



Mahmud Zamakhshari's Contribution to Linguistics and His Scientific Legacy

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Received: 06-08-2025
Accepted: 17-09-2025
Published: 28-10-2025



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Abstract: *This paper explores the linguistic significance and scholarly legacy of Mahmud Zamakhshari, one of the most prominent philologists of the Islamic Golden Age. Special attention is given to his influential lexicographic works, particularly *Asas al-Balagha*, which reflects his deep understanding of Arabic eloquence and grammar. The study analyzes the structure of his dictionary, the use of illustrative materials from the Qur'an, Hadith, Arabic poetry, and proverbs, as well as the categorization of lexical entries by meaning and usage. Furthermore, the paper highlights *Muqaddimat al-Adab* as a foundational work in multilingual lexicography and comparative linguistics. Zamakhshari's approach demonstrates a remarkable integration of linguistic theory and practical application, making his contributions valuable to both historical and contemporary linguistic studies.*

Keywords: *Mahmud Zamakhshari, Asas Al-Balagha, Muqaddimat Al-Adab, Arabic Linguistics, Lexicography, Islamic Philology, Comparative Linguistics, Eloquence, Grammar, Qur'anic Studies.*

Introduction

Among the great intellectual figures of the Islamic Golden Age, Mahmud Zamakhshari (1075–1144) occupies a prominent position in the fields of Arabic linguistics, lexicography, and literary criticism. Known as “Jar Allah” for his deep scholarship in Qur'anic exegesis and Arabic eloquence, Zamakhshari left behind a vast body of work, with *Asās al-Balāgha* and *Muqaddimat al-Adab* standing out as foundational contributions to Arabic philology.

Asās al-Balāgha established a unique approach to Arabic lexicography by combining literal and figurative meanings of words, supported by extensive examples from the Qur'an, hadith, Arabic poetry, and proverbs. Unlike earlier lexicons, Zamakhshari presented entries alphabetically and contextually, thereby making the dictionary not only a linguistic resource but also a guide to eloquence and stylistics.

Meanwhile, *Muqaddimat al-Adab* went beyond traditional Arabic lexicography by incorporating multilingual glossaries in Persian, Turkic, and Mongolian, making it one of the earliest comparative linguistic works. This innovation reflects Zamakhshari's recognition of the intercultural and multilingual environment of the Muslim world,

highlighting the role of language in fostering communication and scholarship across civilizations.

Zamakhshari's contributions demonstrate a deep integration of linguistic theory, practical lexicography, and cultural studies. His legacy has influenced not only classical Arabic scholarship but also modern linguistics, where his works continue to be studied as pioneering examples of multilingual dictionaries and contextual lexicons. This paper seeks to analyze Zamakhshari's linguistic methodology, evaluate his innovations, and situate his legacy within both historical and contemporary linguistic studies.

Methodology

Zamakhshari was one of the leading scholars of his era and is credited with writing nearly seventy works covering various fields of science. Unfortunately, only a portion of these have survived to our time. Different sources provide different counts of his works. The German orientalist Carl Brockelmann, in his "History of Arabic Literature," states that Zamakhshari authored 31 works. In contrast, Dr. Ahmad Muhammad Khufi, in his monograph titled "Zamakhshariy," mentions 48 works. Academician A. Rustamov, in his book "Mahmud Zamakhshariy," provides evidence of 39 works, while B.Z. Khalidov, in one of his articles, asserts that Zamakhshari wrote 55 works. Another researcher of Zamakhshari's scientific legacy, U. Uvatov, in his book "Nozik Iboralar" ("Subtle Expressions"), presents information about 34 works[1]. Furthermore, in 1998, Zamakhshari's work "Asas al-Balagha" was published in Beirut, and in its introduction, the researcher Muhammad Basil 'Uyun al-Sud included a list of 65 of the scholar's works.

Interest in studying the scholarly legacy of Mahmud Zamakhshari has established its own traditions in the field of global Oriental studies. In particular, many scholars and researchers have produced numerous works about Zamakhshari's biography, his scientific activities, and his literary heritage.

Zamakhshari's scientific work has been studied in a general sense for a long time. Among medieval Arab researchers, Ibn Khallikan[2], Yaqut al-Hamawi[3] and Haji Khalifa[4] provided valuable information about his life and contributions in their works. He has attracted not only Eastern scholars, but also Western researchers, especially European orientalists. The findings of prominent orientalists and scholars such as Carl Brockelmann[5], I.Yu. Krachkovskiy[6], B.Z. Khalidov[7], A.B. Khalidov[8], and V.M. Belkin[9] on Zamakhshari's scholarly legacy play a significant role in the study of his life and intellectual contributions.

