

# Argumentation Structure of Retorts in Old Arabic Prose

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## ABSTRACT

*Retorts is an Arabic prosaic art that received an interest and attention during 9<sup>th</sup> century. The term is defined and several books were written about it, and this interest contributes to survive many examples of the art since it is an oral art. The researcher attempts to investigate the argumentative nature of this art, which is different from all other oral arts that depend on the question- answer dialogue. The researcher finds that it is a unique pattern in which the responder does not allow the dialogue to continue or use arguments. But the responder attempts to conclude the dialogue, and silence the questioner who has a desire to embarrass the official or make fun of him/ her. It is the responder's reaction, then the responder also has the same intention to embarrass and make fun of the questioner. The responder has used rhetorical and pragmatic styles that the researcher refers to in this study.*

**Keywords:** argumentation, retorts, Arabic prose, pragmatics and verbal communication.

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## INTRODUCTION

There are no references of retorts in Arabic writings during the pre- Islamic period that can be depended on to identify the retorts origins and basic structure. Moreover, the existed legacy of retorts is so little but it refers to its existence in the simple form, however, retorts framework cannot identified in respect to structure and subjects. But it is considered the old origin of this art, which is fully matured after the coming of Islam. The one who wants to root this art has to be convinced with what is received during Islamic, Umayyad and Abbasid eras in which it is developed, collected and studied.

Retorts have developed through sectarian and beliefs debates during Umayyad era. The struggle among political parties have a great role to enrich the fallacy phenomena. The features of retorts become evident in many genres during that period (Abdulateef Adil 2013: 133). So, debate and argument become public approach. Retort is not away from this environment but it becomes a product of it, and they are not limited to the beliefs aspect but they pervade in most cultural aspects. Retorts are not exclusive on seriousness but it includes jocularity and obscenity in most cases especially in the end of 2<sup>nd</sup> century (A. H) and the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century (A.H). The secondary functions of retorts is limited to make fun and mocke beside the major function that is confutation, and this cannot be achieved unless the person deals thoughtfully and clemently with the question. Al-Zamakhshari said that " people who are not angry ready for answers" (Al-Zamakhshari 1996: 2/72 . Retort is the definite answer for the questioner. After hearing the answer, the questioner is not re-asking the same question because the answer is confuted.

### The aim of the study:

The study aims to observe and clarify the argumentation structure of retorts in old Arabic prose, and the differences from other literary types.

### The presentation of the topic:

The retorts in old Arabic sources come in form of live situations among literary men and entourage, poets' answers, insane people, nomads or wise and witty answers on the tongues of animals. In most times, retorts are mixed with fun, obscenity and promiscuity that are intended by the responder to silence his opponent.

Among the conditions of retorts is the attendance of the two parties, the questioner and the responder. Each has different motives, but the common issue is that each one of them wants to silence or confute his opponent. Reading the answers and their related questions make us realize undoubtedly that the questioner aims to confute, embarrass and silence the officials. For example, " Al-Mahdi has said to Shuraik when Essa Bin Mosa was there, do you accept Essa

if he testifies for you? Al-Mahdi wants to allure them. Shuraik said ' whoever testifies at me, I would ask about him, and no one inquires about Essa except Amir al-Mu'minin, if you recommend him, I would accept him. So he turns the answer against him." ( Ibn Hamdoon 1996: 7/186-187 ) The reference included in that dialogue "he wants to allure them" reveals the ultimate aim of asking such a question; that is silence and embarrassment. The official employs a retort in the end of the above dialogue "he turns the answer against him," which means against Al-Mahdi who asks the question.

The inclusion of this aim in the answer does not need any reference because it is "confuted or silenced answer," and this is enough to prove what we previously mentioned. The major aim of retorts is confutation or to silence others. The matter of question and answer or the attendance of the two partners is not limited to retorts. But it is found in other oral arts like debate, argument and bragging. However, the existence of question and answer have different aims and styles in these arts. Retort is different from debate, though both initiated with a question, retort is based on mutual dialogue (several roles), it is one role (question) and another role (answer), and who initiates the dialogue will be the loser in contrast to debate. Retort is closer to argument than other types.

