

Investigating Application of Literary Methods for Interpretation and Translation of Religious Text

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ABSTRACT

In some contexts of use, text interpretation and accurate conveyance of meaning has a critical importance. Religious texts, on top of that, Quranic texts have inherent intricacies which renders the job of Islamic exegetes and expounders very difficult. Considering the importance of these texts for Muslims and extensive foreign readers, the current research is an attempt to examine the application of major literary methods of text interpretation for interpretation and translation of Quranic text. To this aim taxonomy of methods discussed by Titscher, et al (2012) was selected as the theoretical baseline for the study. The findings of the research showed that commentators can employ literary methods toward literary text interpretation for Quranic interpretation directly or with some considerations. The findings also indicated that, application of these methods requires further investigation because translation is inherently different from interpretation. It was concluded that, according to Shiite school of thought, for Quranic interpretation, methods of text analysis is only a tool and exegetes stand in the need of some internal and external resources amongst which is traditional quotations and Hadith from the side of immaculate Imams.

Introduction

Text understanding is a sophisticated phenomenon that relies on a variety of factors such as memory, perception, cognition, conception inside readers and many beyond the reader such as context, society, history and etc. Therefore, many researchers in the field call for interdisciplinary approach toward text analysis. For instance, Kubriakova (2012) enlists cognitive linguistics, cognitive psychology, social psychology, psycholinguistics, text linguistics, social linguistics and pragmatics as those from which one can benefit to arrive at a proper interdisciplinary approach. Yet, considering the intricacies of some texts, some researchers believe that other areas of knowledge and practices need to be employed to analyze and understand a given text including considering local mentality and communication tone and actualizing positive perception (Spitzmuller and Warnke, 2011; Jackendoff, 2011 and Harder, 2010). In order to blend all these ideas and perspective in text understanding, another line of the research emerged in the field devoting itself to suggesting a comprehensive model and framework toward text analysis and understanding (Lixin, 2012 and Cowley, 2011). Besides, some researchers strived toward developing applied and in-depth theories to shed more light on this discursive practice (Antos, 1997; Jackendoff, 2011 and Gunina, 2012).

Among literary texts, religious texts enjoy sophisticated linguistics and philosophy and therefore not only readers, but also commentators find it a formidable task to develop a profound understanding of them. Considering the population of Muslim throughout the world, one of those mostly read text is the holy Quran that adopts the

primary role of guiding human. Considering the intricacies stated above, many words and phrases of the holy Quran, in spite of its extremely eloquent language, enjoy profound meanings the understanding of which seems difficult for ordinary readers. Researchers in the field of Shiite commentating and exegesis believe that in-depth comprehension of Quranic texts goes beyond the limits of translation, interpretation or common practices and approaches toward text understanding. They believe that understanding this text stands in the need of a special expertise, particular instrument and exclusive sources (Zanjani, 2000 and Sobhani, 1995).

Therefore, the current research is an attempt to provide a comparative analysis of approaches and practices toward Quranic text understanding and those prevalent ones in linguistics. To this aim, the following research question is formulated:

To what extent understanding Quran text differs from normative linguistic texts?

Literature Review

Theoretical Background

According to Van Dijk (1985), text analysis and interpretation can be studied from a variety of perspectives including linguistic, anthropological, philosophical, sociological, poetical, psychological, historical or even communicative. Similarly, Wetherell (2001) suggests four possible approaches toward text analysis, viewing a given text as a coherent and well-defined discourse, the first of which resides at the level of language. In other words, the first approach views language as a system and strives to delve into meaningful patterns in the discourse while the second approach goes beyond the usage of language and puts emphasis on language in use as an activity the purpose of which is analysis of the interaction between the different elements of the discourse. The third approach, however, studies language associated with specific purpose aimed at uncovering major rhetorical conventions and macro-structures of a given text which realize a specific genre. And last, but not the least, the fourth approach studies textual patterns the pattern study within a broader context such as society, culture or politics (Guerra, 2014).