Zamakhshari was renowned in his time as a prominent linguist, lexicographer, Islamic scholar, and literary critic. A major influence on his development in these fields was his teacher - the famous linguist, lexicographer, and literary scholar Abu Mudar Mahmud ibn Jarir al-Dabbiy al-Isfahani, who died in 1113 in Marv. According to Yaqut al-Hamawi, Zamakhshari's mentor Abu Mudar Mahmud ibn Sharif al-Isfahani was an unparalleled expert in the field of linguistics, particularly in syntax (nahw) and morphology (sarf)[10].

The Arabic language occupies a central place in Zamakhshari's scholarly work. He wrote most of his works in Arabic. According to I.Yu. Krachkovskiy[11], although Zamakhshari was not of Arab origin, he rose to become a prominent representative of Arab culture. From a young age, he studied the Arabic language with great passion and

enthusiasm. He spent many years tirelessly researching the lives, customs, and various dialects of the Arab people. The scholar regarded Arabic with deep affection. For this reason, he undertook a profound study of the language and authored numerous important works on Arabic grammar, lexicon, and linguistics more broadly. His world-renowned works such as “*Muqaddimat al-Adab*,” “*Al-Mufassal*,” and “*Asas al-Balagha*” were written in this field. The Arabs’ concise evaluation of him - “If the Khwarazmian had not been lame, the Arabs would not have known their own language!” - speaks volumes and requires no further commentary[12].

Deeply admiring the vast expressive power of the Arabic language, Zamakhshari composed all his works exclusively in Arabic. His perfect mastery of the language was undoubtedly the result of great effort and tireless dedication.

In the prefaces to his works, Zamakhshari consistently acknowledged Arabic as a tool of Arab culture. Arab scholars held his scientific legacy in deep respect and once said: “The Arabs could not conquer Mawarannahr with weapons, but a scholar from Khwarazm conquered the entire Arab world with his staff”[13].

Zamakhshari mastered many fields of knowledge, including Arabic grammar (*sarf* and *nahw*), literary criticism, lexicography, linguistics, geography, prosody (*‘arud*), logic, religious sciences, and Qur’anic exegesis. His linguistic works, in particular, form a substantial part of his scholarly legacy.

Below is a comparative analysis of the structure and composition of two of Zamakhshari’s great works in linguistics — *Muqaddimat al-Adab* and *Asas al-Balagha*.

Mahmud Zamakhshari’s *Muqaddimat al-Adab* has a complex structure, consisting of sections such as the introduction, nouns, verbs, particles (function words), noun declension, and verb conjugation. In scholarly literature, *Muqaddimat al-Adab* is also widely known as a dictionary, since its sections on nouns and verbs are compiled in the form of a lexicon and are significantly larger in volume than the others. The work was completed around the year 1137. In this work, Zamakhshari aimed to include all the words and expressions used in the Arabic language of his time, paying particular attention to their etymology. For this reason, this major work of his can rightly be considered one of the earliest of its kind in this field.

Manuscripts of *Muqaddimat al-Adab* exist that include vocabulary in Arabic, Persian, Turkic-Uzbek, and Mongolian. According to some sources, there is also a version with Greek entries[14].

Muqaddimat al-Adab begins with a brief introduction. Many of the author's works — including *Atwaq al-Dhahab fi al-Mawa’izh wa al-Khutab* (The Golden Necklaces of Advice and Sermons) and *Asas al-Balagha* (The Foundation of Eloquence) — likewise open with short prefaces. In contrast to the traditional lengthy introductions common in classical literary works, Zamakhshari uses his prefaces to directly explain the purpose of the book, its structure, and the reasons for its composition. In the preface to *Muqaddimat al-Adab*, he also expresses his thoughts on the richness of the Arabic language and the necessity of studying it.

Result and Discussion

Zamakhshari's *Muqaddimat al-Adab* is a multilingual, encyclopedic work with a complex structure — the kind rarely encountered in the history of philological science. The first section, dedicated to nouns, essentially functions as a modern encyclopedic dictionary. The second section, on verbs, is structured at a high scholarly level based on Arabic grammatical rules. The third, fourth, and fifth sections — dealing with particles, noun declension, and verb conjugation — are devoted to the core rules of Arabic grammar. Each grammatical rule is supported by numerous examples, making the explanations both clear and academically rigorous[15].

This work by Zamakhshari includes information on all branches of knowledge that were part of the science of *adab* (literature and refined knowledge) in his era. According to Professor Zohidjon Islomov, Doctor of Philological Sciences and a long-time researcher of *Muqaddimat al-Adab*, several manuscript versions of the work have survived to the present day. These include bilingual Arabic–Persian, Arabic–Turkic, Arabic–Khwarazmian manuscripts; trilingual versions with Arabic, Persian, and Turkic; and even quadrilingual manuscripts featuring Arabic, Persian, Mongolian, and Turkic glossaries. Indeed, this work of the great scholar encompasses deep linguistic knowledge and a high level of scholarly expertise, and from the time of its creation until today, it has remained one of the rare encyclopedic sources in the field of linguistics[16].

