EUROPE 2016

An Introduction to the theory of mixed function in the Qur'an (With an emphasis on jurisprudential implications)

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Abstract

In linguistics, language functions are divided into two major categories: ordinary and poetic. A text with normal function seeks to reveal the intentions with the least ambiguity, whereas a poetic text aims to increase ambiguity and expand meanings. A literary text has a world made by itself and utilizes words not defined by reference to the external world or pre-existing concepts. Here, a word can imply unlimited meanings; the referent of a pronoun may either be multiple or not mentioned at all. In addition, any part of a sentence can be separated and understood as an independent expression. This article reviews the linguistic functions of the Qur'an, and by providing a variety of evidences, it attempts to prove the hypothesis that the Qur'an has mixed (hybrid) functions; but not solely in the sense that some verses are ordinary, while others are poetic. Instead, it means that one verse may be ordinary, and at the same time, at another level, it may have a poetic function.

Keywords: the Qur'an, Functions of language, ordinary Function, Poetic/literary Function, Mixed function

Introduction

One of the most important and decisive issues in the interpretation of Holy Scriptures is whether their function is ordinary, poetic (literary), or a combination of the two. A text with ordinary function has been hired to express a specific meaning and its aim is to convey the intentional meaning, with the least ambiguity. In this function, multiple meanings, hidden concepts, and symbolic implications are considered not only desirable but also detrimental to the purpose. In contrast, a literary work, unusually, seeks to add to meanings through cryptic and ambiguous words. In these texts, familiar concepts and foreign reference are abolished, and the text is understood only by reference to itself. The present paper aims to study the characteristics of ordinary and literary function and tries to trace these features in the Qur'an so as to identify its function. The hypothesis is that the Qur'an- even in its jurisprudential verses - carries out mixed functions, which in turn can influence jurisprudential interpretations of the text.

2   Functions of language and their role in the meaning and interpretation of the text

One of the issues that has an important influence on the meaning and interpretation of a text is the functions of language. Linguists have defined language functions in various terms. Karl Bohler, for instance, has proposed Emotive, Conative, and Referential functions; whereas Roman Jakobson has added Metalingual, Phatic, and Poetic. (See more in Meadina, 2005, pp.2-9; Simms, 2003, p.74; Ricoeur, 2003, p.26)

Of all the functions of language, there is a fundamental distinction between the poetic (literary/artistic) function and ordinary (non-poetic) function.

Genette writes: "It is thus as though Aristotle had set up a distinction between two functions of language: its ordinary function, which is to speak (legein) in order to inform, interrogate, persuade, order, promise, a so forth, and its artistic function, which is to produce works (poiein)". (Genette, 1993, p.6)

However, one must not identify 'poem' with 'the poetic' in Jakobson. (Ricoeur, 2003, p.262) Poetic language is not necessarily the language of poetry, although it is usually found there as well as in other created works of literature. (Simms, 2003, p.74) This is the same reason why I prefer to call it "literary function". In addition, it seems inappropriate to use terms like "poem" and "poetic" when referring to Holy Scriptures.

2.1 Ordinary function

Ordinary function of language can have several main characteristics:

A. communication: in ordinary function, the sender uses words to communicate. As Eco highlights even an author, who writes claims only for itself, with publication of his/her work, puts it in the flow of communication.

B. Conveying the meaning: all so-called ordinary functions have one common goal; i.e. conveying meaning to the real or imagined audience.

C. revealing the intention: The importance of intention in normal speech and common dialogue is even accepted by strong anti-intentionalism scholars such as Wimsatt and Beardsley: "Poetry differs from practical messages, which are successful if and only if we correctly infer the intention" (Wimsatt Jr., 1946, p.471).

D. Reducing or eliminating ambiguity: For Ricoeur, ordinary and everyday language aims at communication through the reduction of ambiguity (the ultimate goal is to remove ambiguity). Indeed, the aim of scientific language (such as legal language) is achieving to a single meaning.

