



NASIF AL-YAZIJI AND “FAṢL AL-KHIṬĀB FĪ ‘UṢŪL LUĠHAT AL-A‘RĀB”: DUALISM OF TRADITION AND DIDACTICS IN ARABIC GRAMMAR

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Abstract. This article examines the scholarly contributions of Nasif Yaziji, a pivotal figure of the Arabic Renaissance (Nahda), whose work was instrumental in the revitalization and systematization of the Arabic language. His seminal treatise, *Faṣl al-Khiṭāb fī Uṣūl Luġhat al-A‘rāb*, emerged as a groundbreaking textbook on Arabic grammar and morphology. Its primary objective was not merely to restore the classical prestige of the Arabic language but also to establish an efficacious didactic methodology for its instruction. Al-Yaziji's work exemplifies a profound reverence for the classical linguistic tradition, drawing extensively from the scholarly heritage of his predecessors, notably Ibn Farḥāt and his *Baḥth al-Maṭālib wa Hathth al-Ṭālib*. This adherence is evident in the structural organization of *Faṣl al-Khiṭāb fī Uṣūl Luġhat al-A‘rāb* and its congruent approach to the definition of linguistic terminology. Concurrently, Yaziji transcends the role of a mere successor by introducing his distinctive methodological innovations. He meticulously elucidates vocalizations, verb derivations, and intricate grammatical nuances often overlooked in prior scholarship. His pioneering dualistic approach integrates a commitment to didactic optimization and simplification with a rigorous engagement with complex linguistic phenomena. This is conspicuously demonstrated through the extensive use of commentaries and tabular representations of verbal derivations. Furthermore, the introduction of concepts such as "interpretation of derivation" (*ta‘wīl al-‘ishtiḳāq*) and "verb-like elements" (*shibh al-fi‘l*) underscores his significant contributions to the evolution of linguistic thought. Consequently, *Faṣl al-Khiṭāb fī Uṣūl Luġhat al-A‘rāb* stands as a compelling exemplar of the successful synthesis between profound knowledge of traditional grammar and innovative pedagogical methods.

Keywords: Arabic grammar, Arabic Renaissance (Nahda), didactics, morphology, syntax, vocalizations, verbs.





Introduction: Nasif Yaziji (1800–1871) stands as a central figure of the Arabic Renaissance (Nahda) [Daniel L. Newman 472-475], whose philological legacy significantly influenced the evolution of Arabic linguistic thought. According to Sādiq Samrā'ī, Yaziji was a resolute champion of the Arabic language, playing a crucial role in its revival and consolidation in the 19th century. His endeavors aimed at refining the language and enhancing its appeal, thus positioning him as one of the initiators of Arabic nationalism and a leader in the movement to revitalize Arabic linguistic heritage. Researchers emphasize that Yaziji pioneered the restoration of the Arabic language's former glory in the lives of Arabs after a period of decline and the threat of oblivion. He actively resisted this trend, breathing new life into classical Arabic [Sādiq Samrā'ī].

Concurrently, Nasif Yaziji developed a systematic methodology for teaching Arabic, which had been absent before his time [Krymsky 381]. In 1863, Butrus al-Bustani invited him to teach at the newly opened "National School." Subsequently, Yaziji served as a professor at the "Patriarchal School" and was among the first instructors at the "Syrian Protestant College," later reorganized into the "American University." Within his extensive teaching and scholarly activities, Nasif Yaziji authored numerous influential works on morphology and grammar, including the treatise Faṣl al-Khiṭāb fī Uṣūl Lughat al-A'rāb ("Clear Elucidation of the Principles of the Arabic Language," hereafter Faṣl al-Khiṭāb) [Lāra 'Abūd]. Jurjī Zaydān characterizes this grammatical work as follows:

It is a comprehensive work on the foundations of morphology and grammar. Among educators, there is a consensus that it is the best text written in these fields. It combines completeness and conciseness to such an extent that not a single word can be removed or added from it [Jurjī Zaydān 29].

Nasif Yaziji himself explicitly states the didactic purpose of his book in its preface:

This is a concise exposition, which I have made like a gate (bāb) to the rules of morphology and syntax, by means of which young students can enter the assembly of elder [scholars]. And I have named it Faṣl al-Khiṭāb fī Uṣūl Lughat al-A'rāb. And I have divided it into two books, comprising chapters and sections, containing what can be included in such principles [Nāṣif Yāzījī 2].

