

## The Phenomenon of the Foreign Vocabulary of Qur'an: Theories and Factors

ظاهرة المفردات الأجنبية للقرآن: نظريات وعوامل

\* Khelf Yakout

خلف ياقوت

Tahri Mohamed University (Bechar).

جامعة الطاهري محمد (بشار)

yakout.khelf@univ-bechar.dz

Dep. Day : 26/02/2022

Acc. day: 16/04/2022

Pub. day: 02/09/2022

### Abstract:

Since the birth of Islam, scholars and religious men have tried to investigate the phenomenon of the foreign vocabulary of the Qur'an; thus, different and contradictory views emerged. This study aims at reviewing the theories of the foreign vocabulary of the Qur'an focusing on the main factors and this phenomenon. Besides, it sheds light on the origins of the so-called 'borrowed words'. Based on the review and the discussion, it was found that many common nouns and verbs have 'originated' from a foreign language; this might very well be the case, but their use and understanding amongst the Arabs, perhaps for centuries before the coming of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), had made them as 'Arabic' as could possibly be.

**Keywords:** borrowing; foreign; Qur'an; theories; vocabulary.

مُلَخَّصُ الْبَحْثِ

منذ ظهور الإسلام، حاول العلماء و رجال الدين تحري ظاهرة المفردات الأجنبية للقرآن. وهكذا، ظهرت وجهات نظر مختلفة ومتناقضة. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى مراجعة نظريات المفردات الأجنبية للقرآن مع التركيز على العوامل الرئيسية لهذه الظاهرة. إلى جانب ذلك، فإنها تسلط الضوء على أصول ما يسمى 'الكلمات المستعارة'. واستنادا إلى العرض والتحليل، تبين أن العديد من الأسماء والأفعال الشائعة قد "نشأت" من لغة أجنبية؛ قد يكون هذا هو الحال، ولكن استخدامها وفهمها بين العرب، ربما لقرون قبل مجيء النبي محمد (صلى الله عليه وسلم)، جعلت منها "عربية" كما يمكن أن يكون.

\*. Khelf Yakout.. yakout.khelf@univ-bechar.dz



## I. Introduction

The phenomenon of naturalization of foreign words into the Arabic vocabulary happens as a result of different cultures and races integrating and coming together. Moreover, the glorious Qur'an can be described as 'plain Arabic' because the foreign words in the Qur'an had already been naturalized and were already part of the Arabic language before revelation. Furthermore, a basic philological approach to the Qur'an might well suggest that looking for foreign vocabulary in the text is simply a 'natural' thing to do; languages interact, grow, and change due to the mingling of people in situations in which they employ different languages.

The purpose of this study is to answer the following questions: what are ancient scholars' views about the existence of foreign vocabulary in the Qur'an? What are the factors of this phenomenon? And finally, what are the languages from which these borrowed words came?

## II. Literature Review

The examination of Arabic vocabulary in the context of Biblical studies alerted modern scholars early on to the fact that certain terms used in the Qur'an were, in fact, being used in a technical religious sense that was found in other Semitic languages. This created the complicated situation of a dual goal for this type of study of foreign vocabulary in Arabic.

It appears that in the Schools a majority of authorities were against the existence of foreign words in the Quran. "The Imams differ," says al Suyuti "as to the occurrence of foreign words in the Qur'an, but the majority, among whom are the Imam Al-Shafi'i, Ibn Jarir, and Abu Ubayda, is against their occurrence there in." (Jeffery, 1938, p12). The fundamental argument of these authorities is that the Qur'an in many passages refers to itself as an Arabic Qur'an and they lay particular stress on the passage:

44) قال تعالى: ﴿وَلَوْ جَعَلْنَاهُ أَعْجَمِيًّا لَقَالُوا لَوْلَا فُصِّلَتْ آيَاتُهُ أَأَعْجَمِي وَعَرَبِي﴾ (فصلت)

## III. Discussion

### 1. Main Theories of Foreign Vocabulary in Qur'an

The phenomenon of the foreign vocabulary of the Qur'an has created a controversy between scholars, philosophers and religious men and it is an ancient one. Although modern scholarship can claim that this fact is indisputable, it was certainly not so in the eyes of some early Muslims.

