964: 11-12.) I will call this establishment of Arabic grammar rules that microlevel of language as it is concerned with the specific rules of language and not with the general rules and observations that apply to Arabic and other languages as in the case of language functions, which I call the macrolevel of language. This is evident in ABT's reference to language users in general through his use of "humans" and not the Arabic language speakers in particular in the excerpt below which is taken from *Sharh Usoul al-Kafi* by Mohammed Saleh al-Mazindarani (Vol. 11, p. 230).

أيها الناس في الإنسان عشر خصال يظهرها لسانه: شاهد يخبر عن الضمير، حاكم يفصل بين الخطاب، وناطق يرد به الجواب، وشافع يدرك به الحاجة، وواصف يعرف به الأشياء، وأمير

يأمر بالحسن، وواعظ ينهى عن القبيح، ومعز تسكن به الأحزان، وحاضر تجلى به الضغائن، ومونق تلذذ به الأسماع.

People! There are 10 traits in humans that are made visible by one's own tongue [talking:] A witness to one's conscience, an arbitrator for settling (discoursal) arguments, an articulator that provides answers, a means through which needs are fulfilled, a descriptor by which things are made known, a commander that commands the doing of good things, an advisor that advises against bad acts, A comforter to allay the sorrow, an interlocutor through which, tensions are diffused, and a [linguistic] adornment that delights the ears.¹

Interestingly, Abd Al-Qahir Al-Jurjani (2007:137) mentions almost the same text with some variations but without crediting ABT. He merely says that

قال بعض البلغاء في وصف اللسان: اللسان أداة يظهر بها حسن البيان، وظاهر يخبر عن الضمير، وشاهد ينبئك عن غائب، وحاكم يفصل به الخطاب، وواعظ ينهى عن القبيح، ومزين يدعو إلى الحسن، وزارع يحرث المودة، وحاصد يحصد الضغينة، ومُله يونق الأسماع"

Some well-spoken person said, describing the tongue [language] as: A tool through which eloquence is shown, something visible [a sign] that tells of conscience, a witness that tells you about [something] absent, an arbitrator for settling (discoursal) arguments, an advisor that advises against bad acts, an ornamentor that calls for doing good deeds, a cultivator that cultivates affection, a reaper that reaps grudges, and a distractor that delights the ears.

Research Problem

Arabic language studies are lacking in research on language functions and their applications. Arab linguists, especially early linguists, focus on the microlevel of language like grammar, phonology, and meaning. This is driven by a focus on the interpretation and recitation of the Holy Quran. Language functions, one of the macrolevels of language, bring about a new focus on the relation of language to different fields of life. It connects language to other fields and phenomena. An exploration of language functions as stated by ABT sheds the light on the need to explore these functions and their applications to modern problems where language plays an important role, which this study is purporting to do.

Research Hypothesis:

By mentioning language functions, ABT brings to focus an important aspect of the macrolevel of language, which is language functions. He explains how language is used and what functions it serves because a

conscious use of language is essential for forming and developing personal and social experiences. In mentioning the language functions within a religious sermon, ABT is indicating that language use is a conscious process that connects language to other fields and phenomena.

A Brief Survey of Language Functions:

The topic of language functions is not new. Modern linguists are heavily concerned with language functions not only as an end in themselves but also as they serve a slew of other purposes like language learning, language acquisition, text analysis, language pathology, sociology of language, neurolinguistics, psychology, education, and public speaking, to mention just a few. Different linguists also propose different numbers and labels for language functions and sometimes there is an overlap between, say, the conative function proposed by Roman Jakobson, and the instrumental function proposed by Michael Halliday (Mathews, 1997:71.)

In his seminal work "*Closing statements: Linguistics and Poetics*", Jakobson (in Sebeok, 1960: 353-359) defines six language functions, which he associates with a certain factor in the linguistic message. As such, he associates functions as follows:

Referential: Context

Aesthetic/poetic: Message

Emotive: Addresser

Conative: Addressee

Phatic: Channel (of communication)

Metalingual: Code

Exploring Jacobson's language functions in TESOL, Angela C. Tribus (2017:11) provides the following useful table to explain Jacobson's language functions.

Classification	Strongest Factor	Function	Examples
Referential	Context	descriptions, contextual information	Our business hours are 9am-5pm, Monday through Friday.
Emotive	Addresser	interjections/expressions of emotional state	Oh, man... Awesome! Whew!
Conative	Addressee	concerned with commanding; vocative or imperative addressing of the receiver	Go on, open it! Shoo. Get out of here. Check this out.
Phatic	Contact	concerns channel of communication; performs	Hey! Mmmhmm...How

		social task as opposed to conveying information; to establish, prolong, or discontinue conversation	about that? Really? No way.
Metalinguistic	Code	requires language analysis; using language to discuss language	Noun, adjective, codeswitching Water is a non-count noun, right?
Poetic/Aesthetic	Message	involves choosing words carefully; the art of words, often self-reflective	But, soft! What light through yonder window breaks?

