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# The Paradox of Concept or Conception in Qur'anic Discourse: Selected Models from Qur'anic Surahs

# Le paradoxe du concept ou de la conception dans le discours coranique : des modèles choisis tirés de sourates coraniques

**Brahim SOUAKER***
**Scientific and Technical Research Centre for the Development of the Arabic Language– Ouargla Unit, Algeria**
**b.souaker@crstdla.dz.**

**Djemoi TARECHE**
**Scientific and Technical Research Centre for the Development of the Arabic Language Ouargla Unit, Algeria**
**d.tareche@crstdla.dz**

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**Abstract:** This study examines the paradox in Qur'anic discourse as a possible feature of Qur'anic styles to be found in any speech. The research targets language behaviour at the textual and contextual levels. The paradoxical structure of discourse is based on a semantic opposition between the literal meaning of the utterance and the redefined and conditioned sense of the contextual signals—so-called "paradoxical meaning." Such meaning is presented as a variety of verbal elegance and intellectual subtlety in which the speaker tries to convey subtle ideas with minimal expression. The study aims to highlight the significance of exploring paradox both in the overall use of language and in Qur'anic language itself, stressing the heavy responsibility it entails and the great honour of studying and investigating it.

***Keywords: Paradox; Qur'anic discourse; Meaning; Antithesis.***

**Résumé:** Cette recherche explore le paradoxe dans le discours coranique en tant que trait potentiel des styles coraniques présents dans tout type de discours. L'étude se concentre sur les modalités d'emploi de la langue tant au niveau textuel que contextuel. Le discours paradoxal est construit sur une contradiction sémantique entre la signification explicite de l'énoncé et la signification modifiée et préchoisie par les contextes mentionnés auparavant - ce que l'on désigne comme le « sens paradoxal ». Cette signification est exprimée à travers un champ d'élégance linguistique et de

* Corresponding author

finesse intellectuelle, où l'orateur s'efforce de transmettre des idées délicates avec une expression minimale. Cette recherche vise à mettre en évidence l'importance d'examiner le paradoxe tant dans le contexte général de la langue que spécifiquement dans la langue coranique. Elle insiste sur le poids considérable de cette responsabilité et l'honneur colossal que représente son étude et son analyse.

**Mots-clés** : Paradoxe ; Discours coranique ; Signification ; Opposition

## 1. Introduction

Paradox, as understood today, is one of the liveliest areas of stylistic study. Through it, new criteria are established for the interpretation of literary texts—be they poetry or prose—according to the impressions of the author and the delicacy in their words. Such paradoxes assist in revealing the innermost thoughts of the author, causing the recipient to cultivate curiosity and intellectual engagement, which causes them to stay attentive and interested in the message being conveyed.

Paradox, from the view of literary theorists, means the tension and struggle that arises between speech components which are seemingly coherent but are contradictory. The conflict calls for a relational field among the constituents of the utterance, such that the paradox becomes the central force in determining the meaning of the text and driving its message in the reader's or listener's mind.

This study will demonstrate that paradox is an artistic and literary tool that turns the recipient's expectations upside down and disrupts the anticipated course of interpretation. The semantic payoff of the paradox can only be accessed by linking the words utilised in its building to the sense intended in the text. This is required to arrive at the communicative objective embedded in the linguistic form.

It is well-known that searching in the Book of Allah is a noble action, and tafsir (exegesis) science is one of the noblest of sciences concerning Allah’s Speech that aims to elucidate the implied sense behind Qur'anic utterances and express the Master of the Worlds' will. Tafsir is included in purposive knowledge (ʿulūm al-maqāṣid)—i.e.,

knowledge for the sake of whose purpose lies the understanding of ultimate ends and purposes.

To ensure that interpretation has a sane and scholarly method, some causal principles were established to link premises to conclusions. There are also supporting sciences that were constructed to help tafsir and provide it with the tools required for constructing its propositions.

Of these, the linguistic sciences occupy a position of utmost importance, alongside the sciences of jurisprudence, hadith, and history. Together, they help in achieving a comprehensive understanding that approximates the divine intention behind Qur'anic speech, and also in unravelling the syntactic and individual meanings, along with the inner riches present within divine revelation.

