

Islam, the Qur'an and the Arabic Literature

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Since the advent of Islam and the revelation of the Qur'an in the early years of the seventh century AD, the Muslim Holy Book has been the subject of many extensive analytical studies. The focus of the great majority of these studies has been the theological and legislative aspects of the Holy Book, for the Qur'an provides Muslims with detailed guidance on their everyday problems.

Together with the sayings, actions, and recommendations of Muhammad, the Qur'an has been the ultimate source of legal authority for Muslims over the past fourteen centuries. Muslim scholars have painstakingly examined, analyzed and interpreted the various verses of the Holy Book, detailing the requirements the Qur'an imposes on Muslims in order for them to achieve spiritual purity. Thus, in addition to its legislative and theological value, the Qur'an has also served as a source of spiritual guidance for the followers of Islam.

There is, however, another aspect of the Qur'an which has received far less attention than its theological and legislative guidance, namely its linguistic significance, for the Qur'an was undoubtedly the first book to be composed in Arabic. The advent of Islam and the revelation of the Qur'an have had far-reaching effects on the status, the content, and the structure of the Arabic language.¹¹

This paper will examine the linguistic influence of the Qur'an and the impact of its revelation on Arabic. It will be argued that, while the Arabic language was extremely effective as the medium for the revelation of the Holy Qur'an and the dissemination of the new faith, the language benefited enormously from the new role it acquired with the advent of Islam.

Islam and Arabic: a unique relationship

The revelation of the Qur'an in Arabic set the scene for a unique and lasting relationship between the language and Islam. On the one hand, Arabic provided a very effective medium for communicating the message of the religion. On the other hand, Islam helped Arabic to acquire the universal status which it

has continued to enjoy since the Middle Ages, emerging as one of the principal world languages.

It has been argued that Arabic has not simply remained 'ancillary to Islam'² but that it has also been significant as a means of 'cultural and national revival in the Arabic-speaking countries.'³ Arabic is a rich and expressive language and has played an important role in the cultural preservation of the Arabic-speaking people. However, without the bond it has had with Islam, Arabic would probably not have undergone the internal revolution it did, nor expanded beyond the borders of the Arabian Peninsula with such speed and magnitude.

The relationship of Islam and the Qur'an to Arabic involves more than just the use of a language to communicate a divine message. There are a number of factors which set this relationship apart from that which exists between other holy books and the languages in which they appeared, for Arabic has come to be closely associated with Islam, and in this way has acquired a semi-official status. It is implicit that anyone professing Islam cannot ignore the role Arabic plays in his faith.

Embracing Islam, therefore, entails exposure to, and familiarity with, the Arabic language. Such familiarity is necessitated by the fact that memorization and recitation of Qur'anic verses in their original language is necessary for the performance of the daily rituals.

Other holy books may have had an impact on the languages in which they originally appeared, but the impact that Islam and the Qur'an have had on Arabic appears to be unique in its extent and durability.

It has often been the case that a holy book appears in a given language and is then translated into other languages, in which it continues to be read and recited during the performance of rituals, but, in the case of the Qur'an, although it has been translated into many languages, these translations cannot replace the original language as a language of worship, which continues to be Arabic for all Muslims, native speakers and others.

Other holy books also came to be associated with specific languages, such as the Torah with Hebrew, and, perhaps less intimately, the New Testament with Greek and Latin. However, the nature of the relationship between the Qur'an and Arabic is still unique for reasons to be given below.

The Qur'an: Muhammad's strongest argument

It has often been argued that the Qur'an is not only the first book, and the highest linguistic achievement, of the Arabic language, but that it is also Muhammad's strongest argument against those who doubted his Message. The question that needs to be addressed here concerns the reason why a holy book, a composition of language, should be hailed as Islam's (and Muhammad's) strongest argument.⁴

The point has sometimes been made that other prophets had more tangible miracles. In the case of Muhammad, however, the miracle was not comparable to Moses' staff or Christ's healing powers, but was simply the expression in language of the Qur'an.

To understand why Muhammad's strongest argument or miracle was a book, the Holy Qur'an, it is necessary to understand the role language and linguistic composition played in the lives of the pre-Islamic Arabs. It is also important to understand the nature of the Arabic language itself during the pre-Islamic period. This understanding will help to show why the revelation of the Qur'an through Muhammad found attentive ears among his contemporaries, who not only were articulate users of the language but held those skilled in the arts of linguistic composition in high esteem.[5](#)

The role played by language in pre-Islamic Arabia

Before the rise of Islam, Arabic was mainly a spoken language with an oral literature of elaborate poetry and, to a lesser extent, prose.[6](#) Writing had not yet fully developed and memorization was the most common means of preserving the literature.[7](#) Both poetry and prose in the pre-Islamic era dealt with a rather limited range of topics which included in the case of poetry praise, eulogy (panegyric), defamation, and love, and in the case of prose superstition, legends, parables, and wisdom tales.[8](#)

Pre-Islamic Arabs took great pride in their language and in articulate and accurate speech, the latter being one of the main requisites for social prominence. On this particular point, Professor Hitti writes: No people in the world manifest such enthusiastic admiration for literary expression and are moved by the word, spoken or written, as the Arabs. Hardly any language seems capable of exercising over the minds of its users such an irresistible influence as Arabic.[9](#)

What made this phenomenon even more remarkable is the near absence of other forms of artistic expression such as music, painting, and drama. The sole elaborate form of artistic expression available to the pre-Islamic Arabs was the art of the spoken word.[10](#) Eloquence and the ability to compose articulate prose or poetry were foremost among the traits of a worthy bedouin.[11](#)

