The Information Structuring Of The Arabic Written Text: The Qur'anic Suras As a Case Study

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Abstract

The thematic structure, communicative dynamism and information structuring along with other explicit or implicit features of the text interact in the process of presenting the message of the text and its interpretation. This paper attempts an analysis of two Qur'anic suras as a sample of the Glorious Qur'an. The divine texts proved to have a clear message presented in the form of a beginning, peak and end. The peak of the communicative dynamism where the highest degree of information is reached lies in the area given, for convenience, the percentage 80% of the size of the text. The explicit cohesive devices were found to exhaust the major part of the chain of deictics.

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Introduction

Holy books are seen as divine messages to man on earth, which can be a perfect sample of discourse. They comprise separate parts of one whole message. These parts have titles, beginning, development and end. Therefore, the principles of discourse analysis should find this type of text a fertile area where all explicit and implicit features of text and texture can be diagnosed. The peculiarity of the Arabic text in its lack of a regular thematic structure necessitates that we resort to other features of the text in order to manifest what makes it a text and how its message is depicted. All the elements of discourse analysis should be present in the mind of the analyst if he ever wished to arrive at the precise analysis of the text.

In this paper each Qur'anic sura (chapter) is considered a separate message from God to mankind. There is clear orienting of the hearer to a message which is related to a general context and which is to be brought to completion by virtue of the communicative dynamism (CD) of the flow of information. The message is conceived of by readers as an order from God to mankind to follow a specific path in life. In this type of argumentative texts the CD is very clear and plays a crucial part in the unfolding of the message.

The resources at the speaker/writer's disposal are so many. Among these resources are thematic choice and cohesion. However, those resources are not always used without prejudice to this instrument or that. The linguistic and especially the syntactic resources are the major modality in the process of grasping the message of the sura. This paper focuses on the information presented through linguistic means: grammar, thematic choice and information structure (New and Given). Someone might argue that the whole text is entirely new information as it was originally addressed to the people who constituted a part of the actual universe of discourse of the message at the moment of the first utterance. This issue will be addressed later in this paper.

In the systemic-functional model there is an interesting asymmetry between the function in the information structures (Fries, 1993: 463). The thematic structure consists of Theme and Rheme. Theme is defined as the "point of departure" of the clause as message whereas the rheme is defined negatively as anything that is not theme. The interaction between thematic structure, theme and rheme, and information structure, (New and Given) contributes to the process of communicative dynamism (CD) whereby an utterance is seen as a process of gradually unfolding meaning. Some parts of the utterance will contribute little to the meaning because

they reflect only what has already been communicated. By contrast, rhematic aspects have the highest degree of CD (Crystal, 1985: 58).

In Arabic texts, the degree of CD which an element carries depends on semantic factors and word and clause order rather than phonological factors as is the case in languages such as English.

In this paper two chapters (suras) of the Glorious Qur'an will be analysed in order to establish a model for the information system of the Arabic text.

Text 1: Sura titled "The Father of Flame"

﴿ تَبَّتْ يَدَا أَبِي لَهَبٍ وَتَبَّ   (1) مَا أَغْنَى عَنْهُ مَالُهُ وَمَا كَسَبَ   (2) سَيَصْلَى نَارًا ذَاتَ لَهَبٍ   (3) وَامْرَأَتُهُ حَمَّالَةَ الْحَطَبِ   (4) فِي جِيدِهَا حَبْلٌ مِنْ مَسَدٍ (5)﴾

تَبَّتْ يَدَا أَبِي لَهَب

Perish the hands of the father of Flame!

وَتَبّ

Perish he!

مَا أَغْنَى عَنْهُ مَالُهُ وَمَا كَسَب

No profit did he make of all his wealth and all his gains.

سَيَصْلَى نَارًا ذَاتَ لَهَب

He will soon be (burnt) in a fire of blazing flame.

وَامْرَأَتُهُ حَمَّالَةَ الْحَطَب

And his wife shall carry the (crackling) wood as fuel.

فِي جِيدِهَا حَبْلٌ مِنْ مَسَد

round her neck a twisted rope of palm-leaf fiber.

(Ali 2001, Tr.)

This sura has the following thematic structure. (The division of the text into sentences follows the Arabic concept of sentence as a unit of information) (T = Theme, R = Rheme)

T1	R1
T2 (TI)	R2(R1)
T3	R3
T4 (R2)	R4
T5	R5

Aziz (1998: 120-121) maintains that the English text differs from the Arabic text considerably in its thematic structure. It is simple and follows one pattern: the theme of the preceding sentence becomes the theme of the following one. This means that the English text is related through its theme and rheme. The Arabic thematic structure is more complicated due to the flexibility of word

order. However, all languages aim to bring the message to completion by a strategy called by linguistic analyst as communicative dynamism (CD). This is a fundamental concept of the modern Prague school theory of linguistics whereby an utterance is seen as a process of gradually unfolding meaning: each part of the utterance contributing variously (dynamically) to the total communicative effect. Some parts of the utterance will add little to the overall meaning and, hence, have the lowest degree of (CD) while the rhematic aspects have the highest degree of CD and contain new information that advances the communicative process (Crystal, 1985: 58).