## 2. The Concept of Paradox

Paradox (irony) is a form of expression that requires the addressee to use double modes of listening. In one sense, the recipient must comprehend the utterance in its usual surface sense; in another sense, they must comprehend that this literal sense is not to be taken literally.[1]

Paradox is amongst the most potent tools of language available to help communicate certain concepts or draw the attention of individuals to certain facts about reality. Paradox relies upon the difference between the asserted and the de facto intended, typically requiring deep reflection on the part of the reader or listener concerning the matter in question.

### 2.1 The Linguistic Meaning of Paradox

To understand the semantic dimensions of the term paradox in its various morphological forms and derivations, one must begin by consulting classical Arabic dictionaries. The point of departure lies in the triliteral root ف-ر-ق (fāʾ–rāʾ–qāf).

In Kitāb al-ʿAyn, it is recorded: "al-farq refers to the parting line in the hair at the top of the head; al-farq also means a separation between two things until they part and move apart. Tafāraqa (they parted) and iftaraqū (they dispersed) convey each other's dispersal. al-Furqān is any

volume by which Allah separates the truth from falsehood. As in: 'Thus does Allah make for you a criterion (furqān) as in Surah Al-Anfal:29: " O you who believe! If you obey and fear Allâh, He will grant you Furqân". —that is, a clear proof against the disbelievers and a means of victory.[2] Allah, the Almighty said: And He sent down the Taurât (Torah) and the Injeel (Gospel), aforetime, as a guidance to mankind. And He sent down the criterion (furqān). (Surah Al-Imran: 3-4.) Related to this meaning, what is stated in surah Mursalāt (Those Sent Forth)-4 "Then separate them, one from another," that is, the angels descend with the difference between halal (lawful) and haram(unlawful).

Similarly, Ibn Duraid in Jamhurat al-Lugha states: "al-Furqān means referring to the Qur'an, and to something which serves as a criterion in differentiating between right and wrong,[3] as for instance in the words of Allah: 'We gave Moses and Aaron the criterion (furqān)'( Surah Anbiyaa:48), and 'We sent down to Our servant on the Day of Criterion' (Surah Al-Anfal:41), which applied to the Battle of Badr, when Allah granted victory—a day which sifted truth and falsehood.

According to al-Ṣiḥāḥ of al-Rāzī, al-Furqān is a name for the Qur'an, i.e., a discriminator between falsehood and truth, and between lawful and unlawful. In the case of al-Fārūq between human beings, he is the one separating between matters and passing judgment, from the root faraqa, i.e., separating or distinguishing.[4]

Hence, mufāraqa (paradox) is the passive participle of fāraqa (to separate), from root f-r-q, and its verbal noun is farq (separation). Farq is synonymous with union, denoting division between two items. A mafāriq (road fork) is where roads diverge. One might say fāraqa al-shayʾ (he left something) to denote separation or departure.[5]

The Al-Muʿjam al-Wasīṭ defines farq as: "To distinguish or discern one thing from another, or to judge between enemies."[6]

Of this philological examination, it is clear that mufāraqa involves separation, division, deviation, difference, and distinction of two things, positions, or states—especially where they are opposite or mutually incompatible. And yet, the literal meaning in this sense

becomes biased unless augmented by the technical meaning of mufāraqa, to produce a complete concept structure both in word and rhetoric.

## 2.2 The Technical Definition of Paradox

Our search for the technical definition of paradox is grounded in the lexical foundations provided by classical and modern Arabic lexicons. These definitions form a point of departure for discussion of mufāraqa (paradox) as a literary and rhetorical concept in both Arabic and Western critical theory.

In Arabic literary tradition, some of the most ancient writings point toward the heart of what later came to be understood as paradox. Al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 255 AH), for example, provides a rich account of oppositional paradox without actually naming it as paradox. He writes:

"If two men talked or wrote or begged or recited something—each of them handsome, prestigious, noble in looks, and of noble stock, and the other ill-favored, shabby, and of low stock—though they were equally fluent and truthful in speaking, the masses would like the ill-favored one better than the noble. They would be so surprised at him that they would not observe anything about the other, nor would their astonishment become admiration.". Their own low expectations of him, their frustration at his eloquence, and their indifference to his looks—all these would intensify the appearance of beauty of his words. The less the source, the more the wonder; and the more the wonder, the greater the admiration; and the greater the admiration, the greater the innovation.

