

# The Functions And Linguistic Analysis Of Metaphor In The Holy Qur'an

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## Abstract

The paper aims to tackle the function of metaphor in the Qur'an within the theoretical framework put forward by Lakoff & Turner (1989). This theory is known as the Cognitive Theory of Metaphor. It shows how the Qur'an is structured around the idea of the variety of meaning of lexical items, and how every correspondence between the two domains of "literal" and "non-literal" can fit into it. However, such an application of cognitive semantic approach can provide valuable insights. These insights enhance the overall aim of this paper which is to prove the linguistic creativity of the Qur'an through applying the cognitive theory of metaphor. This paper outlines the basis from which the Qur'an should be considered not only as a book of religious teachings, but also as a linguistic miracle for Arabs (El-sharif, 2011). The structure of this paper is presented as follows. First, we introduce the theoretical background and arguments of this study. Afterwards, we underline the significance of this study and its contribution to the field. In the following section, we present the definition and function of metaphor. Next, we embark on the linguistic analysis of metaphor in the holy Qur'an, metaphorical language and its use in discourse, and metaphor and Islamic religious discourse. Finally, we end the essay with a concluding paragraph.

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**Keywords:** Metaphor, Functions, Linguistic Analysis, Holy Qur'an

## **Introduction**

As defined by Lakoff & Johnson (1980), this paper is concerned with applying the cognitive linguistic view of metaphor theory to the Qur'an. However, such an application of cognitive semantic approach can provide valuable insights. These insights enhance the overall aim of this paper which is to prove the linguistic creativity of the Qur'an through applying the cognitive theory of metaphor. These metaphors are used in the Holy Qur'an as a persuasive tool for both believers and unbelievers. They are used to persuade disbelievers to have faith in God and, at the same time, to strengthen the faith of believers in God. On one hand, metaphors act as heralds of goodness for those who believe in God and have strong faith in Him, His messages, and His messengers. On the other hand, they act as a source of punishment for those who disbelieve in Him and deny His messages and His messengers (Zaid, 2011:78).

The Qur'an was sent in the language of the Arabs, who were known for their linguistic talent, especially in poetry. Traditionally, poetry and other literary forms, such as narratives and signaled giftedness is an idea shared by modern applied linguists and anthropologists. While linguistic anthropologists focus mainly on traditional oral art, some researchers have argued that the framing and critical potential of linguistic performance is keyed by the more fleeting use of poetic and/or other creative language in everyday interactions (Maybin & Swann, 2007) as stated in Zaid (2011:78). The Qur'anic text is a linguistic miracle and was intended to challenge Arabs who are fluent in classic Arabic and poetry at the time it was revealed. Consequently, poetry is like other literary forms such as narratives, and signaled linguistic giftedness which is according to traditional teaching (El-sharif, 2011: 43). Discourse Analysis is the discipline of linguistics which puts into practice a set of systematic methods that approach the relationship between the text and its context. Subsequently, it involves a diverse selection of quantitative and qualitative approaches. These approaches facilitate the way for the discourse analyst to break through the different components of a particular discourse and uncover its messages.

## **Significance of the Study**

The study of metaphors in Arabic religious texts has been driven mainly by the need to interpret the meanings of the Holy Qur'an and the prophetic Tradition. In fact, the development of the science of interpreting and explaining the Holy Qur'an (*tafsir*) has significantly contributed to the development of Arabic studies, especially rhetoric. In this respect, the necessity for studying metaphors has been developed based on the need to deduce religious principles and commandments from the sources on a sound basis (El-Sharif, 2011). For these reasons, metaphorical language constitutes

an indispensable linguistic tool in religious discourse. In her book *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Soskice, 1985, 1985), Janet Martin Soskice was among the pioneer researchers to draw attention to the relationship between metaphor and religious language. Soskice argues in her book that what is needed to study religious language is not a more literal theology, but a better understanding of metaphor. She opines that the analysis of metaphor in religious language illuminates the way in which the clergy speak of God. Thus, this contributes in revealing how our understanding of metaphors in religious language can facilitate the way we perceive sciences and other disciplines. This opinion paper outlines the basis by which we consider the Qur'an not only as a book of religious teachings, but also as a linguistic miracle for Arabs (El-sharif, 2011).