However, the important point that is worth mentioning is given and new information in the analysis of Arabic texts such as the Glorious Qur'an. The whole text can be considered as new to a reader who reads it after such a long time from the time of revelation. This is true only at the beginning of the text where the message has its point of departure. In this example, a number of key elements start to unfold like "Perish", "Father of Flame", "what profit", all of which preparing the reader for what is about to come as well as providing him with enough contextual information to be used later by the reader's background information.

The second important point is the cohesion of the text which is not as straightforward as that of the English texts. Aziz (1998)

suggests that Theme and Rheme in the English texts are exchanged in regular way that relates the parts of the text to each other. In the Arabic text, however, cohesion is probably best explained with reference to Topic/Comment binary characterization.

e.g.   (1) Perish the hands of the Father of Flame.

    (2) Perish he.

    (3) No profit did HE make of all HIS wealth and all HIS gains.

    (4) (HE) will (soon) be (burnt) in a fire of blazing flame.

       Implied subject

    (5) Wife (his) shall carry the (crackling) wood as fuel, round her neck a twisted rope of palm-leaf fiber.

The topic in (1) is "the hands of the father of flame". Part of this topic "father of flame" links this sentence to another sentence (3) by the pronouns "he" and "his". And (4) is linked to (1), (2), (3) and (4) by the possessive pronoun "his" which is implied in the topic of the clause. Thus, we can say that cohesion is more important in the structure of the Arabic text than thematic structure.

The CD of this text can be seen along the following line: the message is punishment of a sinner and his wife for mistreating the Prophet. The reader of this type of texts needs a background knowledge against which he can interpret the message. One of the

difficulties in locating new information is that no written language directly signals the location of new information (Fries, 1993:454). Therefore, we need to work hard in order to identify the new information.

The Verification of Real Situation

One of the ways of providing the actuality of the situation is by referring to the categories of Field, Tenor and Mode;

i. Field: The field of this text is a divine message through a prophet to mankind. At one level the verses are intended to convince people not to disobey the messenger of God. The desired action is for the hearer to believe and obey the messenger.

ii. Tenor

1. The speaker: The speaker is God.

2. Reader/Listener: The text is placed in a holy book. The readers/listeners are well-known to the speaker. The reader knows that he is reading an important thing.

iii. Mode: The channel is a graphic language viz. a written text that can be recited to achieve the same effect. This means that language is the only element in the interaction.

Our example requires from the reader to know in advance that prophet Muhammad's uncle addressed the prophet using the word

"Perish you". Therefore, we can say that the point of departure, so to speak, for the whole message is this word "Perish". This starting point of the message, which is Given information, carries the lowest degree of CD and can be retrieved from the context which is in this case background knowledge. The expression "the father of flame" is new in the sense that the person is given a new name other than his real name which marks the start of the CD progression.

After that we face an expression of reprimand by telling the reader/hearer that the person called earlier by the name "father of the flame" has no gains from all of his wealth. The cohesive device is here the pronoun "his". The following Rheme whose Theme is again another cohesive device "he", is presented as a cause for the preceding result, as if the meaning is "for he will soon be in a fire...". This is the peak of the CD of the whole message as the next step only a mentioning of another name who is joined by a coordinator "and" which serves to add the whole load of meaning of the previous information to the new name. The message continues to descend to bring the message to an end. It is worth noting here that the message does not leave the reader/hearer in the midair, but its CD moves in a curve that has a beginning, middle and end.

This point can be illustrated by figure (1):

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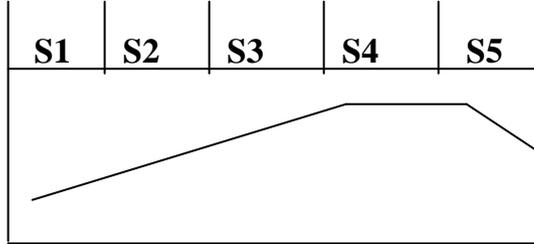
(Fig. 1)

The second example is the "***The Elephant***" sura:

﴿ أَلَمْ تَرَى كَيْفَ فَعَلَ رَبُّكَ بِأَصْحَابِ الْفِيلِ   (1) أَلَمْ يَجْعَلْ كَيْدَهُمْ فِي تَضْلِيلٍ (2) وَأَرْسَلَ عَلَيْهِمْ طَيْرًا أَبَابِيلَ (3) تَرْمِيهِمْ بِحِجَارَةٍ مِنْ سِجِّيلٍ   (4) فَجَعَلَهُمْ كَعَصْفٍ مَأْكُولٍ (5)﴾

Translation

أَلَمْ تَرَى كَيْفَ فَعَلَ رَبُّكَ بِأَصْحَابِ الْفِيل

Seest thou not how thy Lord dealt with the companions of the elephant?