Had al-Jāḥiẓ wished to define paradox in its critical application, his language could hardly be more accurate and unclouded—though his concern here is somewhat more within the realm of rhetoric and eloquence, realms closely connected with the effect of paradox. [7]

Ibn Qutaybah (d. 276 AH) also treated topics close to those of paradox, such as omens and favorable auguries (taṭayyur and tafāʾul), as attested by a report of al-Aṣmaʿī: I asked Ibn ʿAwf about auspicious signs, and he said: It is as if a person were sick and someone were to

say, 'O Sālim' (healthy), or searching for something and someone were to say, 'O Wājid' (one who finds).[8]

Modern science verifies the rhetorical power of paradox. A Helsinki study demonstrated that employing paradox in public discourse raises listeners' awareness and engagement in the message. Paradox induces thinking, provoking new and creative thinking structures, thereby constituting a powerful tool for persuasive and effective communication. [9]

It is widely known that the paradox phenomenon is vast and diverse. It transcends a wide range of disciplines—rhetoric, philosophy, sociology, literature, linguistics, etc. [10]As D. C. Muecke has argued in his seminal work Irony, paradox[11] in its very essence is deeply related to the human condition itself.[12]

Thus, the application of paradox in speech or writing is a powerful rhetorical device that enhances communicative efficiency and makes the message more effective. Writers and speakers are well advised to employ this tool to attract attention and convey abstract concepts effectively.

## 3. Qur'anic Paradox and Its Types

Paradox in Qur'anic discourse manifests in varied stylistic devices that give it an intellectual brilliance typical of its language. It invites the recipient to engage in the use of intellect and reason for the sake of unveiling the layers of meaning in it. As a rhetoric, Qur'anic paradox, through its numerous manifestations, is responsible for one of the greatest techniques for producing semantic richness in the text. It plays a vital role in demarcating the character and shape of linguistic inimitability (iʿjāz) and eloquence within Qur'anic discourse.[13]

Paradox, in practice, functions as part of an economy of semantic contexts and cues that help to confer the Qur'anic text with its unique rhetorical and expressive power.

More specifically, paradox disrupts the expected progression of discourse, turning abruptly from one level to the opposite one. This alteration generally produces a psychological tension with the addressee, one which provokes intellectual interest concerning the nature of the statement—affectively biased in many instances by irony or sarcasm, itself a constituent element of paradoxical discourse.

Paradox within the Qur'ān occurs in various important modes:

### 3.1 Tonal Paradox

Tonal paradox is the tone of an utterance being presented sarcastically or ironically, employed to draw attention to a discrepancy between surface and underlying intention. Tone is employed to undermine the literal opposition in favour of a deeper oppositional one.[14] For Qur'anic speech, tonal paradox is usually marked by high and formal vocabulary, intensifying the irony effect at the lexical and syntactic levels.

### 3.2 Verbal Paradox

Verbal paradox, or diction irony, reveals the close interrelation between paradox and metaphor. For M. H. Abrams, verbal irony has always been one of the principals of the rhetorical tropes. The evident meaning of an utterance, as defined by verbal paradox, typically differs from the intended, latent meaning.

In this kind, a single word or phrase is employed to convey one sense, but another, often its opposite, is intended. This contrast between the surface and underlying sense is typical of verbal paradox.[15]

Such a paradox may operate on various discourse levels and generally involves an element of illocutionary force, with the speaker's intent ranging from aggressiveness to soothing persuasion. It also involves a rhetorical reversal, in which the intended meaning is opposite that of the literal reading.[16]

### 3.3 Narrative or Suggestive Paradox (Ihām)

Narrative paradox is the presentation of an idea based on the recipient's assumption or belief rather than fact. It states a notion which, seeming to make sense at first glance, is actually flawed or false. This

is typically accomplished by some form of ironic simulation that pretends to accept a belief in order to negate it.

In Arabic rhetoric, this kind of paradox intersects with the device of tawriyah (double meaning), where a term bears two meanings: proximate and distant, where the proximate is a cover for the distant, intended meaning.[17]

Paradox in this case borrows from metaphorical frameworks and goes around literal meaning in the direction of a subversive or contrary suggestion.

Classical Arab critics recount numerous occasions in which a statement appears to convey praise or approbation at an initial glance but, on closer scrutiny, is discovered to contain sarcasm and mockery.

