

## Inhalt

### Vorwort

1.	Einleitung.....	9
2.	Rahmenbedingungen.....	20
2.1.	Zeitgeschichte.....	20
2.1.1	Integration und Abgrenzung .....	20
2.1.2	Theologischer Diskurs und politische Macht.....	24
2.2	Die arabische Sprache als Gegenstand der Wissenschaft .....	27
2.2.1	Dichterische Meisterschaft .....	27
2.2.2	Zur Existenzberechtigung von Sprachkritik.....	29
2.2.3	Die islamische Zäsur .....	32
2.2.4	Einführung von Bewertungskriterien .....	33
2.2.5	Systematik .....	38
2.2.6	Grammatik.....	41
2.2.7	Der Kommentar ( <i>at-tafsīr</i> ) .....	45
2.3	<i>Kitāb al-bayān wat-tabyīn</i> .....	47
2.3.1	Formaler Werkaufbau .....	48
2.3.2	Anordnung des Materials .....	51
2.3.3	Stilistik.....	52
3.	Das Ringen um den besten Ausdruck .....	57
3.1	Bestimmung und Übersetzung eines Begriffs .....	57
3.2	Die Bedeutungen ( <i>al-ma'ānī</i> ).....	58
3.3	Zeichen für die Bedeutungen.....	62
3.3.1.	Der Wortlaut ( <i>al-laḫḫ</i> ) .....	64
3.3.2	Die Geste ( <i>al-iṣāra</i> ).....	70
3.3.3	Das Ausrechnen ( <i>al-'aḳd</i> ).....	72
3.3.4	Die Schrift ( <i>al-ḥaṭṭ</i> ) .....	73
3.3.5	Die Zeichenhaftigkeit des Seins ( <i>an-niṣba</i> ).....	76
3.4	Qualitäten der Rede.....	77
3.4.1	Die Vortragskunst ( <i>al-ḥiṭāba</i> ) .....	77
3.4.2	Die Beredsamkeit ( <i>al-balāḡa</i> ) .....	80
3.4.3	Die korrekte Hochsprache ( <i>al-faṣāḥa</i> ) .....	84
3.4.4	Die Prägnanz ( <i>al-iḡāz</i> ) .....	87
3.4.5	Das Schweigen ( <i>aṣ-ṣamt</i> ) .....	90
3.5	Sprachliche Mängel.....	96
3.5.1	Sprachunfähigkeit und Fehlerhaftigkeit ( <i>al-'iyy</i> ).....	96
3.5.2	Dialekt und Umgangssprache ( <i>al-laḥn</i> ).....	103

3.6	Das Verhältnis von Bezeichnendem und Bezeichnetem.....	107
3.7	Die Sonderstellung der arabischen Sprache.....	113
3.7.1	Die Beduinen.....	122
3.8	Zusammenfassung.....	125
4.	<b>Rezeption</b> .....	132
4.1	Abū Hilāl al-'Askarī .....	133
4.1.1	Motivik und sprachliche Originalität .....	134
4.1.2	Rezeptionsmuster.....	135
4.2	'Abdalqāhir al-Ġurġānī.....	138
4.2.1	Von der existentiellen Bedeutung der Rede .....	140
4.2.2	Erkenntnis und Komposition .....	142
4.2.3	Der Wille zur Formulierung .....	153
4.2.4	Zur Bevorzugung des Wortlauts ( <i>al-lafz</i> ).....	157
5.	<b>Schluss</b> .....	162
5.1	Professionalisierung und Engagement .....	162
5.2	Ausgewogenheit .....	166
5.3	Annäherung an das Ideal.....	167
	English Summary .....	173
	Abkürzungen/Kurztitel .....	176
	Literaturverzeichnis .....	177
	Index.....	183

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## English Summary

This book is the result of several years of fruitful research and teaching at the Department for Arabic and Islamic Studies, University of Goettingen, Germany. There, it has been accepted by the Faculty of Humanities as my *Habilitation* in 2004. Parts of the book could be discussed during a lengthy stay in Lebanon as well as on conferences and workshops during the past few years. I want to express my sincere gratitude to all colleagues and friends who gave me inspiration and support with their remarks, ideas and criticism.

Abū 'Uthmān 'Amr b. Baḥr al-Kinānī al-Fuqaymī al-Jāḥiẓ, living from 776/7 to 868 in Basra und Bagdad, is one of the most interesting Arab scholars. His numerous works reflect the vivid intellectual life of his time. They show a free and educated mind, connected with the debates (and the dependences) of his contemporaries, full of contradictions and eager to comment on everything that came across his pen. Especially interesting are his ideas on language and rhetoric. Al-Jāḥiẓ has often been criticized for not writing systematically enough, for writing about everyone and everything which is why he is thought to not have provided consistent theories. Western literary theory often ignores that there have been approaches to literary theory in the Arab world. Therefore, it proved to be a challenging task to bring these two fields together: to extract al-Jāḥiẓ's ideas on language and understanding and to work them up for the interested academic world; not only to discuss them with colleagues in Arabic and Islamic studies but also for the interested scholars in the field of literary history, literary theory, comparative literature and the history of linguistic philosophy.

The early years of the Islamic community attest a remarkable effort to collect and classify knowledge. After some introductory remarks on the subject, on the dimension of the linguistic turn in philosophy in general and in the Arabic thought in particular, chapter two sketches the atmosphere in which concepts of language could grow. The most important development of that time was the implementation of literary criticism (*naqd*) as a discipline of its own, the criticism of language, poetry, and speech. Mastering the language was no longer only a means to express ideas in theology, philosophy, history and sciences. Ibn Sallām al-Jumāḥī, Ibn Qutayba, al-Jāḥiẓ and others showed more interest in how essential the knowledge of the mechanisms of language influences our life. From the starting points, religion and poetry, these scholars delivered evidences for the far-reaching consequences. Classification and categorization of poetical speech and rhetorical effects are more than decorations on an aesthetic playground.