The terms of debate have been defined in which the debaters are convergent. Each one should wait for his/ her opponent to finish his/ her issue, and never abuse verbally or physically, and the goal of debate is to reveal the right. So, we should not debate who does not convince with the evidence (Abdulrahman 2000: 74-75) . the result of the debate is similar to the retorts, but the difference is that the debate is dialogical and the retorts are (silence the opponent) has no dialogue. If the debater waits for his opponent and does not abuse him/ her and his aim is persuasion, the responder in retort aims to silence, surprise and embarrassment. The responder does not follow the way of persuasion, mostly he makes fun and uses obscenity, or fallacy that depended on some social and traditional taboos to reach to the goal of the retort.

In the narrated retorts, we do not find a dialogue between the questioner and the responder except in rare cases. Dialogue management in this situation is oscillating between the questioner desire and the responder's one. The questioner's desire is confutation and incapacitation, and the responder's desire is confutation and silencing. If the questioner is being asked and answered with a retort, the responder will attempt to restore the prestige of his question in case there is a kind of possible chance to raise a new question he thinks to be unanswerable or a retort. But he is surprised by another confuted answer that finishes the dialogue.

The questioner's offensive way of asking is also met by the responder's offensive method of answering even if the question is a kind of retort. This mechanism is generated by the responder from the same question. For example, in Hamad's counsel to Abihanifa who said that "Hamad bin Abisuleiman said: if you have been asked about a dilemma, you would turn it into a question to get rid of your questioner and his question...." ( Ibn Hamdoon 1996: 7/229 ) .

The structure of retort begins with a question and it might be finished with a question and this is the least. The retorts structure is a closed one in contrast to debate structure, which is open one; the structure of the retort is a narrow one in which the responder as the questioner work on narrowing down on the other partner to silence and confute him. The question comes basically to embarrass the addressee, silence and confute him. But the addressee faces up to respond the questioner with a confuted ready answer that silences the questioner as mentioned in many retorts.

It is not necessary that persuasion is the way of silencing, but the questioner could be the reason. It means the questioner is afraid of the answer that makes him keep silent. It was reported that Al-Shaby said: " I walked in on Shureih and I heard him saying: Beware of the answer. I said him so, he said: I disputed with a man, I said I do not think you know what to say! He said, I do not come out as you think. I knew he had the same so he kept quiet" (Ibn Abi Awn 1996:84 ) . If we wonder why was the answer considered a retort? The example mentioned above is a clue that the retort even if it is not decisive, the questioner is afraid that the responder may reply him again with thunderous more painful respond as it is clear in the example: " I knew he had the same so he kept quiet". It is referred to this point in their advice and wisdoms: " who is not afraid of the answer will speak, and who is afraid will be silenced" ( Al-Baha'i 2006: 3/1547 ) . The questioner in retorts thinks that he has the answer, the knowledge, since he expects an answer, so he is surprised that he does not have anything. The answer for him will be thunderous but in the debate he is going to be the dominant side of the dialogue.

Retorts have several structures as the following:

- Some take the form of argumentation by mobility as what is mentioned in the tale:

" Al-Hajaj bin Yousif said to Yahya bin Saeed Bin Al-As: I have been informed that you are as ugly as the devil, he said: the prince does not deny that the master of man looks like the master of jins?" ( Ibn Hamdon 1996: 7/176 ) . Here, the responder moves from the probable answer, which is to deny the pervious information or refute it, to establish the similarity and move from it to achieve a certain aim: As the devil is the master of jins so I'm the master of man, therefore, it is no wonder there is similarity between the two masters.

