

The Role of Shifters in the Narrative Structure of Nafthath al-Masdur, with Emphasis on the Author's Position

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ABSTRACT

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New Historicism regards history as a narrative construction — a subjective product that reflects reality, shaped by the consciousness of its author. This approach aligns closely with the theories of Roman Jakobson, the prominent linguist and key figure of Russian Formalism. Jakobson, one of the pioneers of this school, maintained that art and literature must be analyzed primarily through their language and structural features, rather than through their surface meaning or thematic content. He especially emphasized the role of language as the historian's tool, arguing that despite the historian's attempts to remain invisible within the historical text, their presence inevitably surfaces through the linguistic elements they employ. Jakobson refers to these elements as **shifters**, considering them indicators of the author's intervention in the narration of history. The present study aims to examine such shifters in the historical text Nafthath al-Masdur, highlighting the presence and agency of the author within the narrative. It is worth noting that this theoretical framework was previously applied to Tarikh-i Jahan-Gusha by Mahdi Ghasemzadeh. In the current research, the authors first identify and categorize shifters and the methods of their analysis from the perspective of literary theory, drawing upon both primary and secondary sources. Subsequently, they collect and analyze evidence of each type and subtype of shifter found in Nafthath al-Masdur. The findings of the study reveal that the author extensively employs shifters throughout the text, though in certain instances, some distinctive features of these shifters are omitted or underutilized.

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Introduction

New Historicism challenges the traditional view of historiography as an objective, impartial recording of facts. Instead, it posits that history is a subjective narrative constructed by the author—a “story” influenced by the writer’s worldview, ideology, and linguistic choices. This study draws upon the linguistic theories of Roman Jakobson, particularly his concept of “shifters” (elements of language whose meaning depends on the communicative context), to re-evaluate the classical Persian text *Nafthat al-Masdur*. The fundamental premise is that language is an active tool; even when a historian attempts to remain “invisible” to present an objective account, their presence inevitably emerges through linguistic interventions. This research aims to analyze the functional role of these shifters in *Nafthat al-Masdur* to demonstrate that the text is not merely a dry historical record, but a carefully constructed narrative that reveals the author’s active intervention, subjective evaluation, and ideological orientation toward the tragic events of the Mongol invasion.

Method

This study employs a descriptive-analytical methodology rooted in New Historicist criticism and linguistic narrative analysis. Utilizing library research, the authors examine the text of *Nafthat al-Masdur* to identify and categorize “shifters”—linguistic devices that allow for shifts in perspective, time, or narrator position. The analytical framework categorizes these shifters into specific types, such as citational markers (referential categories), structural narrative shifts (pauses, resumes, and temporal redirections), and moralizing or evaluative commentary. By analyzing the frequency and function of these elements, the research evaluates how Zeydari Nasawi disrupts the standard, objective flow of historical narrative to assert his own presence as a witness and an interpreter of history.

Results

The analysis reveals that Zeydari Nasawi extensively employs shifters to weave his personal emotions, reactions, and philosophical reflections into the historical account. Key findings include:

- **Literary Integration as Rhetorical Strategy:** While the author avoids formal, academic citations of historical sources, he frequently uses “literary shifters”—such as Quranic verses, prophetic traditions

(hadiths), classical Persian and Arabic poetry, and proverbs—to validate his assertions and express his emotional state. This effectively transforms the narrative from an objective report into a highly charged, personal testimony.

- **Control of Narrative Time:** The author makes frequent use of structural markers (e.g., “let us return to our story,” “to pause here”) to manage the flow of the narrative. These markers interrupt the historical timeline, highlighting the author’s role as the architect of the text.
- **Subjectivity over Objectivity:** The presence of extensive descriptions, moralizing commentary, and emotive language confirms that the text is not a neutral account. The author uses these linguistic interventions to channel his trauma and criticism regarding the political failures of his time.
- **Absence of Standard Markers:** The study notes that the absence of certain “standard” historical shifters (such as direct source-to-source citation) paradoxically reinforces the author’s authoritative presence as a direct eyewitness to the events he chronicles.

Conclusion

Nafthat al-Masdur transcends the boundaries of traditional historiography. It functions as a subjective narrative where the historical event is subordinate to the author’s interpretation and emotional response. The findings confirm that the text’s “historical” legitimacy is heavily mediated by the author’s literary craft. Through the strategic use of shifters—notably through the infusion of moral wisdom, poetic imagery, and narrative self-awareness—Zeydari Nasawi creates a work that is simultaneously a historical record and an intensely personal, literary construction. This research concludes that the study of shifters provides a robust mechanism for exposing the “constructedness” of classical Persian historical texts, proving that the historian’s voice remains an active, inescapable, and defining component of the historical narrative.