Linguistic Correction Criteria in Al-Hariri's Scholarship Durrat al-Ghawwas as a Model

ضوابط التصويب اللغوي عند الحريري - درة الغواص أنموذجا -

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Received: 24/04/2026 *Accepted: 08/05/2026* *Published:10/06/2026*

Abstract:

Language is the core medium of human communication and a driver of civilizational progress. Arabic, once marked by its linguistic purity, experienced increasing influence from non-native speakers, leading to shifts in vocabulary, meaning, and style across both common and educated usage. In response, scholars undertook efforts of linguistic correction to preserve its integrity. This study, *"Linguistic Correction Criteria in Al-Hariri's Scholarship: Durrat al-Ghawwas as a Model,"* adopts a descriptive approach to examine whether deviation from Classical Arabic threatens the language or contributes to its evolution, and whether linguistic correction operates within defined standards. It also explores Al-Hariri's corrective methods and their impact across generations.

Keywords: Al-Hariri's methodology; linguistic correction; *Durrat al-Ghawwas*; cultivated speakers; linguistic errors.

ملخص:

اللغة أداة التواصل الأساسية وركيزة بناء الحضارات. وقد عرفت العربية، رغم نقائها، تأثيرات لغوية وافدة نتيجة اختلاطها بغير الناطقين بها، مما أدى إلى تغيرات في

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الألفاظ والدلالات والأساليب لدى العامة والخاصة. وقد تصدى العلماء لذلك بالتصويب اللغوي حفاظًا على سلامتها. يتناول هذا البحث الموسوم بـ «ضوابط التصويب اللغوي عند الحريري – درة الغواص أنموذجًا –» هذه الظاهرة اعتمادًا على المنهج الوصفي، ساعيًا إلى بيان مدى خطورة الانحراف عن العربية الفصيحة، وإمكانية إسهامه في تطورها، ومدى خضوع التصويب لضوابط محددة. كما يرصد آليات الحريري في التصويب وأثرها في المتأدبين قديمًا وحديثًا.

كلمات مفتاحية: منهج الحريري؛ التصويب اللغوي؛ درة الغواص؛ المتأدبون؛ الأخطاء اللغوية.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Language is the very substance of social and human life — social relations are inconceivable without it. Society is the primary custodian of language, employing it in manifold ways that reflect the breadth and complexity of human experience. In the pre-Islamic era, Arabic was a national language tended by its speakers with extraordinary care: it was refined in its vocabulary, rich in its meanings, and sophisticated in its stylistic repertoire. It met the needs of its users, who found in it a medium of expression. Speakers and learners alike gravitated toward it, drawn by the elegance of its structures and the vitality of its lexicon.

When non-Arabs embraced Islam in large numbers, the obligation to learn Arabic — as the language of worship —

meant that they inevitably carried over elements from their mother tongues: foreign vocabulary, calqued meanings, and transposed syntactic patterns. The common people and the educated classes alike absorbed these intrusions. Chroniclers and biographers have preserved accounts that illustrate the extent to which Arabic was affected during this period.

Al-Hariri lived during the Abbasid era, a dynasty whose rise rested heavily on the support of non-Arab clients (mawālī) and Persian constituencies — groups that had played a decisive role in toppling the Umayyads and who rose to occupy the highest offices of state. Many among these non-Arab administrators mastered the Arabic tongue and achieved fluency in its high registers. Yet their presence also left an unmistakable imprint on the Arabic language through the lexical, semantic, and stylistic additions they introduced, shaped by analogy with their native tongues. As Ibn al-Anbari recorded:

"The Arabs continued to speak naturally according to the disposition of early Islam and pre-Islamic times, until God caused Islam to prevail over all other religions. People entered it in multitudes, coming to it in droves, and in it converged diverse tongues and varied languages. Corruption spread in the language and in Arabic grammar — its adornment and the key to its meanings. Those who by instinct recoiled from the faulty usage of non-native Arab speakers became alarmed at its spread and dominance, until concern over the disappearance of their language and the corruption of their speech drove them to record it for those who had lost it, and to set it right for those who had gone astray." (al-Zubaydī, 1974, p. 11)

In this environment, members of different language communities gravitated toward their native tongues and smuggled elements of them into Arabic. Corruption crept even into the speech of pure-blooded Arabs and bedouins of unimpeachable lineage; some abandoned the natural disposition in which they had been reared, turning their faces toward foreign languages and their alien stylistic patterns. They began applying analogical reasoning derived from other linguistic systems, producing constructions that belonged to neither world — hybrid formulations born of two languages in uneasy cohabitation.