2.2 Literary (poetic) function

Literary function is unconventional because of the characteristics that make it wholly contrastive to the ordinary functioning of language. It can have several main characteristics:

A. Emphasizing on the message: Jakobson defines the poetic function as the function that puts the accent on the message for its own sake. (Ricoeur, 2003, pp.162 & 169) The major point here is the message, and not external situations.

B. self-purposing and drawing attention to the nature of language: A literary text refers only to the language; and hence, it draws attention to language and its extensive facilities (possibilities). "Language involves an essential movement of saying something about a subject matter. But the matter need not be external or extrinsic, and in the case of the poem, it can be the poetic language itself". (Hoy, 1982, p.149)

As V. Mayakovsky explains, poetic language is outside the domain of the semantic function. When B. Eichenbaum spoke of "language that goes beyond the idea" and V. Khlebnikov wrote about "independent speech", they meant the literary language. (Ahmadi, 2009, pp.69-70)

C. The abolishment of reference: Literary texts will not refer to anything other than language itself. Poetry 'posits a completely new world'. "Poetic language is its own ground; it functions without recourse to an encompassing, external reality or to everyday language." (Hoy, 1982, pp.73-74) The order of things revealed is liberated from reference such that a possible world (a secondary or split referent) and a corresponding way of being is manifest before the text. (Topping, 2007, p.36) Jakobson underlines the importance of what Husserl called absence, i.e. no poetic word has the [external] subject: 'The French poet was true to say that the poetic flower means the absence of potpourri.

D. The suspension of ordinary propositions: The central concern of some poetic texts is precisely with breaking down all previous ordinary understanding, all everyday contexts, and possibly any text whatsoever. (Hoy, 1982, p.77) Familiar expressions and ordinary usage must be suspended if poetry is to see and make us see things 'for the first time'. (Hoy, 1982, p.73) We will need what V. Shklovsky calls 'defamiliarization'. It seems that poetry, like Lewis Carroll's Humpty-Dumpty, make words mean anything it wants them to mean.

E. Self-organizing and independence: Poetry is a 'closed world' and belongs to the category of autonomous texts, because so much like religious and legal texts, it claims independence and comprehensiveness. It has no witness but itself and does not see itself as requiring external confirmation.

F. Ambiguity (concealing intentions): Barthes holds that poetry does not use words to clarify or conveying meanings; but to conceal them. The poet is aware that meanings are multiple and unreachable, thus (s)he can only "obscure ideas" (the term applied by Stefan Malarme) (Ahmadi, 2009, p.227). Similarly, Todorov introduces the countless meanings of Kafka's stories resulting from their linguistic ambiguity, following which many interpretations emerge. (See: Todorov, 1982, p.89)

G. The creation of a sense of creativity: The literary text puts the reader in a position where he/she acts like "the producer of the text and the creator of new meanings". In other words, the reader sees the text as waiting his/her creative power, and feels the urge to "finish the unfinished story of the text." Furthermore, by underlining the difference between creative and non-creative writings, O. Echo has stated that creative texts leave the conclusions to the reader (See: Ahmadi, 2009, pp.368-9).

H. The proliferation of meaning: The literary writer creates words in a way that causes them to have many different meanings. His goal is the multiplying and deepening of meanings, through a process which Ricoeur calls breaking the rules and adding to the language.

3   Mixed function

In recognizing functions, it should be noted that a literary text may not contain 'all the characteristics mentioned for literary works,' or those characteristics may not be alike, thus, with their strength and weakness. What's more, in a text, there may be both ordinary and literary function. In other words, its function may be a combination of the two: ordinary and literary. The surface meaning of this is that some phrases in a text have normal function but some others have the literary function. But, a deeper concept is that a phrase, has although with normal function, - on a different rank and level and rank - has literary function. For example, while it refers to something external and objective, it can be stated in coded or non-referential form, has other meanings in relation to the text itself, or other text or language.

This article claims that the function of the Qur'an is a combined function in both senses mentioned.