Other such traits included horsemanship, courage, and hospitality. With its very nature and structure, its abundance of imagery, vocabulary, and figures of speech, the Arabic language lent itself to elaborate poetic composition and sonorous prose. The tremendous quantity of poetry that we have inherited attests to the significant role language played in pre-Islamic Arabia. In fact, the role language and poetry played was so important that other fields of study which developed during the first centuries of the Islamic era were greatly influenced by the then established study of poetic literature.[12](#)

The importance of poetry for that era is clearly manifest in the writings of scholars from subsequent centuries. Al-Jahiz (d. 869), for instance, quotes poetic works in his famous *al-Bayan wa l-Tabyin*.[13](#) The grammarian al-Asma'i (d. c. 830) used the term *fasiḥ* (articulate) in reference to the poets whom he quotes. The following quotation from Ibn Rashīq further illustrates the importance attached to linguistic skills in pre-Islamic Arabia. He writes:

Whenever a poet emerged in an Arab tribe, other tribes would come to congratulate, feasts would be prepared, the women would join together on lutes as they do at weddings and old and young men would

all rejoice at the good news. The Arabs used to congratulate each other only on the birth of a child and when a poet rose among them. [14](#)

In his *'Uyun al-Akhbar*, Ibn Qutayba defined poetry as follows:

Poetry is the mine of knowledge of the Arabs and the book of their wisdom, the archive of their history and the reservoir of their epic days, the wall that defends their exploits, the impassable trench that preserves their glories, the impartial witness for the day of judgment. [15](#)

Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406), a notable scholar of the fourteenth century, remarked on the importance of poetry in Arab life:

It should be known that Arabs thought highly of poetry as a form of speech. Therefore, they made it the archives of their history, the evidence for what they considered right and wrong, and the principal basis of reference for most of their sciences and wisdom. [16](#)

Almost four centuries earlier, Ibn Faris (d. 1005) elaborated on the same theme, but went further to comment on the quality of the poetry that was composed during the pre-Islamic era:

Poetry is the archive of the Arabs; in it their genealogies have been preserved; it sheds light on the darkest and strangest things found in the Book of God and in the tradition of God's apostle and that of his companions. Perhaps a poem may be luckier than another, and one poem sweeter and more elegant than another, but none of the ancient poems lacks its degree of excellence. [17](#)

Such was the role that the spoken word played in the life of pre-Islamic Arabs. With the emphasis placed on eloquent and articulate speech, the prominent position occupied by those who had the talent for linguistic composition, and the pride the early Arabs took in their language, it is little wonder that the Qur'an was revealed in the most eloquent, articulate, and elaborate style the Arabic language has known.

The Qur'an has without doubt provided a level of linguistic excellence unparalleled in the history of the Arabic language. Theologians explain this phenomenon as God's wisdom in addressing the articulate Arabs through the medium in which they were most adept and with which they felt most comfortable.

The effectiveness of the Qur'an was thus ensured by the fact that it represented a level of eloquence unattainable even by their most eloquent speakers. The Qur'an remains a book of inimitable quality, not only from a linguistic, but also from an intellectual, point of view. When Muhammad was challenged by his fellow countrymen to present a miracle, in keeping with the tradition of other prophets, he presented the Qur'an to them. The inimitability of the Qur'an is repeatedly emphasized in the Holy Book itself. Thus the Qur'an challenges the disbelievers:

And if you are in doubt as to what we have revealed, then produce a sura like unto it. (2: 23) [18](#)¹⁸

A yet stronger challenge occurs in another chapter:

Or do they say: 'He forged it'? Say: 'Bring then a sura like unto it and call [to your aid] anyone you can. ' (10: 38)

The role of the poet in pre-Islamic Arabia

Except for a few proverbs, legends, and some magical and medicinal formulee, the bulk of the literary heritage from the pre-Islamic era was in the form of poetry.¹⁹ Prose, which lacks the elaborate rhythm and formal structure of poetry, did not lend itself easily to memorization. Furthermore, in the absence of a developed system of writing, prose was much less easily preserved. Prose works from the pre-Islamic period were mainly genealogies (*ansab*) and legends dealing with inter-tribal wars (*ayyam al-'arab*).²⁰ Poetry therefore represents the main form of artistic expression during the pre-Islamic era.

The significance of poetry in pre-Islamic Arabia was underscored by the annual fairs, the most famous of which was the Suq Ukaz, in which poets competed for fame and recognition through recitations of poetry. The recitations constituted the main form of entertainment at the fairs. which were cultural as well as trading events.

The pre-Islamic poet, enjoying his enviable talent for composing poetry, played multiple roles. He was an artist, an entertainer, a journalist, and the spokesman for his tribe. Furthermore, he was the historian who kept alive the history and past glories of his tribe. His poetry provided a very effective means of propaganda and public relations.

He was readily capable of influencing public opinion, and his poetry was sought by kings and tribal chiefs who generously rewarded him. In short, the poet enjoyed a very prominent status in pre-Islamic Arabia.²¹

The inimitability of the Qur'an

The inimitability of the Qur'an is not limited to its content. In fact, the Holy Book of Islam is held by Muslim scholars to be inimitable not only in its content but also in its language. The Qur'an, it has been constantly maintained, embodies linguistic and literary beauty which exceeds anything of human origin.