### **Literature Review**

The definition of metaphor as a "medium of transfer" has been used by linguists, semanticists, and discourse analysts to achieve many different functions. L & J (1980) introduced an approach to metaphor analysis which is known as the theory of "conceptual metaphor". Hence, this was developed in their later works (Lakoff, 1988, 1993; Lakoff, 2008; Lakoff & Tuner, 1989). L & J asserted the fact that metaphor is a matter of experience of everyday life rather than a matter of language. They argued that metaphor pervades "our way of conceiving the world" and is reflected in our "language, thoughts, and actions". Additionally, it has influence on how people think and act. They stress the fact that metaphor is "present in everyday life. Thus, they regard metaphor as an approach in understanding the world (1980, p.3). For them, metaphor is a tool that is used automatically and unconsciously. Furthermore, they stress the fact that the conceptual experience should be grasped and comprehended through another conceptual experience.

Subsequently, Kövecses (2002) develops further the idea of the conceptual metaphor. For him, a domain of experience of something is understood through another conceptual domain. Furthermore, he sees that the conceptual metaphor helps to understand the non-physical by contrasting it with physical reality (p.4). On the other hand, other linguists criticize the cognitive semantics as an inadequate approach in providing an accurate account of metaphor. Sadock (1993) argues that metaphor is beyond the scope of semantics. This is because "it relies on conflict between what is said and what is intended" (p.110).

Searle (1979) adopts the view that metaphor has a pragmatic function as it deals with what is intended by the speaker, and not the semantic reference of the utterance mentioned by the speaker. However, the same attitude was followed by Levinson (1983). He argues that metaphor has a

“function that cannot be derived by principles of semantic interpretation; but rather, pragmatics can provide the metaphorical interpretation” (p.11) (El-sharif, 2011).

### **Definition and Function of Metaphor**

Metaphor has been traditionally studied and analyzed within the framework of rhetorics, literary works, and literary studies. It has been related to figurative language. Also, it has been regarded as "just a kind of artistic embellishment" or something that is "divorced and isolated from everyday language" (Murray & Moon, 2006).

Similarly, metaphor is defined in Longman Dictionary (1995) as "a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is literally denoting one kind of object or idea that is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them". It can be concluded that metaphor is regarded as a means of "meaning transfer". Alternatively, Charteris-Black describes it as a medium through which "meanings are transferred" (2004, 19).

Lakoff & Johnson (1980) present a cognitive assumption which revolves round the existence of a set of metaphorical concepts. Around this, we can conceptualize the world or our worldviews. They asserted that metaphor is rather a matter of experience or everyday life than merely a matter of language. “Metaphor is a tool so ordinary that we use it unconsciously and automatically... it is irreplaceable; metaphor allows us to understand ourselves and our world in ways that no other modes of thought can.” (Lakoff & Turner, 1989: xi)

However, it has a substantial impact on the poetic character of a literary work. This is because such work depends on the imaginative use inferred to it by the writer.

On the other hand, other linguists criticize the cognitive semantics as an inadequate approach to provide an accurate account of metaphor. Sadock (1993) argues that metaphor is beyond the scope of semantics as “it relies on conflict between what is said and what is intended” (p.110). Searle (1979) adopts the view that metaphor has a pragmatic function as it deals with what is intended by the speaker, and not the semantic reference of the utterance mentioned by the speaker. The same attitude was followed by Levinson (1983) as he argues that metaphor has a function that cannot be derived by principles of semantic interpretation; but rather, pragmatics can provide the metaphorical interpretation” (p.11).

The definition of metaphor as a "medium of transfer" has been used by linguists, semanticists, and discourse analysts to achieve many different functions. L & J (1980) introduced an approach to metaphor analysis which is known as the theory of “conceptual metaphor”. Hence, this was developed in their later works (Lakoff, 1988, 1993; Lakoff, 2008; Lakoff & Tuner,

1989). L & J asserted the fact that metaphor is a matter of experience of everyday life rather than a matter of language. They argued that metaphor pervades "our way of conceiving the world" and is reflected in our "language, thoughts, and actions". Additionally, it has influence on how people think and act.