4   The possibility of introducing the mixed function in the Qur'an and an investigation of relevant problems

In this discussion, it is necessary to refer to some of the issues that might be regarded as obstacles to the realization of the mixed function in the Qur'an.

4.1   literary function and anti-intentionalism

As shown in a previous research by the present author (See: Abedi Sarasia, 1389) interpreters and scholars of Shia "Principles of Jurisprudence" (Osool al-feqh) tend to be intentionalists; hence, they perceive the main aim of understanding the Word of Allah as discovering His intention.

Nevertheless, the explanations proposed about the literary function maintain that understanding authorial intentions is usually unnecessary, and even in some cases it will be impossible (especially where the author has no pre-intention to meaning).

It should be noted, however, that the above-mentioned notions do not mean that the intention is totally absent in literary text and the creator of a literary text necessarily lacks pre-intention. If so, we would have to count the vast number of texts known today as literary texts among the non-literary. A literary text may have been created with the aim of "artistic expression of ideas" or "conveying the various meanings as (wholly or partly) the author's purpose."

In sacred texts including the Qur'an, the infinite knowledge of the Owner (Allah) provides the possibility of intending all possible meanings of these texts (although not necessarily all of these meanings are His purpose).

4.2   Mixed function and the ambiguity (ambivalence) of the Qur'an

It may be argued that reading the Qur'an in terms of literary or mixed functions will necessitate considering it as unclear or ambivalent; for ambiguity and hiding ideas is the main element of literary function. This is while the Qur'an defines itself as 'tibyān' (the Book making everything clear) (16:89), 'mubīn' (a Clear Book) (5:15), and "ballāgh" (the clear Message) (14:52). The answer can be that these features are related to the totality of the Qur'an,

not to each and every verse, nor to all of its semantic levels. The reason for this is that: there is ambiguity in some verses that are called "mutashābihāt" (allegorical; obscure) (See the Qur'an, 3:7); as there is ambivalence in specific interpretations of the Qur'an called 'Ta'wīl' and in 'bātin' (inward; hidden) parts of the Book. Additionally, based on the mixed function, most of the verses, because of their ordinary function, have meanings that are clear and understandable for everyone; and merely another level of meanings, which is in the domain of literary function, "bātin" or "Ta'wīl", are hidden and coded.

4.3   Mixed function and creating a sense of creativity

With some deliberate ambiguity and instilling a sense of creativity in the audience, the literary / mixed function makes the audience the creator of meanings and even the text and considers them as terminators of the story. But this is wrong with regard to the Words of Allah; because (a) it is incompatible with its holiness and leads to distortion or to "Tafsir bi ra'y" (Interpretation on personal opinion); and (b) it requires that these meanings be attributed to the interpreter rather than to Allah and this renders Him as unaware of the meanings assumed. At the same time, this problem can be overcome Firstly, because the sense of creation is not innate to the literary function. Secondly, it does not necessarily mean that the interpreter can do anything arbitrarily with the text and its meaning; because of the specific requirements of religious texts, one cannot change the text phrases, interpret it as desired, or impose presupposition on it. Thirdly, instilling a sense of creativity in the Qur'an can be understood as Allah having created the words that - due to their the depth, breadth, and ambiguity- can not only express several meanings (of which He is aware), but can also encourage a sense of creativity in the audience (as they could, by their creative sense, achieve the intended meanings of Almighty Allah).

4.4   Mixed function and interpretational chaos

Another argument against applying the mixed function concept to the Qur'an and believing in the plurality of meaning in such a large scale might be that such a theory can lead to interpretational chaos; because in this approach we can no longer verify other understandings. And that anyone can consider his own as correct understanding of the text; as one might thus infer from the Qur'an that prayer and fasting are not obligatory or that oppression and robbery are forbidden. Nevertheless, this criticism is true only if we deal with "all possible meanings" as correct, or when we do not have a way to distinguish right from wrong. While firstly some meanings are patently false, and are not attributable to God (such as the apparent meaning of ambiguous verses like 'the hand of God' or 'the face of Allah'; see 48: 10 and 2: 115); and secondly, interpreting or making commentary is a matter followed systematically and based on criteria; and there are standards according to which one can determine right meanings from wrong (including: lack of opposition to the Sharia or the rules of grammar, and lack of internal contradiction.) The multiplicity theory includes only true or different meanings, not contradictory ones; different concepts not opposite ones.