This is borne out by the fact that no-one has ever been able to compose anything remotely resembling it in its linguistic, literary, or conceptual elegance.²² This point is repeatedly emphasized in the Holy Book itself. Thus the Qur'an says:

If the whole of mankind and the jinn were to gather together to produce the like of this Qur'an, they could not produce the like thereof, even if they backed each other up. (17:88)

The inimitable nature of the Qur'an was recognized by generation after generation of scholars. Al-Tabari (d. 923) dealt with this subject in his voluminous study of the Holy Book.²³ Al-Zamakhshari elaborated

on this theme in his famous al-Kashshaf,^{[24](#)} as did Baydawi in his Tafsir. ^{[25](#)}AlBaqillam, a prominent scholar, wrote a book which he devoted entirely to this subject and to which he gave the title *I'jaz al-Qur'an* (The Inimitability of the Qur'an).^{[26](#)} Here he wrote:

The Qur'an is so wonderfully arranged and so marvelously composed, and so exalted is its literary excellence that it is beyond what any mere creature could attain.^{[27](#)}

Al-Jawziyya, also a noted scholar, added that:

Whoever knows Arabic and is acquainted with lexicography, grammar, rhetoric, and Arabic poetry and prose recognizes ipso facto the supremacy of the Qur'an^{[28](#)}

Ibn Khaldun also dealt with certain aspects of the style of the Qur'an:

The inimitability of the Qur'an consists in the fact that its language indicates all the requirements of the situation referred to, whether they are stated or understood. This represents the highest degree of speech. In addition, the Qur'an is perfect in the choice of words and excellence of arrangement.^{[29](#)}

The inimitability as well as the linguistic significance of the Qur'an can be better understood within its pre-Islamic context and according to the role language played during that period. Furthermore, the linguistic significance of the Qur'an can also be better understood within that same context.

The linguistic aspect of the Holy Book was brilliantly used by the Prophet in challenging and eventually prevailing upon his fellow Arabs who held in high esteem those who were eloquent and articulate. The eloquence of the Qur'an clearly impressed and overwhelmed them. This explains why the Qur'an has been referred to as 'Muhammad's miracle', or. as the 'miracle of Islam'.

The use of the power of the Qur'an as a means of persuasion was admitted by the Prophet himself and was mentioned repeatedly in the Qur'an mostly in the form of a challenge to the disbelievers to produce something similar. On the need and justification for the Prophet to use a book such as the Qur'an, Ibn Qutayba wrote:

God offered the Qur'an as the Prophet's sign in the same way as He offered signs for all the other prophets. He sent the things most appropriate to the time in which they were sent. Thus Moses had the power to divide the sea with his hand and rod, and to let the rock burst forth with water in the desert, and all his other signs in a time of magic. And Jesus had the power to bring the dead back to life, to make birds out of clay, to cure those who had been blind from birth and the leprous, and all his other signs in a time of medicine. And Muhammad, may God bless him and grant him salvation, had the book and all his other signs in a time of eloquence.^{[30](#)}

The impact of the Qur'an of the Arabic language

Structure and content

As has already been pointed out, scholars have gone to great lengths over the past thirteen centuries to describe and emphasize the inimitability of the verses of the Qur'an. However, the impact of the revelation of the Qur'an on the Arabic language, its structure and content, has certainly been the focus of fewer studies. Works on the inimitability of the Qur'an have mostly focused on the literary beauty of the Holy Book, its conceptual strength and precision.

Another important aspect of the Qur'an, one not adequately addressed, lies in its linguistic impact on the form and content of the Arabic language.

The Holy Qur'an has undoubtedly helped reinforce and deepen the Arab people's awareness of the richness and beauty of their tongue. From a linguistic point of view, the revelation of the Qur'an was the most important event in the history of the Arabic language.

It was an event with far-reaching and lasting consequence, for the Qur'an gave Arabic a form which it had hitherto lacked. In fact, it was due to the desire to preserve the Qur'an that efforts were made to develop and refine the Arabic alphabet. It was within the same context that Abu l-Aswad al-Du'ali developed the dot system in the first century of the Islamic era in his attempt to lay the basis for Arabic grammatical theory.^{[31](#)}

His efforts were among the first to establish a permanent form for the Arabic alphabet and hence the Arabic writing system. As deciphered from the earliest inscriptions, the Arabic alphabet was vague, unsystematic, and inefficient. The dot system as developed by al-Du'ah helped to clarify and establish distinctions which were otherwise unclear. In fact, it can be maintained that had it not been for the strong desire to preserve the Qur'an, its form, grammar, pronunciation, and accuracy, the Arabic alphabet and writing system might not have developed as quickly as they did.

The Arabic alphabet and writing system were only one aspect of the Qur'an's impact on the language; it also gave Arabic a rigidity of form and a precision of presentation which were novel to the language, as well as a host of new locutions, complex concepts, meanings, and arguments. Furthermore, the Qur'an enriched the lexicon of the language by bringing new words and expressions into use, and by introducing loan-words from foreign languages. It also presented a firm set of linguistic standards and directions which were instrumental in the subsequent documentation of Arabic grammar.

The Qur'an likewise helped to expand the scope of Arabic as it was known in the early years of the seventh century. Islam and the Qur'an helped to open new horizons and fields of study which included such disciplines as philology, Islamic law (the *sharia*), and Islamic philosophy. The Qur'an also introduced a host of new themes and linguistic forms not only to the Arabic language but to the Arab

mind as well. Taha Husayn dealt with this particular aspect of the verses of the Qur'an when he wrote:

In its external form the Qur'an is neither poetry nor prose. It is not poetry because it does not observe the metre and rhyme of poetry and it is not prose because it is not composed in the same manner in which prose was customarily composed.^{[32](#)}

The Qur'an consists of verses which vary in length depending on their theme and the occasion for which they were revealed. What is most interesting about Qur'anic verses is the superb selection of words, a selection which helps to induce varying reading speeds, which render these verses most effective. On this particular point,

Taha Husayn wrote:

For example, those verses dealing with the dialogues that took place between the Prophet and the pagans as well as those dealing with legislation require the type of low reading speed appropriate to explanation and recapitulation. On the other hand, those verses in which the pagans are warned of the fate that awaits them require a higher speed appropriate to censuring and warning.^{[33](#)}

The varying speeds which Taha Husayn mentions appear to be achieved with remarkable spontaneity, which is the result, in Taha Husayn's words, of 'a careful selection of words and expressions.'^{[34](#)} He gives sura 26, *al-Shu'ara'*, as an example of the type of verse requiring speedy reading, and sura 28, *al-Qasas*, as an example of that requiring slow reading.

