

CONCEPT: Personification

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From The Encyclopedia of Arabic Rhetoric

Definition

Personification is a rhetorical description for presenting a non-human, inanimate, or abstract entity as possessing characteristically human actions, emotions, qualities, or capacities. Abdul-Raof applies this category to Arabic examples and describes the phenomenon as the transfer of human characteristics to non-human, inanimate, or abstract entities.^[1]

Personification is **not treated in this Encyclopedia as an independent Arabic rhetorical device**. This page instead functions as a [concept guide](#) showing how expressions commonly described as personification can be analysed through the established Arabic rhetorical taxonomy.

In many cases, the relevant Arabic rhetorical device is [Metaphor](#) (*al-isti'āra*), particularly **implicit metaphor** (*al-isti'āra al-makniyya*). A non-human or abstract entity is implicitly compared with a human or rational being; that comparator is omitted, while an action, quality, emotion, or capacity associated with it is retained.

How Arabic Rhetoric Analyses Personification

Under the [Model for Rhetorical Action](#), the analytical question is not simply whether an expression appears to personify something, but **what linguistic operation produces that interpretation**.

A common personifying construction can be analysed as follows:

- Target:** a non-human, inanimate, or abstract entity is presented in the expression.
- Transferred property:** an action, emotion, quality, or capacity conventionally associated with human or rational beings is attributed to that entity.
- Implied comparison:** the entity is understood through an implicit comparison with a human or rational being.
- Suppressed comparator:** the human or rational comparator is not explicitly stated.
- Retained attribute:** something characteristic of that comparator remains in the expression, such as weeping, complaining, rejoicing, fearing, judging, or speaking.
- Where these conditions hold, the expression can be analysed as [Metaphor](#), especially *al-isti'āra al-makniyya*.

Thus, **personification describes the resulting conceptual pattern, while *isti'āra makniyya* identifies the rhetorical operation through which that pattern is produced**.

Recognition

A reader may initially recognise personification when:

- a non-human, inanimate, or abstract entity is presented as performing an apparently human action;^[1]
- a human emotion, attitude, intention, or capacity is attributed to such an entity;^[1]
- the entity is represented as though it were capable of rational or human agency.

To determine the appropriate Arabic rhetorical annotation, continue beyond this initial recognition:

- Identify the non-human or abstract entity.
- Identify the apparently human property attributed to it.
- Ask whether the expression implicitly presents the entity as resembling a human or rational being.
- If so, identify the omitted comparator and the retained human attribute. This normally indicates [implicit metaphor](#) (*isti'āra makniyya*).
- If no similarity-based transfer is required, consider whether another Arabic rhetorical operation better explains the expression.

When another analysis may be preferable

Not every expression that can loosely be described as personification requires metaphorical analysis.

- Relational transfer:** An expression such as “the city celebrated” may refer to the city's inhabitants rather than figuratively presenting the city itself as a human agent. In such a case, [Relational Transfer](#) may provide the better analysis.



تشخيص، تجسيد

Concept Guide: Personification

Analytical gateway into the
Encyclopedia of Arabic Rhetoric

Primary Arabic analysis

Metaphor
al-isti'āra, especially *al-isti'āra al-makniyya*

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Taxonomy

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- **Literal fictional narration:** Animals or objects may function as speaking characters within the literal world of a fable or fictional narrative. Their speech does not by itself establish an instance of metaphor.
- **Multiple operations:** A non-human entity may be directly addressed using [the Vocative](#) while simultaneously being represented metaphorically as capable of hearing or responding. The relevant operations should be identified separately.

Examples

Source Example

إِنَّا عَرَضْنَا الْأَمَانَةَ عَلَى السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَالْجِبَالِ فَأَبَيْنَ أَنْ يَحْمِلْنَهَا وَأَشْفَقْنَ مِنْهَا وَحَمَلَهَا الْإِنْسَانُ إِنَّهُ كَانَ ظَلُومًا جَهُولًا

Indeed, We offered the trust to the heavens, the earth, and the mountains, but they declined to bear it and feared it. But man undertook to bear it. Indeed, he was unjust and ignorant. (Q33:72)

Personification

Abdul-Raof presents the heavens, earth, and mountains being described as declining and fearing as an example of personification.^[1]

Arabic rhetorical analysis

The heavens, earth, and mountains are represented as possessing capacities associated with rational beings: refusal and fear. On a figurative analysis, they are implicitly compared with rational agents capable of accepting or rejecting an obligation. The comparator is suppressed while its characteristic capacities — '['abayna'](#) (they declined) and '['ashfaqna'](#) (they feared) — are retained. The relevant operation can therefore be analysed as [implicit metaphor](#) (*isti'āra makniyya*).

Source Example

حَتَّى الْحَجَرُ يَسْتَنْكِرُ هَذِهِ الْجَرَائِمَ الْبَشِيعَةَ

Even stones denounce these horrible crimes.

Personification

Abdul-Raof presents the attribution of '['yastankiru'](#) (denounces) to '['al-hajar'](#) (stone) as personification.^[1]

Arabic rhetorical analysis

The stone is implicitly represented as a rational human agent capable of making a moral judgment and denouncing wrongdoing. The human comparator is omitted, while the human capacity of denunciation is retained. The expression can therefore be analysed as [implicit metaphor](#) (*isti'āra makniyya*).

Constructed Example

شَكََا الْجِدَارُ وَحْدَتَهُ

The wall complained of its loneliness.

Personification

The wall is presented as capable of experiencing loneliness and complaining about it.

Arabic rhetorical analysis

The wall is implicitly compared with a human being capable of loneliness and complaint. The human comparator is omitted, while the characteristic action '['shakā'](#) (complained) and the emotional state '['wahdatahu'](#) (its loneliness) are retained. The expression is therefore analysed as [implicit metaphor](#) (*isti'āra makniyya*).

Related Arabic Rhetorical Devices

- **Metaphor** ([al-isti'āra](#)): the principal analysis for personification produced through an implicit comparison between a non-human entity and a human or rational being.
- **Relational Transfer** ([al-majāz](#)): may provide a better analysis where a place, institution, or other non-human expression stands for the human beings associated with it rather than itself acquiring human properties.
- **The Vocative** ([al-nidā'](#)): may co-occur when a non-human or abstract entity is directly addressed as though capable of receiving speech.

- **CONCEPT: Addressing the Non-Human** where an inanimate object is addressed directly.

References

1. [↑] ^a ^b ^c ^d ^e Hussein Abdul-Raof, *Arabic Rhetoric: A Pragmatic Analysis*  (Oxford: Routledge, 2006), 255-256, ISBN 9780415386098. DOI: 10.4324/9780203965399 

Page History

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