

THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

Lafz: Language Praxis

JEFFREY SACKS

I want to think about the word لفظ (*lafz*).

But what is *lafz*? And, somewhat differently, if *lafz* is utterance, what is an utterance? In order to think about *lafz*, I wish to think about it in relation to language and the poetic, in relation to matter and the social, and in relation to the sort of act it occasions—and the sort of doing it may be said to be—and to do so I begin with Ibn Manẓūr, who notes in his thirteenth-century lexicon لسان العرب (*Lisān al-‘arab; The Tongue of the Arabs*) that لَفْظٌ (*lafāza*) is رمى (*ramā*; “to toss”); it is, he writes, أن ترمي بشيء كان في فمك (“to toss out something that was in your mouth”), and it is, further, to spit something out: يلقي ما يخرج الخلال من بين أسنانه (“to propel outward what a toothpick dislodges from between one’s teeth”).¹ *Lafz*, Ibn Manẓūr explains, points as well to the motions of the sea when it tosses something on the shore: والبحر يلفظ بما في جوفه إلى الشاطئ (“And the sea tosses what it holds in its interior upon the shore”). And so *lafz*, if it is something, is a certain sort of doing in relation to the mouth, and the projecting of matter across a threshold, and I notice that *lafz* is therefore a material practice, an act given in the expulsion of matter through an opening or across a passage. In this *lafz* is a tossing—Ibn Manẓūr, in a passage I’ve cited here, uses the verb ألقى (*alqā*; “to cast” or “to fling”)—as when the sea presses its detritus, “what it holds in its interior,” upon the shore. And so *lafz* speaks to us of a particular sort of doing with the tongue—it is, one might say, a language praxis—in excess of the temporal mode of a self-determined subject of language, or a being that would be itself and that would, then, do the sort of act that language occasions and is. Instead, in the sort of doing occasioned in *lafz* the time of language is the time of its utterance, where صوت (*ṣawt*; “voice” or “sound”) would be akin to the matter pressed forth and upon the shore of the sea, in a temporality with which I wish to linger as I think about *lafz* in relation to language

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and form, in relation to materiality and the social, and in relation, finally, to being and world.

But to think about *lafz*, and to think and write about it in the English language, and at the site of the university and its disciplines, is already to do so in relation to a certain kind of translation. And so to approach a reflection on *lafz* I underline that this translational context makes visible an incommensurability between the sense of language given through this term and the conception of language that has been privileged in the hegemonic and normative, at once philological and philosophical, traditions of Europe and its language practices in their globality, since at least the seventeenth Christian century. In these traditions language is to be an occasion for a subject's interiorizing self-reflection and its formation of world, and this through an idiom that divides, as Denise Ferreira da Silva has explicated it, the subject of self-determination and historicity, the subject capable of interiorizing self-reflection, from the racialized subjects of affectability and incapacity.² It is in this frame that non-European languages, textual and linguistic practices, and social forms have become objects of study in the university, and it is in this frame that the modern disciplines for reading have been formed—for example, the modern philological, and, later, literary disciplines—and so my intention is to decline such an understanding of language and in this way approach *lafz* in a manner that explicates the sort of doing it occasions without subordinating this doing to the social, epistemic, or juridical terms privileged in modern philosophical self-representation, linguistic or literary cultivation, and the critical understanding of reading and world.³ I've shared that in the reflection on *lafz*, in thinking about it, I observe an incommensurability among languages and historical and social forms; at the same time I offer, in thinking about *lafz*, a refusal of the practices of social obliteration directed, through the privilege of a particular sense of what language is, at non-European languages and modes of doing, being, knowing, and life.