From a different point of view, researchers categorize approaches toward text interpretation on the basis of text, context and readership (Guerin et al, 2005). Context-oriented approaches include a) biographical criticism-viewing the author's life as a facilitating factor for reader's comprehension, b) historical criticism - believing that social, cultural and intellectual context helps understanding, c) psychoanalytical, psychological and social criticism-employing theories and perspectives from psychoanalysis, psychology, behavioral sciences and social outlooks for text analysis and comprehension and d) Bakhtin approach - believing in text as a social activity, while text-oriented approaches encompass a) formalism- in which a text is primarily a form and content is a manifestation of it, b) structuralism – in which language is viewed as a system with two manifest and latent levels , c) stylistics – which views discourse as not only being grammar and structure but also rhetoric and logic and d) post-structuralism – on the basis of which language is subject to contingency, indeterminacy and generation of multiple meanings (Widdowson, 1975; Gelder, 1982; Kim, 2004; Guerin et al, 2005; Jeffries, 2010 and James, 2014). There is another line of research that categorizes these theories on the basis of the reader such hermeneutics and phenomenology (Guerin et al, 2005).

Related literature

Parsaeyan (2018) carried out a research on application of new approaches in religious text analysis and suggested that a comprehensive approach to the interpretation of the Qur'an and the discovery of the semantic network of the verses depends on the use of traditional methods and new science such as hermeneutics. In this research, after describing different versions of the hermeneutic circle and the views of the Muslim Quranic scholars, the role of the hermeneutic circle was discovered in the light of the hidden and networked relations of texts of the Qur'an and use of textual, classical and inter-textual elements in understanding the verses and various types of hermeneutics circles between the word and verse, verse and textual context, verses and situational situations, verses and surahs, verses and Quran, and among the Quran and other religious sources were presented.

In an attempt to put these theoretical underpinnings into real practice of education, Ghasemi, et al (2011) delved into the theory and findings of Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics in text interpretation and concluded that this theory promotes text comprehension in three levels of explanation, understanding and appropriation.

Also, in the same year, England (2011) investigates mystic meaning in sacred text and Christian spirituality through the interpretive use of the bible. In conclusion, he puts forward four areas in Christian spirituality for further investigation namely the observation of the 'open' and 'live' quality of classic sacred texts; the attention owed to the informing worldviews of both authors and readers; the specific use of language and modes of exegesis employed in the Christian spiritual quest, and last but not the least, the issue of the highly personal and narrative nature of Christian spirituality and the way it can be monitored.

Arguing in favor of an introductory course in the study of religion that proceeds through interactive interpretation as a responsible form of comparison, Patton and Vernon (2009) conducted a study in an educational setting. To fulfill the objectives of their research, they employed examples from a typical classroom to show the procedure through which they work with pedagogical principles of critical reading, pluralism within religious traditions and between religious traditions and the use of the working hypothesis as a tool in analyzing religious texts. They concluded that this procedure is a viable path for education.

In a study in a religious context, Gökçir (2005) conducted a study aimed at investigating the application of contemporary western critical methods to the study of the bible and the holy Quran. In the very beginning of his research he presented a comprehensive definition of theories, their types and their applications. Then, he discussed biblical and Quranic studies in the light of this contemporary literary criticism and concluded that both areas of textual studies can be attributed to the influence of a new approach to the divine text through new paradigms of literary studies. He also concluded that throughout the second half of twentieth century, a number of theological discourses were culturally interwoven with literary criticism in Christian and Muslim debates.

Method

The current research has adopted a qualitative and descriptive design through analysis of major methods toward text interpretation in literature, aimed at evaluating their application in interpretation of the Quranic texts. Then, the qualitative data obtained from this analysis are discussed comparatively. To this purpose, a proper bulk of books and articles on text interpretation methods in literature were investigated. Comparatively, some of major studies on commentary and interpretation of Quranic texts in Shiite school of thought were scrutinized. Then, the differences and similarities between them were highlighted and application of these methods for interpretation of the holy Quran was discussed and boundaries between translation, interpretation and exegesis were explained. In order to set a limit on the scope of the study, the taxonomy of methods and approaches toward text and discourse analysis by Titscher et al (2012) was adopted and three of them (grounded theory, hermeneutics and semiotics) were discussed in-details.

