

CONCEPT: Addressing the Non-Human

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Discussion

Read

From The Encyclopedia of Arabic Rhetoric

Definition

Addressing the Non-Human describes a rhetorical configuration in which speech is directed towards an animal, object, place, abstract entity, or other non-human addressee as though it were capable of receiving the utterance. Abdul-Raof discusses this phenomenon under the English term **apostrophe**, describing an unreal speech situation in which a non-human object is treated as though capable of hearing and responding.^[1]

Addressing the Non-Human is **not treated in this Encyclopedia as an independent Arabic rhetorical device**. This page is a **Concept Guide**: it explains how expressions of this kind can be decomposed into established devices in the [Arabic Rhetorical Device Taxonomy](#).

How Arabic Rhetoric Analyses Addressing the Non-Human

Under the [Model for Rhetorical Action](#), the fact that the addressee is non-human describes the overall rhetorical configuration. The linguistic operations producing that configuration should be identified separately.

The Vocative

The central operation is usually [the Vocative](#) (*al-nidāʾ*).

- The communicator explicitly establishes an entity as the addressee of the utterance.
- This frequently occurs through the vocative particle *yā*.
- The addressee may be an animal, object, place, natural phenomenon, abstract concept, occasion, or other entity that would not ordinarily participate in the communicative exchange.

Abdul-Raof similarly identifies the use of *yā* with a non-human addressee as characteristic of the phenomenon he calls apostrophe.^[1]

The sentence addressed to it

The speech directed towards the non-human entity may itself instantiate another rhetorical operation. For example:

- a question may instantiate [the Interrogative](#);
- a command may instantiate [the Imperative](#);
- a prohibition may instantiate [Prohibition](#).

These operations remain analytically distinct from the fact that their addressee is non-human.

Figurative representation

In some cases, addressing a non-human entity also represents it as possessing capacities normally associated with human or rational beings — for example, hearing, understanding, feeling, deciding, or responding.

Where this depends upon an implicit similarity between the non-human entity and a human or rational being, [Metaphor](#) may also be present, particularly *al-istiʿāra al-makniyya*.

Thus, an expression traditionally described in English-language rhetoric as **apostrophe** may contain several simultaneously identifiable operations:

- non-human addressee → [Vocative](#)
- question addressed to it → [Interrogative](#)
- command or prohibition addressed to it → [Imperative](#) / [Prohibition](#)
- human or rational capacities attributed to it → potentially [implicit metaphor](#)

The concept therefore describes a **configuration of rhetorical operations** rather than an additional atomic rhetorical device.



Concept Guide: Addressing the Non-Human

Analytical gateway into the Encyclopedia of Arabic Rhetoric

Primary Arabic analysis

The Vocative

al-nidāʾ

May co-occur with

Metaphor, Interrogative, Imperative, Prohibition

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Taxonomy

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- non-human addressee → [Vocative](#)
- question addressed to it → [Interrogative](#)
- command or prohibition addressed to it → [Imperative](#) / [Prohibition](#)
- human or rational capacities attributed to it → potentially [implicit metaphor](#)

Recognition

A reader may initially recognise Addressing the Non-Human when:

- speech is explicitly directed towards a non-human, inanimate, or abstract entity;^[1]
- the entity is introduced through a vocative construction, frequently using *yā*;^[1]
- the utterance treats the entity as though it could hear, understand, or respond.^[1]

To determine the appropriate Arabic rhetorical analysis:

1. Identify the addressee.
2. If the expression explicitly calls or addresses it, identify [the Vocative](#).
3. Identify what kind of utterance is directed towards it: question, command, prohibition, statement, or another sentence type.
4. Annotate any independently present rhetorical operation associated with that sentence type.
5. Ask whether the non-human entity is also being figuratively represented as a human or rational agent.
6. If that representation depends upon implicit similarity and a suppressed comparator, [implicit metaphor](#) (*isti'āra makniyya*) may additionally be present.

Examples

Source Example

عَيْدُ بَائٍ حَالٍ عُدْتُ يَا عَيْدُ؟

O 'Īd, in which state have you come back?

