

## Collation and Distortion in Manuscripts

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### Abstract:

This article discusses two main types of errors found in manuscript copying: *taṣḥīf* (collation), which involves confusing letters with similar shapes or diacritical dots, and *taḥrīf* (distortion), which involves altering letter forms and thereby changing meaning. Scribes, whether intentionally or unintentionally, often introduced grammatical mistakes, omissions, substitutions, or marginal insertions into the main text. Scholars have written numerous works to identify and correct such errors, especially in names and chains of transmission. The editor's (*muḥaqqiq*) role is to correct these errors in the margins, not the main text, while preserving the author's original wording. The article also explains methods for examining manuscripts to detect forgery, including studying paper, ink, script consistency, and colophons. Additions or improvements to the author's original text by the editor are considered a scholarly crime. Finally, the article highlights historical examples of collation errors in the Qur'an, hadith, and poetry.

**Keywords:** Taṣḥīf (Collation) , Taḥrīf (Distortion) , Manuscript Editing (Taḥqīq) , Scribes' Errors , Textual Criticism

### The Concept of Collation (Taṣḥīf):

It is every alteration that arises from the resemblance of script forms. Al-Ma'arrī said: "Collation is when a man takes a word from his reading of a sheet (*ṣaḥīfah*), not having heard it from men, and thus changes it from what is correct." Collation has occurred among a group of the best scholars of Arabic, including: the author of *Al-Jamharah*, the author of *Al-Ṣiḥāḥ*, the author of *Al-'Ayn*, Tha'lab, Al-Mufaṣṣal, and Al-A'mash, to the extent that Imam Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal said: "Who is free from error and collation?" It is mentioned in *Lisān al-'Arab*: "Al-Muṣḥafī and al-Ṣaḥafī: the one who transmits error from reading sheets due to similar letters. And al-Taṣḥīf: error in the sheet."

Thus, collation (*taṣḥīf*) is the alteration of the pronunciation of one or more letters, i.e., through the misplacing or omission of diacritical dots (*i'jām* and *iḥmāl*).

## **Distortion (Tahrīf):**

Distorting speech from its proper places means changing its meaning. This occurs by substituting similar-shaped letters: such as *dāl* and *rā*, *wāw* and *kāf* and *lām*, *fā* and *qāf*. It is mentioned in *Lisān al-‘Arab*: "The Jews used to change the meanings of the Torah using similar letters, so God described them as doing so, for He, the Exalted, said: '**They distort words from their [proper] places**'. "[ al-Tūnjī, *Al-Minhāj*, 169]

## **First / Errors of Scribes:**

**1- Scribes' Mistakes:** In ancient times, copying was akin to modern printing presses. The scribe earned his living from this craft, sometimes making many times what the author earned from his book. There is no doubt that there were distinguished, honest, trustworthy, and meticulous scribes. But there was also an ignorant, mercenary class. The trustworthy scribe is characterized by transmitting everything he encounters in the book with complete accuracy and honesty, without addition, interpolation, omission, or distortion. A scribe might do all of this intentionally for clarification, or inadvertently due to negligence. Often, they omit conjunctions, replace them with others, or forget to copy small words such as

*lahu* (for him), *minhu* (from him), *‘an* (from/about).

He might also skip one or more words, or skip a line or two, or insert a marginal note into the main text, thinking that the author had added something, or because he thought the marginal note was sound, so he inserts it into its place within the meaning. Scribes' errors are very numerous, the most important of which, besides the above, are:

1. Often, a scribe commits grammatical errors, such as neglecting the jussive (jazm) or accusative (naṣb) cases, or errors in duals, plurals, numbers, and counted nouns. We should not be hasty in attributing errors to the author, especially if he is a scholar of language and literature. However, scholarly authors (like Ibn Abī Uṣaybi‘ah) do not pay as much attention to their language as to their ideas. In this case, the manuscript's difficulties are dealt with by relying on correcting errors in the footnotes.

Furthermore, some historians from the Ottoman era – and many there are – tend to write in a style closer to the vernacular, even though they are among the most learned scholars of their time, like Al-‘Urdī in *Ma‘ādin al-Dhahab* and

Al-Murādī in *Sulk al-Durar*, despite their esteemed status and scholarly standing.

2. Often, a scribe inadvertently omits some words or substitutes others. This can be remedied by comparison or by referring to the author's other works or books of scholarship and literature.
3. A scribe might go so far as to delete, add, or distort, intentionally or unintentionally. If the editor (muḥaqqiq) discovers this, he should point it out and note it. A scribe may also repeat some words, especially at the ends of lines or beginnings of pages.
4. A scribe might insert a marginal note into the main text, thinking that the author had made an addition, or out of a desire for clarification. This is discovered by consulting the master copy (al-nuskhaḥ al-umm).