- The other type takes into consideration the opponent's argument and he employs what is in the question as: "Mazbad's wife was pregnant and she looks at her husband's ugly face: woe for me if the baby inside me similar to you, he said: woe for me if the baby in your body is not similar to me" ( Ibn Abi Awn 1996: 180 ). The answer is derived from the question using the same words but with slight change. The other answers depending on the question is the following example : "Abdulla Bin Khazim has said to his majordomo laughing at him: where are you heading to 'Haman'? He said: build you a tower, Abdulla surprised by the answer because majordomo has considered his master a Pharaoh, if he is Haman" ( Al-Zamakhshari 1996: 2/76, Ibn Asim 2014: 54 ). Here, the responder has employed the relationship between Haman and Pharaoh as it is circulated in their traditional heritage but he could not admit frankly that his master is Pharaoh. He hinted and referred to the direct relation through intertextuality with the holy Quran verse that said by Pharaoh : " And Pharaoh said : Haman ! Build for me a tower that I may reach the roads" ( Holy Quran: 40/36 ). The majordomo has explained to his master that if he is Haman, his master must be Pharaoh. So, the answer is a kind of retort and surprising at the same time, and this is explained in Al-Zamakhshari's statement when he narrated the story.
- Evasive answer as in this story: "Shureih visited Ziad Bin Abih When he came out , they asked him , how was his situation ? He said : ' I left him threatening and commanding, he imagines he is in good health to threaten and command, but he is dying, commands to implement his wills and threatens to wail on him " ( Al-Zamakhshari 1996: 2/84 ). Shureih has answered evasively the receiver understands it according to his stand from his master (Ziad). If the receiver is one of his supporters, he will understand it as a sign of recovery. But his opponents understand it as sign of the master's imminent death because Ziad started to read his will. The sign that the answer is evasive is Al-Zamakhshari's comment on the statement ' he imagines he is in good health.....'
- There is a funny and obscene answer like " Kutheir has recited poetry, Al-Farazdaq has told him: Did your mother go to Basrah? He said: No. But my father went there many times." ( Ibn Abi Awn 1996: 193 ).

" Gruel is served for several people with chicken on it. One of them has stolen a chicken but seen by another man. When they finish eating, someone said to him: get out the chicken to pick up crumbs, he answered: the chicken is laying eggs" ( Ibn Asim 2014: 64 ). The other example is : " A man has said to Abi Nawas: Emir of the Believers have nominated on apes and pigs, Abi Nawas said: So, hear and obey since you are one of subjects." ( Al-Zamakhshari 1996: 2/82 ). It is also told that " a city- dweller has stolen a shirt, he sent his son to sell it in the market but the shirt is stolen from his son. When the boy returned, his father said to him: have you sold the shirt? He said: yes. The father said: how much? The boy said: by the capital." ( Ibn Abi Awn 1996: 186 ). The retort comes as the following : (news+ news+ news) then ( preliminary question/ real answer+ question/ retort), and the retort cannot be understood and the answer cannot be a retort unless we revise the references ( the three news)

We cannot realize that meaning of (capital) unless we go back to the phrase ( a city- dweller stole a shirt) and (stolen from him), while the process of (sell) between the two structures of the sentences of the answer and the news. Also, the semantic structure in which the trade cannot be fulfilled only through the process of selling that intermediates between (capital) and (profit). It is told that "Al-Asfahani looked at Abi Hafan and a man on his left, he said: What lies you are telling each other? Abu Hafan said: Parasing you." ( Ibn Abi Awn 1996: 200 ).

Sometimes, we don't find the retort as an answer for a question, but it is a reaction against a word or an action happened before the responder but he/ she is not intended but he starts to answer. This answer is different as we referred to it, as of two types, the type that is related to the question is not part of the retort. The type that is related to questioner is part of the retort. The first type has the following tale: " A blind man said: how hard to lose sight! One-eyed man said: I have half experience." ( Ibn Abi Awn 1996: 192 ). The second type has the following tale: "A man said to the camel- man: there are abscess on my ugliest part of body. The camel- man said: you lied, here is your face has no abscesses on it" ( Ibn Abi Awn 1996: 208 ). Also, "Abdulmalik said to a nomad: the camel that prevents milking it, the stick will straighten it, he said: so, the vessel receded and the milker's nose broken." ( Al-Zamakhshari 1996: 2/56 ). The questioner uses the authority argument to mislead him and make it a way to silence, but the responder has employed a retort shows that the relationship between the ruler and the ruled is not subject to the laws of the ruler. Here, it stands on absolute submission or subjugated by force. But the responder referred to that the reaction will be negative, the vessel receded ( prevent financial resources from the authority) and break the milker's nose ( becomes part of the opposition against the state). The questioner imagines that he can respond to the answer by another answer he thinks it is a retort but the responder has a harder answer than the first like:

