



Language and Thought in Classical Arabic Poetry: A Linguistic–Philosophical Analysis

Asep Majidi Tamam

UNIK Cipasung Tasikmalaya
asepmtamam@unik-cipasung.ac.id

Adi Supardi

UNIK Cipasung Tasikmalaya
adisupardi@unik-cipasung.ac.id

Rohanda

UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung
rohanda@uinsgd.ac.id

Dadan Mardani

IAI AL-AZIS Indramayu
dadan@al-zaytun.ac.id

ENGLISH ABSTRACT

This article examines the relationship between language and thought in classical Arabic poetry from a linguistic–philosophical perspective. Language is viewed not only as a medium of expression but also as a framework for shaping human thought and worldview. In classical Arabic literary tradition, poetry functions as an intellectual and cultural space where linguistic structures, rhetorical devices, and symbolic expressions reflect rational, emotional, and spiritual ways of thinking. This study employs a qualitative approach using textual analysis and literary hermeneutics to analyze selected classical Arabic poems, including pre-Islamic poetry, the works of al-Mutanabbī, and Sufi poetry represented by Ibn al-Fāriḍ. The analysis focuses on linguistic features such as metaphor (*isti'ārah*), symbolism, rhythm, and rhyme, and their role in constructing cognitive and philosophical meanings. Drawing on theories of linguistic relativity and conceptual metaphor, this study argues that poetic language in classical Arabic literature not only represents thought but also shapes it. The findings show that classical Arabic poetry reflects symbolic and analogical thinking, where language connects rational reflection, emotional experience, and spiritual awareness. This study contributes to Arabic literary and linguistic studies by highlighting the cognitive and philosophical dimensions of poetic language in the classical Arabic tradition.

Keywords: Classical Arabic Poetry, Language and Thought, Linguistic Relativity, Poetic Language

INDONESIAN ABSTRACT

Artikel ini mengkaji relasi antara bahasa dan pikiran dalam syair Arab klasik melalui pendekatan linguistik dan filsafat bahasa. Bahasa dipahami tidak hanya sebagai sarana komunikasi, tetapi juga sebagai kerangka kognitif yang membentuk cara manusia berpikir, memaknai realitas, dan mengekspresikan pandangan hidup. Dalam tradisi sastra Arab, syair menempati posisi penting sebagai medium artikulasi intelektual, emosional, dan spiritual yang merefleksikan struktur berpikir masyarakat Arab pada berbagai periode sejarah. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode analisis teks dan hermeneutika sastra terhadap sejumlah syair Arab klasik, termasuk puisi pra-Islam, karya al-Mutanabbī, serta syair sufistik Ibn al-Fāriḍ. Analisis difokuskan pada unsur-unsur kebahasaan seperti metafora, simbolisme, ritme, dan rima, serta perannya dalam membangun makna filosofis dan kognitif. Dengan memanfaatkan perspektif relativitas linguistik dan teori metafora konseptual, artikel ini menunjukkan bahwa bahasa puitik dalam syair Arab klasik tidak sekadar merepresentasikan pikiran, tetapi turut membentuk dan mengarahkan cara berpikir yang bersifat simbolik, analogis, dan transendental. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa syair Arab klasik merupakan ruang kognitif yang mempertemukan refleksi rasional, pengalaman emosional, dan kesadaran spiritual melalui struktur bahasa yang khas.

Kata Kunci: *Syair Arab Klasik, Bahasa dan Pikiran, Relativitas Linguistik, Bahasa Puitik*

Introduction

The relationship between language and thought has long been a central concern in linguistics, philosophy of language, and cognitive studies. Language is no longer viewed merely as a neutral instrument for conveying pre-existing ideas, but rather as an active medium that shapes perception, organizes experience, and frames human understanding of reality through habitual patterns of meaning and use (Gadamer, 2004; Wittgenstein, 1953). Scholars have emphasized that linguistic structures influence how individuals conceptualize the world, construct meaning, and articulate both abstract and concrete experiences (Sapir, 1921; Whorf, 1956). From this perspective, language functions as a cognitive framework through which thought is not only expressed but also formed, a view reinforced by cognitive linguistic studies highlighting the role of metaphor and embodied experience in human cognition (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 2020; Littlemore, 2023).