Another aspect of the novelty of the Qur'an language has to do with its themes. These themes and topics represent a clear departure from those which had been hitherto familiar to the Arabs. As Taha Husayn explained:

It does not deal with any such things as ruins, camels, or long journeys in the desert; nor does it describe longing for the beloved, love, or eulogy, topics most familiar to pre-Islamic Arabs. But rather it talks to the Arabs about such things as the oneness of God, His limitless power, His knowledge, which is unattainable, His will, which is unstoppable, and His creation of heaven and earth.^{[35](#)}

This passage underscores yet another innovative aspect of the Qur'an, namely the presentation of novel themes through an abundance of examples all aimed at illustration and persuasion. The use of illustration is one of the most effective stylistic techniques of the Qur'an. One can hardly read a verse without experiencing the impact of this technique.

The art of narrative style represents another innovative aspect of the Qur'an. It relates in astounding detail the stories of Noah Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and Jesus, among others. It presents the dialogues that took place in such stories and the claims and counter-claims made by each of the opposing parties. Story-telling may not have been totally novel in pre-Islamic Arabia given the significant quantity of parables, epics, and myths that were inherited from that period.

What was novel, however, was the type of integrated, elaborate story involving such essential items as theme, plot, well-developed characters, and denouement which are to be found in the Qur'an, which refers itself to the benefit in telling such stories:

We do relate unto thee the most beautiful stories, in that We reveal unto thee this [portion of the] Qur'an. Before this thou too were among those who knew it not. (1: 3)

Lexical borrowing

Lexical borrowing is another area in which the Qur'an established precedent. The Holy Book draws freely on words of non-Arabic origin, including Persian, Sanskrit, and Syriac. The importance of the Qur'an in this respect can be better understood against a deep-seated theme which can be discerned in the writings of scholars of pre and early Islam, namely, that the Arabian Peninsula was, during the pre-Islamic era, more or less isolated from the rest of the world, and that the Arabic language, and consequently the Qur'an, was the unique product of the Arabian desert.

Inherent in this theme is a belief in the 'purity' of the Arabic tongue and hence the scholars' reluctance to agree with the fact that in its attempt to illustrate the breadth of human religious experience the Qur'an drew on the lexicons of other languages and religions.^{[36](#)} The verse:

Thus have We sent down this Arabic Qur'an (20:113)

is often cited in support of this view.^{[37](#)}

It is obvious from the literature that the majority of the earlier scholars, for example, al-Shafi'i, Ibn Jarir, Abu ' Ubayda, al-Qadi Abu Bakr, and Ibn Faris, rejected the theory that some of the words of the Qur'an were not of Arabic origin.^{[38](#)} The question of lexical borrowing and the existence of foreign words in the Qur'an was viewed differently by different scholars. Thus the earlier scholars maintained that the existence of foreign words implied inadequacy of the language. Al-Suyuti quoted Ibn Aws as saying:

If the Qur'an had contained anything other than Arabic, then it would be thought that Arabic was incapable of expressing those things in its own words.^{[39](#)}

Later scholars, however, viewed lexical borrowing differently. Thus, al-Suyuti explained that the adoption of some non-Arabic words in the Qur'an took place because such words denoted objects or ideas for which no Arabic words were readily available.^{[40](#)}

Examples include the Persian words '*istibraq*' (a thick, silky brocade), '*ibriq*' (a water jug); the Nabatean word '*akwab*' (goblets); the Aramaic word '*asfar*' (a large book); the Hebrew borrowing '*rahman*' (merciful); and the Syriac words '*zayt*' (olive oil) and '*zaytun*' (the olive tree). The Qur'an has several hundred such foreign borrowings.

Earlier generations of Muslim scholars maintained that such words were either ancient Arabic words that

had gone out of use until the revelation of the Qur'an, or that such words were ancient borrowings introduced into Arabic long before the Revelation which had since then acquired an Arabic pattern.^{[41](#)}

Whether we agree with the view that foreign words in the Qur'an are direct borrowings from other languages or with the view that the majority of these words were ancient borrowings which occurred in pre-Islamic poetry and which had been in use long before the revelation of the Qur'an, it is a fact that the Qur'an contains words that are not of Arabic origin.

Such words come from a host of languages including Ethiopic, Persian, Greek, Sanskrit, Syriac, Hebrew, Nabatean, Coptic, Turkish, and Berber.^{[42](#)} By adopting words of non-Arabic origin, the Qur'an may have helped to legitimize a very important linguistic process, that of lexical borrowing. The importance of this practice derives particularly from the fact that the use of foreign words was viewed unfavorably by a large number of Arab scholars at that time.^{[43](#)}

The term *'ajami* (Persian, foreign) was used strictly in reference to non-Arabic words to set them aside from native Arabic words. During the documentation of the grammar in the first three centuries of the Islamic calendar, the same term was used to refer to less-than-native pronunciations of Arabic.

In their attempt to document the grammar, the early scholars considered the speech of the bedouins in the heart of the desert to be the most reliable and purest, apparently due to their belief that the bedouins seldom left the desert or mixed with speakers of other languages.^{[44](#)} Likewise, the early grammarians did not look favourably upon the adoption of foreign terms into Arabic, apparently in the belief that borrowing would indicate certain gaps or deficiencies in the language.

Since it contained words of non-Arabic origin, the Qur'an established a precedent for lexical borrowing as a tool whereby languages may enrich themselves. This was clearly one of the most innovative aspects of the Qur'an. It is particularly important given the unfavorable climate that prevailed among the early Muslim scholars with respect to lexical borrowing.