Leech (1974) also mentions five functions of language. These are the informational, expressive, directive, aesthetic, and phatic function of language. According to Leech (*ibid.*) “the informational function “concentrates on the message. It is used to give new information.” On the other hand, the expressive function is used to express the speakers’ feelings and attitudes while the directive function, as the name indicates, is used to influence the addressee and make them do or refrain from a certain action.” The aesthetic function is concerned with “the use of language for the sake of the linguistic artifact itself, and for no purpose” (*Ibid.*) And, finally, the phatic function is “the function of keeping communication lines open, and keeping social relationships in good repair (in Britain culture, talking about the weather is a well-known example of this)” (*ibid.*)

Others mention more or different functions for language. For example, Finch (2003:39) states seven functions of language. These are: The physiological, phatic, recording, identifying, reasoning, communicative, and the pleasure function. On the other hand, Halliday (2004:4), “proposes a set of seven functions, the first six serving as the basis of interpreting the language of very young children: (1) instrumental, (2) regulatory, (3) interactional, (4) personal, (5) heuristic, (6) imaginative, and (7) informative.”

Of the early Arab linguists who speak, rather rudimentarily and in passing, about the function(s) language serves are Ibn Jinni and Ibn Sinan Al-Khafaji. Ibn Jinni defines language as "sounds through which each [group of] people express their purposes [needs.]" So, "the function of language as seen by Ibn Jinni is the expression of purposes and needs"

(Bouguemra and Shalaf, 2017:16). In the same vein, Khafaji sees that "speech is not an end in itself. Rather, it is needed by people to express their purposes [needs] and understand the meanings that are inside them" (ibid.)² Khafaji presses language functions to a further domain, which is the experiential and heuristic domain or the domain of learning, exploring (one's inner being) and gaining knowledge. In other words, while Ibn Jinni limits language to the communicative-social domain, Khafaji adds another function whose locus is the language users themselves irrespective of the communicative function of language.

The definition of each function depends on the approach adopted by the linguist or their research background. Many of the functions stated by researchers – linguists and others – share the same labels and the same definition, sometimes, as in the phatic function and the aesthetic function, for example. Some do not share the same name, yet they overlap with other functions as in, for example, Lyons (cited in Mathews, 1997:151) "distinguishes the descriptive function (corresponding to Bühler's representational or Jakobson's referential) from the social and expressive functions, together classes as interpersonal."

The following table compares the functions as mentioned by ABT, Jakobson, Leech, Finch, and Halliday. It helps us see how these functions overlap and where they diverge.

Table 1

Comparison of language functions and their denominations by major scholars

No.	Functions	Ali bin Abi Talib (ABT)	Jacobson	Leech	Finch	Halliday
1-	Ideational/experiential	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
2-	Metalingual	No	Yes	No	No	No
3-	Heuristic/informative	Yes	No	Yes, as Informative	Yes, as Communicative	Yes, as Heuristic
4-	Instrumental	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
5-	Representational	Yes	No	Yes, as Informative	Yes, as Communicative	Yes
6-	Directive/ regulatory	Yes	Yes, as Conative	Yes, as Directive	No	Yes, as Regulatory

7-	Emotive/interpersonal	Yes	Yes, as Emotive	Yes, as Expressive	No	Yes, as Interactional
8-	Preventive/cathartic	Yes	No	No	No	No
9-	Poetic/aesthetic	Yes	Yes	Yes, as Aesthetic	Yes, as Pleasure	No
10-	Phatic	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
11-	Physiological	No	No	No	Yes	No
12-	Recording	No	No	No	Yes	No
13-	Identifying	No	No	No	Yes	No
14-	Reasoning/analytic	Yes	No	No	Yes, as reasoning	No
15-	Communicative	Yes, as Representational	No	Yes, as Informative	Yes	Yes, as Representational
16-	Pleasure	Yes, as Poetic	Yes, as Poetic	Yes, as Aesthetic	Yes	No
17-	Referential	No	No	No	Yes	No
18-	Conative	No	Yes	No	No	No

As the table shows, there is a lot of overlap among the functions. There are also functions some scholars mention while others drop out of their categorization. Some functions are given different names by different scholars like the communicative function, which is referred to as the representational by ABT (based on his explanation) and Halliday and the informative function by Leech. In the above table, “yes” means that the function is mentioned as such by the scholar, “no” means that it is not categorized as a function by the scholars in question, and “yes informative, poetic, etc.” means that the function is categorized as a function but is under another label. The “yes^{Label}” share the same description and definition among the different scholars.