1. Motivations for Critical Literary Composition

The impetus for scholarly composition differs from one era to the next and from one critic to another, depending on the nature of the issues at stake — whether they touch on foundational matters such as religion, language, or the social order. There is no question that language is the lifeblood of nations and faiths: when language is assailed, society is assailed, and religion is undermined. The extinction or disfigurement of a language entails the extinction and disfigurement of the community it sustains. History offers abundant evidence that colonial powers — both ancient and modern — have systematically suppressed the mother tongue and installed a foreign language in its place as an instrument of domination. Conversely, the early Muslim conquerors spread Arabic alongside the teachings of Islam, recognizing it as the medium through which they could guide newly converted peoples.

Given language's supreme importance, the motivation to write in its defense must be regarded as an obligation of the highest order. We have already seen how passions were inflamed

when grammatical error (laḥn) first spread across the Islamic world — for it wounded both the Arabic language and the Islamic faith simultaneously. Those who cherished both responded by taking every measure to close the breach that threatened to break the backbone of Arabic. It is reported that a man committed a grammatical error in the presence of the Prophet ﷺ, who said: 'Guide your brother; he has gone astray.'

The infection of laḥn then intensified, spreading widely among the people, who inclined toward it so strongly that it began to seem, to some, like the natural standard. Entire generations grew up in its shadow. The common people gravitated toward laḥn because it offered a measure of ease and freed them from the burden of formal correctness. The gravity of the situation deepened, however, when laḥn reached the educated elite — holders of official positions, men of letters and government — for the public looks to these figures with a particularly sharp and exacting eye. When they err, their standing diminishes and their authority is compromised. Al-Hariri observed this with great acuity:

"I have seen many who have ascended to the heights of rank and borne the mark of literary cultivation, yet who have imitated the common people in some of what slips from their speech and flows from their pens — errors that, when exposed and attributed to their authors, diminish the standing of the eminent and tarnish those of distinction." (al-Ḥarīrī, Durrat al-ghawwāṣ fī awhām al-khawāṣṣ, 1998, p. 9)

The common people are far more susceptible to foreign influence and far quicker to abandon what they have learned than those who have been formed by the discipline of sustained study,

whose knowledge has become so thoroughly internalized that it cannot be dislodged without great difficulty. For this reason, the native Arabic speaker, when he errs in a linguistic matter, finds that his tongue refuses to comply for long. Similarly, those who have drunk deeply from pure linguistic sources find that this very immersion acts as a shield against the corrupting influence of other civilizations, preserving their tongue in the condition in which it was first formed.

When errors infect men of learning and public officials — those who wield the pen and command authority — the damage done to both Arabic and society is compounded. The people's gaze falls upon such figures with special intensity. Al-Hariri was acutely conscious of this dynamic. He considered the elite above such lapses, and when he saw them succumbing to what was proper only among the common people, he was moved to compose his work, explaining his motivations and exposing the sites of error:

"My sense of honor for the distinction of those men, and my passionate concern for their reputation, impelled me to deflect from them the aspersions [cast by such errors], and to clarify what had become ambiguous and confused for them — that I might join the company of those who tend well to what they plant, and who wish for their brother what they wish for themselves." (al-Ḥarīrī, Durrat al-ghawwāṣ fī awhām al-khawāṣṣ, 1998, p. 9)

Zeal for the Arabic language and its speakers moved him to shield them from the stigma of laḥn and to purge them of the corrupting influence of foreign tongues — tongues introduced by the non-Arab population and by those whose speech had drifted

toward theirs, becoming a hybrid beholden to neither camp. He therefore composed:

"This book as an illumination for those who seek insight, and a reminder for those who wish to remember. I have entitled it Durrat al-Ghawwas fī Awhām al-Khawāṣṣ [The Pearl-Diver's Gem: On the Misconceptions of the Educated Elite]. Into it I have poured choice selections from the finest points, and subtle observations not to be found assembled in any other book — together with the unusual anecdotes appropriate to their contexts and the well-placed stories apt for their occasions. If it finds favor in the eyes of the reader and student, and kindles something in the mind of the inquirer, then glory be to God; otherwise, may God reward the sincere endeavor — He is my sufficiency and upon Him I rely." (al-Ḥarīrī, Durrat al-ghawwāṣ fī awhām al-khawāṣṣ, 1998, p. 9)

Al-Hariri collected and catalogued the errors then current, corrected them, identified their flaws, and supported his corrections with textual evidence designed to establish the authentic form and refute the erroneous usage. He marshaled arguments and laid out reasons at length. The total number of cases corrected in the work reaches two hundred and twenty-two (222).

Al-Hariri adopted a distinctive methodology in treating the errors prevalent among the educated elite — those singled out for distinction, holders of governmental office, men of letters and learning who bore honorary titles and were entrusted with responsibilities of state. Among the salient features of this methodology are the following:

1.1 Cultivated Address When Engaging the Elite

Employing gentleness, warmth, and tact in persuading others to abandon deeply ingrained habits and ingrained attachments — particularly when that persuasion is reinforced by compelling evidence and adorned with elevated citations drawn from the Qur'an, the Prophet's ḥadīth, poetry, and proverbial wisdom — is among the most commendable strategies in linguistic correction. This is precisely what we observe in Al-Hariri's approach. He chose to describe the errors as 'awhām' (misconceptions or illusions), a designation that carries the implicit suggestion that these false notions, which have seized minds and intellects, will quickly dissolve and revert to their authentic forms once the correct standard is demonstrated. The term 'awhām' carries a further connotation: it evokes the insubstantial, speculative nature of these linguistic usages, which have no sound foundation and cannot withstand rigorous scholarly scrutiny. It is therefore a more apt designation than 'errors' (akhtā') and more fitting than the prescriptive 'say this, not that' (qul wa lā taqul) approach, or the blunter 'correction of usage' (iṣlāḥ al-manṭiq) — for it preserves the dignity of those being addressed, whose high station demands no less.

1.2 The Marshaling of Textual Evidence

Al-Hariri's method characteristically involves exposing and censuring the error, diminishing and disparaging it, and depicting it in terms calculated to unsettle minds and disturb the comfortable certainties of those who have used it — so that the rational faculty asserts itself, revokes what the tongue has uttered, turns to reliable transmitted evidence, and applies its

analytical capacity until the correct path becomes clear. Consider his treatment of the words masaḥa and maṣaḥa:

The phrase *masaḥa Allāhu mā bika* ('May God wipe away what ails you') is said to a sick person when visitors come to call on him. Al-Hariri considers this usage incorrect, since masaḥa has its own established senses — wiping the head of an orphan, wiping over sandals in ritual purification, and so on. The correct form, in his view, is *maṣaḥa*.

He supports this position with an anecdote: 'It is related that al-Naḍr ibn Shumayl al-Māzinī fell ill, and a group came to visit him. One of them, known by the kunya Abū Ṣāliḥ, said to him: 'Masaḥa Allāhu mā bika.' Al-Naḍr replied: 'Do not say masaḥa, with the sīn — rather say maṣaḥa, with the ṣād, meaning: may God cause it to vanish and dissolve. Have you not heard the poet's words:

"When wine within the vessel foamed / the foam dissolved and maṣaḥ."

The man replied: 'The sīn may be substituted for the ṣād, just as one says al-ṣirāṭ and al-sirāṭ, ṣaqr and saqr.' Al-Naḍr said to him: 'Then you are Abū Sāliḥ — not Abū Ṣāliḥ!" (al-Ḥarīrī, Durrat al-ghawwāṣ fī awhām al-khawāṣṣ, 1998, pp. 21-22)

This anecdote, and the transmitted evidence Al-Hariri deploys throughout the work, serves his overarching aim: the elimination of these misconceptions. When we approach this particular lexical pair from a semantic standpoint, maṣaḥa is the stronger term: it carries the sense of thorough erasure, complete disappearance, leaving no trace, whereas masaḥa may leave some residue behind. The letter ṣād, characterized by the

phonological features of iṭbāq (velarization) and istiṭ'lā' (elevation), gives maṣaḥa a stronger semantic force. The contrast between the two is analogous to the contrast between haḍama ('to digest fully') and qaḍama ('to gnaw').