Scholars have become aware of the errors of their peers, tracked them, and then compiled them in chapters and books. Among those who wrote about the errors of authors and scribes are: Al-‘Askarī, Al-Dāraquṭnī, Ibn Ḥajar, Al-Suyūfī. Perhaps the most important thing they noticed and drew attention to is what occurred by way of collation and distortion in names, such as *al-Ghālī* and *al-Qālī*, *‘Iyād* and *‘Abbād*, *al-Ḥasan* and *al-Ḥusayn*, *al-Mulḥī* and *al-Malahī*, *al-*

*Marwazī* and *al-Marūrūdhī*. Thus, many works were composed on what is called *al-Mu’talif wa al-Mukhtalif* (Homographs and Heterographs) of names, lineages, and *kunyas* (agnomens), and they paid great attention to them. Among the most important of these books are:

- *Al-Tanbīh ‘alā Ḥudūth al-Taṣḥīf* by Ḥamzah al-Iṣfahānī (d. 360 AH)
- *Al-Tanbīhāt ‘alā Aghālīt al-Ruwāt* by ‘Alī ibn Ḥamzah (d. 375 AH)
- *Sharḥ mā Yaqa‘u fīhi al-Taṣḥīf wa al-Taḥrīf* by Abū Aḥmad al-‘Askarī (d. 382 AH)
- *Al-Mu’talif wa al-Mukhtalif fī Asmā’ Nuqalāt al-Ḥadīth* by al-Azdī (d. 409 AH)
- *Al-Ikmāl* by Ibn Mākūlā (d. 430 AH)
- *Talkhīṣ al-Mutashābih* by al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (d. 463 AH)
- *Talkhīṣ al-Mutashābih* by al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (d. 463 AH) [Note: repeated in original]
- *Al-Istidrāk* by Ibn Nuqṭah (d. 629 AH)
- *Al-Mushtabah fī al-Rijāl, Asmā’ihim wa Ansābihim* by al-Dhahabī (d. 748 AH)

Many errors in names and words can be remedied by referring to such books. Omissions from the text can be remedied by:

1. Knowing the author's style, whether he uses rhyme (saj'), antithesis (ṭibāq), or parallelism.
2. Merismus (al-talfīq): The author might be concerned with mentioning antonyms in his writings. If a word or letter is omitted, it can be discovered through rhyme, antithesis, or merismus, i.e., the method of extreme opposition. For example, someone saying: "God sent him to every eloquent and non-Arab" or another saying: "I have known neither human nor jinn" or another saying: "I did not know any believer or dhimmi."
3. Searching in books of literature (adab): One author might have quoted a text from a book, and consulting that can be useful. If resolving the ambiguity is impossible, place dots in place of the omission and comment on its ambiguity in a footnote.

There are some scribes who deliberately changed the title of the book they were copying or the author's name for purely commercial purposes.[ al-Tūnjī, *Al-Minhāj*, 170-171]

### **Second / Correction (Taṣḥīḥ):**

It is rare for a manuscript text to remain exactly as its author wrote it or to come out exactly as he intended. The text may contain

omissions or additions due to age or the actions of scribes. Collation or distortion may also occur due to scribes' actions. Part of the editor's (muḥaqqiq) mission is to address all of this with precision and honesty. In all cases, most corrections should be in the margin, not in the main text. Even in this case, they must be indicated in the margin. By doing so, he fulfills his trust and truly serves knowledge.

In the case of correcting obvious grammatical errors about which there is no ambiguity or disagreement, they should be indicated in the margin with the phrase: "In the original... which is an error." If a letter or word is found missing from the text, he can [insert it] after that letter or word and place it between two curly braces {}, while referring to that in the margin.

It may happen that entire phrases or even a whole paragraph are missing from the text due to a lacuna (kharam) affecting the paper, either from handling or the passage of time. The editor must also compare the text of the manuscript with other copies of it, restore the missing part, and indicate this in the margin.[ Fahmī, *Taḥqīq al-Makḥṭūṭāt*, p. 37]

As for external additions, i.e., those that the editor himself adds to the text for clarification or to complete the sense, they are not permissible

in the main text but should be indicated in the margin. As for adding to or changing the author's text with the aim of improving it or raising its level, this is a crime against knowledge that a serious editor should not commit.[ Fahmī, *Tahqīq al-Makhṭūṭāt*, 38]

If the author makes an error in a word or in the spelling of a proper noun, the editor may correct this in the margin, but the main text should be written as he found it, because this gives the reader an idea of the author's culture and breadth of knowledge.