Al-Qurtubi (1997), in his book, summarized this controversy. He stated that the scholars of Islam have unanimously agreed that there are no non-Arabic sentences or phrases in the Qur'an, and they have also agreed that there are non-Arabic proper names such as 'Jesus' (عيسى), Gabriel (جبريل) and 'Noah' (نوح). However, they differed into two groups regarding the presence of solitary foreign words in the Qur'an.

The ninth-century philologist Abu 'Ubayda claims: "Whoever suggests there is anything other than the Arabic language in the Qur'an has made a serious charge against God." (as cited in Rippin, 2007, p 252). This sentiment appears to have been widespread in the formative centuries of Islam. Abu 'Ubayda clearly recognized the existence of a similarity between certain words in foreign languages and those in the Qur'an, but his response to that observation is to state that the form of a word in one language can correspond to its form in another and its meaning in one language can approach that of another language, whether that be between Arabic and Persian or some other language.

Moreover, in the early ninth century, Al-Shafi'i suggested that no one knew the entire stock of Arabic vocabulary, so what might be thought of as "foreign" to one group of Arabs was, in fact, known to others. He says:

...of all tongues, that of the Arabs is the richest and the most extensive in vocabulary. Do we know any man except a prophet who apprehended all of it? However, no portion of it escapes everyone, so that there is always someone who knows it. Knowledge of this tongue to the Arabs is like the knowledge of the sunna to the jurists: We know of no one who possesses a knowledge of all the sunna without missing a portion of it . . . . In like manner is the knowledge concerning the tongue of the Arabs by the scholars and the public: No part of it will be missed by them all, nor should it be sought from other people; for no one can learn this tongue save he who has learned it from the Arabs. (cited in Rippin, 2007, p 252)

At the same time, al-Shafi'i admitted that there may be in foreign tongues certain words, whether acquired or transmitted, which may be similar to those of the Arab tongue, just as some words in one foreign tongue may be similar to those in others. Although these tongues are spoken in separate countries and are different and unrelated to one another despite the similarity

of some of the words. Thus, while similarities may exist, they are there simply by coincidence and not because of a relationship between the words.

Furthermore, in the early ninth century, Abu 'Ubayda (as cited in Jefferey, 1938) made a historical argument. For him, words of foreign origin are found in the Qur'an but they had entered into Arabic before the revelation of the Qur'an and are thus now to be considered Arabic. The usage of Arabic words is deemed to be superior to that of other languages. In the tenth century, Al-Tabari (1997) provided yet another angle to the problem, although the view may well not originate with him; words which appear to be foreign reflect similarity between languages; this does not indicate anything about the historical origins of the words.

In later centuries, the idea of foreign vocabulary was not denied by commentators. In the twelfth-century, Jawaliqi and Mansur (1998, p 112); for example, spoke plainly about "foreign words found in the speech of the ancient Arabs and employed in the Qur'an" without any cautious restrictions. In the late fifteenth century, Al-Suyuti (1926) took the incorporation of foreign languages within the Qur'an as a positive fact, a change in attitude which was the result, perhaps, of an increased emphasis on the universal appeal of Islam and certainly taken as a part of the argument for the excellent qualities of the text of the scripture.

## 2. Factors of Foreign Vocabulary in Qur'an

Concerning the second question, ancient scholars observe that there are some factors of the foreign vocabulary in Qur'an. First, several Persian words were identified, often correctly by the judgment of today's scholarship, probably as a result of the scholars' personal knowledge of the language. This type of observation would be words that were known from other languages by the early scholars, the meaning of which in the Qur'an was such as to suggest a relationship between the Quranic usage and the foreign language. Thus, this may have occurred because the meaning of the Arabic root would not support such a usage: دين as both "religion" and "day of reckoning" may be an example.