In literary discourse, especially poetry, the relationship between language and thought becomes more visible and complex. Poetic language intensifies linguistic expression through metaphor, symbolism, rhythm, and stylistic deviation, allowing deeper cognitive and philosophical meanings to emerge through interpretation rather than literal representation (Ricoeur, 1977). Literary language therefore does not merely

reflect thought but actively participates in meaning construction and worldview formation (Gadamer, 2004; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Poetry creates a space where rational reflection, emotional experience, and symbolic imagination intersect, enabling language to expand cognition beyond ordinary discourse (Wittgenstein, 1953). Recent literary-cognitive studies have also emphasized the role of figurative language in shaping emotional and conceptual understanding within literary texts (Stockwell, 2024; Tsur, 2023).

Within the Arabic intellectual tradition, language occupies a particularly significant position. Arabic functions not only as a literary and cultural medium but also as a language closely associated with religious, philosophical, and aesthetic dimensions of Arab-Islamic civilization (Nasr, 1987). Classical Arabic poetry (*shi'r*) historically served as a vehicle for preserving collective memory, expressing ethical values, and articulating philosophical reflection (Arberry, 1965; Ibn Qutaybah, 1983; Jayyusi, 1977). Arabic poetry is characterized by strict metrical patterns (*'arūd*), rhyme (*qāfiyah*), and rhetorical devices such as metaphor (*isti'ārah*), simile (*tashbīh*), and symbolism (*kināyah*). These rhetorical structures reveal sophisticated conceptual and cognitive patterns embedded in Arabic literary expression (Mustofa, 2010). More recent studies in Arabic rhetoric and stylistics also highlight how poetic structures contribute to conceptual meaning-making and cultural cognition in Arabic literature (Alotaibi, 2024; Abdul-Raof, 2023).

Recent studies in Arabic linguistics and literature have increasingly highlighted the importance of meaning, discourse, and contextual interpretation in understanding Arabic texts. Previous research demonstrates growing scholarly interest in communicative structures in Qur'anic narratives, socio-cultural meanings embedded in Arabic language use, and the role of Arabic learning contexts in shaping students' engagement and understanding (Astari et al., 2023; Aulia, 2022; Kholis & Nadhif, 2023; Rozak et al., 2023; Suwardi et al., 2023). More recent studies have also emphasized cognitive, semantic, and linguistic dimensions in Arabic studies, including cognitive linguistics, Arabic discourse processing, and language-cognition relations (Alqahtani, 2024; AlJassmi, 2024; Saci, 2024). These studies suggest that Arabic texts and Arabic language practices are closely connected to broader systems of meaning, culture, and cognition. However, most existing research focuses primarily on pedagogical

applications, discourse analysis, or thematic interpretation rather than explicitly examining the relationship between linguistic structure and modes of thinking.

Classical Arabic poetry offers fertile ground for examining the interaction between language and thought. Across pre-Islamic, Islamic, and Sufi traditions, poetry functioned not merely as artistic expression but also as a medium for preserving collective memory and articulating philosophical reflection. Pre-Islamic poetry expressed tribal values and existential concerns through images of nature, space, and time, while poets such as al-Mutanabbī articulated ideas of power, identity, and human agency. In Sufi poetry, Ibn al-Fāriḍ employed symbolic expressions of love, union, and transcendence to conceptualize spiritual experience beyond literal description (Arberry, 1965; Chittick, 1989; Ibn al-Fāriḍ, 2004; Schimmel, 1975). Contemporary scholarship on Sufi poetics and Arabic literary cognition further demonstrates how symbolic language operates as a medium for spiritual and philosophical conceptualization (Knysh, 2023; Abdel Haleem, 2024).

From a linguistic perspective, classical Arabic poetry is marked by dense rhetorical structures and conceptual compression. Through metaphor, analogy, and symbolic expression, Arabic poetic language functions as a system of meaning-making rather than mere ornamentation, reflecting conceptual and rhetorical processes within the Arabic literary tradition (Jayyusi, 1977; Mustofa, 2010). This aligns with cognitive and hermeneutic approaches that regard figurative language as central to meaning construction and human conceptualization (Gadamer, 2004; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Ricoeur, 1977). Recent developments in cognitive poetics and discourse studies also support the view that literary language actively shapes perception, interpretation, and conceptual understanding (Gavins & Steen, 2023; Semino, 2024).