They stress the fact that metaphor is "present in everyday life and they regard metaphor as an approach to understanding the world (1980, p.3). To summarize the functions of metaphor, it can be said that there are two traditional views with regard to the study of the metaphor: the classical view and the romantic view (Saeed, 2007). The classical view regards metaphor as "decorative and does not relate the metaphor to thought" (Deignan, 1999, 2005). The romantic view of the metaphor regards the metaphor as an integral part to thought and as a way of experiencing the world (Saeed, 2007).

### Linguistic Analysis of Metaphor in the Holy Qur'an

وَمَثَلُهُمْ فِي الْإِنْجِيلِ كَزَرْعٍ أَخْرَجَ شَطْأَهُ فَآزَرَهُ فَاسْتَغْلَظَ فَاسْتَوَىٰ عَلَىٰ سُوْقِهِ يُعْجِبُ الزَّارِعَ لِيُغَيِّظَ بِهِمُ الْكُفَّارَ

... *THEIR likeness in the Gospel, is like a seed that sends out a stalk, then makes it firm, and it becomes strong and rises straight upon its stem, gladdening the cultivator's heart, in order to fill the unbelievers with dismay. (in Al-Fat'h,29)*

1. One of the beautiful metaphors in Qur'an, this ayah, is about the companions of the Prophet (salla Allahu alaihi wasallam) on how their example was described in the original Gospel of Hazrat Isa's (Jesus). The metaphor begins with the conjunction ك (with fat'ha on it) meaning 'like'. Thus, it is in the category of a simile. The main source is a 'seed' developed further in the ayah. As a result, this becomes an 'extended metaphor'. At a pure literary level, we might interpret every single element of the extended metaphor, attributing a target to each feature of the process of the seed growing up (such as its standing straight, it's gaining strength, and finally, becoming a strong trunk, etc.). However, it seems that the interpreted meaning of the overall metaphor is the growth in the numbers of the believers and followers when Prophet Mohammad (salla Allahu alaihi wa sallam) started preaching his religion. As such, the metaphor might be viewed as a compound one, in which details are added to amplify the main source (The structure of Entropy, 2012).

مَثَلُ الَّذِينَ يُنْفِقُونَ أَمْوَالَهُمْ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ كَمَثَلِ حَبَّةٍ أَنْبَتَتْ سَبْعَ سَنَابِلٍ فِي كُلِّ سُنْبُلَةٍ مِائَةٌ حَبَّةٌ ۗ وَاللَّهُ يُضَاعِفُ لِمَنْ يَشَاءُ ۗ وَاللَّهُ وَاسِعٌ عَلِيمٌ

*The example of those who spend their wealth in Allah's way is similar to that of a grain which has sprouted seven stalks and in each stalk are a hundred grains; and Allah may increase it still more than this, for*

*whomever He wills; and Allah is Most Capable, All Knowing. (in Al-Baqara, 261)*

2. This is another extended and compound metaphor in which the metaphorical relationship is established explicitly. Hence, it is technically a simile. Although the target referred to are the people who do the spending, the target is their wealth spent in the way of Allah, which when spent is like a seed sown. Thus, this will bring as much reward from God's bounty as a single seed sprouting into a bushful of grain (The structure of Entropy, 2012).

فَمَثَلُهُ كَمَثَلِ صَفْوَانٍ عَلَيْهِ تُرَابٌ فَأَصَابَهُ وَابِلٌ فَتَرَكَهُ صَلْدًا

... *HIS example is like that of a [large] smooth stone upon which is dust and is hit by a downpour that leaves it bare. (in Al-Baqara, 264)*

3. In context, the above ayah is about the spending of those who do it merely for show; evidenced by the fact that their giving is usually followed by flaunting it in the society or reminding the taker of their 'good deed'. Also, it is followed by some kind of inferior treatment towards the taker. Again, through a similitude developed by compound elements, the main target is the true nature of their spending (likened to a hard and bare rock on which nothing of worth can grow). The spending itself was like some dust gathered on the flat stone; as soon as some worldly temptation came along (the rains), the true nature was revealed underneath (The structure of Entropy, 2012).