1.3 The Refinement of His Corrective Approach

Al-Hariri's technique in offering correction is distinguished by its subtlety and tact. He depicts the errors in such a way as to render them distasteful and undesirable — particularly by setting them against what the Arabs actually said, what the Noble Qur'an attests, and what the speech of the Prophet ﷺ, the lord of all messengers, establishes.

This cultivated manner of addressing the holders of the highest literary and governmental positions is a style befitting their rank. It preserves their dignity, rekindles in them a spirit of zealous protectiveness toward Arabic, and ensures that their adoption of his corrections achieves what Al-Hariri aspires to. He honors them by acknowledging that they have attained the highest offices and are marked by literary refinement — which, he implies, makes it all the more incumbent upon them to rise to the level of their station rather than descend to the level of the common people. As the Qur'an declares:

"And not equal are the blind and the seeing." (Qur'an 35:19)

On the other hand, the tendency of the educated elite to be influenced by common usage damages their own standing — for elevation and distinction are what is expected of them. We observe that Al-Hariri frequently employs the term awhām (misconceptions), which signals that these cultivated men have

fallen into their errors not from deliberate choice but from the mistaken belief — or sheer unquestioning habit, born of widespread usage — that those usages are correct. So common had these forms become, in the speech of both the educated and the uneducated, that they seemed standard, equivalent to the authentic Arabic that the people no longer recognized.

Accordingly, we find him repeatedly using the formula:

- 'They say…' (yaqūlūna…) — without rebuke or reproach.
- 'Among their misconceptions' (min awhāmihim).
- 'Among these is their misconception that…' (wa min dhālika tawahhumu-hum).
- 'Among these is that they do not distinguish…' (wa min dhālika anna-hum lā yufarriqūna).
- 'Among these is that they write…' (wa min dhālika anna-hum yaktubūna).
- 'Of this kind…' (min hādhā al-namaṭ).

These expressions are marked by tact and elegance of tongue. Rarely does one find Al-Hariri harsh — and when he does strike a harder note, as in the phrase 'among their flagrant misconceptions and manifest errors' (min awhāmihim al-fāḍiḥa wa-aghlāṭihim al-wāḍiḥa), it occurs only in the very first case treated, after which all subsequent formulations return to a tone of refined courtesy and wit. This variety in the vocabulary of address demonstrates Al-Hariri's acute sensitivity to his audience, whom he addresses in terms calculated to soften hearts and move them to abandon their misconceptions.

2. The Nature of Linguistic Errors in Al-Hariri's Era

Anyone who traces the patterns of error that afflict speakers across different periods will find that these errors are diverse in nature: grammatical (naḥwiyya), morphological (ṣarfiyya), semantic (dalāliyya), and rhetorical (balāghiyya), taking many forms and never disappearing entirely from any era. The causes that allow error to propagate and become entrenched among speakers are numerous. The errors that Al-Hariri catalogues in Durrat al-Ghawwas may be classified under the following headings:

- Grammatical, Morphological, and Orthographic Errors
- Semantic Errors
- Errors in Stylistic Usage: Proper Employment of Expressions in Literal and Figurative Contexts
- The Correct Use of Stylistic Constructions

3. The Criteria of Linguistic Correction: Classical and Modern Perspectives

Anyone who reflects carefully on the methods employed by the classical scholars in criticizing and correcting the errors that afflicted speakers of Arabic — whether common people or the educated elite — will recognize that these methods were diverse, sometimes in harmony, sometimes in tension. Yet the first generation of scholars and others who confronted the spread of laḥn tended to rely on a style of public condemnation, magnifying the gravity of the error and censuring those who committed it. Whenever they heard speech that departed from established Arabic usage, they hastened to its speaker and took

him to account, sometimes rebuking him harshly, sometimes with gentleness.