Results and Discussion

As it is discussed in the previous section, the current research adopted a qualitative approach toward its analysis; however, in order to answer the research question and meet the objective of the research, some qualitative and quantitative methods of texts analysis which employ linguistic and non-linguistic perspectives toward data collection and analysis are collected and evaluated. The results of this analysis are shown in table 1.

Table 1: *Application of major text interpretation methods for Quranic interpretations (AP=Applied Directly –AC= Applied with Considerations)*

Method	Description	AP	AC
Grounded Theory	Methodology for generating theories on the basis of data		✓
Hermeneutics	Breaking down data into individual meaning units with the purpose of analyzing the reason of the speaker in the use of those syntactic categories		✓
Semiotics	Linking of sign and signified through meanings	✓	
Ethnography	Study of individual cultures, and formal models of linguistics for the interpretation of human behavior in cultural contexts	✓	
Content Analysis	A linguistic method for identifying meaningful syntactic, semantic and pragmatic patterns		✓
Critical Discourse Analysis	Analyzing discourse rather than text which includes intertextuality and socio-cultural Knowledge		✓
Conversation Analysis	Identifying communicative principles of the production of social order in linguistic and non-linguistic interaction	✓	

The findings presented in table 1 indicate that almost all approaches and methods which are used for text interpretation can be used for the purpose of interpreting Quranic texts, though they are not enough for arriving at a comprehensive understanding of it. In the following section three of these major approaches are discussed in details.

A) Grounded Theory

This is a methodology from which the theory emerges from analyzed linguistic and/or contextual data (Guerin, 2005). In other words, grounded theory is a systematic methodology in which theories are constructed by methodical gathering and analysis of data (Glaser, 1992). This methodology adopts an inductive reasoning approach toward data analysis and stands in sharp contrast with hypothetical-deductive model of experimental research (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

According to Behrooz-Lak and Ali-Yari (2018), grounded theory has the required potential for being used to the aims of theory generation and texts interpretations, however, in order to apply grounded theory for religious texts and extracting their hidden message, some prerequisites and preliminary steps are required including appropriate collection of texts for further analysis and determining a standard for validating the collected texts

and supplementary quotations. In spite of that, it seems impossible to adopt grounded theory as the sole instrument for text interpretation and religious exegesis because of its formulaic nature and openness to creative interpretation which sets limits on its applicability and endangers generalizability and accuracy of its findings. Yet, one more criticism that might emerge is yielding relative conclusion which brings about an obstacle for religious *Ejtehad* but this worry can be mitigated through adopting some scientific measures (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Charmaz, 2000).

B) Hermeneutics

According to Guerin (2005) in hermeneutics, the data are broken down into individual meaning units with the purpose of analyzing the reason of the speaker in the use of those syntactic categories. It is worth mentioning that religious texts have been among those texts which have attracted hermeneutics because this discipline is directly related to the study of the texts and their meanings. Since Islam has been a text-based and revelation-centered religion has not been an exception (Namvar, 2008). Therefore, hermeneutics can help Islamic commentators in arriving at a proper method for interpreting religious texts (Masoudi, 2008). In the same line of research, Parsaeyan (2018) conducted a research and concluded that this discipline can help Islamic commentators to uncover the semantic network of the Quranic texts. Therefore, with some considerations, hermeneutics can be applied in interpretation of Quranic texts. The first consideration is the effect of interpreters' presuppositions on the final outcome of religious comment. According to Islamic view, scientific knowing and awareness prior to religious commentating is of benefit but these presupposition should not bring about an additional explanation to the content of the religious texts or against it. The second vital consideration is that the time interval between exegete (commentator) and descent of the holy Quran can not impede the interpretation of text (Rabani-Golpayegani, 2005).