And so from a question about the materiality of *lafz* I turn to a question about language and

sociality, underlining several passages in two texts of the ninth-century writer al-Jāḥiẓ. I begin with a passage that appears in his manual on rhetoric, *البيان والتبيين* (*al-Bayān wa-l-tabyīn; Eloquence and Elucidation*) where al-Jāḥiẓ writes of *lafz* in its relation to “sound” or “voice,” which is, he writes, its *آلة* (*ālah*; “instrument”),

والصوت هو آلة اللفظ وهو الجوهر الذي يقوم به التقطيع وبه يوجد التأليف. ولن تكون حركات اللسان لفظاً ولا كلاماً موزوناً ولا منثوراً إلا بظهور الصوت. ولا تكون الحروف كلاماً إلا بالتقطيع والتأليف. (1.58)

Voice is the instrument of utterance [*lafz*] and the substance through which articulation is carried out and through which composition is made present. The movements of the tongue will not constitute an utterance [*lafz*], and neither will they constitute metered speech or prose, except through the bringing forth of voice [*ṣawt*]. And units of sound will not constitute speech except through articulation and composition.

To think about *lafz*, I want to linger with *ṣawt* and consider it as a material substance in relation to language and the poetic. If voice is the instrument of utterance, and if utterance is the occasion for the giving of speech through the mouth, then voice, or sound, is the matter through which the sort of doing that utterance is occurs. I notice that in this the practice of speech bears a relation to a mode of comportment and to a linguistic and corporeal performance, to which al-Jāḥiẓ calls attention in the *إظهار* (*iẓhār*; “bringing forth”) of sound in the practice of lingual formulation. The doing of language in the articulation of speech turns on a movement of the tongue, and so I notice as well in this passage a relation, and a temporal or material doing, anterior to any language practice. It is only through the motion of the tongue that the matter of sound or voice transmutes, in utterance, into *كلام* (*kalām*; “speech”); it is only through this motion that there is something like speech, or language, at all. And so if there is language, it may be understood as what is given in *حركات اللسان* (*ḥarakāt al-lisān*; “the movements of the tongue”) in utterance. The performance of the tongue entails a formal economy

of motion, made manifest in poetics and rhetoric in the formulation and articulation of sound in relation to utterance:

ولا تكون الحروف كلاماً إلا بالتقطيع والتأليف

Units of sound will not constitute speech except through articulation and composition.

I observe, in order to move toward a reflection on language and the social, that the material phonemic utterance becomes speech—it becomes the social form that language is—only through its rendering as *lafz* in the sense that al-Jāhiz explicates here, where language occasions a certain doing in lingual practice.

In *Eloquence and Elucidation*, the economy of language turns on what al-Jāhiz calls إيجاز (*ijāz*; “concision”): والإيجاز هو البلاغة (“The eloquent use of language is concision”; 1.79). Al-Jāhiz emphasizes بيان (*bayān*; “clarity of expression”) in the relation between “speaker” and “listener”:

مدار الأمر والغاية التي إليها يجري القائل والسامع إنما هو الفهم والإفهام فبأي شيء بلغت الإفهام وأوضحت عن المعنى، فذلك هو البيان في ذلك الموضوع

(1.56)

The axis on which the matter turns and the aim in relation to which the speaker and the listener move is understanding and giving to understand, for anything through which you give someone to understand or clarify the meaning is clarity of expression in that context.

And yet “clarity of expression” does not refer to an ideational content—to the explication of an object of language—but to the form through which the material practice that language is occurs:

وأحسن الكلام ما كان قليلاً يُغنيك عن كثيره، ومعناه في ظاهر لفظه

(1.61)

The best speech is that which, in its spareness, relieves you of its multiplicity, and whose meaning is apparent in its expression.

What is privileged is speech wherein the material expression of language does not give rise to a plurality of uttered forms but of meanings:

الكلام الذي قل عدد حروفه وكثر عدد معانيه
(2.244)

speech the number of whose letters is few and the number of whose meanings is many.

Al-Jāhiz underlines that if eloquence were concerned only with meaning, then the sense of what language is would become convoluted:

فمن زعم أن البلاغة أن يكون السامع يفهم معنى القائل جعل الفصاحة واللكنة والخطأ والصواب والإغلاق والإبانة والملحون والمعرب كله سواء وكله بياناً

(1.105)

Those who claim that eloquence is what occurs when the listener understands the meaning of the speaker make fluent language and incorrect pronunciation, error and proper usage, ambiguous and clear expression, and ungrammatical and grammatical speech all the same, they make all of them clarity of expression.