It is the editor's duty to correct the collation and distortion in the manuscript, which are the work of scribes, and few manuscripts are free from it.

Collation (*taṣḥīf*) is the confusion in the diacritical dots of similarly shaped letters, such as *bā, tā, thā; jīm, ḥā, khā; dāl, dhāl; rā, zāy*, and others. Distortion (*taḥrīf*), on the other hand, is changing the form and script of letters, such as *dāl* and *rā; dāl* and *lām; mīm* and *qāf*, and others.[ Fahmī, *Tahqīq al-Makhṭūṭāt*, 39]

### **- Examining Copies for Distortion:**

The examiner of a manuscript faces various aspects through which he can evaluate and properly assess the manuscript.

1. He must study its paper to determine its age, and not be deceived by dates inscribed in it that may be forged. It should be noted that traces of bookworms, woodworms, and wear do not definitively prove the age of a copy, as we see such traces on manuscripts no more than fifty years old. Likewise, some modern manuscripts are artificially aged by merchants so that their paper appears old and worn. Al-Qifṭī reported that Ibn Sīnā made three books, one in the style of Ibn al-‘Amīd, the second in the style of al-Ṣāḥib, and the third in the style of al-Ṣābī, and ordered them bound and their leather aged, in order to pass them off on Abū Maṣū‘ al-Jabbān. No doubt this forgery was intended as a joke, but it shows us that history contains indications of the occurrence of forgery.

Just as forgery occurs in authorship, it also occurs in handwriting. History relates that some skilled people were able to imitate scripts with great precision. Ibn al-Athīr mentioned that ‘Alī ibn Muḥammad al-Aḥḍab al-Muzawwir (d. 370 AH) could write in the hand of anyone, so that the person being impersonated had no doubt it was his hand.

2. He should study the ink to determine whether its date is near or far.

3. Likewise, the script, for each era has a particular style of script and writing system that an experienced expert can judge based on his expertise.
4. He should examine the consistency of the script and its system throughout the copy. The copy might be composite (*mulaffaqah*), which diminishes or enhances its value.
5. [He should examine] the book's title and what its opening bears in terms of *ijāzāt* (certificates of authorization), ownership statements, and reading records.
6. Also, he might find within the copy indications of readings by certain scholars or their comments.
7. He should look at the book's chapters, sections, and parts to verify the completeness of the copy and the correctness of its arrangement. Many old books adhere to the system of *ta'qībah* (catchword), which is the word often written at the bottom of the right-hand page to indicate the beginning of the next page. By tracking these catchwords, one can be assured of the sequence of the book.
8. He should look at the book's colophon (*khātimah*) to perhaps learn the scribe's name, the copying date, and the copy's

lineage.[ Abd al-Salām, *Tahqīq al-Nuṣūṣ wa Nashruhā*, , 40-41]

Books of *Majālis* (sessions) and *Amālī* (dictations) are often subject to alteration, substitution, and addition by students and transmitters. It is mentioned in the introduction to *Tahdhīb al-Lughah* by Al-Azharī, when discussing Al-Aṣma'ī: "He dictated a book in Baghdad on *Nawādir* (rare linguistic forms), and additions were made to it that were not his words. Abū al-Faḍl al-Mundhirī narrated to me from Abū Ja'far al-Ghassānī from Salamah who said: Abū Rabī'ah, a companion of 'Abd Allāh ibn Ṭāhir and friend of Abū al-Samrā', came with the *Nawādir* book attributed to Al-Aṣma'ī and placed it before him. Al-Aṣma'ī began looking at it and said: 'This is not all my speech. Additions have been made to it by others. If you wish that I mark what I remember of it and strike out the rest, I will do so. Otherwise, do not read it.' Salamah ibn 'Āṣim said: So Al-Aṣma'ī marked what he disapproved of in the book, which was more than a third. Then he ordered us, and we copied it for him."