لَا تَعْمَى الْأَبْصَارُ وَلَكِنْ تَعْمَى الْقُلُوبُ الَّتِي فِي الصُّدُورِ

... *IT IS not the eyes that are blind, but it is the hearts in the bosoms, that are blind. (in Al-Hajj, 46)*

4. There are two metaphors in here, both absolute. Heart is a well-known idiomatic reference to 'sense', 'affect', and 'feeling'. Blindness is also a rather common representation of the state of senselessness, lack of insight, and affective insensitivity.

بِيَدِكَ الْخَيْرُ

In Your Hand is all good (In Al-i-Imran 26).

وَمَا رَمَيْتَ إِذْ رَمَيْتَ وَلَكِنَّ اللَّهَ رَمَى

and it was not you [o prophet Muhammed] when you threw [sand at them], but it was Allah Who threw it (In Al-Anfal 17).

5. In both of these examples, personification occurs by crediting a human feature or action with God Almighty. Of course, Allah Sub'hana'hu wa Ta'ala is above any literal comparisons to any creature of His own. However, for ease of communication and translability to His human subjects, He makes ample use of personification in the Qur'an and applies it to His own case.

The first instance here is a common proverbial expression in this case applied to God. In the second instance, there is a very deliberate

personification by attributing an act by the Prophet (salla Allahu alaihi wasallam) to His own self. Thus, this technique achieves particular effects in meaning. For one, it suggests that all rightful action by His subjects, in particular, by His prophets, represent the authority and decree of His Lordship. For another, it shows that great courageous acts performed under devotion to one's God are appreciated and endearing. This was so that God Himself attaches His name and agency to those deeds; thus, declaring the high status of such actions in God's reckoning. Note that these effects are not particular to the Last Prophet as might be suggested by the wording of the above ayah. In the opening section of this ayah (right before the quoted one), Allah Ta'ala attributes the general actions of the Muslim army against the enemy to Himself in the same manner (The structure of Entropy, 2012).

### **Metaphorical Language and its Use in Discourse**

Modern cognitive approaches to metaphor analysis utilize critical approaches of discourse analysis in order to draw attention to the critical awareness of particular metaphors within language and culture. Philip Eubanks emphasizes that the 'connection between the cognitive and the cultural is the greatest strength of cognitive metaphor theory' (Eubanks, 2000, p. 25). He builds his proposition on Lakoff and Johnson's remark which states that:

[M]etaphors [...] highlight and make coherent certain aspects of our experience [...] metaphors may create realities for us, especially social realities. A metaphor may thus be a guide for future action [...] this will, in turn, reinforce the power of the metaphor to make experience coherent. In this sense, metaphors can be self-fulfilling prophecies. (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 156)

Lakoff and Johnson were the first linguists to argue that metaphorical language holds a vital position in any given language or culture. They stated that metaphors are not consistently tied to physical explanations of reality. In fact, their use must be considered as a reflection of the linguistic and social behaviors of the culture where they emerge. What is meant by the above proposition is that metaphors contain within them beliefs about the actual nature of everyday phenomena. To illustrate this, the acquisition of any sort of knowledge by a child is universally metaphorised in terms of writing. Consequently, people commonly describe the mind at birth as a *tabula rasa* – an empty slate on which all knowledge must be “written” by others. Or, to give another illustration, it is popular in many cultures to depict the hearts of the followers of a given religion as empty vessels which should be filled by the many religious principles and beliefs which religion encompasses. For

example, the Prophet Muhammad frequently refers to images of the heart, ink, and the process of writing when talking about the acquisition of spiritual knowledge and guidance. Therefore, a particular discourse can be perceived as a mirror of the socio-cultural practices of its society. Furthermore, it constructs its own context in relevance to the specific social principles and standpoints of that society or culture. A discourse maker who employs metaphorical language must make his metaphors conform to these social principles in order to make his discourse appreciable and influential (El-sharif, 2011).