A privileging of understanding in relation to meaning would mute the practice of economy in speech, the doing of language in clarity of expression, where language is understood as a corporeal act with the tongue in its relation to a sensual doing in voice. Al-Jāhiz’s emphasis on the formulation of language points to language’s not being derivative of the form of a subject that speaks and that, through its speech, would give rise to a self-reflective interiority, because language occasions a practice in formal articulation in excess of any single being or act.⁴ Language becomes a practice for a collective form of linguistic life, a sociality of doing with matter, one instance of which is the phoneme in its relation to sound, which the passage I’ve translated above explicates.

The practice of language occasions a collective form of aesthetic life where الجمال (*al-jamāl*; “beauty”) relates to a phenomenology of the tongue that gives place to a shared, if still not selfsame, form. Al-Jāhiz reports:

وقال العباس بن عبد المطلب للنبي : يا رسول الله فيم الجمال؟ قال : في اللسان

(1.109)

‘Al-Abbās ibn ‘Abd al-Muṭallab said to the Prophet, prayers and peace be upon him, “Oh Prophet of God, in what does beauty consist?” He said: “In language.”

If the eleventh-century philologist Ibn Rashīq al-Qayrawānī comments, in citing this passage attributed to the Prophet, that here *البيان* (“he intends eloquent speech”; 1.241), this is to point to a sense of language anterior to the poetic and the rhetorical, where language is a practice of form and constraint that does not impose a sense of communality organized around a subject but instead generates a shared practice of comportment given through an inessential gathering in linguistic life.⁵ Here, there is no ontologically selfsame or linguistically constituted being presupposed for the social, but instead the social is an indetermined practice in lingual doing. Al-Jāhīz writes of this doing in relation to the poetic, linking it to the understanding of language and eloquence that the pages I’m reading here explicate:

خير أبيات الشعر البيت الذي إذا سمعت صدره عرفت قافيته
(*al-Bayān* 1.179)

The best verse of poetry is one for which, when you hear its first hemistich, you know the rhyme.

I wish to emphasize the verb *سَمِعَ* (*sami‘a*; “to hear”) in this passage, to underline the practice of sound in utterance, and to draw out a relation to the ear in the poetic and its relation to form.⁶

الشعر كلام عُقد بالقوافي (“Poetry is speech held together by rhyme”), Ibn Rashīq further notes, and yet if *الوزن* أعظم أركان حد الشعر (“meter is the most important of the pillars in the delimitation of poetry”; 1.134), it is equally understood that

القافية شريكة الوزن في الاختصاص بالشعر، ولا يسمى شعرا حتى يكون له وزن وقافية

(1.151)

Rhyme shares with meter in the specification of what poetry is, for something is not called poetry unless it has meter and rhyme.

Each of these—meter and rhyme—is linked, in Ibn Rashīq, to *نية* (*niyyah*; “intention”), and his explanation relates each of these, as well, to *lafz*:

الشعر يقوم بعد النية من أربعة أشياء: اللفظ، والوزن، والمعنى، والقافية، فهذا هو حد الشعر

(1.119)

Poetry, following intention, consists of four things: utterance, meter, meaning, and rhyme, for this is what delimits poetry.

There is an intention in poetic speech; for *العرب* (“the Arabs”), al-Jāhīz writes, *كل شيء* (“everything”) is

بديهية وارتجال، وكأنه إلهام، وليست هناك معاناة ولا مكابدة، ولا إجمالة فكر، ولا استعانة

(*al-Bayān* 3.425)

intuition and improvisation, as if it were inspiration, there is no effort or suffering or pondering or prolixity.

