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## The Quran Through The Cognitive Metaphor Theory: How Does God Objectify The Word?<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** In this paper, the Quran, which has been repeatedly read by nearly every society in the world for centuries, and without the influence of cultural indicators such as age, education, gender, race, etc., is analysed in metaphorical sense. This essential text has been interpreted differently by different scholars in different ages. How can the Quran be read and understood by everybody? This is undoubtedly one of the most crucial questions about this holy book. Hence, my aim is to seek an answer to the issue of the Quran and its universality in the context of metaphorical language. For this purpose, I use Lakoff and Johnson's metaphor theory (known as the cognitive theory of metaphors) to analyse and discuss metaphors in the Quran.

**Keywords:** The Quran, Textual Analysis, Metaphor, Cognitive Theory, Universality.

### INTRODUCTION: Metaphors We Live By

It is possible to note that to analyse these metaphors in the Quran may be equal to analysing the universality dimension of the text. So, my aim in this research is to analyse a metaphor-based book in the context of a universality theme. It is methodologically used a qualitative approach that helps to analyse explicit and implicit concepts, instead of countable words (Huckin, 2004: 15). In other words, it is preferred a qualitative method in order to analyse the metaphorical language of the Quran effectively. Since it is difficult to "begin to untangle the threads of so many voices in a single text" (Bazerman and Prior, 2004: 4), we find a concrete and common parameter that combines the Quran and its universality problem.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is written at Lancaster University as postgraduate assignment.

Metaphorical language as a way of expression is not a new discussion topic. It is easy to encounter metaphors in every text, and metaphor-based discussion in very broad geographical and cultural arenas, from Hellenic to Persian, from Japanese to Arabic, etc. Emotions, feelings, thoughts, experiences and expectations have been expressed through metaphor for centuries. Likewise, Lakoff (1986: 276) mentions that no life is imaginable or conceivable without metaphors, which are “motivated by the structure of our experience”.

“Conceptual systems of cultures and religions are metaphorical in nature” (Lakoff and Johnson: 2003: 40). In other words, “all the significant assertions of theology are expressed in language that is irreducibly metaphorical” (Avis, 1999: 90). Language that “is not assumed to be a representation of ideas” (Scott, 1988: 34) is not only an empire of signs, but also an empire of metaphors. In addition, “metaphors are iconic signs presenting meanings as well as representing meanings” (MacCormac, 1990: 192). Kövecses mentions (2002: 6) that metaphors typically use abstract concepts and assume that these concepts are physically concrete. Abstract concepts without metaphors are incomplete; furthermore, we complete our intellectual world through metaphor.

Not only the Quran, but also the “whole of our universe is textual” (Barry, 2002: 35). For that reason, the Quran is a textual sample, among countless texts, that will be analysed in this work. This is the first important point of the research. Secondly, texts are clues and they teach how to read the lives people live. “Texts, messages, and symbols never speak for themselves. They inform someone” (Krippendorff, 2004: 25).

According to Lakoff and Johnson (2003: 273), “we live our lives on the basis of inferences we derive via metaphor”. They also say ‘yes’ to the question of “do you think the whole world is a metaphor for something?” (Skarmeta, 1987: 15-16). Each new metaphor shows a new dimension of realities in the world; therefore, each metaphor is a new discovery. To understand metaphors in our lives is to realise whom we are and which society we live in.

## ANALYSIS

The research process consists of four research discoveries<sup>2</sup>: *text*, *context*, *methodology* and *theory*. The linguistic dimensions of the text tend to result in subjectivity, because language itself is an indicator that belongs to a limited geography and culture. For this reason, we did not follow classical metaphor theories that focus on the linguistic dimensions of texts. Thus, we preferred a cognitive theory of metaphor that analyses metaphors along with their intellectual dimensions.

### Research Questions<sup>3</sup>

a) Is there any relationship between the language of the Quran and the reasons why it has been read many times and every day approximately for 1,400 years?

b) How is the metaphorical language in the Quran formed?

### The Hypotheses

a) The metaphoric references of the book can easily be comprehended by everybody from different socio-cultural and intellectual background.

b) It is a universal book.

People use these metaphors “unconsciously and automatically” (Lakoff and Turner, 1989: xi). This interpretation is completely different from classical approaches to metaphors because they discuss metaphors as if they are merely linguistic and intellectual entities.

Basically, Lakoff and Johnson investigated these metaphors under three headings, which are *conceptual metaphors*, *orientational metaphors* and *ontological metaphors*. We also analyse the metaphors in the Quran by means of these subheadings.

### Conceptual Metaphors in the Quran

Lakoff and Johnson (2003: 4) give the *argument is war* metaphor as an example to explain conceptual metaphors. Interestingly, classic theorists look for a “word” to find a metaphor in a sentence and they expect an analogy or a physical similarity between words. However, in the view

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<sup>2</sup> *Research discovery* is a term used in the context of research levels.