Yet another factor that led to observations about foreign words was the rise of grammatical studies in Arabic, thus, understanding the actual form or pattern of Arabic words. This then allowed observations about the aberrance of some words found in the Qur'an. Among these would be examples of difficult morphological structures and irregular phonetic features as found in words in the following table:

Table 1: Words and their meaning

| Word   | Meaning      |
|--------|--------------|
| استبرق | Silk brocade |
| زنجبيل | ginger       |
| برزخ   | barrier      |
| فردوس  | paradise     |
| نمارق  | cushions     |

Source: Al Suyuti, 1926, p 270

Another such mode of consideration would be words from barren roots; that is, words which have no verbal forms associated with them, such as: تنور in the sense of “oven”, جبت, meaning “idol”, and رحيق, meaning “wine”.

The isolation of these features as ‘aberrant’ depended upon a set of criteria being established which could act to define Arabic as a linguistic structure as such. These criteria were developed by early grammarians such as the famous eighth-century figures Sibawayhi and al-Khalil who established, for example, the permissible morphological forms of Arabic words. As well, certain combinations of letters that could not occur in Arabic words were determined and that acted as another criterion. Among the observations cited in Al-Suyuti (1926), for example, is that a الجيم and a القاف cannot be found in the same word. Words that violate these rules are deemed to be ‘foreign’.

In the case of apparent Arabic words which are classed as ‘foreign’ words, the immediate suspicion must be that an exegetical problem led to the suggestion of the foreignness of the word, as Jeffery (1938) argued in his work, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Quran*, the hermeneutical advantage is clear; “if the word is foreign, then it is open to a far greater interpretational variation than if the word is to be taken as a common Arabic word that may account for some of the words on the following list: المشكاة- أبابيل- جبريل- الحب- السجيل- القسطاس- الغساق- بنيان- جبين أمة- جلايب أساطير- أحبار (Jeffery, 1938, p 67).”

Likewise, the attribution of a number of words to Greek seems to convey certain cultural assumptions rather than linguistic knowledge. In this case, it appears to be matters related to commerce and urban society. For example, the following words are commonly attributed to Greek: قسط, "justice", قسطاس, "scales", صراط, "road", قنطار, "hundredweight" (Al Suyuti, 1926, p 277).

It is worthy to note that while, in several instances, modern philology agrees with the early Muslim thoughts on certain words being derived ultimately from Greek, that does not indicate necessary linguistic knowledge. The idea that these words come from Greek does not, in fact, account historically for the words in Arabic.

### 3. Origins of Borrowed Words

According to Pennacchio (2011), the origins of borrowings in the Qur'an span a long period of time – from the Assyrian Empire to Byzantium – and span a vast linguistic area that includes all Semitic languages spoken in Arabia's neighboring lands: Akkadian, Aramaic, Hebrew, Syriac, Ethiopian, Nabataean, and South Arabic; as well as non-Semitic languages spoken by the Greek, Roman, and Persian Empires.

The use of Akkadian and Aramaic borrowings predates Islam. They are the names of items that appear to have been assimilated into the receiving language in the same way that the objects have been assimilated into the recipient culture. They have no connection to Islam's teaching. Although there are few Arabic borrowings from Akkadian, their existence seems logical: the sources demonstrate that the first Arabs lived during the Assyrian Empire's reign (Eph'al, 1982). Although there is a significant time difference between the attested 2<sup>nd</sup> century Akkadian and the Qur'an's 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabic, the two languages are fairly similar because the Arabic language is able to preserve the most archaic grammatical features. Examples of such borrowings are the words: فرات meaning freshwater, أساور meaning bracelets (Pennacchio, 2011).

Jeffery (1938) frequently states that an Arabic word stems from Syriac since it is a common language. He stated: "it would have been from Aram. that the word passed into Arabic, probably at a very early period, and as the word is of much wider use in Syriac than in Jewish Aramaic, we are probably right in considering it as a borrowing from Syriac" (p. 49). In the same line, since Armenian and Ethiopian are sprung from Syriac, he believes Arabic is also descended from it. Take for example the word سبيل, which means way, road. Jeffery's reference to Syriac is mainly based on Mingana's *Syriac*

*Influence on the Style of the Kur'an* (1927), quoted 77 times (Pennacchio, 2011).