Al-Zajjājī recorded in his Īḍāḥ fī 'Ilal al-Naḥw that when Abū al-Aswad al-Du'alī heard the children of Arabs speaking with the errors of those of mixed linguistic heritage, he condemned and denounced the practice. It is reported that Abū al-Aswad al-Du'alī — the founder of Arabic grammar — once heard his daughter say: 'yā abah, mā ashadda al-ḥarra' ('Father, how intense the heat!'), to which he replied: 'The scorched earth at midday, my daughter' — mistaking her exclamation for a question. She said: 'I was not asking you — I was exclaiming at the intensity of the heat.' He then told her to say: 'mā ashadda al-ḥarra' — and then said: 'We are from God [alone] — the tongues of our children have been corrupted.'

The events and incidents through which laḥn spread — among the common people and, critically, among the educated classes who enjoyed some command of the language — continued to accumulate, serving as ominous harbingers of a dire threat. A resolute group of scholars, animated by zeal for Arabic, rolled up their sleeves to confront this threat. Two broad methods of addressing laḥn may be identified:

3.1 The Magnification of Error and the Rebuke of Its Perpetrators

This approach was characteristic of the earliest period of laḥn, when writing as a medium was still relatively limited and people erred chiefly in oral speech — so that correction, too, was primarily oral, sometimes taking the form of stern rebuke and denunciation, sometimes of gentle persuasion. In those early

generations, the spoken word carried enormous weight, and error was regarded with great gravity.

Chroniclers and biographers have preserved accounts of what befell certain poets and writers when they erred. When Ṭarafa ibn al-'Abd heard al-Musayyab ibn 'Alas recite his famous verse:

"And I have whiled away my grief at its approach / with a lean she-camel bearing the brands of al-Sayariyya — a stalwart beast."

He uttered his celebrated quip: 'The camel has turned into a she-camel' (istanwaqa al-jamal) — for the poet had used a masculine referent that implicitly rendered his subject female. Similar incidents abound in the tradition.

In the very first case he corrects, Al-Hariri gives it the heading: 'Their flagrant misconceptions and manifest errors.' He writes: 'They say: All the pilgrims have arrived (qadima sa-iru al-hajj) — yet sa-ir means what remains, not all.' The act of attributing these errors to the elite and characterizing them as 'flagrant' and 'manifest' is, in essence, a censure of those who commit them — for condemning what they have uttered is, by way of metonymy, condemning them. This form of characterization works both to expose the defect in their usage and to impel them to abandon what brands and disgraces them. For when a thing is known to be corrupt and yet is still uttered, the speaker is more deserving of reproach.

4. The Foundations of Al-Hariri's Linguistic Criticism and Its Methodological Observations

4.1 Rigorism in the Standard of Linguistic Correctness

Al-Hariri was exceptionally rigorous in his standard of linguistic correctness — more so than any of his predecessors who had taken it upon themselves to confront laḥn. His rigorism reached the point where he regarded the use of the fluent (faṣīḥ) form, as opposed to the more eloquent (afṣaḥ), as itself a misconception and an error from which the Arabic tongue should remain free (al-Khafājī, 1996, p. 37). This degree of rigorism does not always serve the best interests of Arabic. What is needed instead is a readiness to accept what speakers have used and settled upon, under carefully defined conditions — as some modern language academies now do. Certain styles and certain words may shift in their connotations across time, and this is not in itself a defect, provided the change does not pose a genuine threat to the language and its scholarly legacy.

4.2 Deficiencies in Transmitted and Applied Knowledge

Al-Hariri commanded an extensive knowledge of Arabic, and despite the breadth of his learning and his mastery of the language, he was a man of scholarly humility, readily acknowledging the merit of those who preceded him. His literary Maqāmāt stand as testimony to his distinction and pre-eminence, and in their preface he graciously concedes the priority of al-Badīʾ ibn Ḥamdūn, saying with characteristic modesty:

"This, notwithstanding my acknowledgment that al-Badi — may God have mercy on him — was a consummate master and a man of manifest signs; and that whoever undertakes after

him to compose a maqama, even were he endowed with the eloquence of Qudama, can only draw from the remnants of his cup, and travel that road only by his guidance. And well did the poet say:"

"Had I wept before her weeping out of longing for Su'dā / I would have healed my soul before the hour of regret."