<sup>3</sup> “Questions, after all, raise some profound issues about what kind of knowledge is possible and desirable” (Rose, 2003: 9). Desirable and possible knowledge constitute our hypotheses.

of cognitive theory, neither the argument nor war is a metaphor; on the contrary, the *argument is war* sentence as a whole is a metaphor. This means that the argument term can be used within a war concept.<sup>4</sup> “It is important to see that we do not just talk about arguments in terms of war. We can actually win or lose arguments. We see the person we are arguing with as an opponent. We attack his positions and we defend our own. We gain and lose ground. We plan and use strategies” (2003: 4). For instance, “he attacked every weak point in our argument. His criticisms were right on target. I demolished his argument. I’ve never won an argument with him. If you use that strategy, he’ll wipe you out” (ibid.). There are similar examples in the Quran as well, which means “life is trial”.

Life can be perceived subjectively, because what people understand from life may be different. However, trial is a more concrete and understandable concept. Trials involve different levels and processes, but the nature of them, in every culture, is absolutely similar. All of them require preparation; they involve difficulties and obstacles; they have results, like a prize or punishment.

*He Who created Death and Life, that He may try which of you is best in deed: and He is the Exalted in Might, Oft-Forgiving*

*Mulk / 2 (The Sovereignty)*

Tests have potentially good (successful) or bad (unsuccessful) results, as mentioned above. According to the Quran, those who can pass these tests in this life deserve a better life in the future.

*Be sure We shall test you with something of fear and hunger, some loss in goods, lives and the fruits (of your toil), but give glad tidings to those who patiently persevere.*

*Al-*

*Baqara / 155 (The Cow)*

In every culture, a trial process has to be endured. Also, every trial process consists of several tests. It is not possible to find an exception to it. Trial is not a linguistic but a conceptual and intellectual phenome-

<sup>4</sup> If the *argument is war* sentence is analysed by some classical theorists, they would probably claim that argument is *like* a war. This is surely a superficial perspective that is not adequate to analyse metaphors in the Quran.

non. In other words, this metaphorical interconnection between life and trial is not based on a figural similarity,<sup>5</sup> but on a contextual relation. To define a metaphor as merely artistic and rhetoric in design may be wrong, because a metaphor is meant to be understood by everybody. More obviously, “metaphors are not just decorative but essential for learning” (Petrie and Oshlag, 1993: 608). The main purpose is to support permanence and universality, which are provided by means of clarity and simplicity in these verses. This idea also supports the cognitive theorists’ arguments because, according to cognitive theory, text readers do not have to have special skills to comprehend metaphors.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, metaphors may help to show people undiscovered places they are not able to imagine. “Metaphors are hills and mountains on the flat literal landscape. They are more noticeable and take longer to cross than the flat land” (Goatly, 1997: 336).

### **Orientational Metaphors in the Quran**

“Orientational metaphors give a concept a spatial orientation” (ibid.: 14); more obviously, health is UP, whereas sickness is DOWN (I’m feeling UP). More is UP; less is DOWN. Conscious is UP; Unconscious is DOWN (ibid.: 14). Orientational metaphors integrate concepts into places. Physical experiences have crucial importance for these metaphors.

When one says “down”, this is universally perceived as negative, wrong, harmful or insufficient things and situations; meanwhile, “up” is evaluated as positive, correct, useful or sufficient things and situations. Orientational metaphors in the Quran also run in parallel with this rule. For that reason, the Quran has universal expressions in the context of orientational metaphors.

*...whoever assigns partners to Allah, it is as if he had fallen from the sky...*

*Hajj / 31 (The Pilgrimage)*

In this context, the sky represents the ideal (and most acceptable) attitudes and beliefs. In other words, “to assign partners to Allah” is, like

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<sup>5</sup> According to classical approach, metaphors are necessarily based on the similarity between two entities.

<sup>6</sup> This disproves the classical metaphor theories, because they claim that those who want to realise metaphors must have special skills.

an unacceptable attitude in terms of an Islamic perspective, equal to falling from the sky. The sky refers to faith. It is not possible to find any physical analogy between sky and faith, but the sky, which is UP, represents monotheism,<sup>7</sup> which is also UP in Islam. Polytheism is defined as falling from the sky.

Metaphors in the Quran are not ornamental and decorative. They are important elements of thought and thinking. When God uses the “low” word, it has to be understood similarly in different cultures and experiences. For that reason, words are frequently used along with their opposite forms. For instance:

*We have indeed created man in the best of moulds. Then do We abase him (to be) the lowest of the low.*

*At Tin (The Fig) 4-5*

In this verse, there is no doubt that “the lowest of the low” is the opposite of the best creation.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the lowest thing is the worst thing. “The lowest of the low” phrase is an indirect expression that has implicit clues “that are half answer, but not the complete picture; they provide some data, some direction to the destination, but not the arrival” (Happel, 2002: 8).

It is not hard to find more examples of orientational metaphors in the Quran. These metaphors strengthen the universality of the Quran.

*Is he who walks (without seeing) on his face, more rightly guided, or he who (sees and) walks upright on a Straight Way?*

*Al-Mulk / 22 (Dominion)*

Blindness is DOWN; similarly, those who walk on their faces represent DOWN. In contrast, walking *upright* or in a straight way is UP. The usage in these verses is no coincidence because, as Strenski (1989: 137) mentions, metaphors reflect our thoughts and shape our behaviours. These *universal* thoughts and behaviours that people *universally* learn are *universally* represented by orientational metaphors.