One intensifying element was the increasing awareness of a maturing society. Islam being the common denominator, all the rest was subject to discussion and change. Origins, values, ethics, knowledge had to be agreed on and argued about. Foreign cultures (Iranian, Indian, Greek) were incorporated while Arabic-Islamic

norms had to be established. It is this mixture of self-determination that led to the question about the role of Arabic beyond the language of the prophet Muḥammad. Although al-Jāḥiẓ starts with very concrete descriptions of linguistic phenomena, he draws theoretical conclusions that go further.

Chapter three begins with a structured analysis of al-Jāḥiẓ's system of language. He developed this system in the *Kitāb al-bayān wa-l-tabyīn* which he probably finished as an *opus magnum* in his last years. However, we can also find statements and opinions on language and rhetoric in other works by him, for example *Kitāb al-ḥayawān* and several of his *rasā'il*. Five spheres of language (words/*alfāz*, gesture/*ishāra*, scripture/*khaṭṭ*, calculation/*ʿaql*, universal reference/*niṣba*) are distinguished and completed by certain features that appear in the communication process, such as silence (*ṣamt*). After focusing on the oral manifestations of language (for example the qualities of a good sermon), al-Jāḥiẓ gives us examples for the poor use of language, too.

The objective of this chapter is to investigate how far al-Jāḥiẓ goes when he analyzes mechanisms of language. A thorough reading proves that he did not simply justify the superior role of the Arabs within the human community - as it may appear in polemics against the *shu'ūbiyya* -, but tried to understand the rules of communication. In the second and third centuries after *hijra* there has been an animated culture of dispute and debate among the Arabs on how and where to position themselves in the range of peoples and languages. While finding arguments for the special responsibility of native Arabs and following the traditional line of thought with regard to the Islamic revelation, al-Jāḥiẓ reaches a point where he elaborates mechanisms of communication in general. He even mentions the language of birds as an example for the idea that each communication process is perfect in itself as long as the participants can understand each other. Understanding, here, means an undisturbed equivalence of the signifier and the signified. Furthermore, communication does not necessarily take place within the boundaries of language; it can happen through sounds, gestures, and any expression or sign that means something to somebody else. Criticism of dialects and faults, therefore, is not at first an elitism and a justification of Arab superiority (at least not only), but a consciousness of the fragility of communication. This communication, for al-Jāḥiẓ, has two dimensions, strung together: communication among humans and communication with God. And here, al-Jāḥiẓ goes back to Islam and at the same time universalizes his approach. God gets in contact with His creatures whilst sending signs. The whole creation is a sign of God, and man is called to decipher it. Although al-Jāḥiẓ did not express it explicitly, we could go so far and claim that the decoding process is a reciprocal one. Man, too, has to make himself understood before His creator who, in turn, has to understand.

Communication among humans also is a divine gift that has to be used properly. The many examples of misunderstandings and good or bad speech al-Jāḥiẓ gives, serve the purpose of sensitizing his readers for the extensive effect language can

have. Beyond the short-term effect of being unable to grasp the meaning of a word or the intention of a speaker, in the long term the creation could be damaged.

The fourth chapter touches on the problem of reception. Al-Jāḥiẓ's works have been read, commented on and developed further by many authors; besides the view that his theories are hard to grasp we find respect for his style and for the almost unequalled variety of his writings. However, most disciples and successors do not go into detail but rather content themselves with general assessments. As two examples, the impact on Abū Hilāl al-'Askarī and 'Abdalqāhir al-Jurjānī is examined with respect to the ground al-Jāḥiẓ has prepared. The concept of *naẓm* that made al-Jurjānī famous and especially interesting for modern literary theory can be found in its beginnings in al-Jāḥiẓ's theories, too. Both try to grasp the moment and the circumstances at which signifier and signified – or *lafẓ* and *ma'nā* – can come together and how the human speaker can reach this point. While al-Jāḥiẓ sometimes ventures forward and gives the human communication partners the responsibility not only for the successful connection to each other but also for the protection of the creation, al-Jurjānī in the last moment pulls back and leaves the decisive action to a somewhat diffuse inspiration by which the intention of the speaker meets the right expression or the chosen word meets the right image.

One of the unanswered questions in al-Jāḥiẓ's-research-circles is the one about the reason and motivation behind his writing style in *Kitāb al-bayān wat-tabyīn*. As I have mentioned in the introduction, there are many excellent investigations and studies on different aspects of al-Jāḥiẓ's writings. When we try to answer this question, we inevitably enter the sphere of speculation. Chapter five focuses on the consequences the previous results could have for our picture of al-Jāḥiẓ in particular and the role of early Arabic linguistic and literary theory within a broader framework in general. It seems as if al-Jāḥiẓ entered an ongoing discourse of his time that must have been much more diverse and colourful than we usually assume. While earlier works often clearly reveal their patrons or the political circumstances under which they have been presented, the last elaborations on language and perception show much more ambivalence and freedom of thought. Modern literary theory, especially when dealing with semiotics and a linguistic turn in philosophy, would gain a lot in recognizing the rich Arabic heritage when it comes to the theories of signs. Al-Jāḥiẓ starts from the rather limited field of theological defence, linguistic perfection and cultural rivalry – and ends up with surprising insights into the nature of communication.