"But she wept before me and stirred in me the weeping / by her tears — and so the merit belongs to the one who comes first." (al-Ḥarīrī, Maqāmāt al-Ḥarīrī, 1873, p. 16)

Yet for all his learning, Al-Hariri sometimes issued rulings without verifying them or calling to mind the transmitted evidence that contradicted his judgments. If we were to make some allowance for him, we might say that the domain of language is vast, and that a scholar may naturally be drawn to certain transmitted forms over others — whether out of attachment to what is familiar and widespread, or out of genuine ignorance of some reports. This is a well-known phenomenon among scholars, as the poet said:

"Say to one who claims philosophy in learning: / You have memorized something, but many things have escaped you." (Abū Nuwās, 1953, p. 7)

4.3 His Combination of Transmitted Evidence and Analogical Reasoning

Al-Hariri sometimes relies on analogical reasoning (qiyās) in his corrections and sometimes takes transmitted evidence (samā') as his proof. He rejects samā' in some cases and upholds qiyās, and reverses this in others. An example is his denial of the construction al-ḥawāmīm as a legitimate

designation for the Qur'anic surahs beginning with the letters Ḥā'–Mīm, insisting instead that the correct expression is 'Āl Ḥā' Mīm' — as Ibn Mas'ūd said: 'Āl Ḥā' Mīm are the brocade of the Qur'an' and 'When I fall upon the Āl Ḥā' Mīm, I fall upon lush and pleasant meadows in which I linger.' (al-Qāsim ibn Sallām, 1995, p. 255)

Yet what he rejects is in fact attested in Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī: 'I learned the matched pairs that the Prophet ﷺ used to recite, two by two in each prayer unit.' Abdullah stood and Alqama entered with him, and Alqama departed. We asked him [about it], and he said: 'Twenty surahs from the beginning of the mufaṣṣal, according to Ibn Mas'ūd's arrangement — the last of them being the ḥawāmīm: Ḥā' Mīm al-Dukhān and 'Amma Yatasā'alūn.' Hadith No. 4710, vol. 4, (al-Bukhārī, 1993, p. 1911)

It would have been more appropriate to accept both forms, given that both transmissions are sound.

4.4 His Privileging of One Grammatical School Over Another

Al-Hariri was a committed adherent of the Basran grammatical school, and his allegiance to the Basran position is pronounced. The disagreement between the Basrans and the Kufans is broad and its issues are numerous. Among the positions on which Al-Hariri sides with one school over another — despite the validity of the opposing view — are the following:

• The question of iḥmarra and iḥmāra.

• The question of attributive derivation (nisba) from plurals: the Basrans hold that when forming the relative adjective (nisba) from a plural, it must revert to the singular; the Kufans

take the opposite view. Al-Hariri supports the Basran position — yet the Kufan position is equally valid. The word al-anṣār, for instance, is a plural, and the nisba derived from it is anṣārī — formed from the plural itself.

4.5 Failure to Apply His Own Criteria Consistently

In his correction of the word iḥmarra, Al-Hariri states that it is used for colors that are fixed, permanent, and stable — and that when the color is transient, caused by some passing circumstance, iḥmārra (the lengthened form) is to be used. Yet he does not consistently apply this very principle to his own usage.

5. CONCLUSION

Linguistic correction is an urgent necessity — by it the language is preserved and protected. It requires an ample store of transmitted knowledge, a sophisticated command of the issues and problems of the language, the capacity for analysis, argumentation, and comparative judgment, and a refined discernment in addressing people across the full range of their circumstances and stations. The study of linguistic correction is a field that has generated a vast scholarly literature, and inquiry in this domain continues unabated.

On the basis of what has been presented, this study arrives at the following conclusions:

- First, linguistic correction is an effective instrument for rehabilitating tongues that have deviated from the mother language. In its scope and influence, it rivals the role of mass media in the modern age, and it differs fundamentally from the older prescriptive genre of 'say this, not that' (qul wa lā taqul).

- Second, Al-Hariri's vision of the Arabic language led him to adopt a novel methodology that reveals his wisdom and skill in both treatment and address.
- Third, Al-Hariri forged a distinctive approach to linguistic correction that combines censure and praise, and the art of discriminating judgment and comparative weighing.
- Fourth, many works of linguistic correction rely heavily on the accumulation of textual evidence in order to impel the reader to abandon erroneous constructions — yet Al-Hariri went further, expanding the role of explanatory reasoning, for he regarded reasoned justification as the principal instrument of genuine persuasion.

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