In summary, Al Suyuti's (1926, p 49) classification is the most complete version that has come down to us; he divides the borrowing into the following classes:

- (i) Words borrowed from Ethiopic (لسان الحبشة)
- (ii) Words borrowed from Persian (اللغة الفارسية)
- (iii) Words borrowed from Greek (اللغة الرومية)
- (iv) Words borrowed from Indian (اللغة الهندية)
- (v) Words borrowed from Syriac (اللغة السريانية)
- (vi) Words borrowed from Hebrew (اللغة العبرانية)
- (vii) Words borrowed from Nabataean (اللغة النبطية)
- (viii) Words borrowed from Coptic (اللغة القبطية)
- (ix) Words borrowed from Turkish (اللغة التركية)
- (x) Words borrowed from Negro (اللغة الزنجية)
- (xi) Words borrowed from Berber (اللغة البربرية)

As a final point, the fact that words of non-Arab origin are undeniably found in pre-Islamic poetry (in particular, the 'Seven Hanging Odes') clearly shows that Arabs, like all cultures, took specific phrases from other languages and incorporated them into their own.

There is no doubt that Jeffery's (1938) masterpiece of scholarship outshines anything else written on the subject, however, at the same time, it cannot be taken as the final authority on each and every word that it lists. Rather, it serves as an indispensable index to see which words might possibly qualify as being non-Arabic in origin. What sets Jefferey's work head and shoulders above all other works is that he specifically links each alleged foreign word back to its original language, be it Aramaic, Syriac, Hebrew, Greek, or other.

#### a. Non-Muslim Views

Muir (1923) claimed that the Prophet (*PBUH*) learned about Judaism and Christianity via members of both religions who lived in the Hijaz, as well as from his own travels to Syria. "We may be assured that Mahomet did not

miss any occasion to enquire into the customs and tenets of the Syrian Christians, or to converse with the monks and clergy who fell in his way," Muir (1923, p. 20-21) claims. Muir bemoans the Prophet's exposure to a distorted and erroneous vision of Christianity, claiming that if he had been given the right understanding of the religion rather than "the Empire's misnamed catholicism," he would have converted to it rather than deceiving others with a new creed.

Taking Muir's theories a step further, Watt (1991) argued in his book *Muhammad at Mecca* that one of the theses of the book is that the glory of Islam is largely owing to a fusion of some Arab features with some Judaeo-Christian notions. He also claims (p. 27) that the Prophet had a 'monotheist informant'. According to Watt, the Prophet (PBUH) created a new monotheistic religion on purpose to escape the political ramifications of converting to Judaism or Christianity (p. 38).

In his book *Muhammadanism: A Historical Survey*, Gibb (1961) proposes another theory on the Qur'an's sources. He claims that, given the tight commercial relationship between Mecca and Yemen, it would be logical to believe that some religious concepts were transported to Mecca with caravans of spices and woven goods, and there are subtleties of terminology in the Qur'an that support this claim. According to Hitti (1979), the Qur'an's sources are plainly Christian, Jewish, and Arab pagan, and Muhammad's (PBUH) contribution was to Islamize, Arabicize, and nationalize the material.

#### **b. Muslim Responses against Ancient Views**

The previously mentioned viewpoints, as voiced by Jefferey and others, are inherently biased in the eyes of Muslims. Many of the early Orientalists were devout Christians who had no reservations regarding their religious beliefs on Islam (Qadhi, 2008). Later scholars, working in an era when, even if such a bias existed, admitting it would be frowned upon, the general paradigm from which academic research was conducted was that of a secular one, in which there is no God who communicates with man and sends different prophets with the same message to different peoples (Al-Khazradji, 2018). Of course, most current academics apply the same standards to all faiths, not only Islam, when using this paradigm.

As a result, some of the issues that religiously committed Muslim academics will have when dealing with research into the origins of the Qur'an will be quite similar to those that members of other faiths would face when dealing with their own traditions (Qadhi, 2008).

However, this is not the only line of defense used by Muslim intellectuals. They draw attention to the Prophet's (PBUH) social and

intellectual environment and question if the Prophet's representation corresponds to historical truths and realities (Qadhi, 2008; Ben Ali, 2016). It is hard not to get the feeling that certain Western authors give to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) an encyclopedic knowledge that no one else in his time or era was said to have, or could even come close to.

