



Linguistic Abnormality With Emphasis on Threshold Theory, in Attar Manteq Al- Tayr

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Abstract: The present study explores the role of linguistic deviation in evoking intuitive and epistemic experiences for readers of mystical texts, focusing specifically on The Conference of the Birds by Attar of Nishapur. Anchored in the framework of Threshold Theory from cognitive linguistics, the research analyzes syntactic, semantic, and rhetorical anomalies as deliberate tools to transmit mystical experiences. Using a qualitative and interpretive methodology with a cognitive approach to language, the study examines selected verses containing linguistic irregularities. Drawing upon core concepts of Threshold Theory, conceptual metaphor, and cognitive blending, the analysis reveals that such deviations actively disrupt conventional meaning-making and propel the reader toward deeper interpretive engagement. These disruptions – marked by cognitive pauses, suspended meanings, and logical fractures – facilitate a transition from surface understanding to lived, intuitive insight. Rather than being mere violations of standard language, these deviations are foundational mechanisms that render truth experientially accessible. Threshold Theory thus provides a compelling framework for reinterpreting the language of mysticism, with broader implications for literary, linguistic, and rhetorical analysis.

Keywords: Linguistic Abnormality, Threshold Theory, Cognitive Linguistics, Rhetoric, Manteq Al-Tayr.

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1. Introduction

Classical mystical works, especially *The Conference of the Birds* (*Manṭiq-ut-Ṭayr*) by ‘Aṭṭār of Nishapur, stand as an example of this mode of expression. This work is significant not only for its semantic aspect but also for its linguistic texture, which creates new horizons for stylistic and cognitive analyses. In recent decades, new approaches within cognitive linguistics, particularly concepts such as “conceptual mapping”, “cognitive schemas”, and “threshold theory”, have made it possible to analyze the processes involved in understanding language and meaning more deeply. Within cognitive linguistics, threshold theory is based on the fact that understanding of complex and unfamiliar concepts (e.g., mystical concepts) requires a mental passage through “thresholds of understanding”. At the initial encounter with a text, these thresholds may generate cognitive resistance, but sustained and reflective engagement gradually paves the way for deeper comprehension (Evans, 2007: 101). In this regard, linguistic anomalies can be viewed as a tool which challenges the reader’s mind to go beyond common linguistic and interpretive models, achieving a level of perception aligned with “intuitive insight” or even “cognitive transformation”. Accordingly, linguistic anomalies in texts such as *The Conference of the Birds* are not only mere violations of linguistic norms, but they also serve as efficient tools through which the author leads the audience from the surface of language toward the depths of spiritual experience. For this reason, a cognitive analysis of these anomalies, especially when relying on threshold theory, can open a new horizon for understanding the mystical linguistic mechanisms, in which the boundaries between language and experience, reason and intuition, and form and meaning are redefined in a fluid and dynamic way.

2. Literature Review

Collier (1989), in the article titled “A Methodological Critique of the Threshold Hypothesis”, offers a critical evaluation of the methodological pillars of this theory. She believes that the mere use of the threshold theory, without attention to contextual and cultural factors, can lead to misleading generalizations. However, the article emphasizes that the concept of a “threshold level of understanding” has considerable analytical value for analyzing how complex linguistic concepts are perceived. A more recent article, titled “Threshold Hypothesis and Executive Function: Insights from Saudi International School Bilinguals” (2023), by Mohammad Al-Ruwais and Abdulkarim Al-Qarni, published in 2023 in the Journal of the Association for Scientific Research in Human Resource Management, investigates the relationship between levels of linguistic proficiency and executive functioning among children at international schools in Saudi

Arabia. This study demonstrates that children who attain a threshold level of competence in both languages exhibit stronger performance in working memory, cognitive control, and mental flexibility. Among Persian-language studies, the article by Sayyad-Kuh and Shams al-Dini titled “An Examination of Structural Deviations in the Linguistic Elements of ‘Attār of Nishapur’s Ghazals Based on Geoffrey Leech’s Linguistic Theory” (2021) analyzes linguistic elements in *The Conference of the Birds*, concluding that the high frequency of newly formed Sufi compounds, as key stylistic features of ‘Attār’s ghazals, reflects his strong adherence to mystical values and principles. Khadijeh Bahrami, in her article “*The Stylistics of Attār’s The Conference of the Birds based on Halliday’s Functional Linguistics*” (2024), examines the ideational and interpersonal meta-roles present in the *Conference of the Birds*.

3. Methodology

In terms of subject, theoretical framework, and analytical method, the present study has significant differences from earlier research. Most existing studies on *The Conference of the Birds* and other mystical texts have concentrated on traditional stylistic analysis, literary arrays, or thematic analysis, while largely neglecting cognitive approaches. In some cases, linguistic anomalies have been addressed solely in terms of rhetorical features and linguistic deviation, without situating them within the cognitive processes of comprehension and meaning formation. On the contrary, this study uses threshold theory within cognitive linguistics as its primary framework and interprets linguistic anomalies not only as deviation from norms, but also as “mechanisms of cognitive transition” within linguistic and spiritual experience. This approach promotes the analysis of mystical language from description to cognitive explanation, demonstrating that ‘Attār’s language does more than invite contemplation; it actively involves the reader in a process of mental transformation. Therefore, through an integrative and innovative approach, this research offers a new understanding of the role of language in conveying mystical experience.

4. Results and Discussion

In *The Conference of the Birds*, language does not only function as a tool for conveying meaning, but also operates as a tool through which experience is generated, an experience that becomes accessible only by crossing linguistic and conceptual thresholds. The linguistic anomalies in the text do not prevent understanding; instead, they are intentionally built to draw the mind away from automatic and default modes of language, entering a stage of perception and intuition. This form of intuitive understanding differs from meaning recognition, as it results from a kind

of “cognitive transformation” activated by the anomalous functions of the text.

The present essay reveals that syntactic, semantic, and rhetorical anomalies are not deviations from standard language, but purposive mechanisms for activating the reader’s cognitive processes and their passage across perceptual thresholds toward deeper mystical experience. At the syntactic level, the omission of sentence elements, extreme inversion, and unusual constructions interrupt the reader’s cognitive flow when encountering a sentence. This interruption, particularly when meaning is not conveyed through a direct linguistic form, forces the mind to reconstruct the syntax and to generate a conceptual framework for meaning. This operation corresponds precisely to what threshold theory defines as movement from the linguistic level to the cognitive level. At the semantic level, anomalies, including the use of opposing concepts, illogical meaning-generating compounds, and multi-meaning expressions, confront the mind with paradoxes that make direct comprehension impossible. Such anomalies create a context for cognitive growth and the achievement of epistemic experience. At the rhetorical level, ‘Aṭṭār takes advantage of devices such as Īhām (ambiguity), expansive metaphors, surreal images, and rhetorical contradictions to develop the emotional and perceptual structures of the reader. Numerous verses in *The Conference of the Birds* are constructed in a way that meaning emerges not only at the overt linguistic level, but also within the reader’s experiential and affective domain. In the threshold theory, this type of interpretation results from the activation of deeper cognitive and metaphorical layers of the mind.