The cognitive machinery that a metaphor possesses and the way it functions in everyday language provides the discourse producer with a tool that gives his/her metaphors an explanatory power. This power makes a novel idea more readily comprehensible for the discourse recipient. This is because a metaphor is mostly based on the common cultural background of the discourse recipient. Eva Kittay maintains that ‘metaphor has cognitive value and this stems not from providing new facts about the world, but from a reconceptualisation of the information that is already available to us’ (Kittay, 1987, p. 39). Metaphorical language can resolve ambiguous and incomprehensible arguments by bringing to the surface the most comprehensible aspects of the argument in question and in reference to our familiar domains of experience. She further claims that metaphor actually gives us “epistemic access” to fresh experience. In addition, to the extent that we have no other linguistic resources to achieve this, metaphor is “cognitively irreplaceable” (Kittay, 1987, p. 39). For these reasons, metaphorical language constitutes an indispensable linguistic tool in religious discourse (El -sharif, 2011: 53-55).

### **Metaphor and Islamic Religious Discourse**

Metaphorical language has been valued in Arabic culture mostly for its rhetorical significance, though early Arab philologists did not recognize it as an indispensable aspect of language (El-sharif, 2011: 53-58). For centuries, metaphorical language has been considered as a supportive and an “ornamental” feature of discourse, especially if the latter involves arguments and debates which aim to attract the discourse recipient’s attention. Al-Jurjani (d. 1078 CE), a prominent Arab philologist, maintained that a metaphor could only reveal deep insight into a few embedded (concealed) relationships between different things (Jurjani, 1988, p. 57). A metaphor was essentially regarded as an ornamental device for poetry and speeches. This view has remained omnipresent in most early Arab discussions and commentaries regarding the existence of metaphorical language in any Arabic text.



A number of early Arab philosophers and theologians have questioned the existence of metaphors in Islamic religious discourse, especially in the Holy Qur'an. Some of these questions were presented because they believed that the word "metaphor" denotes an untrue or false statement. Further, "literalist" theologians affirmed that whatever the Qur'an says, is (or should be) literally true because it is the word of God; and God does not say anything untrue. On the other hand, most early Arab philosophers recognized the inevitability of using metaphors in religious discourse. They argued that it is the incomparable nature of the divine communication that entails the existence of metaphors which can transmit the divine message into human language. In other words, since religion does not have a special language of its own, it must resort to ordinary language in accordance with society's conventions (*caada*). Thus, the given language operates as a means of conversation (*muḥawarah*) (Al-Ghazali, 1904, p. 35). Accordingly, a prophet easily expresses the distinguishing qualities of the divine language to his followers through similitude. This is because prophets have always been sent to speak the language of their people. In spite of the feasibility of the previous justifications for the existence of metaphors in religious language, many Muslim theologians have persistently refused to "blemish" the study of religion with such philosophical arguments. Most early Muslim theologians feared that such speculations could lead to some metaphorical interpretations that would contradict the well-established principles of faith and creed explicitly or implicitly (El-sharif, 2011: 58-60).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the present paper has tackled the function of metaphor in the Qur'an within the theoretical framework put forward by Lakoff & Turner (1989). Hence, this is known as the Cognitive Theory of Metaphor. The use of such a metaphor makes the reader clarify and define the relationship between object and image. Meanwhile, this process serves two purposes: first, it forces the reader to participate actively in the Qur'an i.e. consider its message and follow its teachings. Second, it gives him knowledge about something he did not know or only partly knew by making it analogous to something he can imagine (Sharaf Eldin, 2014). To summarize the functions of metaphor, it can be said that there are two traditional views with regard to the study of the metaphor: the classical view and the romantic view (Saeed, 2007). The classical view regards the metaphor as "decorative and does not relate the metaphor to thought" (Deignan, 1999, 2005). Subsequently, the romantic view of the metaphor regards the metaphor as an integral part to thought and as a way of experiencing the world (Saeed, 2007). Moreover, the concept of the metaphor as a means of transferring meaning continues to be its principal

function in current linguistic theories. Therefore, if this is not done, we would not understand them. Thus, as we have seen, the linguistic creativity of the Qur'an is extraordinary. As such, basic metaphors are used in novel unprecedented ways.

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