Such claims appear to Muslims to neglect basic historical truths of the time, some of which even the Qur'an spoke to. One of them is that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was an illiterate Bedouin who grew up in an uneducated community. The glorious Qur'an reminds listeners that the Prophet (PBUH) spent an entire lifetime (i.e., forty years) in their midst, during which he showed no inclination for the literary activity or flair for writing skills – if he had, the Qur'an explicitly states, there would be a legitimate reason to be skeptical (Qadhi, 2008).

## VI. Conclusion

The study of lexical borrowing in the Qur'an used to be at the heart of Muslim linguists defending the Qur'an's Arabic character, as well as orientalist looking for the origins of Islam. Because Jeffery's study became the sole source of information on the subject, less studies in the field were published throughout the last century.

The list provided by Jeffery needs to be edited thoroughly. Certain terms were assumed to be loanwords by the scholar, although they are actually Arabic words that have changed over time; other meanings are typical Semitic terminology. Some borrowing lists will need to be explored further, and some loanwords will almost certainly need to be uncovered.

To conclude, it can be said that both parties to the quarrel are right. The great philologists were right in claiming that there are foreign words in the Qur'an, for in regard to origin (أصل) these words are Persian, Syrian or Abyssinian. But Al Shafi'i and his followers are also right, for since these words have been adopted into the Arabic language and polished by the tongues of the Arabs, they are indeed Arabic using Jeffery's (1938) statement . قد اختلطت هذه الحروف بكلام العرب فمن قال أنها عربية فهو صادق و من قال عجمية فصادق “ (p 45)

Jeffery (1938) shows that many common nouns and verbs have 'originated' from a foreign language; this might very well be the case, but their use and understanding amongst the Arabs, perhaps for centuries before the coming of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), had made them as 'Arabic' as could possibly be. The point here is that the case cannot be made with such common nouns and verbs that the Prophet (PBUH) himself had anything to

do with them or that he somehow introduced them into the language of the Arabs (whereas the case may indeed be made with other words). Hence their inclusion on a list of 'foreign' vocabulary of the Qur'an (as opposed to a list of foreign vocabulary of the Arabic language), seems, foreign. However, using the following glorious Ayat, the view becomes clear that despite the existence of some borrowed vocabulary in the Qur'an, they cannot be considered as 'foreign' since they were adopted and used before.

قال تعالى: ﴿وَكَذَلِكَ أَنْزَلْنَاهُ قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا وَصَرَفْنَا فِيهِ مِنَ الْوَعِيدِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَّقُونَ أَوْ يُحْدِثُ لَهُمْ ذِكْرًا﴾  
(طه/ 113 )

وقال تعالى: ﴿وَكَذَلِكَ أَنْزَلْنَاهُ مُخْتَصِمًا عَرَبِيًّا﴾ (الرعد / 37. 2)

وقال تعالى: ﴿وَكَذَلِكَ أَوْخَيْنَا إِلَيْكَ قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا﴾ (الشورى / 7. 3)

وقال تعالى: ﴿إِنَّا جَعَلْنَاهُ قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا لَعَلَّكُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ﴾ (الزخرف / 3. 4)

وقال تعالى: ﴿قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا غَيْرَ ذِي عِوَجٍ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَّقُونَ﴾ ( الزمر / 28. 5)

It is also worth noting that, while classical works on the sciences of the Qur'an discussed a wide range of topics and attempted to 'defend' the Revelation's purity by confronting those who opposed it head-on, detailed defense of the accusation that the Qur'an is taken from Judaeo-Christian sources because of parallels between the two is rare to find in their works, or even in treatises that responded to Christian polemics against Islam.

Thus, this relates to Muslims' psychological mindset, in which such parallels are interpreted as evidence of the continuity of the same chain of prophets and the same message, revealed by the same God. In other words, such connections do not bother them as much as they do a secular, Christian, or Jewish observer, because each of these three groups will explain such parallels from inside their own paradigm. This does not imply that such defense does not exist in the classical sources, for it does; what should be said here is that when one compares the quantity of material on this specific issue, versus other issues (for example, proving the *i'jāz* of the Qur'ān), it is quite clear that this issue was not of as great a concern to them as other issues.

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