"Yazid Bin Abdulmalik's tutor said to him: you made a grammatical mistake, Yazid said: the horse stumbles. The tutor said: right, and it will be beaten till it stands. Yazid said: perhaps it might also break the nose of its stableman." ( Ibn Abdalbar 1982: 1/105 ). The tutor during his dialogue with the prince wants to rebuke the prince due to his mistake in grammar. But the prince has reminded him of occurrence of that mistake but it will not happen again, as the horse stumbles. The tutor does not understand the hints in the prince's words so the tutor continues rebuking in his speech. He said " it is beaten till it stands". He takes the wrong turn in his method of education. Here, the retort supported by authority and intimidation that are taken as a way to curb the tutor and put an end for his rebuking speech with the prince.

The use of questions that have retorts is being part of fallacy. Some of retorts also fallacy. Fallacy stands on two things: (bad faith and concealment), and bad faith and concealment are present and part of the questioner's and responder's intentions. Sometimes, the responder comes out with a retort through mocking and foolishness. As Mazbid's say when he is being asked: "Do you have flour at your home? He said: No, and no majesty". We find the answer has a communicative feature. The man answered that there is no flour at his home but derives another meaning from the first word (flour) to mean (majesty). In this way, he does not answer on the question directly (flour) and he defines it in respect to the equivalent of (flour). Similar example is: "On a cold day, a city-dweller has been seen at a man's grave known by his debauchery, he has been asked: what are you doing here? He said: I warm up by his fire" ( Ibn Abi Awn 1996: 181 ) . The questioner might be the winner in the structure of retorts in reverse to what we mentioned if his question is charged or compound. It is a style the speaker intends to "insert unjustified and not part of the opponent's commitments presuppositions, within one question whereby any direct answer given by the responder makes him confess of these commitments" ( Adil Mustafa: 149 ) .

Al-Hajaj bin Yousif has called " a man to order him to fight his enemy, he said: do you have goodness? He said: No, but I have evil, he said: this is what I want you to do, go fighting" ( Al-Tawhedi 1988: 1/132 ) the questioner sets a trap for the responder, and the responder does not have a choice in answer. He has chosen what he thinks that it will save him from the service of Al-Hajaj who wanted to use him in fighting his enemy "Do you have goodness?." The responder said: " I have evil" he believes that will deter Al-Hajaj from asking him to fight his enemy. But Al-Hajaj was resolute to do so. Al-Hajaj deceived the responder through putting the word (goodness) in the middle of the question to make the responder feels that whoever has this feature will be chosen, and here the responder falls in the trap when he said that he has the opposite of (goodness). So, Al-Hajaj said" this is what I wanted you to do." The question is a kind of fallacy. The speaker attempted to avoid Al-Hajaj's trap but the questioner has the control due to his evil reputation and this corresponds the (evil) frame that the responder attempts to get rid of the command in this kind of answer. The argumentative structure is completely different of the retorts as the first questioner wins the retort, and it is an answer of an answer not an answer of a question. It is the product of fallacy question the responder tried to face it by another fallacy question, but he has faced a retort from third party. The retorts can be divided into two types:

- 1- Answers directed to the same question to be an answer for the it. It is either to make an ignorant knows something, clarify an issue, increase knowledge or express certain intellectual situation. This type includes judgmental answers, sermonic, hermitic answers, philosopher's answers and the answers on animals' tongues. In these kinds of answers, the responders do not tend to embarrass or silence the questioners, the exception is when the answer is directed to the questioner himself to silence him/ her.
- 2- Answers directed to the questioner not to the question: in this case it takes the role of the confuted and the silenced one. The questioner will silence not the question. Here, we find a special pattern of question should be available for the question to be a retort.

Generally speaking, the question should rise from or express a basic aim where the questioner wants to embarrass the official, silence, confute, rebuke or make fun of him. Then the answer should be directed towards the questioner to respond it. The responder takes several ways to respond, but it is not necessary to fill the gap or meet a questioner's need or the question. But we, sometimes, find it as fallacy, funny, obscene or intellectual answer. But in all these situations, the main aim is to confute, counterattack against the questioner's attack. Retorts are mixed with sarcasm, which is a "offensive practice, active technique to diffuse the possible reactions of the mocked person to embarrass him especially the spectators is not the source of sarcasm as the sarcastic may detach himself from responsibility and relate it to certain source of echo, hidden voices or a witness on the saying" ( Amina Al-Dahry: 34 ) .