Although classical Arabic poetry has often been studied as literary heritage, cultural artifact, or rhetorical expression, it should also be understood as a cognitive and philosophical discourse embedded in language. Existing studies have contributed significantly to understanding Arabic poetic aesthetics and literary history, yet they often treat language primarily as a vehicle for conveying meaning rather than as an active force shaping modes of thought and conceptualization (Arberry, 1965; Ibn Qutaybah, 1983; Jayyusi, 1977). Similarly, contemporary Arabic studies have increasingly explored discourse, meaning, and Arabic learning practices, but they have

rarely examined classical Arabic poetry within a linguistic–philosophical framework (Astari et al., 2023; Aulia, 2022; Kholis & Nadhif, 2023; Rozak et al., 2023; Suwardi et al., 2023). Recent interdisciplinary studies in language philosophy and literary cognition also suggest the importance of integrating linguistic and cognitive perspectives in literary analysis (Evans, 2023; Zlatev, 2024).

Therefore, there remains a clear research gap concerning how poetic language functions as a cognitive framework shaping thought and meaning in classical Arabic poetry. Addressing this gap requires an interdisciplinary approach integrating Arabic literary studies with linguistics and philosophy of language. By adopting a linguistic–philosophical perspective, this study seeks to move beyond descriptive and thematic readings of Arabic poetry and foreground the active role of language in shaping patterns of thinking within the classical Arabic intellectual tradition.

In response to this gap, this article aims to examine classical Arabic poetry as a linguistic and cognitive domain in which language actively shapes modes of thought and meaning construction. Specifically, this study analyzes how metaphor, symbolism, rhythm, and rhyme function not only as stylistic devices but also as cognitive instruments reflecting and shaping patterns of thinking. By focusing on selected examples from pre-Islamic poetry, the works of al-Mutanabbī, and Sufi poetry represented by Ibn al-Fāriḍ, this article argues that poetic language embodies a symbolic and analogical mode of thought characteristic of the classical Arabic worldview.

Furthermore, this study contributes to Arabic linguistics and literary studies by introducing a linguistic–philosophical perspective that foregrounds the relationship between language and thought. By situating classical Arabic poetry within broader discussions of language, cognition, and meaning, this study seeks to enrich existing approaches that have primarily emphasized thematic, historical, or pedagogical dimensions of Arabic poetry. In doing so, the article offers an interdisciplinary framework that highlights the intellectual depth of Arabic poetic discourse and its relevance for contemporary studies of language, literature, and cognition.

Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research approach with a focus on textual analysis and literary hermeneutics. The qualitative approach is considered appropriate because the objective of this article is not to measure linguistic phenomena statistically, but to interpret meanings, symbols, and conceptual structures embedded in classical Arabic poetic texts, as commonly emphasized in qualitative and interpretative research traditions (Creswell, 2013). The study treats poetry as a linguistic and cognitive artifact, where language functions as a medium for shaping thought, worldview, and philosophical reflection through interpretative engagement with texts (Gadamer, 2004).

The data sources of this study consist of selected classical Arabic poems representing different historical and intellectual periods: pre-Islamic poetry (al-shi'r al-jāhili), the poetry of al-Mutanabbī as a representative of rational-rhetorical discourse, and Sufi poetry exemplified by Ibn al-Fāriḍ. These texts were selected purposively based on their linguistic richness, symbolic density, and relevance to discussions on language, meaning, and thought, following qualitative principles of purposive sampling in textual and interpretative research (Creswell, 2013). Authoritative editions of classical dīwāns and well-established secondary literature were used to ensure textual reliability and scholarly accuracy, as commonly practiced in classical Arabic literary studies (Arberry, 1965; Ibn al-Fāriḍ, 2004).

The analytical procedure involved several stages. First, the poetic texts were examined linguistically to identify prominent features such as metaphor (isti'ārah), symbolism, rhythm, rhyme, and rhetorical structure, following established approaches in Arabic rhetorical and literary analysis (balāghah) (Mustofa, 2010). Second, these linguistic features were interpreted hermeneutically to uncover their conceptual and cognitive implications, particularly in relation to how meaning and thought are constructed through poetic language (Gadamer, 2004; Ricoeur, 1977). Third, the findings were contextualized within broader discussions in linguistics and philosophy of language, especially studies concerned with the relationship between language, cognition, and worldview (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Sapir, 1921).