ABT’s Functions of Language:

In his sermon, ABT aptly speaks about 10 functions of language when he says that “there are 10 traits that a human’s tongue reveals.” The word “tongue” is used interchangeably with “language” in Arabic. Through a close inspection of ABT’s description of these “traits,” we can glean the following functions:

Table 2

Language functions mentioned by ABT (translations provided by me)

No.	Function	Arabic Original Text	English Translation ³
1-	Ideational/experiential (meta-) function	شاهد يخبر عن الضمير	A witness to one's inner consciousness. (It reveals one's ideas, attitudes, opinions, etc.) According to Halliday (cited in Ahmad (2015:31), the ideational function "serves as expression of content in language, articulating our mental experiences and representations of the world."
2-	Reasoning/analytic function	حاكم يفصل بين الخطاب واتيناه الحكمة وفصل الخطاب الميزان: "تفكيك الكلام الحاصل من مخاطبة واحد لغيره وتمييز حقه من باطله وينطبق على القضاء بين المتخاصمين في خصامهم."	A judge or an arbitrator for settling (discoursal) arguments.
3-	Heuristic/informative function	ناطق يرد به الجواب	An articulator that provides answers.
4-	Instrumental function	شافع تدرك به الحاجة	A means through which needs are fulfilled.
5-	Representational function	واصف تعرف به الأشياء	A descriptor by which things are made known.
6-	Directive/ regulatory function	أمير يأمر بالحسن	A commander that commands the doing of good things.
7-	Directive/ regulatory function	واعظ ينهي عن الفبيح	An advisor that advises against bad things.
8-	Emotive/interpersonal function	معر تسكن به الأحران	A comforter to allay the sorrow.
9-	Curative/cathartic function	حاضر تجلى به الضغائن حاضر القوم: جالسهم، وحادثهم بما يحضره، ومنه: فلان حسن المحاضرة.	An interlocutor through which, tensions are diffused.
10-	Poetic/aesthetic function	مونق تلتذ به الأسماع	An adornment that delights the ears.

Some of these functions ABT mentions like the "esthetic function," "the interpersonal function," "the representational," "the instrumental," etc. are already accounted for and explained by the above-mentioned linguists and many others. However, there is a function ABT mentions, which I could not find in modern linguistic literature. This is what I call the "curative/cathartic function," which serves the purpose of diffusing tensions and dispelling rancor, bitterness, and resentment among people. ABT places this function within an interpersonal, social, sphere, i.e., it goes beyond the personal level of functioning, which is referred to by Finch (2003: 21) as the physiological function, which "allow us to release pent-up energy which otherwise would be quite intolerable." Moreover, Finch's function is restricted to bad language and swearing

(ibid. 22) and so it is diametrically opposing to the cathartic effect proposed by ABT which accounts for removing tensions and hard feelings among people through talking, dialogue, speaking up, and verbalization.

I want to highlight these linguistic traits or functions because they are considered ground-breaking that a man in the heart of the desert in the 7th century Arabia can speak about purely theoretical matters like language functions. I should note, nevertheless, that the way ABT puts these traits and the context in which he mentions them serve the purpose he wants to achieve, which is the establishment or the reinforcement of an Islamic value system for daily consumption by believers.

Interestingly, as mentioned above, ABT does not use the word function although this word appeared in some of the Prophet Mohammed's hadiths. Instead, ABT uses the word "trait" or "*khisla*." To speak about the functions that language serves. The attestation provided by the Doha Historical Dictionary of Arabic (DHDA,) which is available online, dates the word "function" to 632 B.C. It cites the following hadith by the Prophet as an attestation:

مَنْ تَوَضَّأَ وَاجِدَةً فَتِلْكَ وَظِيفَةُ الْوُضُوءِ الَّتِي لَا بُدَّ مِنْهَا، وَمَنْ تَوَضَّأَ اثْنَيْنِ فَلَهُ كِفْلَيْنِ ، وَمَنْ تَوَضَّأَ ثَلَاثًا فَذَلِكَ وَضُوءِي، وَوُضُوءُ الْأَنْبِيَاءِ قَبْلِي.

Translation⁴:

"Whoever washes for ablution once, then this is the required limit of ablution. Whoever washes twice, then they will be twice rewarded. Washing thrice is my [way of doing] ablution and that of the prophets who came before me."

In this context, DHDA defines the word "function" as the required limit or the precondition for something to be complete. The dictionary lists another sense for the word, which is "the required duty levied on something." DHDA cites a tradition by the Prophet as an attestation to this sense:

لَكُمْ يَا بَنِي نَهْدٍ، فِي الْوُظَيْفَةِ الْفَرِيضَةُ.

Translation⁵:

"You will have [to pay,] you Bani Nahd, the duty that is required [from you to pay.]"