Structure and style

The Qur'an has made remarkable contributions to the structure and style of the Arabic language. It combines within its covers the first documentation of the sentence patterns of Arabic, and it was instrumental in the documentation of Arabic grammar which began in the first Islamic century. From the time of Sibawayh (d. c. 793) up to the present day there is hardly a page in any manual of Arabic grammar which does not contain one or more verses from the Qur'an. Furthermore, the strong interest in Qur'anic studies brought with it an equally strong interest in Arabic linguistic studies.

The style of the Qur'an helped to develop and enrich the Arabic language. As the first book in the Arabic language, it introduced stylistic innovations which greatly influenced trends in subsequent generations. Foremost among such trends is the Qur'an's abundant use of figures of speech in place of simple words.

The Qur'an makes extensive use of illustrations, imagery, and metaphor, thus adding beauty, life, and colour to plain words. In fact, the ubiquity of figures of speech in the Qur'an has led Sayyid Qutb to conclude that 'the use of imagery and figures of speech is the Qur'an's preferred style.'⁴⁵ The preference for figures of speech over plain words appears to be a general trend that permeates the entire Book. Thus, the Qur'an affirms the impossibility of the disbelievers' entry into paradise:

“Nor will they enter the Garden until a thick rope can pass through the eye of a needle”. (7: 40)

Confirming that the disbelievers' actions will be in vain, the Qur'an conveys this notion in the following way:

“The parable of those who reject their Lord is that their works are as ashes on which the wind blows furiously as on a tempestuous day.” (14: 18)

Another idea, that of those who do charitable acts yet spoil what they have done by gloating and reminding others of such acts is conveyed thus:

“they are in a parable like a hard, barren rock on which is a little soil: on it falls heavy rain which leaves it just a bare stone.” (2: 265)

The opposite case, namely that of those who spend for God's sake rather than in order to boast, is also expressed through imagery:

“as a garden, high and fertile; heavy rain falls on it but makes it yield a double increase of harvest.” (2: 265)

Earlier in the same sura, the same idea is conveyed through a different figure of speech:

“The parable of those who spend their money in the way of God is that of a grain of corn: it groweth seven ears and each ear hath a hundred grains.” (2: 261)

Criticizing those who worship gods other than Allah, the Qur'an likens their actions to that of a spider building a web:

“The parable of those who take protectors other than God is that of the spider building for itself a house; but, truly, the flimsiest of houses is the spider's house.” (29: 41)

Doomsday is one of the frequent themes of the Qur'an. The description of the horrors of that day is also presented through figures of speech:

“for the convulsion of the Hour will be a terrible thing! The day ye shall see it, each mother giving suck shall forget her suckling-babe, and each pregnant female shall deliver her load. Thou shalt see mankind as in a drunken riot, yet not drunk.” (22: 2)

Another very characteristic stylistic device of the Qur'an is that of anthropomorphization. Thus it describes dawn as:

“breathing away the darkness” (78: 10),

“the night as concealing the sun and veiling the day, the wind as fecundating, causing the rain to fall” (15: 22).

The sea is likened to ink which, if used, will not suffice to write the words of God:

“Say: If the ocean were ink wherewith to write out the words of my Lord, sooner would the ocean be exhausted, even if we added another ocean like it.” (18: 109)

Slandering is likened to eating another person's flesh:

“Nor speak ill of each other behind their backs. Would any of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother.” (49: 12)

The rhythmic pattern of speech found in Qur'anic recitations is yet another remarkable aspect of the language of the Qur'an. These patterns are a reflection of the special array of words and arrangement of phrases found in the Book. In the view of many scholars such verses combine the characteristics of both poetry and prose.[46](#)

Unlike some poetry, the verses of the Qur'an do not have one single rhyme, thus there is more room for flexibility and freedom of expression. The Qur'an does, however, reflect certain aspects of poetry, especially with respect to its use of words with identical numbers of syllables. This 'music' is more noticeable in short verses than it is in long ones.[47](#)

Sayyid Qutb cites sura 53 (*al-Najm*) as an excellent example of prose rhythm produced by words similar in length and all ending in the same sound, in this case the long [a](#)[48](#) There is another type of internal rhythm which is inherent in the structure of the single sentence. This is seen when the length of words varies within the same sura.

A good example of this is sura 19 (*Maryam*), which begins with short words and phrases, then changes to longer ones. Furthermore, the rhythms of the various segments are enhanced by the use of two main rhymes throughout the entire sura. These rhymes end either in *nun* or *mim* preceded by either *ya'* or *wa'w*.

The narrative aspect of Qur'an style remains one of the most creative and innovative of the Holy Book, one which has profoundly influenced and enriched the Arabic language. Whatever narrative style the language had in pre-Islamic times were relatively crude and primitive.

Even though the narrative parts of the Qur'an were clearly put to the service of the main theme of the

Book, i.e., religion, the narrative was so highly developed and integrated that it became a work of art in itself. The Qur'an is remarkably innovative with respect to its method of presentation, which involves four different techniques.

One common technique is that of beginning a story with a short summary, followed by the details from beginning to end, as in sura 18 (*al-Kahf*).

The second technique is that of beginning a story by presenting the conclusion first, then the lesson to be derived from it, and then the story from beginning to end, as in the story of Moses in sura 28 (*al-Qasas*).

The third technique presents the story directly without introduction, as in that of Mary following the birth of Jesus in sura 19 (*Maryam*), and the story of King Solomon and the ants in sura 27 (*al-Naml*).

The fourth, and perhaps most innovative, technique is that of presenting the story through dramatization. This technique gives only a brief introduction signaling the beginning of the scene, followed by a dramatization of the story with a dialogue among the various characters, as in the story of Abraham and Ismail in sura 2.

