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Spelling Out a 'World' in Brotherly Letters

**A Study of Transitivity and Narrative in Pre-modern and Modern Ikhwāniyyāt ('Brotherly Letters') from North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula**

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# Spelling Out a “World” in Brotherly Letters

A Study of Transitivity and Narrative in Pre-modern and Modern

*’Iḥwāniyyāt* from North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula

Call for Applications

August, 2017

**Practicing “Blickwechsel”: Entangled Perspectives on Theory, Arts and History  
in the Field of Arabic Literary Studies**

**AGYA International Bilingual Summer School**

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## Introduction

The proposed study seeks to assess the semantic and interpretative repositories in a selection of unofficial, or private, Arabic letters of the *’iḥwāniyyāt* (‘brotherly letters’) genre, from the western part of the pre-modern and modern Arab-Islamic world where one finds al-’Andalus (Andalusia) and the Greater Maḡrib. The letters intended as material for the analysis were authored by the Andalusian vizier and litterateur ’Ibn ’Abī al-Ḥiṣāl Muḥammad al-Ġāfiqī (d. 540/1146), the Maḡribian Islamic judge and poet ’Ibn ’Umayra al-Maḥzūmī (d. 656/1258), and from the modern period marked by the *Nahḍa* (‘The awakening; the Arab “Renaissance”’), the Tunisian poet ’Abū al-Qāsim al-Šābī (d. 1353/1934) and the southern Maḡribian religious scholar, politician, and author Muḥammad al-Muḥṭār al-Sūsī (d. 1383/1963).

By working from the premise of an existing diegesis (i.e. narrative; story), or “world-representative” material, the analysis aims to construe the experiential craft of characterization and depiction through a transitivity model<sup>1</sup>. The study will focus on the epistolary “’anā”-character, the “I”, and the epistolary “’anta/’antum”-character, the “You”, and how their constructions of meaning and interpretation are brought about. By virtue of the functionality of this stylistic approach, which has rarely been sought with regard to Arabic literature<sup>2</sup>, one is able to appreciate language as a generous resource for meaning making and, by extension, as functionally related to its context of use, albeit a literary or “micro-historical” one, where epistolary language may have been used for conveying a particular meaning or enacting a specific agency (cf. de Silva & Burns, 1999: 34). The features of transitivity in the epistolary discourses may be further juxtaposed in the light of possible common themes, such as affliction (*’ibtīlā*), rebuke (*’itāb*), travel/exile (*safar/naḥy*), longing (*ḥanīn/šawq*), and fraternal love (*’iḥā*). Thus, in essence, this study is an exploratory one that ranges across chronological and territorial frontiers with its probing stylistic and narrative case studies of specimens from what seems to be a perennial art of letter writing.

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1 The transitivity model concerns itself with the analysis of various processes, realized, or represented, by types of verbs and inquires about the method with which the writer (or speaker) encodes the processes experienced in the narrative: Material Processes, Mental Processes, Relational Processes, Behavioral Processes, Verbal Processes, and Existential Processes. Here, ‘transitivity’ is used rather as a semantic concept than a purely syntactic description of a verb that takes a direct object (Eggins, 1994: 317-318; Iwamoto, n.d.).

2 To the best of my knowledge there exist only a modest amount of related studies, of which the following are key examples: Al-Janabi, Mahdi, K. H., “Transitivity Analysis in English and Arabic Short Narrative Texts: A Contrastive Study”, *Majallat al-’Ādāb*, Vol. 107 (1435/2013): 31-58; Abd El-Wahab, Dalia Abd El-Wahab M., *Transitivity in English and Arabic: Problems Arising in Translation (A Contrastive Systemic Functional Study)*. The Faculty of Arts, Alexandria University, 2012; Bardi, Mohammed, A., *A Systemic Functional Description Of The Grammar Of Arabic*. Department of Linguistics, Macquarie University. 2008.

### ***Research Questions***

How do linguistic features of transitivity contribute to meaning making within and above and beyond the epistolary texts (the *’iḥwāniyyāt*)?;

What semantic and interpretative contents have the epistolary “’anā”-character, the “I”, and the epistolary “’anta/’antum”-character, the “You”, been constructed with?

How can aspects of narrative voice and perspective impart meaning and interpretation in these regards?

### **State of the Art**

The relatively recent “trans-generic” branch of modern narratology works from the premise that the discipline's different concepts and system of categories, whether classical or modern, are more or less applicable in the analysis of other “genres” or formats (e.g. non-fiction genres, lyric poetry, etc) (Müller-Zettelmann, 2011: 249; Hühn & Schönert, 2005: 1-2). Trans-generic narratology, when actually employed, has confirmed the narrative's wide scope of validity and has been able to discuss and demonstrate how both basic and more intrinsic narrative elements are adopted and transformed when used in other formats and expressions (see e.g. Müller-Zettelmann, 2011: 249). However, as highlighted by Hühn and Sommer (2012), there is still much more to be investigated within the field of trans-generic narratology. Among the suggested subjects for further research one finds the relation of event types, or planes of eventfulness, with different cultures and traditions and historical epochs, and the nature of their transmission with respect to the media or format in question (Hühn & Sommer, 2012). I believe that a functional stylistic approach, with its integrated model of language and context as conceptualized in *transitivity*, with its various process types, could be helpful for precisely this trans-generic and cross-cultural (and cross-chronological) call. Moreover, and as further argued and illustrated by Paul Simpson and Patricia Canning (2014), narratological inquires constitutes important stylistic intersections with transitivity analysis, and this, in view of the fact that accounts on transitivity themselves to a large degree have neglected concepts that pertains to the plane of narrative<sup>3</sup> (Simpson and Canning, 2014: 291). This neglect may be due to the conventional transitivity profile simply not being equipped enough to alone grasp and

3 See also Iwamoto, Noriko, "Stylistic and Linguistic Analysis of a Literary Text Using Systemic Functional Grammar", *Departmental Bulletin Paper*, (n.d.): 61-96.