This objective defines the author's overall approach; however, as will be demonstrated, a profound respect for classical tradition and a quest for its comprehensiveness underlie its apparent simplicity.



The work *Faṣl al-Khiṭāb*, completed in 1847, was first published in 1836 in Beirut, Lebanon. The American Press issued a thousand copies of this Arabic grammar. According to Hala Auji, this edition likely represents the first secular publication in Arabic in the history of the Middle East. It is crucial to note that the grammar was printed by Protestant missionaries from the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), who had established their printing press in Beirut two years prior, in 1834 [Hala Auji].

Influence of *Baḥth Al-Maṭālib* on *Faṣl Al-Khiṭāb*

Yaziji, deeply rooted in the classical Arabic linguistic tradition, actively studied and utilized the works of his predecessors. Specifically, he largely drew upon Ibn Farḥāt's *Baḥth al-Maṭālib wa Hathth al-Ṭālib* ("Investigation of Issues and Encouragement of the Student [of Arabic]," hereafter *Baḥth al-Maṭālib*), which is noticeable in aspects such as the book's format, including the precedence of morphology over syntax, the consideration of the alphabet, and the inclusion of topics omitted in earlier grammatical works intended for native speakers¹. Such topics include the rule of the pausal form (*waqf*).

The author states:

A word on which a stop is made and which ends in *tā' marbūṭa* (ة) is replaced by *hā'* (ه), for example: *جَاءَتْ فَاطِمَةُ* → *جَاءَتْ فَاطِمَةٌ* - 'Fatimah came.' If the word has a *tanwīn* after a *fatha*, the *tanwīn* is replaced by an *alif*, for example: *رَأَيْتُ زَيْدًا* → *رَأَيْتُ زَيْدًا* - 'I saw Zayd.' The most common is stopping on a word with a *sukūn*, for example: *جَاءَ الرَّجُلُ* → *جَاءَ الرَّجُلُ* - 'The man came [Nāṣif Yāziji 254].

Nasif Yaziji followed Ibn Farḥāt and adhered to a similar approach in defining linguistic terms. This becomes evident when comparing their interpretations of the concept of syntax (*naḥw*):

Text from *Baḥth al-Maṭālib*:

Naḥw, its lexical meaning (*فى اللغة*) is 'aim,' and as a term (*فى الاصطلاح*) it is the science of rules (*أصول*) by which one can know whether a word is inflected (*إعرابًا*) or uninflected (*بناءً*). The purpose of this science is the knowledge of inflectional changes (*معرفة الإعراب*), which means expressing the subject (*الفاعل*) in the nominative case (*رفع*), the object (*المفعول*) in the accusative (*نصب*), and the *muḍāf* (*المضاف*) in the genitive case (*الجر*). The objects of syntax are *kalima* (*الكلمة*) and *kalām* (*الكلام*) [Ibn Farḥāt 57b].

Here is an excerpt from *Faṣl al-Khiṭāb*:

¹ Works oriented towards native speakers and those addressed to non-native speakers differ qualitatively. Authors of the former generally omit and do not cover topics considered well-known and obvious, while compilers of the latter, including Ibn Farḥāt, emphasize such "nuances." This also includes addressing topics in separate chapters such as "solar" and "lunar" letters, letter substitution (i.e., when one letter is written but read differently, e.g., *الحوية* لدي), and others.



Syntax is the science of principles by which the states of word endings are known in terms of their inflection (i'rāb) and immutability (binā'). Its object (mawḍū'uhū) is that which is composed of its lexical units (words) [Nāṣīf Yāzījī 132].

Both presented excerpts from Baḥṯ al-Maṭālib and Faṣl al-Khiṭāb demonstrate an academic approach to defining syntax, which is akin to the European style of scientific exposition: they consistently provide a terminological definition of the discipline (as a science of rules that determine the inflection and immutability of word endings), indicate its purpose (knowledge of inflectional changes that determine grammatical functions), and, importantly, clearly designate its objects of study—kalima (word) and kalām (speech/utterance) in the first case, or "that which is composed of lexical units (words)" in the second. This systematized and explicit method of defining the subject of study, including the indication of its object, underscores the striving for clarity and differentiation of scientific disciplines, which is characteristic of rigorous academic discourse.