When the questioner raises his question, he takes the role of the sender who intends to confute, embarrass and silence. While the responder as he receives the message that includes the question, he takes the role of the receiver sent to. But, he/ she is not convinced with this role only because it is a negative one according to the sender's assumptions or expectations. So, the responder takes another important role; to respond to the question with a retort. Then, the responder impersonates the sender's role to give the answer and the questioner in this situation in the role of the receiver, but here he cannot respond. Since the retort in both cases has a negative role. When he asks a question, he deludes that he is able to embarrass the official and silence him. He is negative because his belief is built on illusion that will lead him to a result contrary to what he expects. It means that he wants to be the controller of the communication process through showing his strength and skills to embarrass the other side and silence him/her. In the last situation when he is responded by a retort, he will be completely negative because he is going to be silent, vanquished and dumbstruck.

This process is contrary to what we find in debates that express the process of (communication) not (connection). In communication, the connection is between two partners where one time becomes a speaker and another time is a receiver at the same time. The communication process in debate is a process of roles exchanges while the basic aim of retort is to prevent other partner from taking any role.

Retort is one of distinctive examples of verbal communication that has a pragmatic value. Consequently, this motivates us to consider retort as discourse analysis, which "meets pragmatics in analyzing discourse and speech acts." (Belqasim Dafa 2014: 494).

The dialogue we find in argument and debate especially what can be described as argumentation dialogue is of different types like quarrelling that is characterized by anger and moral violations. Also, the debate, investigation and searching for clues that lead to crucial proof to win a certain case. Negotiation is another example, which is an chance to obtain personal gains through trading and bargaining "we find in these four types that the major axis of argumentation function is the receiver, where pragmatics has recently paid attention to this issue as listener, reader and an discussor" (Belqasim Dafa 2014: 500).

It is important to refer to the significance of sender in communication process "because the sender's will is a corner stone in its pragmatic" (Al-Shahry 2004:47). Based on what is already mentioned, we can clarify that dialogue in retort is different from debate because it does not have role exchange. Its common formula is: (question/ retort), and the main doer is not the (receiver) but the (sender), which means that the argumentation function operates through pragmatic efficiency the retort has. The questioner (sender) directed his speech to the official with a basic goal to silence, confute or make fool of him/ her to show his power and superiority over him/ her. The sender deluded that the official cannot answer the question with different means like fallacy...etc. However, the other partner 'the official', (negative receiver) as he thinks, will make unexpected backlash that shocks the questioner and confutes him/ her. At this moment, the receiver and the responder will control the results of the dialogue and overpower other partner (questioner) using different means as arguments and evidences or other means like fallacy.

The fundamental axis of the argumentation function in this type of dialogue is the (sender) not the (receiver) since the sender controls the dialogue and takes positive role whether the situation is built on the illusion of superiority as mentioned above or in case of the responder as confirmed in the repeated statement "silence him/ her," which means to answer with a retort.

If we look at the aforesaid types of argumentation dialogue, we will find that (quarrel) is closer to the retort because the emotional aspect is present in this type in addition to immoral violations in both types. But, on one side, in quarrel, as commonly understood, verbal action accompanies physical ones while retort has no verbal or physical action since the questioner will be confuted and silenced. On the other side, the essential axis of argumentative function in personal quarrel is the receiver while the sender is the basic axis in the retort because the receiver in both cases of sending (question/ answer) is a negative receiver. In case of question the questioner is deluded and in case of answer is through the final result; that is confutation and silence.