Although this article is non-empirical in nature, its methodological rigor lies in the systematic selection of texts, the careful application of interpretative analysis, and the integration of interdisciplinary perspectives, which are widely recognized as valid

strategies in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). By combining linguistic analysis with philosophical reflection, this method allows for a comprehensive understanding of classical Arabic poetry as a space where language and thought interact dynamically through symbolic and conceptual mediation (Gadamer, 2004). This approach is consistent with recent interpretative studies in Arabic linguistics and literature that emphasize semantic construction, communicative meaning, and contextual interpretation in Arabic texts (Astari et al., 2023; Aulia, 2022).

Result and Discussion

Linguistic Structures in Classical Arabic Poetry and Patterns of Thought

The linguistic structure of classical Arabic poetry reveals a close relationship between formal language organization and patterns of thought. One of the most distinctive features of Arabic poetry is its strict adherence to metrical patterns (‘arūd) and rhyme schemes (qāfiyah), which impose formal constraints on poetic expression. These constraints require poets to engage in deliberate lexical selection, syntactic compression, and semantic precision. As a result, meaning in classical Arabic poetry is not produced spontaneously, but carefully constructed through controlled linguistic choices. This structural discipline reflects a mode of thinking that values order, balance, and coherence, suggesting that poetic language functions as a framework for disciplined cognition rather than as a free-flowing emotional outlet.

From a cognitive perspective, the repetitive and patterned nature of meter and rhyme also plays a significant role in shaping thought processes. In predominantly oral cultures such as pre-Islamic Arab society, poetic structures functioned as mnemonic devices that facilitated memorization, transmission of knowledge, and collective reflection. The rhythmic organization of language trained the mind to think sequentially and relationally, reinforcing associative links between sound, meaning, and memory. This observation aligns with studies in linguistic cognition that view patterned language as a tool for organizing mental representation and conceptual continuity (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

In addition to formal structure, classical Arabic poetry is characterized by a dense use of figurative language, particularly metaphor (isti‘ārah), simile (tashbīh), and symbolic imagery. These linguistic features indicate a mode of thinking that is

predominantly analogical and associative rather than purely propositional. Meaning is often conveyed indirectly through images of nature, space, and movement—such as desert landscapes, journeys, and celestial phenomena—which function as conceptual metaphors for abstract ideas like honor, time, fate, and transcendence. Such metaphorical constructions demonstrate that poetic language in Arabic does not merely decorate meaning but actively shapes conceptual understanding by mapping concrete experience onto abstract thought.

The prevalence of symbolic language in classical Arabic poetry further suggests that thinking is mediated through culturally shared linguistic patterns. Symbols such as the abandoned campsite (*aṭlāl*), the journey (*riḥlah*), or the beloved figure operate as cognitive anchors that organize emotional and philosophical reflection. These symbols recur across different poetic periods, indicating a shared conceptual framework through which reality is interpreted. This view aligns with studies of Arabic literary and communicative discourse, which emphasize that Arabic texts are embedded in systems of meaning, cultural memory, and interpretative practices (Aulia, 2022; Jayyusi, 1977; Ricoeur, 1977).

The structure of classical Arabic poetry also demonstrates a balance between linguistic economy and semantic density. Poets often compress complex philosophical or emotional ideas into concise expressions, relying on the reader's linguistic and cultural competence to unpack layered meanings. This practice reflects a cognitive environment in which meaning is not explicitly stated but inferred through linguistic cues and shared conventions. As a result, understanding poetic language requires active cognitive engagement, reinforcing the idea that poetry functions as a site of thinking rather than a passive reflection of thought.

These findings indicate that the linguistic structures of classical Arabic poetry—meter, rhyme, figurative language, and symbolic imagery—are not merely formal or aesthetic devices. Instead, they constitute cognitive mechanisms that shape how ideas are conceptualized, remembered, and communicated. By structuring language in patterned and metaphorical ways, classical Arabic poetry fosters a mode of thinking that is relational, symbolic, and integrative. This supports the broader argument of this study that poetic language in the classical Arabic tradition actively participates in the

formation of thought, rather than serving solely as a vehicle for expressing pre-formed ideas.