أَلَمْ يَجْعَلْ كَيْدَهُمْ فِي تَضْلِيل

Did he not make their treacherous plan go astray?

وَأَرْسَلَ عَلَيْهِمْ طَيْرًا أَبَابِيل

And he sent against them flights of birds;

تَرْمِيهِمْ بِحِجَارَةٍ مِنْ سِجِّيل

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Striking them with stones of baked clay

<div dir="rtl">فَجَعَلَهُمْ كَعَصْفٍ مَأْكُول</div>

Then did he make them like an empty Held of stalks and straw (of which the corn) has been eaten up.

(Ali 2001, Tr.)

The Thematic structure is as follows:

T1   R1

T2 (T1)   R2

T3   R3

T4   R4

T5   R5

The texture of this sura cannot be revealed from the thematic structure alone as an explicit realization unless, if we study other types of explicit relations holding between the sentences which make up the text. Brown & Yule (1983: 194) maintain that cohesion can be provided by relationships other than those involving co-reference like: part-whole and co-referential chain.

The part-whole relationship can be exemplified by the example that we encountered in the first sura where the mention of "the hands of the father of flame" as <u>part</u> of the person mentioned

later by the pronoun "he" as <u>whole.</u> By co-referential chain is meant the sequence that starts with a noun as a referent such as "the men" followed by them: they: their etc. The co-referential chain in this sura can be:

1. thy Lord

2. he

3. he

4.

5. he

     and

1. the companions of the elephant

2. their...

3. them

4. them

5. them

We can see that within the second chain there exists a part-whole cohesive realization in: "the companions of the elephant" as whole and "their treacherous plan" as part. However, these explicit relationships do not alone satisfy the definition of text. Therefore, it is a necessity to resort to the semantic relations and realizations in order to prove the coherence of the text.

The development of the CD of the text is slightly different from the previous example, but it follows the same curve of

information. The sura starts with a question which can be defined as a rhetorical one. The prepositional content of the first sentence is "you knew for sure what happened to the army of the Abyssinian prince who attempted to invade Mecca", again; this message needs background information which is the invasion of Mecca by an Abyssinian army led by an elephant with the intention to damage the Ka'ba. The army was attacked by flights of birds and destroyed. The point of departure of the whole message is the idea of "how thy lord dealt with the companions of the elephant". In the second appositive – like sentence the unfolding of information gains weight with the mention of "treacherous plan". The CD of the message draws near to a peak where the flights of birds were brought to the emerging scene of an unfamiliar battle and then we arrive at the peak of the CD where we know of the nature of the material used in the attack which is "stones of backed clay". The message is brought to an end by the last sentence which describes the destroyed army as an "empty field of stalks and straw". Figure (2):

(Fig. 2)

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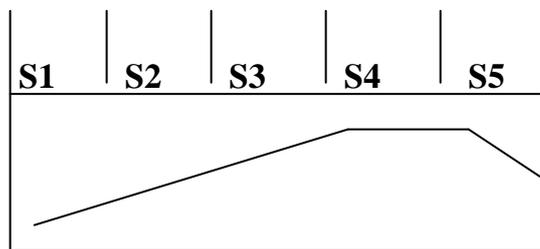
shows the way the CD and information structure develop. We can see that at the 30% of the message the CD reaches the peak in both examples. However, further examples should be studied before a final decision could be reached regarding the peak of CD of the message. The message of this sura is simply an order to the prophet to tell his people that whoever tries to inflict any harm on the holy place of Mecca will face serious consequences including a direct attack by supernatural elements from heaven.

Conclusion

The Qur'anic messages represented by suras of the Glorious Qur'an can only be explained by reference to the explicit and implicit relations holding between verses. However, the thematic structure has little significance in the establishment and interpretation of the text. There is a clear curve of communicative dynamism in each text and the information takes a rising form till it reaches a peak then it goes down in an anticlimax way to bring the message to a smooth end. This strategy can be followed by writers and speakers in sending successful messages to their audience.

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ملخص

البناء المعلوماتي للنص العربي المكتوب: النص القرآني كحالة للدراسة

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إن البنية الثيمية وديناميكية التواصل والبناء المعلوماتي إلى جانب السمات الظاهرة والباطنة الأخرى للنص تتفاعل في عملية تقديم رسالة النص وتفسيرها.

يحاول هذا البحث تحليل سورتين من سور القرآن الكريم كنموذج للقرآن الكريم. لقد أثبتت النصوص السماوية امتلاكها رسائل واضحة مقدمة بشكل مقدمة وذروة ونهاية. ذروة ديناميكية التواصل حيث يتم الوصول إلى أعلى درجة من المعلومات في ما عرف للسهولة بمرحلة 80 % من النص. وجد أن الأدوات الترابطية تستنفد الجزء الأساسي من سلسلة أدوات الإشارة.

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