The retort is characterized as being very brief, and this is one of the features of rhetoric since "no one can abridge discourse unless he has high pragmatic efficiency." (Al-Shahry 2004: 60). The examples of retorts that come from old Arabic books referred to this efficiency of briefing to the extent that most of times the retort includes several words but they are loaded with rich meanings. Every person intends to save his social face whether it is negative or positive to continue communication, "more simply, negative face is the need for independence while the positive one is the need to connect." (George Yule 2010: 100). An example of what is aforementioned is "Khureim 'the soft' entered to Ma'wiya Bin Abi Syfian, and Ma'wiya looked on his legs and said: what legs if they for a maid! Khureim said to him: in your buttocks, O, prince of believers! Ma'wiya said: One for one, and the initiator is the oppressor" (Ibn Abd Raba 1956:1/ 54).

In retort, there is no politeness because this is contrary to the aim the retorts seeks to achieve. When Khureim said "O, prince of believers" is full of sarcasm. It is inappropriate for a person in his position to talk to people in a way that degraded them. On the other side, Ma'wiya's said: "one for one and the initiator is the oppressor" is a kind of confession from Ma'wiya that he deserves the decisive answer and retort from Khureim. Since Ma'wiya is the first to insult Khureim believing that he will be able control and dominate him. But, Ma'wiya is shocked and the wind come contrary to him expectations about Khureim's answer. So, Ma'wiya should not follow his illusion because he knows that if anyone comes with such an answer, he can bring similar or severer answer. Based on this situation, Ma'wiya has said "one for one". It means, if Ma'wiya initiates another insult, he will receive more painful answer than the first.

The retort represents a unique type of artistic Arabic prose and its uniqueness lies in its inclusion of most of the rhetorical features and criteria of artistic beauty that appeared during the age of its heyday era. It is very brief, eloquent, highly effective and its accomplishment of the argumentation function affirms the high pragmatic efficiency of retort.

The characteristics of speech act is meaningfully complete and effective, and can be achieved through words, things and social acts. In case it is successful, it leaves its impacts in reality and the act cannot be successful unless it stands on the concept of intentionality (Shahrawi 2005: 44).

If pragmatics has intentionality, the retort also includes high pragmatic efficiency. I think there is no other oral arts in Islamic Arabic culture has the same effective feature in which the (responder) immersed in surprise, oddity and seriousness with its psychological effects that generated different responses from the receiver. But retort achieves an purpose that we cannot find other arts; that is (silence or confutation), and this point is not found even in the similar types: (debates, bragging, argument, quarrel and disputes) that depend on argumentation. But argumentation in retort is different from all other types since it has a special structure represents the gist of argumentation; I mean the meaning of brief words that are loaded with meaningful contents belong to many cultural, historical and social backgrounds that makes it declarative and allusive at the same time. It is rare to find a retort empty of such inclusions. It is a specific discourse (= answer) directed by definite person (= responder) to a specific person (= questioner) in a communicative context to achieve definite aim (= confutation and silence), and all this intended by the questioner and responder. The questioner is deluded that his speech will be confuting and silencing. The aim for questioner and the responder is the same but the means the questioner uses is built on his delusion of its success. While the responder uses a very successful means obliges the questions to admit his defeat and accept it and keep (silent) because if he attempts to retaliate, he will get more painful answer than the first one.

It is important to refer to that the theories of (face), ( politeness) and (cooperation) in pragmatics are not sufficient to analyze such types of oral arts. The relationship between the questioner and the responder cannot be (cooperative) or (polite). In retort, Grice's principle of cooperation is violated by both the questioner and the responder since, as mentioned earlier, that the aim is to silence each other. We have referred to that the aim of the questioner and the responder is to silence one another, so they will seek every possible means to reach that aim but the means does not conform politeness principle. But we find that (sarcasm) is the motive and feature of this art. Sarcasm during Abbasid era developed and became an essential part of Abbasid society structure. The society due to the economic, political and social conditions seek for humor, laugh and sarcasm as a way to face the difficult conditions.

### Conclusion

The retort represents a unique type of artistic Arabic prose and its uniqueness lies in its gathering most of the rhetorical features and criteria of artistic beauty that appeared during its heyday. It is very brief, eloquent, highly effective and its accomplishment of the argumentation function affirms the high pragmatic efficiency of retort. The environment of the retort has a direct impact on acquiring these features and criteria as the questioner wants to embarrass and make fun of the official. Then, the responder will follow the same tract to mock the questioner and defend himself and refute the questioner's argument.

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