<sup>7</sup> Monotheism is the opposite of assigning partners to Allah.

<sup>8</sup> The opposition is not based on language; however, the opposition can be realised intellectually.

### Ontological Metaphors in the Quran

“Just as the basic experiences of human spatial orientations give rise to orientational metaphors, so our experiences with physical objects (especially our own bodies) provide the basis for an extraordinarily wide variety of ontological metaphors, that is, ways of viewing events, activities, emotions, ideas, etc., as entities and substances” (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003: 25). As mentioned above, a metaphor does not only consist of rhetoric expressions, a metaphor is truth itself.

There is an ontological connection between metaphors and entities. Namely, life (entity) can be understood and described by means of metaphor.

Lakoff and Johnson (2003: 27) offer this sentence to embody ontological metaphors: *The mind is a machine*. In this example, some (italicised) words which indeed belong to machine are used to express mind concepts. For instance, we say “my mind just isn’t *operating* today... We are still trying to *grind out* the solution to this equation... Boy, *wheels are turning* now... I am *a little rusty* today” (ibid.).

Ontological metaphors are very common in the Quran, because the Quran claims that it shows an ideal form of life and the nature of entities created by Allah. The Quran is a guide; besides, this guide has to be understood by everybody, as it claims that it is a universal book.

*Those who reject Our Ayât (proofs, evidences, verses, lessons, signs, revelations, etc.) are deaf and dumb in darkness.*

*Enam / 39 (The Cattle)*

Faith in this context is a light. Proofs, evidences, verses, lessons, signs, revelations are parts of this light. In other words, those who accept these verses are in the light. A deaf person cannot hear any sounds that belong to an entity; a dumb person cannot see any visions that belong to a different dimension of the same entity. To believe in this verse is equal to knowing the truth of entities. According to the verse, knowledge is light, whereas ignorance is darkness. The important point is that *the light* represents positive, useful, true and appropriate things, unexceptionally in every culture; in opposition to that, darkness is bad. For instance, the *Dark Age* refers to an ignorant and terrible age, particularly

for Western culture. Briefly, it is possible to claim that the verse is a universal verse that can be similarly understood by different people who are from a different culture.

There are various verses that support this (universal) perspective in the Quran. For instance:

*Is he who was dead (without Faith by ignorance and disbelief) and We gave him life (by knowledge and Faith) and set for him a light (of Belief) whereby he can walk amongst men— like him who is in the darkness (of disbelief, polytheism and hypocrisy) from which he can never come out?*

*Enam / 122 (The Cattle)*

Some ontological metaphors in the Quran are very conspicuous and remarkable. Hence they can easily be remembered by readers. In one of them, suspicion is defined and expressed very dramatically:

*O you who believe! Avoid much suspicion, indeed some suspicions are sins. And spy not, neither backbite one another. Would one of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? You would hate it (so hate backbiting). And fear Allah. Verily, Allah is the One Who forgives and accepts repentance, Most Merciful.*

*Al-Hujraat / 12 (The Private Apartments)*

Indeed, this sense of disgust and hate is not a universal sense. More obviously, even the most disgusting things can be perceived as normal by some people. However, nobody likes to eat the flesh of his or her brother. “Metaphors therefore serve the purpose of rendering the unknown world more structured and comprehensible. Abstract ideas and concepts become comprehensible through the use of images that are familiar to us” (Hidasi, 2008: 104). This is also a universal truth.

## FINDINGS<sup>9</sup>

i. Cognitive theory attached importance to context rather than to words. Similarly, context in the Quran is a more important and determining factor than words, thus proving the universality of the Quran. This provides a great chance for readers of the Quran, because vocabu-

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<sup>9</sup> These findings are about the Quran and its universality problem.

lary is not universal, but totally cultural. However, contextualisation makes the text universal. In other words, even the most difficult words can be understood by means of contextualisation.

ii. There are many abstract concepts that are embodied by metaphors (concrete entities and examples) in the Quran.

iii. There are no necessary physical similarities between concepts and contexts in the Quran. This situation is parallel with cognitive theory as well.

iv. The Quran is shaped in Arabic language, Arabic vocabulary and grammar. Although the Quran has different textual notions or linguistic culture, it adds new (universal) dimensions to the Arabic language by means of these metaphors. In other words, old language, old vocabulary and old grammar are reformed by new meanings that come from the world of metaphors.

v. There are conceptual, orientational and ontological metaphors in the Quran.

vi. Metaphors in the Quran are not linguistic but intellectual, in parallel with the cognitive theory that we have used.

vii. Metaphors in the Quran are used to make the text understandable to its readers. They are not decor or unnecessary rhetoric. These metaphors are inseparable parts of the Quran.

viii. Readers do not have to have any special skill to understand the metaphors in the Quran. According to Lakoff and Johnson, provided that we analyse metaphors, we are able to analyse the lives that we live. Our truth is our metaphor; similarly, our metaphor is our truth because, according to these authors, the metaphors that we use are not merely words, but a visible system of life.

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