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Lafẓ and maʿnā

Lafẓ (linguistic expression, utterance) and *maʿnā* (meaning, signification) are terms in which linguists as well as scholars in other Islamic disciplines have described language, beginning with Sībawayh (d. c.180/796) in his famous *Kitāb*, the oldest extant treatise on Arabic grammar (on Sībawayh, see Carter). In the fourth chapter of his *Kitāb*, Sībawayh draws attention to the various ways in which expression and meaning may be related: each distinct expression can have a specific meaning; one expression may possess several meanings (homonymy); and different expressions can have an identical meaning (synonymy; on the extent to which, if at all, Greek grammar and logic or other linguistic traditions had an impact on the formation of the Arabic grammatical science, see Carter, 2–4). Although Sībawayh does not go into further detail, it is clear that underlying his distinction is at least a rudimentary theory of signification, a theory that over the subsequent centuries was increasingly elaborated upon. Notably—and from a Western perspective, surprisingly—the most far-reaching developments in this field did not derive from the linguistic tradition (based on *ṣarf* [morphology] and *naḥw* [syntax]), but rather from *balāgha* (rhetoric) and *uṣūl al-fiqh* (legal theory).

Even so, the origin of discussions around *lafẓ* and *maʿnā* can be traced back to linguistics, probably triggered by problems arising in Qurʾānic exegesis (Versteegh). Within approximately two to three centuries, the *lafẓ–maʿnā* pair had acquired a functional meaning that still distinguishes it today, somewhat resembling the notions specified by the terms *signifiant* and *signifié* in the linguistic theory developed by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Accordingly, expressions are "coined" (*mawḍūʿ*), that is, they possess one or several fixed meanings—either through original positing (*al-waḍʿ al-awwal*) or later "re-coinage" (through shifts resulting from usage, development of technical—particularly legal—terminology, and so forth; on the theory of "coinage" [*waḍʿ*], see Weiss). (For the earlier usage of the pair—for example, *maʿnā* as the speaker's intention, which precedes and determines the expression the speaker chooses to employ in order to convey her or his message—see Kouloughli.) It is important to note, however, that the term *lafẓ* embraces