## 4. Paradox in Qur'anic Discourse: The Paradox of Concept or Conception

The term paradox of concept or conception is employed to refer to abstract meanings—i.e., to the mental process of understanding or formation of those meanings. Conception here refers both to the formation and understanding of general ideas. Similarly, visualization is employed to refer to the mental imaging or inward constructing of a clear conceptual picture. [18]

The inherent paradox in this category is due to contradiction between the victim's perception, knowledge, or action, and the inherent nature of reality. Such contradiction carries a connotation of oddity or error, and requires moral or intellectual disapproval.

The more distant the external provocation behind the victim's stance or action is from the heart of the matter, the sharper the paradox and the more powerful its rhetorical effect.

For example, when a character acts unscrupulously or suspiciously while at the same time professing noble qualities, the inconsistency between the action and avowed identity creates a paradox. Paradox is created here through the victim's seeming appeal to

sincerity, which is actually unfounded—Leech's surface seriousness with hidden falsity, supporting the interpretive framework of paradox.[19]

The function of such a paradox is then typically ethical or corrective. It seeks to expose hypocrisy or moral perversion through a rhetorical turn that disobeys literal expectation. Abrams and his colleagues have rightly identified paradox as a verbal figure that subverts an attitude radically alien from, or even contrary to, what is said literally. [20]

An inductive examination of conceptual paradoxes in Qur'anic thought suggests that they tend to appear in five simple forms:

### 4.1 Expressions of Explicitness of Victim's Idea

An example is given in the verse:

"They impress on thee as a favour that they Have embraced Islam" (Surah Hujurat:17). The usage of the phrase "consider it a favor" (yamunnūna) is intended, with the heavy connotation of burden so that it fits the rhetorical deployment of the verse.[21] Al-Asbahani identifies that though the hypocrites are speaking about a favor, Allah’s favor is to guide them—a switch that forms the nucleus of the paradox.[22]

An example is given in:

"And ye make it Your livelihood (rizq) that ye deny it (takdhīb)" (Surah Wãqi'a:82). This is against the background of the disbelievers' rejection of divine authorship of the Qur'an. The paradox arises from several reasons:

- The paradox of provision (rizq) and denial (takdhīb), making the denial illogical, even absurd. [23]
- Denial is not only offered as a response to provision, but paradoxically as the provision.[24]
- The verbs are in the present tense—"you make" and "you deny"—showing the persistence and willfulness of the action.
- Syntactical concord between the patterns of verb forms and the concept of continuous supply resonates the perpetual flow of divine

favour and emphasises the stupidity of responding to it with unbelief.[25]

In the overall context, the verse is preceded by a commanding dismissal:

"So I swear by *Mawaqi* (setting or the mansions, etc.) of the stars (they traverse).
. And verily, that is indeed a great oath, if you but know.
. That (this) is indeed an honourable recital (the Noble Qur'an).
. In a Book well-guarded (with Allah in the heaven i.e. *Al-Lauh Al-Mahfuz*).
. Which (that Book with Allah) none can touch but the purified (i.e. the angels).
. A Revelation (this Qur'an) from the Lord of the *'Alamin* (mankind, jinns and all that exists).
. Is it such a talk (this Qur'an) that you (disbelievers) deny?
. And ye make it Your livelihood (rizq) that ye deny it (takdhīb)")"
(Surah Wãqi'a:75-82).

Here, the paradox reaches its crescendo expression in the concept that what ought to be invoking unadulterated awe and thanksgiving is met instead with cavalier neglect and denial.[26]

## 4.2 Quoting the Victim's Speech

Paradoxical enough, such a paradox underlines the flaw or falsehood of the victim's utterance by quite literally quoting the victim. Example:

" There are certainly among you men who would tarry behind: if a misfortune befalls you. They say: "Surely Allah did favor us in that we were not present among them." (Surah Nisãa:72).

In Tafsir al-Jalalin (And there is certainly among you he who would linger behind) refers to being late from fighting, as shown with Abdullah bin Abd Abi Al-Munafiq and his companions. (He says: "Surely Allah did favor us in that we were not present among them. [27]

Here *Shahada* refers to presence. Al-Asbahani adds that: « *Shohoud and Shahada*: attendance with witnessing, either by sight or insight. Regarding "Shahid", it can be expressed to the witness and spectator of the thing.[28]

In this line, the word "favored me" (anʿama) is employed ironically. The hypocrite views his stay behind from battle as Allah's favor, while the Qur'anic context positions it as hypocrisy or cowardice. The deployment of "qad" (emphatic particle) amplifies the irony by introducing the "favor" as something well established, yet actually illusory.