It is worth mentioning that the author of *Kashf al-Zunūn*, as well as Al-Baghdādī in the introduction to *Khizānat al-Adab*, mentioned that Al-Zajjājī had three *Amālī*: major, middle, and minor. However, I have proven in the introduction to my edition of these *Amālī* that

they are one and the same, and that their existence in those three forms is merely the work of students and transmitters. [Abd al-Salām, *Tahqīq al-Nuṣūṣ wa Nashruhā*, , 40]

### **Books on Collation and Distortion:**

Among the earliest books on collation and distortion is what was composed by Abū Aḥmad al-Ḥasan ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-‘Askarī (293-382 AH). About half of it was printed in Egypt in 1326 AH, then it was printed in full, edited by Professor ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Aḥmad, in 1383 AH. Also [among them] is what was composed by Ḥāfiẓ ‘Alī ibn ‘Umar al-Dāraqūṭnī, who died in 385 AH, mentioned by Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ, Al-Nawawī, Ibn Ḥajar, and Al-Suyūṭī.

Among the works that can be considered among the books on collation and distortion is *Al-Tanbīhāt ‘alā Aghālīṭ al-Ruwāt* by ‘Alī ibn Ḥamzah al-Baṣrī, who died in 375 AH, even though he did not name his book accordingly. Likewise, *Al-Tanbīh ‘alā Ḥudūth al-Taṣḥīf* by Ḥamzah ibn Ḥasan al-Iṣfahānī. (‘Abd al-Salām Hārūn)

**Its History:** The history of collation and distortion is very ancient. It has occurred among a group of virtuous scholars, including leading linguists and ḥadīth scholars, to the extent that

Imam Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal said: "Who is free from error and collation?"

Regarding the Book of God, ‘Uthmān ibn Abī Shaybah read: "He made the ship into the leg of his brother." [Paraphrased, reflecting a misreading of Qur’anic text].

He also read: "Alif Lām Mīm. Have you not seen how your Lord dealt with the owners of the elephant?" [Mistake in reading]. Ḥamzah al-Zayyāt used to recite the Qur’ān from the *muṣḥaf* (codex). One day he recited while his father was listening: "Alif Lām Mīm. That is the Book, no oil (zayt) in it," so his father said: "Leave the *muṣḥaf* and receive [the Qur’ān] orally from men."

Some read: "God said about a man."

In ḥadīth, some made a collation error: "A prayer following a prayer is a writing in ‘Illiyīn" [changing it to] "a treasure in darkness." Another made an error: "O Abā ‘Umayr, what did the *nughayr* (little bird) do?" saying instead: "What did the camel do?"

Much of this has occurred in language, poetry, and proper nouns, making the discussion lengthy. This affliction became so widespread that they said: "Do not take the Qur’ān from a *muṣḥafī* (one who relies on the codex), nor knowledge from a *ṣahafī* (one who relies on

sheets)." Just as they satirized those who rely on written sheets, they praised those who did not depend on them for their knowledge. In this regard, Abū Nuwās says in his elegy for Khalaf al-Aḥmar:

*He does not confuse the ḥā with the khā in recitation,*

*Nor does he take his transmission from sheets.*

For fear of collation, we find some authors resorting to deviating from what is conventionally known in language to avoid others falling into error. It is mentioned in *Ṣiḥāḥ al-Jawharī*, p. 685, under the entry (sa'tar): "Sa'tar: a plant. Some write it with *ṣād* in medical books to prevent confusion with *sha'ir* (barley)." ('Abd al-Salām Hārūn, *Taḥqīq al-Nuṣūṣ wa Nashruhā*, 7th ed., Publisher: Maktabat al-Khānjī, Cairo, 1418 AH / 1998 CE, p. 71)

### **Books on Homographs and Heterographs (al-Mu'talif wa al-Mukhtalif):**

It was natural to resist this academic affliction by means that would eliminate it or mitigate its severity. So scholars turned to composing books that investigate *al-Mu'talif wa al-Mukhtalif*. Some of these deal with the names of men (transmitters). On this subject, works were authored by Al-Dāraqutnī (d. 385 AH),

Aḥmad ibn 'Alī al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (d. 463 AH), Ibn Mākūlā (d. 487 AH), Ibn Nuḡṭah al-Ḥanbalī (d. 629 AH), and Al-Dhahabī (d. 748 AH) in his book *Al-Mushtabah*.

Some deal with the names of poets. On this subject, a work was authored by Al-Ḥasan ibn Bishr al-Āmidī (d. 370 AH).

Some deal with the names of tribes. On this subject, a work was authored by Muḥammad ibn Ḥabīb (d. 215 AH). ('Abd al-Salām Hārūn, *Taḥqīq al-Nuṣūṣ wa Nashruhā*, 7th ed., Publisher: Maktabat al-Khānjī, Cairo, 1418 AH / 1998 CE, p. 72) And much more besides.

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