Addressing the Non-Human

Abdul-Raof presents the festival of 'Īd as a non-human addressee which is treated as though capable of receiving and responding to speech.^[1]

Arabic rhetorical analysis

The expression contains [the Vocative](#) in *yā 'īdu* ("O 'Īd"), establishing the festival itself as the addressee. It also contains [an Interrogative](#) in *bi-ayyi ḥālin 'udta* ("in which state have you returned?"). The familiar category of apostrophe therefore corresponds here to the co-occurrence of at least these two identifiable operations.

Source Example

يا حديدُ لا تنصهر ولا تتحوّل الى قنابل لتحرق الأبرياء

O iron, do not melt and change into bombs to burn the innocent.

Addressing the Non-Human

Abdul-Raof presents iron as though it were capable of receiving and acting upon a prohibition.^[1]

Arabic rhetorical analysis

The expression contains [the Vocative](#) in *yā ḥadīdu* ("O iron"). The subsequent *lā taṣāhir* ("do not melt") and *lā tataḥawwal* ("do not change") instantiate [Prohibition](#). The attribution of an ability to receive and comply with the prohibition may additionally support a figurative analysis in which the iron is represented as a volitional agent.

Source Example

يا عنكبوتُ لا تنغطرس فيبيتك واهنْ

O spider, do not be snobbish. Your house is flimsy.

Addressing the Non-Human

Abdul-Raof presents the spider as an addressee capable of receiving an admonition against arrogance.^[1]

Arabic rhetorical analysis

The spider is established as addressee through [the Vocative](#), *yā 'ankabūtu* ("O spider"). The clause *lā tataḡaṭras* ("do not be arrogant") additionally instantiates [Prohibition](#). The attribution of arrogance to the spider may also involve figurative representation of the animal in human evaluative terms.

يا نهْرُ، إلى أين تذهب بمياهك؟ أما تعلم أن القرى تموت عطشاً؟

O river, where are you taking your waters? Do you not know that the villages are dying of thirst?

Addressing the Non-Human

The river is treated as though it were capable of hearing the speaker, directing its own movement, possessing knowledge, and responding to questions.

Arabic rhetorical analysis

The expression contains [the Vocative](#) in *yā nahru* ("O river") and two [Interrogatives](#). The attribution of purposeful movement and knowledge to the river may additionally be analysed through [implicit metaphor](#) (*isti'āra makniyya*), insofar as the river is implicitly represented as a rational agent.

Related Arabic Rhetorical Devices

- **The Vocative** (*al-nidā'*): ordinarily the central operation when a non-human entity is explicitly established as the addressee.
- **The Interrogative** (*al-istifhām*): may co-occur where the non-human addressee is questioned.
- **The Imperative** (*al-amr*): may co-occur where the non-human addressee is commanded.
- **Prohibition** (*al-nahy*): may co-occur where the non-human addressee is told not to perform an action.
- **Metaphor** (*al-isti'āra*): may co-occur where the addressee is represented as possessing human or rational capacities through similarity-based transfer.
- **Personification**: a related Concept Guide concerning the attribution of human actions, qualities, emotions, or capacities to non-human entities.

Different From

- **CONCEPT: Personification** where the characteristics of a human entity are transferred to a non-human, inanimate, or abstract entity.

References

- ↑ ^{a b c d e f g h} Hussein Abdul-Raof, *Arabic Rhetoric: A Pragmatic Analysis*  (Oxford: Routledge, 2006), 246-247, [ISBN 9780415386098](#). DOI: [10.4324/9780203965399](https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203965399) 

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- 2026-02-11 - [Migration to Semantic Device Identifiers](#): Renamed from [CH-10: Addressing the Non-Human](#) to [NONHUMN: Addressing the Non-Human](#).
- 2025-11-20 - [Page](#) incorporated into the [Arabic Rhetorical Device Taxonomy](#) (v0.1.1).
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Category: [Arabic Rhetoric Concept Guides](#)

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