We may then understand the tradition of prosody as bearing an inheritance where language is a temporal practice, a certain sort of doing, which convokes a collective of beings without substance. *القصار أولج في السامع* (“Short poems enter the ear more easily”), Ibn Rashīq explains (1.187), and we may understand this entering of language into the ear as a material occurrence in the social formulation of the poetic as a practice of linguistic life, where the being of the speaker of language is not its own, and where language is merely a particular sort of doing in a practiced, if still inessential, form.⁷

To consider this practice we may turn to the explication of *niyyah* in Ibn Manzūr, where the verb *نوى* (*nawā*) is *قصد* (*qaṣada*; “to aim toward”), as in *انتوى المنزل* (literally, “to intend toward a house”), and the noun *al-nawā* is *الوجه الذي يذهب فيه* (“the direction toward which one departs”) or, as Ibn Manzūr cites al-Jawharī, it is *الوجه الذي ينويه المسافر من قرب أو بعد*

(“the direction a traveler intends, from near or from afar”). It is, further, a *بعد* (*bu‘d*; “distance”), just as it is

التحول من مكان إلى مكان آخر أو من دار إلى دار غيرها كما تنتوي
الأعراب في باديتها

to move from one place to another or from one house to another, as the Bedouin move in their desert.

And *nawā* is also *حفظه* (*ḥafīzahu*; “to protect or guard someone”). Al-Farrā’ said, as Ibn Manzūr cites him, *نواك الله أي حفظك* (“May God protect you [nawāka], which is to say, may He guard you”), as when God accompanies someone on their travels. I wish to linger with the corporeal dimension of intention as Ibn Manzūr explicates it and consider its relation to the poetic, where, as Ibn Rashīq explains, “following” intention, one is to consider the material form of poetic statement in its relation to *lafz* (“utterance”), *ma‘nā* (“meaning”), *wazn* (“meter”), and *qāfiyah* (“rhyme”). If it is in this way that the field of the poetic is specified, I notice that doing in the poetic presupposes a sense of language in relation to the form of a being that intends in a particular manner. And if this intending entails a pointing in a “direction,” or a directing of oneself toward a “distance,” I notice that the taking place of intention in language entails a particular sort of sociality as one moves or changes location. There is an alteration in orientation that mirrors the giving of language in articulated form, and so the intention, which poetry presumes, and which is to precede the allocation of voice in its relation to utterance in the movement of the tongue—where what is privileged, al-Jāḥiẓ writes, is concision—*itself* presumes an understanding of language. In this understanding, one’s intending in language precedes the poetic, and the poetic may therefore be said to be a practice of intending in linguistic form. The sociality of utterance thus gives rise to a mode of poetic life—a life of linguistic sociality—where, if there is an *I* that speaks, this is only in a practice that temporally exceeds itself, in a doing in form and concision that gives itself to others, a

doing that may be said to be this giving, and which, as the Prophet said in the passage cited by both al-Jāḥiẓ and Ibn Rashīq, is that in which beauty consists.

Language, in al-Jāḥiẓ, is a practice of social form and a giving of sense in the formation of world. To consider this, I linger now with al-Jāḥiẓ’s discussion of language in his treatise on creaturely life, *كتاب الحيوان* (*Kitāb al-ḥayawān*; *The Book of Living Beings*). Al-Jāḥiẓ writes that

واللسان: يصنع في جوبة الفم وهوائه الذي في جوف الفم وفي خارجه،
وفي لهاته، وباطن اسنانه، مثل ما يصنع القلم في المداد والليقة والهواء
والقرطاس

(1.76)

Language, in the tongue, is formed in the mouth’s opening, the uvula, the bottoms of the teeth, and through the air contained in the mouth’s interior cavity and its being expressed through it, in the way that the pen acts with ink, silk fibers, breath, and sheets of paper.

If here al-Jāḥiẓ outlines a formation of language where air transmutes into voice or sound into utterance, I note the sense of language as a communicative practice, which is also explicated in al-Jāḥiẓ. Al-Jāḥiẓ underlines that language is a practice shared among living beings—birds *لها منطق تتفاهم بعضها إلى بعض* (“possess a language through which they give their needs to be understood by each other [tatafāham]”; 7.35)—and this sense of language as *tafāhum* (giving one another to understand) is privileged in these sentences, where the social is constituted through the being together of creatures in relation to their communication of needs.⁸ *إعلم* (“Know”), al-Jāḥiẓ writes,

أَنَّ حاجة بعض الناس إلى بعض، صفة لازمة في طبائعهم، وخلفة
قائمة في جواهرهم، وثابتة لا تزالهم، ومحيطة بجماعتهم، ومشملة
على أديانهم وأقصادهم

(1.60)

that the—need of people for each other is a necessary characteristic according to their nature, a disposition founded in their substance, which is firmly rooted and does not pass away, and which encompasses

them in their plurality, and includes those who are closest and those who are farthest away.