5   Evidence / implications of the mixed function in the Qur'an

Whoever familiar with the Qur'an and the interpretive traditions of the Ahl al-Bayt (AS) through which different meanings have been derived from Qur'anic verses observes features in the Word of Allah not discernible in any ordinary or literary words. Thus, the language function of the Qur'an seems not to be considered quite ordinary; nor shall it all be regarded literary with ordinary properties of words abolished. For this feature, we cannot find any right justification unless considering the function of the Qur'an as "a combination of ordinary and literary function". In the following, we shall refer to some of these evidence of and implications.

5.1 Plurality of meanings:

Referring to interpretive traditions, one can clearly observe that a number of hadiths follow a verse, each of which regarding a different meaning as the true meaning of the verse. This was not ignored by the companions of the

Imams (AS), and therefore they used to ask about ambiguities. In response to such a question, Imam Sadiq (AS) said: the Qur'an was revealed in seven letters; and an Imam can give fatwa upon at least seven dimensions.

Although interpreters largely disagree as to the interpretation of "revelation of the Qur'an on seven letters" (See: Al-Feyz Al-Kashani, 1415, vol. 1, p. 59; Al-Majlisi, 1403, vol. 31, p. 205), one of its true meanings (also derivable from the above-mentioned hadith) is that Qur'anic expressions have plurality of concepts and bear different meanings which can be entirely correct. Furthermore, these meanings are such that can provide the basis for jurisprudential rulings.

Jurisprudential inference: Based on the phrase: "And 'Al-masājid' belong to Allah" (72: 18) and due to the different meanings of 'Al-masājid' (places of worship, places of prostration, and prostrations), it can be understood that: (a) mosques do not belong to any human beings and no one has the right to sell a mosque; (b) places of prostration (the seven positions or limbs which during the act of prostration should touch the ground) are owned by God, and hence, when cutting off the hands of a thief (as an act of punishment), the palm of his hand should be saved in the beginning and the fingers must be cut off only (See: Al-Bahrani, 1416, vol. 5, p. 512); (c) prostrations belong to God and one shall not to prostrate to anyone other than Allah.

5.2   The possibility of segmenting the verses:

Segmentation of a verse means to consider and understand part of a verse as independent regardless of the preceding and following parts. Similarly, the same verse can be considered at other times in relation with a phrase from previous positions and other compounds for that can be assumed, and so. In this case, if with possible combinations one can achieve meanings correct by themselves and not contrary to Sharia, they can be considered as true meanings.

According to Allameh Tabatabai, one of the rules in Qur'anic teachings inferable from the sayings of the imams is that "each of the Qur'anic phrases alone tells a fact and, with the limitations that it has, declares a separate one." (Tabatabai, 1374, vol. 1, p. 392) Similar dealing with the verses can be seen in the case of verse 3: 7 in traditions. (Al-Aroosi Al-Hoveyzi, 1415, vol. 1, p. 142, H. 445, p 315; Al-Majlisi, 1403, vol 23, p 199, H.33).

Jurisprudential inference: As regards the intended meaning of 'consuming in vanities' in the verse "do not consume your wealth among yourselves in vanities", there are two possibilities: (A) Eating other things are invalidated, which is the probability of the appearance of the verse. (B) The use of the property invalidly.