In his work, Nasif Yaziji, following the grammatical tradition of Muhammad Mu'izzi [Kazakbaev 155], initially uses the terms sālim (sound), ṣaḥīḥ (healthy), and mu'tal (weak) for verb classification. This approach diverges from the method of his son Ibrahim Yaziji, who, like Ibn Farḥāt, uses the opposition sālim (sound) and ghayr sālim (unsound) [Ibrāhīm Yāzījī]. It should be noted that Ibn Farḥāt called "sound verbs" those verbs whose root consonants are not expressed by weak letters, hamza, or whose root consonant is not doubled. Unsound verbs can be "healthy" or "weak," Ibn Farḥāt asserted. There are three weak letters: alif, wāw, yā'. [Ibn Farḥāt 10b–11a].

However, Nasif Yaziji later reverts to the term ghayr sālim, which was introduced into scholarly discourse by the renowned linguist al-Izzi [Nāṣīf Yāzījī 15].

Nasif Yaziji also employed the method of explaining derived forms, established by Ibn Farḥāt: by adding one, two, or three letters. However, he introduces his unique methodology. He emphasizes that if the root of a verb is expanded through its basic letters, the second or third root consonant is doubled, as in the examples of Form II "قَدَّمَ" and Form IX "احْمَرَ". He also displays didactic ingenuity, for instance, by successfully explaining the vocalizations of the imperfect tense: all added letters when conjugating a trilateral verb have the fatha vocalization, while quadrilateral verbs have the ḍamma (Nāṣīf Yāzījī 17).



The meanings of the derived forms, however, are provided in the commentaries, as they are absent from the main text [Nāṣif Yāziji 13-14].

Here is Ibn Farḥāt's text:

Derived forms of trilateral verbs (الأفعال المزيدة على الثلاثي) number ten and are divided into three parts: those formed by adding one letter, two letters, and three letters. The letters are added from the composition of *سالتمونيتها* [...] We state (نقول) that there are three forms of derived verbs formed by adding one letter. The first of them is: *أَفْعَالٌ، يُفْعَلُ، أُنْفَعِلُ*, for example *أَكْرَمَ يُكْرِمُ إِكْرَامًا* [...] The second form is created by doubling the middle root consonant: *فَعَّلَ يُفَعِّلُ تَفْعِيلًا*, for example *فَرَّخَ يُفَرِّخُ تَفْرِيحًا* whose root is the verb *فَرَّخَ* [...] The third form is *فَاعَلَ يُفَاعِلُ مُفَاعَلَةً*, for example *فَاتَلُ يُفَاتِلُ مُفَاتَلَةً* [...] [Ibn Farḥāt 12a-13b].

And here is Nasif Yaziji's interpretation:

And if the verb is trilateral, one letter may be added to it, and then it takes the form *أَفْعَلٌ*, as in the example *أَكْرَمَ*. Or the form *فَاعَلَ*, as in the example *فَادَمَ*. If two letters are added, it takes the form *تَفَعَّلَ*, as in the example *تَقَدَّمَ*. Or the form *تَفَاعَلَ*, as in the example *تَبَاعَدَ*. Or the form *أَنْفَعَلَ*, as in the example *أَنْطَلَقَ*. Or the form *أَفْعَلَّ*, as in the example *أَحْمَرَ*. And sometimes three letters can be added to it, and then it takes the form *إِسْتَفَعَلَ*, as in the example *إِسْتَعْفَرَ*. Or the form *أَفْعَوْعَلَ*, as in the example *أَخْدَوَدَبَ* [Nāṣif Yāziji 12].

Nasif Yaziji, following Ibn Farḥāt's approach, provides an explication of terminology. For instance, commenting on the concept of "defective" verbs (*af'āl nāqīṣah*), Yaziji notes that their naming is due to the inability of such verbs to form a complete predicative meaning solely through the subject, unlike "complete" verbs. To complete the meaning of a sentence, "defective" verbs require a nominal part, called *khabar* [Nāṣif Yāziji 181]. Ibn Farḥāt also frequently emphasizes the etymological justification of the terms used. As an example, one can cite his reasoning regarding "verbs of the heart" (*af'āl al-qulūb*). He explains that these verbs received this name because most of their semantics (*aghlabuhā*) are related to expressing states inherent to the heart (*al-qalb*), such as doubt (*al-shakk*) or certainty (*al-yaqīn*) [Ibn Farḥāt 115].