Metaphor, Symbolism, and Cognitive Worldview in Classical Arabic Poetry

Metaphor and symbolism constitute central linguistic mechanisms through which classical Arabic poetry constructs and conveys cognitive and philosophical meaning. Rather than functioning as decorative elements, metaphors in Arabic poetry operate as conceptual tools that enable poets to articulate abstract ideas—such as time, fate, honor, love, and transcendence—through concrete and culturally familiar images. This reliance on figurative language indicates that poetic thought in the classical Arabic tradition is fundamentally metaphorical and analogical, grounded in lived experience and shared cultural symbols.

In classical Arabic poetry, metaphors frequently draw upon elements of the natural and social environment, including the desert, the journey, the night, weapons, and the beloved figure. These images serve as cognitive bridges between sensory experience and abstract reflection. For example, the desert is not merely a physical space but a metaphor for endurance, isolation, and existential struggle, while the journey (*riḥlah*) often symbolizes the passage of time, moral testing, or spiritual seeking. Through such metaphors, language enables poets to conceptualize complex ideas in ways that are both intelligible and emotionally resonant. This supports the view that metaphor is a fundamental structure of thought rather than a secondary linguistic embellishment (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Symbolism in classical Arabic poetry further reinforces the role of language in shaping worldview. Recurring symbolic motifs—such as the abandoned campsite (*aṭlāl*), the beloved (*al-maḥbūb*), or light and darkness—function as shared cognitive reference points that organize poetic meaning. These symbols invite readers to engage in interpretative reasoning, drawing upon cultural knowledge and linguistic competence to reconstruct meaning. As a result, understanding poetry becomes an active cognitive process, in which meaning is co-produced by linguistic form and interpretative thought. This interpretative process is consistent with hermeneutic views of symbolic language and with Arabic literary scholarship that regards poetic motifs as culturally embedded structures of meaning (Jayyusi, 1977; Ricoeur, 1977).

The cognitive function of metaphor becomes even more pronounced in Sufi poetry, where symbolic language is employed to articulate spiritual experience and metaphysical insight. In the poetry of Ibn al-Fāriḍ, for instance, metaphors of love, intoxication, and union are used to express states of spiritual awareness that resist literal description. Here, language transcends descriptive function and becomes a means of conceptualizing experiences beyond rational discourse. Symbolic expressions allow poets to navigate the limits of language while still communicating profound cognitive and spiritual insights. This illustrates how poetic language extends the scope of thought by providing alternative modes of conceptualization.

From a cognitive–linguistic perspective, the extensive use of metaphor and symbolism in classical Arabic poetry reflects a worldview in which meaning is relational and context-dependent. Thought is not structured primarily through abstract definitions or linear argumentation, but through networks of associations and analogies. This mode of thinking aligns with broader discussions in linguistics and philosophy of language that emphasize the embodied and culturally situated nature of cognition (Ricoeur, 1977). In this sense, poetic language shapes not only what is said, but how reality itself is perceived and understood.

These observations suggest that metaphor and symbolism in classical Arabic poetry function as cognitive frameworks that organize experience and guide interpretation. Poetic language enables the articulation of philosophical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of human experience by transforming linguistic expression into a mode of thinking. Consequently, classical Arabic poetry can be understood as a linguistic space in which worldview is constructed through symbolic and metaphorical structures. This reinforces the argument that language, particularly in its poetic form, actively participates in shaping patterns of thought within the classical Arabic intellectual tradition.

Linguistic Relativity and the Formation of Thought in Classical Arabic Poetry

The relationship between language and thought in classical Arabic poetry can be further elucidated through the perspective of linguistic relativity. This perspective emphasizes that linguistic structures influence how speakers conceptualize reality, organize experience, and construct meaning. Rather than asserting a deterministic view

in which language rigidly controls thought, contemporary interpretations of linguistic relativity suggest a dynamic interaction in which language provides habitual patterns of interpretation and conceptualization (Sapir, 1921; Whorf, 1956). Within this framework, poetic language becomes a particularly significant site for examining how linguistic form shapes modes of thinking.

Classical Arabic poetry offers compelling evidence of this interaction between language and cognition. The Arabic language is characterized by a rich morphological system, extensive derivational patterns, and semantic flexibility rooted in triliteral and quadriliteral roots. In poetic discourse, these linguistic features enable the construction of layered meanings and associative semantic networks. A single lexical root can generate multiple related meanings, allowing poets to connect emotional, ethical, and metaphysical concepts within a compact linguistic form. This linguistic capacity fosters a mode of thinking that is relational and integrative, rather than strictly categorical or linear.