Other examples of literary studies (Western literature) in which a transitivity model is employed are: Afrianto, Lia, M. I. and Seomantri, Ypsi, S., "Transitivity Analysis on Shakespeare's Sonnets", *IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, Vol. 19, Ver. 1 (Jan. 2014): 78-85; Gumiran, Anne Elizabeth, A., "Transitivity Analysis of John Green's "The Fault in Our Stars", MAESL, De La Salle University-Dasmariñas, n.d. (16 pp.).

sufficiently reflect this extra layer of meaning(s) that Simpson and Canning describes as “the dynamic relationship that obtains between what we *feel* from the text and what is actually *there*. Or not there, as the case may be” (ibid: 299). This state-of-the-art, combined with the scarcity of studies in Arabic literature in which these language-based frameworks have been employed, either singularly or together, makes this an intriguing subject for research that may further discover and shed light on how transitivity and narrative are rendered in pre-modern and modern Arabic literary contexts, and in a substantial manner illustrate what insights they may elicit as hermeneutic tools.

### **Theoretical Framework and Method**

Considering that the semantic and interpretative properties of the epistolary “I” and “You” could be very much determined by the writing subjects' (i.e. the narrating “I”s) experiences and perceptions of the world and themselves, these can arguably be systematically deconstructed from the writers' use of language through a transitivity model. Indeed, literary theorist Mieke Bal too, accentuates *points of perceptions, motivation*, and the relation between *perception and opinion* as all being aspects of description (Bal, 1985: 140, 144). Although Bal seems to delimit this “experientiality” to the three key senses of sight, hearing, and touch, I will seek to expand this notion of experience to also incorporate more abstract and subtle modes of “experiencing” the world, such as possible behavioral, mental, and relational ones, all of which assessments are enabled through a transitivity analysis. Thus, within this framework, the study will inevitably explore the efficiency of this within stylistics celebrated analytical model, developed from Michael Halliday's *Systemic Functional Grammar*, as a both descriptive and interpretative tool in the analysis of pre-modern and modern private letters in Arabic. Moreover, the functionalist method interestingly facilitates the way in which the narratological aspect of *voice* and perspective (focalization) can meditatively be brought into the interpretative call of the analysis when exploring epistolary discourse and how it functions in relation to the signified contents of its “story” (*histoire*).

In short, I believe the proposed functional stylistic and narrative approach, with their complementary schemes and inquiries, can elicit curious insights, potential connections and valuable comparisons with regard to not only the stylistic and aesthetic bases of the epistolary texts but also their philosophy and psychology.

### ***Entangled Perspectives***

On a theoretical and methodological level, a sense of entanglement is conceivable in the study's examination and interpretation of relations and connections between the lexico-grammatical

category of transitivity, aspects of narrative voice and perspective and “world-representative” material<sup>4</sup> found in characterization and depiction – trans-generically and cross-culturally.

Taken to a more abstract level of context, the epistolary texts of this study were written in points of time in Arab and Islamic history that arguably all witnessed a phenomena, of different scales, of self-reflective retrospection, and perhaps also prospection, in light of present state of affairs, whether personal, societal or communal, giving birth to various ideas and concepts of rootedness, reform and cultural and religious revival or awakening (cf. the *Nahḍa* of the 19<sup>th</sup> and mid-20<sup>th</sup> centuries [see e.g. Hill, 2012; 2015], the “traditionalist” tendencies in the Almoravid period [see e.g. Monroe, 2004: 37, 52; Būtšiš, 1993; ‘Abd al-Laṭīf, 1988] and the succeeding ascetic and reformist Almohad ideology [see e.g. Viguera Molins, 2014]). All of which may open up for new cross-cultural and cross-chronological vistas from which particular historical contexts can be viewed and contemplated. It also comprises a very clear shift from the reductionist view of the modern *Nahḍa*-phenomena as a historically and geographically isolated 'East meets the West'-scenario, which – although not the subject of this study – in like manner calls for the placing of the phenomena into a larger global context of contemporaneous “revivals” and “awakenings”, such as the Ottoman reform of the *Tanzīmāt*, the Meiji Restoration, the Bengali renaissance, the Jewish *haskala* and the Harlem renaissance poets. It surely also raises the question whether the tropes of 'renaissance', i.e. 'rebirth', exclusively signifies the way in which non-Western societies conceived their entrance into a historical stage of '[colonial] modernity', a somewhat generalized cultural notion in and of itself (cf. Hill, 2015: 271-272; Rastegar, 2013).

The pre-modern and modern private letters have a great potential of adding new perspectives on the *Nahḍa*-phenomena and its pre-modern equivalents, and this, given that the overwhelming material that *Nahḍa*-studies have dealt with thus far remains for the most part literary in the narrower sense. The study is also an address to the, within the field, general marginalization of the perspective of the Western part of the Arab and Islamic world, whose narratives may potentially bring nuances the histories of the region (Hill, 2015: 261, 271; Rastegar, 2013: 231).

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4 Here, “world-representative” is not measured against a notion of “realism”, rather it is the kind of, by language, evoked world that fills the diegesis, and that may be more or less “realistic”.

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