Nevertheless, Nasif Yaziji was not a blind follower. His work demonstrates independence of thought, evident, for example, in his classification of sentences. While Ibn Farḥāt expanded the classification of nominal sentences to include "subordinate clauses" (*al-jumla al-tābi'ah*). According to Ibn Farḥāt, subordinate clauses are those that begin with particles and are subordinate to the word after





the particle, for example هَلْ بُطْرُسٌ قَائِمٌ². Yaziji restricts himself to the traditional division into nominal and verbal sentences. This distinction highlights his selective approach to the legacy of his predecessors.

Moreover, Nasif Yaziji, unlike Ibn Farḥāt, discusses the past and present-future tenses and the imperative mood in a single chapter. Here are his words:

When a sound verb is joined to pronouns, it is sufficient to change its ending in terms of vocalizations and sukūn, as you already know. Thus, in the conjugation of the past tense of a trilateral verb, one says: ضَرَبَ - he struck [...]. And in the conjugation of the present tense: يَضْرِبُ - he strikes [...]. In the conjugation of the imperative mood: اِضْرِبْ - strike (masc. sing.) [...][Nāṣif Yāzījī 63].

The analysis conducted demonstrates Nasif Yaziji's deep embeddedness in the classical Arabic linguistic tradition and the significant influence of Ibn Farḥāt's *Baḥth al-Maṭālib* on his work *Faṣl al-Khiṭāb*. This influence is evident in both the structural elements of the book (e.g., the sequence of presenting morphology before syntax and attention to the alphabet) and the methodological approach to grammatical phenomena. Specifically, Nasif Yaziji follows Ibn Farḥāt in the explication of linguistic terms, as evidenced by the nearly identical definition of syntax (*naḥw*), as well as in the methodology of explaining derived verb forms. The inclusion in Yaziji's work of topics traditionally omitted in grammars for native speakers (such as the rules of *waqf*) also highlights his adherence to Ibn Farḥāt's pioneering approach for his time, which was oriented towards a broader audience, including non-native speakers of Arabic. However, despite obvious influence, Nasif Yaziji is not a passive imitator. His scholarly thinking demonstrates independence and selectivity. Such selectivity indicates Yaziji's critical engagement with the legacy of his predecessors and his endeavor to create his own, perhaps more systematized or simplified, grammatical work for his audience. Thus, Nasif Yaziji's works represent a valuable example of dialectical interaction with grammatical tradition, where profound knowledge and reverence for predecessors are combined with the development and adaptation of material for his own scholarly and pedagogical objectives.

² Ibid., f. 138v. Sa'īd al-Khūrī al-Shartūnī and Buṭrus al-Bustānī, in their commentary on *Baḥth al-Maṭālib*, noted that the author did not emphasize the position of a particular part of speech at the beginning of a sentence, as the main focus ultimately lies on the subject and predicate. Thus, a sentence like رَاكِبًا جَاءَ زَيْدٌ (Zayd came riding) is still considered verbal, despite beginning with the word "riding." And a sentence like أَأَعْنَتَكَ زَيْدٌ (Is Zayd with you?) is considered nominal, regardless of starting with an adverb of place. See: Sa'īd al-Khūrī al-Shartūnī. *Baḥth al-Maṭālib fī al-'Ilm al-'Aḥbīyyah*. Malta, 1882, p. 340; Buṭrus al-Bustānī. *Miftāḥ al-Miṣbāḥ*. Beirut, 1854, p. 399.





Key aspects of Ibn Farḥāt's methodology

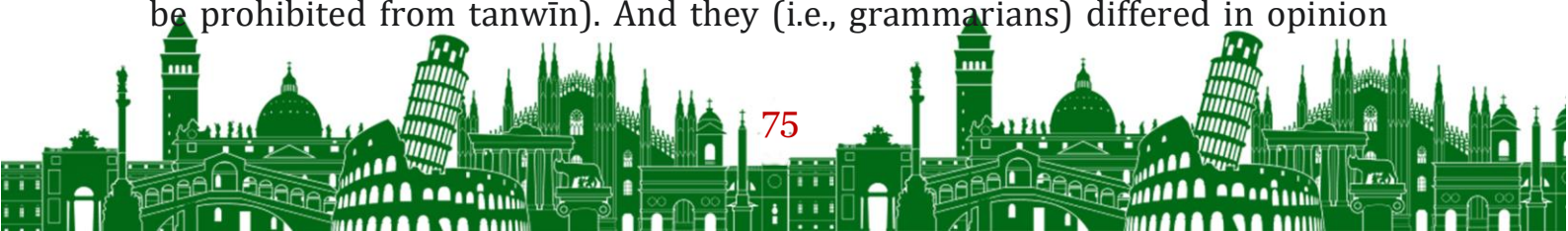
A crucial aspect of Yaziji's methodology is his adherence to Fusha (classical Arabic) and his pursuit of maximum comprehensiveness. Even when systematizing grammar for educational purposes, he did not discard rare or exceptional cases present in classical texts or discussed by early grammarians. An example of this is his mention of the possibility of intensifying an indefinite noun, although this is considered a rare phenomenon. This approach characterizes him as a "custodian" and systematizer of traditional grammar, aiming to make it accessible without sacrificing its completeness. For instance, consider this excerpt from the book:

[That is] any tawkīd ma'nawī (semantic emphasis), concerning relation (nisbah) and completeness (shumūlan), applies (yakhuṣṣ) only to definite (ma'ārif) nouns. And this is the principle (al-aṣl). However, it has been said: on the contrary, an indefinite noun (naḳīrah) can be emphasized if it brings benefit (has meaning), as in his (the author's) saying: 'Oh, if the number of years [were] entirely the month of Rajab!' (يَالَيْتَ عِدَّةَ حَوْلِ كَلِّهِ رَجَبٌ). And this (such usage) is rare (nādir) [Nāṣif Yāzījī 233].

One of the most remarkable, yet simultaneously debatable, features of Yaziji's exposition is his method of using footnotes. He places the main grammatical rules in the main text and his detailed explanations and commentaries in footnotes. While such an approach might be intended to highlight key points, it creates significant difficulties for the reader: constant switching between the text and footnotes disrupts the integrity of perception, slows down the reading pace, and fragments the information. This can hinder the formation of a complete and clear picture of the grammatical phenomenon, reducing reader engagement.

Nevertheless, Yaziji's mastery in footnotes also underscores his meticulousness, attention to detail, and deep, thorough knowledge of the language. This allows him to analyze and comment on even the most subtle linguistic nuances, providing examples of rare declension cases [Nāṣif Yāzījī 155] and referencing authorities such as Sibawayhi [Nāṣif Yāzījī 163, 164]. This is a characteristic feature of a high-caliber classical philologist. The following excerpt serves as evidence:

Because, if it (the word) were not a proper name in the language of non-Arabs, and then became one among Arabs, such as 'Baradjak' (برجق), if a person was named with it, it would not become indeclinable (i.e., it would not be prohibited from tanwīn). And they (i.e., grammarians) differed in opinion





regarding a trilateral word with a vocalized middle letter, such as 'Shatras' (شتراس) or 'Huṣn' (حصن), and the majority (of grammarians) advocates its prohibition (from tanwīn). And in the case of a middle unvocalized letter, such as 'Kunūj' (كنوج), the majority (of grammarians) advocates its declension (i.e., permission for tanwīn) [Nāṣif Yāziji 155].

Based on the analysis of Nasif Yaziji's methodology in philological works, a dualistic approach can be observed: on the one hand, his works demonstrate a striving for didactic optimization and simplification in the presentation of Arabic grammar, which contributes to its greater accessibility for a wide range of learners. On the other hand, alongside this simplification, Yaziji emphasizes complex and specific aspects of grammatical phenomena and their nuances. This strategy, manifesting in detailed explanations and commentaries on the subtleties of morphological and syntactic constructions, not only deepens the reader's understanding of the subject but also implicitly highlights the author's profound erudition and comprehensive mastery of the classical Arabic linguistic tradition. For example, he dedicates a chapter to the negative particles mā and lā, titling it "Chapter Six: On the Mā and Lā of the Hijazis." He further states that the particle mā is equated to laysa by the inhabitants of Hijaz, where in a footnote he clarifies that this linguistic rule is explicitly attributed to the usage of the Hijazis, as speakers of the Tamimi dialect do not employ it in their speech, thus excluding its application in the analysis of their linguistic practice [Nāṣif Yāziji 185].

Nasif employs a method of explanation not found in his predecessors. For instance, he states that the noun of place and time are derived from the maṣḍar mīmī (mimic infinitive), not from the imperfect tense [Nāṣif Yāziji 32]. Yaziji does not merely repeat generally accepted rules but delves into details often overlooked by earlier authors, while offering unique methodological expositions. For example, the following excerpt:

Know that the past tense verb is formed from the maṣḍar (infinitive), and the present tense verb is formed from the past tense verb. All other forms of the past tense verb are formed from the present tense verb. The exception is the passive participle (ism al-maf'ūl), which is formed from the passive verb, while all other forms of the verb are formed from the active verb [Nāṣif Yāziji 34].