In Zamakhshari's scholarly legacy, the lexicon *Asas al-Balagha* ("The Foundations of Eloquence") holds a special place. This dictionary is not only significant among his linguistic works, but it also plays an important role in the broader field of Arabic lexicography. According to academician A. Rustamov, Mahmud Zamakhshari raised Arabic lexicography to a much higher level through his work *Asas al-Balagha*[17]. Hussein Nasser also emphasized that this very work laid the foundation for the fourth school of Arabic lexicography.

In this lexicon, Zamakhshari arranged the entries alphabetically, taking into account all root consonants of the words. At the same time, he included the words as they were commonly used in the phrases and expressions of his time, without separating them from their contextual usage. This method provided a unique basis for offering detailed and comprehensive explanations of word meanings.

In *Asās al-Balāgha*, Mahmud Zamakhshari aimed to reflect the eloquence (*faṣāḥa*) of the Arabic literary language. According to the introduction of the dictionary, the author's goal in adopting this method was to cultivate eloquent speakers and accomplished writers. It is for this very reason that he titled his work *Asās al-Balāgha*, meaning The Foundations of Eloquence. The dictionary is organized according to the 28 letters of the Arabic alphabet and includes a total of 3,742 lexical entries. Zamakhshari refers to each alphabetical section as a *bāb* (chapter), and each *bāb* is further subdivided according to the second radical (root consonant) of the word - these subdivisions are called *faṣl* (section).

Asās al-Balāgha holds a prominent place not only in Mahmud Zamakhshari's lexicographical legacy, but also in the historical development of traditional Arabic lexicography. In this regard, Fāḍil Šāliḥ al-Samarra'ī notes: "Asās al-Balāgha is a dictionary that stands apart from all others. Neither before nor after it was any lexicon compiled using

this unique method. The dictionary is remarkable for the ease with which its entries can be found. For this reason, no other dictionary can truly replace it. Even if other dictionaries lose their relevance, *Asās al-Balāgha* will retain its value and significance” [18].

Asās al-Balāgha contains a total of 3,742 dictionary entries, each structured according to the following components:

- a. the headword;
- b. the primary meaning of the headword;
- c. derivatives of the headword (such as verb forms in both past and present tenses, active and passive participles, verbal nouns, and so on) presented within example sentences;
- d. quotations from the Qur’an, Hadiths, sayings of the caliphs and companions, excerpts from poetic works, idiomatic expressions, and proverbs used to illustrate the headword;
- e. the figurative (metaphorical) meaning of the word;
- f. sentences in which the headword is used metaphorically.

The dictionary entries in *Asās al-Balāgha* can be classified by length into three categories: short, medium, and long entries. Of the 3,742 total entries, 480 are categorized as short dictionary entries. These are brief in length and typically define the headword using only one or two sentences. They provide only the literal meaning of the word. Most of the headwords in these short entries represent words that were relatively infrequently used during that period.

In contrast, medium-length entries not only provide the literal meaning of the headword but also include its figurative meaning. However, compared to long entries, these medium-length articles use fewer illustrative materials for explanation.

In the long dictionary entries, all meanings of the headword are presented. The explanations of such entries can range from half a page to two full pages. In nearly all of these entries, both the literal and figurative meanings of the word are thoroughly explained [19].

Mahmud Zamakhshari primarily based his definitions on the following sources: the Qur’an, Hadiths, idiomatic expressions, proverbs, and poetic excerpts. A total of 447 examples in *Asās al-Balāgha* are drawn from the Qur’an. This fact demonstrates that the Qur’an was widely used during that period not only as a religious text but also as a literary and scholarly source.

In addition, the dictionary extensively uses the Hadiths of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) to explain word meanings. Since many Hadiths concern education, ethics, and moral guidance, the scholar skillfully employed them as rich illustrative material.

In *Asās al-Balāgha*, figurative meanings of words are primarily explained through idiomatic expressions and proverbs. Although some of these expressions have fallen out of use over time, many continue to appear in modern Arabic literature. Furthermore, the dictionary entries also draw upon poetic excerpts from contemporary poets of the 11th–12th centuries to help clarify the meanings of words [20].

Conclusion

The *Asās al-Balāgha* demonstrates Zamakhshari's profound mastery of Arabic eloquence and its grammatical features. In this work, the author provides detailed explanations that reflect his attention to even the subtle semantic distinctions between headwords. The scholar possessed comprehensive knowledge of all linguistic sciences related to the Arabic language, as well as a deep understanding of the Qur'an, Hadiths, idiomatic expressions, proverbs, and the works of Arab poets - all of which he skillfully incorporated into his writings.

Mahmud Zamakhshari, as one of the leading linguists, theorists, and literary figures of his time, made a significant contribution to the advancement of Arabic linguistics. His work *Asās al-Balāgha* provides a deep analysis of the science of eloquence, while *Muqaddimat al-Adab* laid the foundation for multilingual learning methodology. Both works serve as important theoretical and practical sources for modern linguistics.

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