### 4.3 Direct Contrast Between Two Statements

This kind of structure puts two statements side by side to expose the victim's fallacious thinking. For example:

" and when it said to them, Bemive as the people have believed, they say: Should we believe as the foolish have believed?" Unquestionably, it is they who are the foolish, but they know [it] not" (Surah Baqara: 13). And: " Do not cause corruption on the earth," they say, "We are but reformers." ( Surah Baqara: 11).

In both verses, the irony is in the role-reversal—those who are led astray consider themselves rightly guided. The adjective "the fools" (al-sufahāʾ) is used unambiguously, implying a known and identifiable group, thus increasing the irony reversal.

### 4.4 Contrast Between Two Actions or Behaviours

This method places two opposing actions side by side. For instance:

" They conceal [their evil intentions and deeds] from the people, but they cannot conceal [them] from Allah, and He is with them [in His knowledge] when they spend the night in such as He does not accept of speech. And ever is Allah, of what they do, encompassing "( Surah Nisãa: 108)

The paradox is compounded by the verb "yastakhfūna" (they seek to hide), which suggests deliberate hiding. But the irony is that they are seeking to hide from mortals when they forget—or are unaware of—of-the presence of Allah, who is all-seeing and omnipresent.

### 4.5 Rhetorical Interrogation (Astonishment, Rebuke)

This device uses interrogative structures to convey astonishment and moral condemnation. An example is:

"Have you not seen those who claim themselves to be pure? Rather, Allah purifies whom He wills, and injustice is not done to them, [even] as much as a thread [inside a date seed]." "( Surah Nisãa: 49)

The verse uses rhetorical questioning to condemn boasting. For al-Zarkashī, this is a rebuke against the ugliness of self-boasting, both intellectually and religiously.[29]
al-Aṣfahānī explains that tazkiyah (purification of self) is of two types:
1.Action-wise—this is praiseworthy, as in "He has succeeded who purifies it" .
2.Oral-wise—this is reproachable, especially when a person brags about himself.
Thus, the verse is a form of moral paradox: those who claim purity to themselves are really found to lack it.[30]

## 5. Conclusion

It can be easily observed from the above discussion that paradox in Qur'anic rhetoric is a highly advanced rhetorical device, based on the confrontation of two conflicting or contradictory opinions—between a wide, general, conventional notion and a more precise, individual or intellectual description. The greater the contrast between the two opinions, the more powerful the paradox is. This, in its turn, contributes to the Qur'anic discourse its clarity, brevity, and rhetorical elegance.

The Qur'anic paradox typically operates through exhortatory, satirical, and revelations-of-states-of-being modes—psychological, emotional, or spiritual—especially in the area of characters and narratives presented in the Qur'anic narrations. Most of such paradoxes

also lie on defying natural expectation or overturning established norms and thus revealing the Qur'an's unmatched capacity to yield boundless, layered thoughts.

The following principal conclusions are drawn from the paradox of concept or conception in Qur'anic language:

- Paradox does not play very prominently at all in classical Arabic tradition as a technical term but falls under some older concepts of rhetoric such as commendation through the imitation of blame, or the reverse; pretended ignorance (tajāhul al-ʿārif); double meaning (tawriyah); and figurative questioning with sarcastic or ironic intent.
- The bulk of Qur'anic paradoxes hinge on the contradiction between the divine point of view—revealed through revelation—and the finite understanding or response of human beings, either in the narrative or within its broader audience.
- Qur'anic paradox depends on the semantic contradiction theory between surface structure and deep-rooted implications suggested by context and rhetorical sophistication.
- Verbal paradox and narrative paradox (or ihām) often overlap. While both employ figurative language, the latter conveys its irony in the guise of a narrative that ultimately transmutes from meaning into metaphorical or critical terrain.

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[28] Al-Asbahani ,ibid, pp.392-393
[29] Mohammed Al-Abd, ibidi, p.137.
[30] Al-Asbahani ,ibid, p.313.