C. Semiotics

Some scholars believe that communication involves semiotic processes that link sign and signified through meanings and this meaning resides in two levels of surface and deep structures. (Chandler, 2007). In this way, he meaning is either intentional - a word uttered with a specific meaning, or unintentional- a symptom being a sign of a particular medical condition. Accordingly, signs can communicate through any of the senses, visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, or gustatory. The coverage of semiotics is further on than that of linguistics and includes non-linguistic sign systems. In other words, it explores signs and sign processes, indication, designation, likeness, analogy, allegory, metonymy, metaphor, symbolism, signification, and communication (Clarke, 2003).

Islamic researchers believe that semiotics can help Islamic exegetes and commentators to arrive at semantics of Quranic words and expressions because it provides them with a framework through which they can uncover textual and inter-textual relationships inside the written discourse of the holy Quran (Mohagheghian, 2014). According to this researcher, the explicit meaning of the holy Quran is acquired through shedding light on the relationship between the internal layers of the holy Quran and semiotic system on the vertical layer. However, on the horizontal layer, philosophical, theological, logical, scientific, political and other dimensions of Quran are discovered as a textual or objective manifestation of a particular code system (Ibid, 1).

In addition to highlighting the inherent differences between semiotics and linguistics and between semiotics and hermeneutics, Ghaemini (2008) states that semiotics can be employed for Quranic interpretations because a) it is a new methodological innovation toward text analysis, b) adopts a systematic view through semantics and c) helps identifying semantic duplications and new meaning in the text of holy Quran.

Of course, other methods presented in table 1 of the research can be of benefit for Quranic interpretation. For instance, Sarfi (2019) states that content analysis can be used for uncovering Quranic propositions and cohesion and coherence of Quranic discourse. Besides, Falah and Shafipour (2018) submitted proof on the application of critical discourse analysis for Quranic interpretation. In their research, they adopted Fairclough's critical discourse analysis framework for interpreting Surah al-Shams (The Sun) to extract the social functions of the discourse.

Yet, one more line of research that is remained unexplained is the difference between Quranic commentary and translation. In other words, can these methods be used for the purpose of translation? Concerning this equally important question, al-Amri (2010) stated that, in spite of the fact that Quran translation, as of any text, necessarily involves exegetical interventions; however, a critical distinction between these two modes of textual engagement exists. He adds that translation is more imitative in nature while commenting and interpreting Quranic texts stands in the need of an explicatory act of exegesis. Yet, since both practices require linguistic quest, the possibility of their use (at least some of them) for translation is not far from possible. One more evident dichotomy between translation and interpretation (tafsir) is that translation is a more decision-making process which is affected by the bias, ideology, and the context in which translation is done but none of them are permitted in tafsir.

Conclusion

In Shiite school of thought Quran is magazine and inventory of divine words and contents which are either manifest to even common readers or hidden to be covered by expert commentators. Etymologically speaking, Quranic interpretation or Tafsir is derived from the Arabic word "Safr" which means uncovering. The science of exegesis is a jurisprudential profession but at the same times enjoys a wide interdisciplinary framework which is rooted in new sciences. Linguistics has a close affinity with this profession. The fundamental purpose of the current research was shedding light on the feasibility of applying major approaches toward text analysis to Quranic interpretation. The findings of the current research showed that, these linguistics methods can be used for the purpose of Quranic translation but some serious considerations are required. In addition, these methods do not provide enough tools for interpretation and tafsir profession depends on many sources outside the linguistics and even outside the boundary of sciences and that is the divine comments of Shiite Imams on hidden aspects of Quranic texts which are of great help for Shiite exegetes and gives it a peculiar stance among other schools of thought in Quranic interpretation. And finally, the findings showed that Quranic interpretation is inherently different from Quranic translation and therefore applicability of these methods for Quranic translation needs further investigation. These findings have implication for researchers in field of linguistics and Islamic jurisprudence.

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