Yaziji is adept at making complex points accessible, highlighting aspects that earlier authors, such as Ibn Farḥāt, overlooked. For instance, he elaborates on the six main forms of the trilateral verb (Form I), noting that they occur only in sound verbs [Nāṣif Yāziji 11].





Innovations undertaken by Nasif Yaziji

Nasif Yaziji's unique contribution to Arabic linguistics is associated with his active application and development of the concept of "interpretation of derivation" (ta'wīl al-'ishtiqaq). This concept is fundamental to understanding grammatical phenomena such as the adjective (na't). In classical Arabic grammar, an adjective must be a derivative word (mushtaqq). However, it can also be semantically equivalent to a derivative word (be a result of ta'wīl al-'ishtiqaq), as in the example "A man possessing wealth came to me" (جاءني رجل ذو مال), which means "a possessor of wealth."

Ta'wīl al-'ishtiqaq denotes a method of interpreting and semantically explicating meanings through a deep analysis of a word's etymology and its derivational connections [Muhammad Ahmad Zakī 324-355]. Yaziji's development of this concept demonstrates a flexible toolkit for understanding both morphological and semantic aspects of language. It allows not only for the classification of derivative words but also for the interpretation of lexical units that, while not derivatives in the direct sense, nonetheless carry a derivational meaning. This emphasizes the continuity and development of grammatical and linguistic ideas from classical Arabic philology to modern linguistics, where ta'wīl al-'ishtiqaq continues to serve as an important analytical method.

Yaziji also introduces and clarifies key grammatical concepts. Of particular note is his introduced concept of "verb-like elements" (shibh al-fi'l). This is how the author himself explains it:

And know that what from nouns contains the meaning of a verb, such as the maṣdar (verbal noun) and the active participle (ism al-fā'il) and the passive participle (ism al-maf'ūl), these words act like their verb if they are in its place (in the sentence), expressing nominative (raf') and accusative (naṣb) cases according to their requirements, and they are called 'verb-like elements' (shibh al-fi'l) [Nāṣif Yāzījī 239-240].

This demonstrates his commitment to precise classification and explanation of linguistic phenomena. Yaziji, along with Butrus al-Bustani, is a pioneer in presenting derived verbs in a tabular format, which became a genuine innovation in the teaching of Arabic grammar. He also thoroughly explains the maṣdar of derived verbs, and his explanation of the forms of ism al-marra and ism al-naw' is presented in a memorable tabular form [Nāṣif Yāzījī, p. 35].



Conclusion: This article has analyzed the methodological approaches employed by Nasif Yaziji in his fundamental treatise *Faṣl al-Khiṭāb*. The study revealed a key characteristic of his methodology—the dualism of tradition and didactics. Yaziji, on the one hand, was deeply rooted in the classical Arabic linguistic tradition, evident in his reliance on the works of predecessors such as Ibn Farḥāt. This influence is discernible in the book's structure, the sequence of material presentation, and the approach to defining linguistic terms. He meticulously preserved the completeness of grammatical information, including even rare or exceptional cases, underscoring his role as a "custodian" of linguistic heritage. On the other hand, Nasif Yaziji emerged as an innovative didacticist, striving for the optimization and simplification of Arabic grammar for a broad audience. His systematized teaching methodology, the introduction of a tabular format for derived verbs, and his detailed explanation of aspects often overlooked by other authors attest to his innovative approach. The use of footnotes for detailed commentaries, despite potential reading complexities, reflects his meticulousness and commitment to comprehensive analysis of linguistic phenomena.

Furthermore, Yaziji enriched Arabic linguistic thought by introducing and developing concepts such as "interpretation of derivation" and "verb-like elements," thereby affirming his independent scholarly thinking. Thus, the methods applied by Nasif Yaziji in *Faṣl al-Khiṭāb* demonstrate a unique synthesis of profound reverence for classical heritage and an aspiration to adapt it for contemporary educational and scholarly objectives. His work not only constituted a significant contribution to grammar but also served as an example of innovative pedagogical practice that profoundly influenced the development of Arabic linguistics during the Nahda era. The study of Nasif Yaziji's methodology in *Faṣl al-Khiṭāb* opens up important questions for further research. The dualism of his approach—the combination of traditionalism and didactic innovation—represents a valuable model for analyzing the evolution of linguistic and pedagogical practices during periods of cultural revival.

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