Both senses that mentioned by DHDA above do not match the modern meaning of the word "function," which is the purpose someone or something, naturally or by assignment, serves. For Crystal (2008:201) "the role language plays in the context of society or the individual is also

referred to by the term ‘function’ (social function). For example, language is used (‘functions’) to communicate ideas, to express attitudes, and so on. The Online Etymology Dictionary (of English) dates the English word “function” to the 1530s.

The word “*khisla*” that is used by ABT to refer to language functions in his sermon has the same meaning being used in modern times, which is a trait or a quality of something, whether good or bad. In other words, ABT wants to say that, for language to be a language, it must have certain qualities or traits. One of these qualities is that it must serve a function and he moves lists the 10 functions (which represent in total a quality or trait of any human language.)

After this discussion of the word “function” and the word “*khisla*” or “trait,” it is time to move to discuss the language functions listed by ABT in his “Sermon of Wasila.” To validate my findings and since even modern linguists do not agree on unified labels for their language functions, I take ABT’s explanations and match them with similar explanations used by modern linguists for language functions. Many of ABT’s explanations do match the explanations offered by linguists. ABT says language is used for revealing what is inside man’s mind (*dhameer*, which is derived from the root *dhamar*, meaning to hide) man’s ideas, thoughts, opinions, attitudes, etc. are hidden away from people. Once the speaker talks, people come to know what he is thinking of, feeling, intending, or hiding. This ability of language to reveal what is inside man’s head is what others call the expressive, the informative, or representational function.

The “intermediary for settling discursal disputes” function of language is yet another new function introduced by ABT. This function presupposes the existence of a multiplicity of discourses (levels of ideation and conceptual content) and the use of language to sift through these levels and contents to arrive at a unified discourse or a ground for understanding one’s inner thoughts and those of others through process like brainstorming, group discussions, negotiations, and trial defenses, etc. Only Finch (2003:32) mentions this function and labels it “the reasoning function.” Finch (*ibid.*) says, “As an exercise you might try thinking about something, making a conscious effort not to use words. Making your mind blank is one of the most difficult things to do because the brain is in a state of constant activity; its principal concern is with

enabling us to survive, and language is an essential part of that survival process.”

Interestingly, Khafaji (in Bouguemra and Shalaf, 2017:16) mentions something similar when he says that “speech is not an end in itself. It is rather needed by the people to express their purposes [needs] and understand the meanings that are inside them.” By using the word “intermediary,” ABT highlights the objective nature of language, especially the one used for reasoning and argumentation, which is manifest in discourse. In Crystal’s (2008: 84) words, the cognitive meaning or function of language “refers to those aspects of meaning which relate directly to denotations of lexical items and the propositional content of sentences, and thus corresponding to an intellectually objective level of interpretation, as opposed to one where emotional or subjective interpretation is involved.” Language also here is a medium, not merely a tool of, thought.

Then ABT states that language is “an articulator that provides answers.” This is what Halliday calls the “heuristic” function or the use of language as “language as a means of exploring, learning, and acquiring knowledge about one’s environment, typically through the use of questions,” (Chandler & Munday, 2011:186). Providing answers implies the existence of questions. Language is used to gain information and knowledge through the asking of questions, which in turn presupposes the provision of answers, hence the heuristic function of language.

And finally, Language is “a means through which needs are fulfilled.” This is the instrumental function of language. ABT portrays language here as a means, a tool or an instrument through which needs are fulfilled. The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Linguistics defines the instrumental function of language as the use of language for “achieving some practical end,” (Mathews, 1997:151.)

Conclusion:

Arabic studies of language functions and the history of language functions depends mostly on sources and studies borrowed from linguistic and cultural studies in the West. Authentic Arabic sources like Islamic sermons and tradition need to be revisited and explored for any mention of linguistic theories to highlight the perspectives and contributions of Arab scholars in the field and build on these theories to come up with studies that can address the unique challenges facing the Arabic language as a tool, a medium, and a means to resolve some of the

problems the Arab society is experiencing. Language functions like the ones mentioned by ABT is only one example. There are others in Islamic tradition that explicitly mention issues like language arbitrariness and speech acts theory. These issues squarely bear on other philosophical and theological matters like divine unity and human responsibility as well as legal and rhetorical matters.

This study is an invitation to Arab linguists to revisit the rich Islamic and Arab linguistic, philosophical, and maybe the medical heritage to shed light on and address many of the issues our modern society needs to resolve like the problems facing fledgling democracies, language pathology in schools, autism issues, public and political debates, advertising and digital media, religious sermons, and many other issues in which language figures strongly.

Finally, it is imperative to read the linguists' elucidations of language functions as the explanations offered in this paper are very limited viewing the aim and the scope of the study. Further readings of language functions provide more insight and support for the importance of animating discussions of ABT's language functions.

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¹ All translations from Arabic provided in this paper are by me, the researcher.

² Translation provided by me, the researcher.

³ English translation of the Arabic text is provided by me, the researcher.

⁴ My translation.

⁵ My translation.