An important element in the structure of Qur'anic narrative is the varied use of the element of surprise. In some cases the anticlimax is kept from the main players and spectators, and is unfolded for both simultaneously towards the end, as in sura 18 in the story of Moses and the scholar.

Another use of the element of surprise reveals the anticlimax to the audience but conceals it from the characters, who act in total ignorance. The Qur'an commonly uses this technique in situations where satire is intended (satire which is directed at the actors and their behavior) as in the story in sura 68 (*al-Qalam*). A third technique reveals part of the anticlimax to the audience while keeping part of it concealed from both the audience and the characters, as in the story in sura 27 (*al-Naml*).

The structure of Qur'anic narrative displays the well-developed elements of an integrated literary work. One of the elements indispensable to dramatized narrative is change of scenery, which the Qur'an utilizes fully.

In the story of Joseph in sura 12, the reader is presented with a succession of scenes, each of which leads to the next, picking up the main thread of the narrative. Joseph's story comprises some twenty-eight scenes, each of which leads to the next in a manner which maintains the organic unity of the entire narrative. All such scenes are presented through dialogues replete with details and ideas. The result of such a well-knit passage is that the reader finds himself drawn to the narrative, moving anxiously from one scene to another.

This effect is achieved through a coherent series of events which sustain his curiosity and interest. In one scene, for example, we find one of Joseph's brothers entering the king's court in Egypt where

Joseph is the keeper of the store-house. In this scene, Joseph stipulates to his brothers that they should bring their younger brother to the king's court in order to receive provisions. The next scene presents the brothers deliberating among themselves, which is followed by a scene in which they have returned to face their father, Jacob.

The following scene takes the brothers back to Egypt to confront Joseph. The presentation of the narrative in dramatic form involving a succession of scenes brings home effortlessly the main theme and the lessons to be derived from the whole narrative. The use of dialogue makes the scenes more vivid and closer to life. This is an art in which the Qur'an excels, and an art in which it is remarkably innovative. It is clearly a form of literary composition which the Qur'an, the first book in Arabic, introduced to the language.

The portrayal of personalities is a very significant element of the narrative; here, again, the Qur'an sets a precedent. The depiction of personalities in the various narratives manages to convey to the reader the precise dimensions and traits of such figures. This is done through the words and actions of the personalities portrayed.

In the story of Moses, for example, the reader is readily able to discern, through Moses' actions, the type of aggressive yet emotionally sensitive person he was meant to portray. Conversely, in the story of Abraham, the Qur'anic verses carefully depict a calm, peaceful, and patient personality. This careful and accurate delineation of personality is effected largely through dialogue which skillfully brings out the traits of such personalities. The dialogue, in turn, is rendered even more effective by a very careful choice of words.

Islam, the Qur'an, and the internationalization of the Arabic language

The revelation of the Quran in Arabic in the early part of the seventh century AD helped the language to acquire and international status which it has continued to enjoy until the present day. It has been argued that Arabic has not simply remained ancillary to Islam but that it has been significant as a 'means of cultural and national revival in the Arabic-speaking countries.'⁴⁹

It is true that Arabic has played an important role in the life and history of the Arab people, but without the bond it has with Islam it would not have been likely to have acquired the type of international status it has acquired through Islam. It was under the banner of religion that Arabic spread beyond the borders of the Arabian Peninsula.

The early Muslims who emerged from the north-western part of the Arabian Peninsula brought with them not only the Islamic religion but Arabic as well. This phenomenon was so remarkable that, within a few centuries after the revelation of the Qur'an, Arabic became the common language of government, correspondence, business, and literary expression.

The speed and facility with which Arabic was first accepted and then eventually absorbed in the new countries was remarkable, and it was largely due to its association with Islam. Converts to the new religion looked with great interest towards the original language of their Holy Book.⁵⁰ They were clearly fascinated by the new religion and its language. The desire on the part of the new converts to identify with the resourceful pioneers emerging from the Arabian Peninsula was yet another factor in their adoption of the language.

Arabic was able to replace such languages as Greek and Syriac in Syria and the Fertile Crescent, Coptic, Greek, and Latin in Egypt, and Pahlavi in Persia. Syriac, a dialect of the ancient Aramaic language, had a flourishing literature until it gave way to Arabic in the seventh century AD, and was subsequently limited to being a vehicle for translating Greek literature and philosophy into Arabic.

In Egypt, the languages used until the early seventh century were Coptic and Greek; both languages, however, gave way to Arabic, which became the common language of the country, with Coptic as the language of the local Christian Church. By the end of the ninth century, Arabic was already being used in churches alongside Coptic.⁵¹

In Persia, Pahlavi, the language of the Sassanian dynasty (224–640 AD), used the Arabic alphabet and contained a large number of Arabic loan-words. Following the Arab conquest in 640, Pahlavi gave way to New Persian, which adopted the Arabic script and which was greatly influenced by Arabic. It is estimated that one third of the vocabulary of modern Persian (Farsi), is of Arabic origin.⁵²

Persian scholars engaged in the field of Islamic studies wrote mostly in Arabic. Among these were such prominent figures as Ibn Sina (980–1037), al Ghazzali (1058–1111), and Abu Bakr al-Razi of the twelfth century AD who wrote more than thirty books in Arabic. Even though Farsi began to develop its own identity and become gradually independent from Arabic around the tenth century AD,⁵³ the language is still written in the Arabic script.⁵⁴

Similarly, the Arabic script was adopted for the Turkic languages following the conversion to Islam of speakers of these languages, which include, in the Southern Division, Turkish, Azerbaijani, Turkoman, and Chuvash, and, in the Eastern Division, Kirghiz, Kazakh, and Tatar.