Al-Jāhīz comes back to this conception of language later in the *Book of Living Beings*, when he turns to the question of the language of the birds:

فإن قال قائل: ليس هذا بمنطق، قيل له: أما القرآن فقد نطق بآته منطق، والأشعار قد جعلته منطقاً، وكذلك كلام العرب، فإن كنت إنما أخرجته من حد البيان، وزعمت أنه ليس بمنطق لأنك لم تفهم عنه، فأنت أيضاً لا تفهم كلامك عامة الأمم؛ وأنت إن سميت كلامهم رطانة وطمطممة فإنك لا تمتنع من أن تزعم أن ذلك كلامهم ومنطقهم، وعامة الأمم أيضاً لا يفهمون كلامك ومنطقك، فجانز لهم أن يُخرجوا كلامك من البيان والمنطق، وهل صار ذلك الكلام منهم بيانا ومنطقاً إلا لتفاهمهم حاجةً بعضهم إلى بعض، ولأن ذلك كان صوتاً مؤلفاً خرج من لسان وفهم، فهلا كانت أصوات أجناس الطير والوحش والبهائم بيانا ومنطقاً إذ قد علمت أنها مقطعة ومصورة، ومؤلفة ومنظمة، وبها تفاهموا الحاجات، وخرجت من فم ولسان، فإن كنت لا تفهم من ذلك إلا البعض، فكذلك تلك الأجناس لا تفهم من كلامك إلا البعض.

(7.36)

If someone were to say: “This is not language,” it would be said to them: “The Qur’an has said that this is language, poetry has made it language, and the speech of the Arabs has done so as well. If you were nevertheless to remove it from the field of clearly expressive language and were to claim that it is not language at all, because you do not understand it, it is also the case that you do not understand the speech of most nations. And if you were to call their language gibberish or unintelligible words, you would not be prohibited from claiming that that is what their speech and their language is, and since most nations do not understand your speech and your language it would also be possible for them to remove your speech from the field of clear expression and language. Yet does that speech of theirs not become clear expression and language through their giving one another to understand their needs, and because it consists in composed sound that comes out of the mouth and is uttered by the tongue? And do not the sounds of the species of birds, wild animals, and livestock constitute language and communicative speech? For you have learned that it consists of syllables and forms, that it is composed and ordered, that through it they give one another to understand their needs, and that it comes out of the mouth and is uttered by the tongue. And if you understand only a bit of it,

so too those species would only understand a little bit of your speech.

Al-Jāhīz refers in this passage to a Qur’anic verse in *سورة النمل* (*Sūrat al-Naml*; “The Ants”): يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ عَلَّمْنَا مِنْطِقَ الطَّيْرِ (“Oh people, we have been taught the language of the birds”; 27.16), and as he does so he generalizes speech as a practice among living beings, where language is what transpires among beings in a communication of needs. In these passages there is an attention to the verbal form *تَفَاعَلَ* (*tafā’ala*) and to the verb *تَفَاهَمَ* (*tafāhama*), which I’ve translated as “to give one another to understand.” In his ninth-century manual for secretaries Ibn Qutayba notes that the verbal form *tafā’ala* relates to an action that occurs *بين اثنين* (“between two”; 304), and I notice that al-Jāhīz renders the verb *tafāhama*, which is formed from the verb *فَهِمَ* (*fahima*; “to understand”), as a practice that exceeds two beings to encompass a field of sociality constituted through linguistic practice. *بيان القول وإن كان فصيحاً* (*faṣīḥ*; “eloquent”) means *بغير العربية* (“articulate speech, even if it is not Arabic”) as it refers to someone *لا يلحن حتى لا يفهم* (“whose language is well formed so that they do not speak ungrammatically”), as Ibn Manẓūr explains, we may understand al-Jāhīz to point to a sociality of linguistic form where “understanding” is already a kind of “giving one another to understand,” and where eloquence or expression in speech is to be understood in relation to this sociality. There is a non-self-centric doing of language with the tongue, which gives rise to the social as a practice of linguistic being in inessential life, where the life of a single being is not to be understood as a ground for the social, and where the practice of language mirrors the understanding of what being is, what thought occasions, and what relation, in collectivity, may be said to be.⁹ In a passage I cited above al-Jāhīz uses the word *جماعة* (*jamā’ah*) to refer to a plurality of beings, and we may understand this plurality as being produced through a language practice that institutes the social, where an inessential mode of being together, a gathering without substance, is convoked.