From the perspective of linguistic relativity, the prevalence of figurative language in Arabic poetry—particularly metaphor and symbolic imagery—reflects habitual ways of conceptualizing abstract experience through concrete linguistic forms. For example, concepts such as honor, fate, love, and transcendence are consistently framed through images of movement, struggle, light, and union. These patterns are not random stylistic choices but reflect culturally embedded ways of understanding reality through language. As Whorf (1956) suggests, recurrent linguistic patterns shape habitual thought by guiding attention toward certain aspects of experience while backgrounding others.

The application of linguistic relativity to classical Arabic poetry also helps explain the coherence of poetic worldview across different historical periods. Despite variations in theme and context, pre-Islamic poetry, Abbasid court poetry, and Sufi poetry share common linguistic strategies that organize meaning through analogy, symbolism, and rhythmic patterning. These shared strategies indicate that language provides a stable cognitive framework within which diverse forms of thought—rational, emotional, and spiritual—can be articulated. This view is supported by studies of Arabic literary tradition and language–thought relations, which suggest that recurring linguistic patterns are not merely stylistic preferences but culturally embedded modes of conceptualization (Arberry, 1965; Jayyusi, 1977; Sapir, 1921; Whorf, 1956).

In Sufi poetry, the role of linguistic relativity becomes especially evident. Poets such as Ibn al-Fāriḍ employ language that deliberately stretches conventional semantic boundaries, using paradox and symbolic fusion to express experiences of spiritual unity and transcendence. The linguistic possibility of merging subject and object, lover and beloved, self and other, allows poets to conceptualize non-dual modes of thinking that would be difficult to articulate in purely propositional language. Here, language does not merely reflect mystical experience but actively enables its conceptualization.

These findings suggest that classical Arabic poetic language functions as a formative cognitive environment rather than a neutral expressive medium. Linguistic structures—morphological patterns, metaphorical mappings, and rhythmic organization—shape how thought is generated, sustained, and communicated. By applying the perspective of linguistic relativity to Arabic poetry, this study demonstrates that poetic language contributes to the formation of worldview and cognitive orientation within the classical Arabic intellectual tradition. Consequently, understanding classical Arabic poetry requires attention not only to what poets say, but also to how linguistic form guides and shapes the thinking that poetry makes possible.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that classical Arabic poetry constitutes a significant linguistic and cognitive domain in which language actively participates in the formation of thought. By examining poetic language through a linguistic–philosophical perspective, this article shows that language in classical Arabic poetry does not merely serve as a medium for expressing pre-existing ideas, but functions as a formative framework that shapes rational reflection, emotional experience, and spiritual awareness. Linguistic structures such as meter, rhyme, metaphor, and symbolism operate as cognitive mechanisms that organize meaning and guide patterns of thinking within the Arabic intellectual tradition.

The analysis reveals that the structured nature of Arabic poetic language fosters a mode of thought that is relational, symbolic, and analogical. Metaphorical and symbolic expressions enable poets to conceptualize abstract ideas—such as honor, identity, temporality, and transcendence—through concrete linguistic forms rooted in shared cultural experience. From this perspective, poetic language becomes a space where

cognition, culture, and worldview intersect, allowing diverse dimensions of human experience to be articulated and integrated.

By applying the perspective of linguistic relativity to classical Arabic poetry, this study contributes to Arabic literary and linguistic scholarship by addressing a gap in existing research. While previous studies have focused primarily on stylistic, thematic, or pedagogical aspects of Arabic poetry, this article foregrounds the role of language as a cognitive environment that shapes ways of thinking. This approach highlights the intellectual depth of classical Arabic poetry and underscores its relevance for contemporary discussions in linguistics, philosophy of language, and literary studies.

Finally, this study suggests that further research could expand this framework by incorporating comparative analyses with other poetic traditions or by exploring the implications of poetic language for Arabic language education and cognitive development. Understanding classical Arabic poetry as a site of linguistic cognition not only enriches literary interpretation but also offers valuable insights into the dynamic relationship between language, thought, and culture.

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