The Turkic languages continued to use the Arabic script until the early part of this century. The Turkish language, the most important of the Turkic languages, was doubly influenced by Arabic; first, through conversion to Islam, the adoption of the Arabic script, and the adoption of a large number of Arabic loan-words, and secondly through the medium of Farsi. As in the case of the latter, Arabic was the language of composition for many Turkish scholars, notably in the fields of religious and philological studies.⁵⁵

In the Indian subcontinent, the introduction of Arabic was similarly largely due to the adoption of the Islamic faith. It was the language of government during the reign of the sultan Jalal al-Din (963–1014 AH). There is evidence, however, that Arabic reached India prior to the tenth Islamic century through Farsi, which was the language of the court in India prior to the advent of Islam.

Urdu, a written variety of Hindustani with a substantial quantity of Arabic words, is the language used by Muslims; it employs the Arabic alphabet. A great majority of the Urdu scholars of the twelfth Islamic century used the medium of Arabic for their writings. Prominent among them were Wali Allah al-Dihlawi, Shibli al-Na'mani, and Karamat Husayn.[56](#)

Arabic gained more and more ground with the increasing Muslim influence in India. Urdu, which has a vocabulary of which at least thirty per cent is of Arabic origin, continues to the present to be the foremost among the dialects spoken among the Muslims of India and Pakistan. The impact of Arabic extended to other Indic languages such as Hindi and Sindhi, the latter using the Arabic alphabet.

In south-east Asia, the arrival of Islam in the fourteenth century AD brought with it the Arabic language, whose alphabet was subsequently adopted by the Malayo-Polynesian languages. These languages are spoken by the inhabitants of the Malay Peninsula, Madagascar, Taiwan, Indonesia, New Guinea, the Melanesian, Micronesian, and Polynesian islands, the Philippines, and New Zealand. These languages employ writing systems based on the Roman, Indic, and Arabic alphabets.[57](#)

The impact of Islam and the Arabic language was not confined to these parts of Arabia, Africa, and Asia. Indeed, the spread of Islam into the European continent led to the subsequent introduction of Arabic. Less than a century later, the impact of Arabic began to be felt on such languages as Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, French, English, and German.

The impact was most noticeable in Spain and Portugal, where Arabic existed alongside the native languages and was used in church liturgy and in business transactions. It was generally through Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian that Arabic influenced other European languages, including the Scandinavian languages.

The number of Arabic loan-words in Spanish is in the thousands. Many names of cities, rivers, villages, and provinces in Spain have retained their Arabic forms, as in place-names which begin with the words *bani*, *wadi*, and al('son', 'valley', and 'the', respectively), as in Bani al-Madina, Wadi al-Kabir, and al-Qasr.[58](#)

Among the Arabic loan-words in European languages there is a host of scientific terminology. The existence of scientific words of Arabic origin in European languages is attributed to the pioneering efforts of Muslim scholars in the fields of mathematics, physics, chemistry, and medicine. In their works, Muslim scholars had to coin an entirely new terminology to introduce their innovations, which included such novel concepts as algebra, the algorithm, alkali, alchemy, and alcohol. In addition to scientific terms, European languages contain many everyday words of Arabic origin, e.g., coffee, sugar, saffron, admiral, arsenal. Arabic numerals are another case in point.

Conclusion

The Arabic language has without doubt served as a very effective medium for the communication of the message of Islam, and as the Prophet's strongest argument against the challenges of his articulate and eloquent contemporaries. It has also served as a means for preserving the cultural and religious heritage of Arabic-speaking and Muslim peoples.

In this sense, the language has been extremely useful to the religion. However, in its role as the language of the Qur'an, Arabic has benefited enormously. There is a clear legitimacy to the claim that Islam and the Qur'an have helped to preserve Arabic from decay and deterioration, for it was mainly due to the need to preserve the accuracy and pronunciation of the verses of the Qur'an that efforts were instigated towards refining the Arabic alphabet.

Subsequently, the Qur'an was instrumental in the codification of Arabic grammar in the second and third Islamic centuries. Furthermore, the need for Muslims, whether native or non-native speakers of Arabic, to memorize and recite verses from the Qur'an in their daily worship has helped to keep the Arabic language alive. It was due to its association with Islam and the Qur'an that Arabic gained a good deal of prestige as the language of a young faith, a faith that was gaining more and more followers with each new day.

The interest in the new faith this brought with it interest in the language of that faith. It was under the banner of Islam that Arabic spread beyond the borders of the Arabian Peninsula to far-off areas in Europe, south-east Asia, and Africa.

From literary, structural, and stylistic points of view, the Qur'an added immeasurably to the beauty of the language, introducing new styles, forms of expression, figures of speech, and structures. The Qur'an also enriched and expanded the vocabulary of the Arabic language by employing hundreds of words of foreign origin, thus demonstrating the legitimacy of lexical borrowing as a linguistic device.

The Qur'an similarly presented Arab scholars with a higher criterion of literary excellence and set new and more rigid standards for literary composition for subsequent generations of Arab scholars. The model that the Qur'an provided, while remaining inimitable, has sharpened the literary skill and kindled the talent of generations of scholars in their attempts to emulate the style and literary excellence of the Qur'an, the first book in the Arabic language. Interest in the Qur'an, its language, and its exegesis gave rise to a number of related disciplines, which include philological, religious, and linguistic studies. There is no doubt that the Arabic language was extremely useful as a medium for the revelation of the Holy Qur'an and for communicating God's final message to the pre-Islamic Arabs of the seventh century.

It is, however, the conclusion of this paper that the Arabic language underwent drastic changes in its structure, content, and status due to its association with Islam and the Qur'an, changes that the language would not have undergone had it not been for the new role it acquired in its bond with Islam.

and the Qur'an.