According to the latter, (that is accepted by Raghib Isfahani) (Al-Raghib Al-Esfehany, 1412, p. 80), the verse implies prohibition of extravagance and wastefulness (and generally, any use of personal property in a way that leads to spending it for a wrong cause). But this inference is inconsistent with the second part of the verse, "except there be trading by your mutual agreement..."; and it can be true only if we accept "segmentation of verses". In this case, the first part of the verse can be understood regardless of the other part,

5.3   Self-organizing and reference suspension

As noted in relation to literary function, texts have their own world and references become abolished in it; Statements must be understood in the own world of the text. However, in hybrid function, words can refer in one rank to the external world, and be understood in referring to it, and in other ranks, with the suspension of reference, understood according to his inner world. An example of this approach to the text in the verse "and by the star they are guided" (16: 16) can be seen. Guided by the star can be realized referential; In this case, the meaning of the verse is that the Stars (e.g. Polaris) can help people to find their way; this interpretation is also entered in traditions (Al-Bahrani, 1416, vol. 3, p. 409, H.12 and 13). However, in other rank, we can mean the star in the verse with reference suspension in the own world of the text. Characteristic of the star, according to the verse, is the guidance and we know that this feature is a clear example of the Prophet (PBUH) and his successors (AS) (Al-Bahrani, 1416, vol. 3, p. 409, H. 6-11).

Jurisprudential inference: Phrase "and purify your clothing" (74: 4) in referential function refers to desirability of purity and cleaning clothes from uncleannesses; and at the same time, in literary function, refers to the desirability of efforts to purge of the wife from evil; Because in literary language of the Qur'an, couples are clothes of each other (The Qur'an, 2: 187). As well as it has refers to the desirability of efforts in the direction of improving oneself and

correcting belief and behavior and clearing it from the evil, and these are also as a human clothing (The Qur'an, 7: 23).

5.4   A plurality of antecedent

In hybrid function, it is not necessary that the referent of a pronoun be one thing. It may either be multiple or not mentioned at all. For example, the pronoun in "min doonihi" in verse 27 of Surah 18 can be both "Lord" and "book" . According to the first possibility, the meaning of the verse is that you have no other refuge except Allah. This meaning is confirmed by verse 22 of Surah 72. According to the second, the verse, introduces the Holy Qur'an as the unique sanctuary of the Prophet (Al-Sadiqi Al-Tehrany, 1365, vol. 18, p. 72). It can be point out that the Qur'an was the source of all knowledge of Imams, and if there is another source for them, in fact, it guides them to the hints, interpretations, and the essence of Qur'an. This entry confirmed by the traditions that express if we have say something to you, ask us from where of the Qur'an we said that) (Al-Koleyni, 1365, vol. 5, p. 300).

Jurisprudential inference: The pronoun in the verse "none shall touch it except the purified" (56: 79) refers to both "Qur'an" and "Kitabi Maknoon" (A Book safeguarded; that is lawhi mahfooth: Guarded Tablet)

Firstly, the sentence is compositional, and refers to the Prevention from the lines touch of the Qur'an for those who do not have religious purity (Wudu, Ghosl or Tayammum).

Secondly, the sentence is declaration and refers to the fact that only the clean (in belief and ethics) can achieve the truth of the Qur'an.

6   Summary and conclusion

The most important results of this study can be listed as follows:

1. In the Qur'an, one verse may have ordinary function, and another verse may have literary function.

2. In a deeper sense, one verse may be ordinary, and at the same time, at another level, it may fulfill a poetic function.

3. One of the most important foundations / results of hybrid function is the plurality of correct meanings of the Qur'an; but that issue shall not lead to anarchy or chaos in interpretation due to our recognition of wrong meanings and the possibility of distinguishing them from the true.

4. Based on hybrid function, a lot of interpretive evidences only serve a positive function, not a negative one; and so they are not in conflict with the approval of different other meanings (although not contradictory meanings). For example, 'Shan-e-Nuzool' , the beginning and ending of the verse, and the preceding and following verses generally represent only one of the meaning possibilities of the verse and prove one single meaning (positive function), but they cannot by essence negate the other possibilities (negative function); except in special cases such as contradictory possibilities in which the proofing of one probability might lead to the rejection of the contradictories (negative - positive function).

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