

CONCEPT: Tapinosis

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From The Encyclopedia of Arabic Rhetoric

Overview

Diminishing Expression provides an exemplar of how a rhetorical category from another rhetorical tradition may fail to correspond directly to an atomic device in Arabic rhetoric, and how an apparent rhetorical device may instead decompose into an existing [linguistic operation](#) and a separate pragmatic effect.

Abdul-Raof presents **Tapinosis** as a semantic embellishment involving depreciation or belittlement. His examples include referring to a *jabal* (mountain) as a *rabwa* (hill), and referring to a *nahr* (river) as a *jadwal* (stream).^[1]

Although the resulting pragmatic effect may be described as *al-tahqīr* (belittlement or depreciation), the linguistic operation in these examples is not itself a distinct operation of "diminishing". The communicator instead applies a lexical concept associated with a lesser but similar entity to the actual referent.

Why this is a concept rather than a device

At first sight, **Tapinosis** might appear to correspond to an Arabic rhetorical device called *al-tahqīr*. However, analysis of Abdul-Raof's examples reveals that the identifiable linguistic operation is already accounted for elsewhere in the taxonomy.

For example:

في بلادي نهرٌ وعندكم جدول

In my country, there is a river and you have got a stream.

The referent is understood to be a river, but the communicator designates it as a *stream*. The expression therefore involves the transfer of a lexical concept to a referent to which it does not literally apply, on the basis of similarity. In the Encyclopedia's taxonomy, this is analysed through [metaphorical transfer](#).

What makes the expression depreciatory is not a separate linguistic operation, but the **direction of the conceptual substitution**: the selected analogue is smaller, weaker, or less impressive than the referent.

The same analysis applies to Abdul-Raof's second example:

زرتُ بلادكم الشهر الماضي وصعدتُ الربوة في الشمال

I visited your country last month and climbed the hill in the north.

Here, *rabwa* (hill) is used where *jabal* (mountain) would more accurately describe the referent.^[1]

Decomposition under the Model for Rhetorical Action

The phenomenon can therefore be decomposed as follows:

MRA Level	Analysis
Communicator Intent	To depreciate, belittle, or diminish the perceived importance of the referent.
Linguistic Operation	Metaphorical transfer : a lexical concept is applied to a different but similar referent.
Cognitive Relationship	Similarity combined with a downward scalar relationship, such as mountain → hill or river → stream .
Pragmatic Effect	Belittlement or depreciation (<i>tahqīr</i>).

This distinction is important because *tahqīr* is not restricted to metaphorical expressions. Arabic rhetorical sources also recognise belittlement as a possible rhetorical effect of other linguistic operations. For example, 'Akkāwī records *istifhām al-tahqīr* among the rhetorical uses of interrogation.^[2]



التحقير

Concept Guide: Tapinosis

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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Cross-tradition terminology

This exemplar also illustrates a broader problem in comparing rhetorical traditions.

A rhetorical term used in one tradition does not necessarily correspond one-to-one with a device recognised in another. A named figure may package together:

- a linguistic operation;
- a particular cognitive relationship; and
- a characteristic pragmatic effect.

Consequently, importing the name of a figure into the Arabic rhetorical taxonomy without first decomposing its mechanism may produce duplicate devices for linguistic operations that are already represented elsewhere.

In this case, Abdul-Raof's **Tapinosis** identifies a recognisable rhetorical configuration, but the examples supplied do not require a new atomic device. They can instead be represented as a particular use of metaphor producing the pragmatic effect of *tahqīr*.

What this exemplar demonstrates

This case illustrates three principles of the Encyclopedia's analytical framework:

1. **Rhetorical terminology is not necessarily transferable between traditions on a one-to-one basis.** A named figure in another rhetorical tradition may not correspond to an independent device in Arabic rhetoric.
2. **Pragmatic effects are distinct from linguistic operations.** *Tahqīr* is a genuine rhetorical effect, but it may be produced through metaphor, interrogation, or other linguistic operations.
3. **Device identification begins with the linguistic operation.** The relevant question is not merely "What is this figure called?" but "What has the communicator done to the language?"

The original **Diminishing Expression** entry was therefore retired from the device taxonomy. Its examples are retained here because they provide a useful exemplar of rhetorical decomposition under the [Model for Rhetorical Action](#).

See also

- [METAPH: Metaphor](#)
- [Model for Rhetorical Action](#)
- [Criteria for Inclusion in the Encyclopedia of Arabic Rhetoric](#)
- [Personification](#)

References

1. ^{a b} Hussein Abdul-Raof, *Arabic Rhetoric: A Pragmatic Analysis*  (Oxford: Routledge, 2006), 258-259, ISBN 9780415386098. DOI: [10.4324/9780203965399](https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203965399) 
2. [↑] In'ām Fawwāl 'Akkāwī, *Al-Mu'jam al-Mufaṣṣal fī 'Ulūm al-Balāgha: Al-Badī' wa-al-Bayān wa-al-Ma'ānī* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1996), 128.

Page History

- 2026-08-17 - Reclassified from the rhetorical device [BELITTL: Diminishing Expression](#) as a Concept Guide. The BELITTL identifier was retired from the Arabic Rhetorical Device Taxonomy, and the page was rebuilt to explain how rhetorical effects are analysed through established Arabic rhetorical devices.
- 2026-02-11 - [Migration to Semantic Device Identifiers](#): Renamed from [CH-9: Diminishing Expression](#) to [BELITTL: Diminishing Expression](#).
- 2025-11-20 - [Page](#) incorporated into the [Arabic Rhetorical Device Taxonomy \(v0.1.1\)](#).
- 2025-04-15 - Page created: [Diminishing Expression](#).

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