- [1.](#) See, for this view, 'Abbas Hasan, *Al-Lugha wa-l-nahw bayn al-qadim wa-l-hadith*, Cairo, 1966, and Ibrahim Anis, *Min asrar al-lugha*, Cairo, 1970.
- [2.](#) Anwar Cheyne, *The Arabic language: its role in history*, Minnesota, 1969, ch. 4, pp. 53 ff.
- [3.](#) Ibid.
- [4.](#) On this subject, see Taha Husayn's excellent argument in his *Mir'at al-Islam*, pp. 125 ff., and Sayyid Qutbs *Al-Taswir al-fanni fi l-Qur'an*, chs. 1–3.
- [5.](#) Philip K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, London, 1967, pp. 87 ff.
- [6.](#) Cheyne, *Op. Cit.*, ch. 4, pp. 52 ff.
- [7.](#) Ibid., ch. 4, pp. 52 ff.
- [8.](#) Ibid.
- [9.](#) Hitti, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 90 ff.
- [10.](#) Ibrahim Anis, *Fi l-lahajat al-arabiyya*, Cairo, 1962, ch. 2, pp. 33 ff.
- [11.](#) Vicente Cantarino, *Arabic poetics in the golden age*, Leiden, 1975, pp. 17 ff.
- [12.](#) Ibid., ch. 1, pp. 9 ff.
- [13.](#) Al-Jahiz, *Kitab al-Bayan*, Cairo, 1965
- [14.](#) Ibn Rashid, *'Umda*, Cairo, 1934, vol. 1, 65; also in al-Suyuti, *Muzhir*, Cairo, n.d., vol. 2, 203.
- [15.](#) Ibn Qutayba, *'Uyun al-akhbar*, Cairo, 1964, vol. 2, 185.
- [16.](#) Ibn Khaldun, *Al-Muqaddima*, vol. 3, 375.
- [17.](#) Al-Suyuti, *Op. Cit.*, vol. 2, 291.
- [18.](#) All Qur'anic quotations are taken, with some modification, from the translation of Yusuf A. Ali, *The Holy Qur'an*, London, 1983.
- [19.](#) Hitti, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 90–91.
- [20.](#) Ibid.
- [21.](#) Cheyne. *Op. Cit.* pp. 56 ff
- [22.](#) A number of excellent works were devoted entirely to this aspect of the Qur'an, e.g., al-Suyuti, al-Itqan, and al-Baqillani, *I'jaz al-Qur'an*, Beirut, 1979.
- [23.](#) Abu Ja far Muhammad b. Jarir al-Tabari, *Tafsir al-Qur'an*.
- [24.](#) Mahmud b. Umar al-Zamakhshari (d. 1143).
- [25.](#) Nasr al-Din al-Baidawi (d. 1286)
- [26.](#) Al Baqillan, *Op. Cit.* pp 45 ff
- [27.](#) Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Kitab al-Fawai'id al-mushawwig ila 'ulum al-Qur'an wa'ilm al-bayan*, Cairo, 1909, pp. 7, 246.
- [28.](#) Ibn Khaldun, *Op. Cit.*, vol. 3, 338
- [29.](#) Ibn Qutayba, *Kitab Ta'wil mushkil al-Qur'an*, Cairo, 1954, p. 10.
- [30.](#) Ibn Khaldun, *Op. Cit.*, vol. 3, 1266
- [31.](#) Taha Husayn, *Op. Cit.*, p. 129.
- [32.](#) Ibid., pp. 130 ff.
- [33.](#) Ibid., pp. 129 ff.
- [34.](#) Ibid., p. 125
- [35.](#) Arthur Jeffrey, *The Foreign vocabulary of the Qur'an*. Lahore, 1977, pp. 5 ff.
- [36.](#) Ibid., pp. 6 ff.
- [37.](#) Al-Suyuti, al-Itqan, vol. 1, § 38, p. 136.
- [38.](#) Ibid., p. 136.
- [39.](#) Ibid., pp. 136 ff.
- [40.](#) Ibid., pp. 137 ff.
- [41.](#) Ibid.
- [42.](#) Ibid., pp. 138 ff.

- [43.](#) Al-Suyuti, Itqan
- [44.](#) 'Abbas Hasan, Op. Cit., pp. 72 ff.
- [45.](#) Sayyid Qutb, Op. Cit., pp. 34 ff.
- [46.](#) Ibid., pp. 87 ff.
- [47.](#) Ibid.
- [48.](#) Ibid.
- [49.](#) Cheyne, Op. Cit., pp. 5 ff.
- [50.](#) Anwar al-Jindi, Al-Fusha lughat al-Qur'an, Beirut, n.d., p. 31.
- [51.](#) Ibid, p. 45.
- [52.](#) Ibid., p. 72.
- [53.](#) Ibid., p. 72. See also Cheyne, Op. Cit., p. 1.
- [54.](#) Al-Jindi, Op Cit.,p. 77
- [55.](#) In a discussion with Dr Baynurza Hayit, a prominent Turkistani scholar who lives and writes in West Germany, at the third annual meeting of the American Council for the Study of Islamic Societies held at Villanova University in May 1986, he informed me that Turkic languages enjoyed a high degree of mutual intelligibility and interaction during that period in which the Arabic script was in use, and that this feature began to disappear following the switch of writing system in some of these languages.
- [56.](#) Al-Jindi, Op. Cit., p. 81.
- [57.](#) William H. Harris and Judith S. Levy, The New Columbia Encyclopedia, New York and London, 1975, p. 1670.
- [58.](#) Banilmadina is a large resort on the Costa del Sol in southern Spain, Guadalquivir is a river which runs through the ancient city of Seville, and the Alcazar is the famous palace in that city.

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