In this linguistic gathering, a coming together of creatures, we might think of al-Jāhīz as giving to us a

practice where thought transpires in language as a plural social form, and where what it is that one does when one understands is a shared practice among living beings. And so if the interrelational form of the verb *tafā'ala* promises a communication between beings, the action occasioned in it exceeds this frame to become a social mode in excess of what transpires when one being gives language to be understood by another—as in Ibn Qutayba's manual. Instead of an exchange of semantic content, language becomes a doing that calls into being an inessential collective. In this way, the gathering of creatures of which al-Jāhīz writes is indistinguishable from language and this gathering may be said, therefore, to be *منطق الطير* (*manṭiq al-ṭayr*; “the language of the birds”), at once the birds' language and their gathering in a collectivity occasioned in a scene of address where any single being is already more and less than itself. What is given is a sense of the social that is also a mode of being where relation is a practice for an indeterminated collective life, a gathering without return to a temporally coherent or self-determined subject or ground: a language praxis. Al-Jāhīz gives us to think this collective life as poetic, and, more generally, as linguistic, and in this sense we may understand *lafz* as giving us to think the relation of utterance to language, language to form, form to sociality, sociality to collective being, and being to its formation in a linguistic life where this or that utterance—as well as this or that being, thing, word, or relation, as indistinct as these are—will never merely have been its own.

NOTES

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1. Translations here and in what follows are my own.
2. I learn here from Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea*.
3. I learn here from the discussion of philology as “logology” in Hamacher; of the transformations in the Arabic language in the nineteenth century in Tageldin; of the new sense of *adab* (as “literature”) installed in the nineteenth century in Allan; of the

privilege of the monolingual state in Rastegar; and of the new world of legality—a juridicalization of the social—generated in the nineteenth century in Esmeir.

4. And consider, in relation to Arabic poetics, the discussion in Key, where what takes place is a “readjustment of the lexical relationship between vocal form [*lafz*] and mental content [*ma'nā*],” and where, in this “readjustment,” one may notice a sense of language as a practice in the explication of the poetic (240; interpolations added).

5. And consider as well the discussion of the *تعويد* (*ta'wid*; “training” or “habituation”) of the tongue in al-Iṣfahānī:

وقال العتابي: أقدر الناس على الكلام من عود لسانه الراكض في ميادين الالفاظ (31)

Al-'Attābī said: Those who have best mastered speech are those who have trained their runaway tongues on the field of words.

6. In relation to the ear and “voice,” see also al-Jurjānī, where *ṣawt* is defined as *كيفية قائمة بالهواء يحملها إلى الصماخ* (“a quality carried by the air, which it bears into the inner ear”; 210).

7. And consider the discussion of listening in relation to eloquence in al-'Askarī:

ربما كانت البلاغة في الاستماع، فإن المخاطب إذا لم يحسن الاستماع لم يقف على المعنى المؤدي إليه الخطاب (25)

And perhaps eloquence resides in listening, for the addressee, if they do not listen well, will not understand the meaning, which speech conveys to them.

See, as well, Harb's discussion of listening in relation to “indirect signification” and “figurative speech” in terms of “the process of ascription, not the ascription itself,” a process that, as Harb explains, maintains a sense of practiced form in relation to language and, in the context she studies, logic: “This process of ascription is based on a logical relationship that the listener has to deduce in order to grasp the intended meaning” (192).

8. For a discussion of the aporetic dimensions of al-Jāhīz's discussion of language and living beings, see Miller.

9. In the formulations I offer I learn and diverge from the acute reading of al-Jāhīz in relation to a “dynamic perennially open *semiosis*” in Judy (448).

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