The First Harf (Mode) in Qur'anic Recitations: Concept and Evidences —An Integrative Interdisciplinary Analysis—

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***Abstract**:*

Among the foundational prophetic traditions defining the Glorious Qur'an to believers and explaining how it was received and taught is the Hadith of the "Seven Ahruf" (Seven Modes/Letters). Islamic scholars—including linguists, exegetes, and Qur'anic reciters—faced interpretative difficulties regarding this Hadith along two main axes: the meaning of the word Harf (mode/letter) and the meaning of Sab'ah (seven). Opinions oscillated regarding Harf between a literal-lexical reality and a conceptual reality, and regarding Sab'ah between a specific count (enumeration) and mere multiplicity (hyperbole).

This oscillation and confusion indicate that the flaw lies in the research methodology rather than the intrinsic meaning of the subject under study. It became apparent that the methodological defect was interpreting the text in isolation from the broader body of Islamic knowledge that contributes to forming its semantic meaning; thus, the approach lacked an integrative, interdisciplinary framework. This research presents an integrative interdisciplinary practice that highlights a constructive impact in clarifying the intended meaning of Ahruf in the Hadith, specifically by distinguishing the "First Harf" through its independent reality, separate from the broader concept of the "Seven."

***Key words**: (do not exceed 6 words) keyword, keyword, keyword, keyword, keyword, keyword.*

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Introduction

Scholars encountered difficulty regarding the language of the Glorious Qur'an in explaining the intended meaning of the "Seven *Ahruf*" in its recitation, even though a group among them leaned toward viewing them as dialects (*Lughāt*). What led them down diverging paths of understanding was their lack of success in explaining what *Harf* means within the phrasing of "sevenfoldness" (*Tasbī'*). Consequently, their excessive divergence of opinion revealed that the flaw rested with the researcher, not the subject itself.

A point highly worthy of consideration demonstrates this flaw: the contradiction between their excessive interpretations and one of the Lawgiver's primary objectives in legislation—namely, that the expressions of Islamic Law (*Sharī'ah*) were laid down to provide clarity and understanding (*Ifhām*). Where is the clarity in an issue where opinions reached forty different views without reaching a conclusive resolution? Therefore, what truly warrants revision is the research methodology applied to the issue, which is precisely what this paper presents as a scholarly exercise (*Ijtihād*):

1. The Concept of the First *Harf*:

It is the specific *Harf* that the Prophet ﷺ was commanded to recite to his nation (*Ummah*) in the Hadith of Ubayy ibn Ka'b at the Pond (*Aḍā'ah*) of Banū Ghifār for the very first time. It is the original *Harf* to which six additional *Ahruf* were subsequently added as a means of facilitation (*Taysīr*) for the nation in reciting the Qur'an, and its specific meaning differs from theirs.[1]

To properly understand this *Harf* according to the intended meaning of this research, it is necessary to present the general context in which it appeared:

1.1 Text of the Hadith of the Seven *Ahruf*:

It was reported on the authority of Ubayy (may Allah be pleased with him): "The Prophet ﷺ was at the Pond of Banū Ghifār when Gabriel (peace be upon him) came to him and said: 'Allah commands you to recite the Qur'an to your nation on one *Harf*.' He replied: 'I ask Allah His forgiveness and His pardon; my nation cannot bear that.' Then he came to him a second time and said: 'Allah commands you to recite the Qur'an to your nation on two *Ahruf*.' He replied: 'I ask Allah His forgiveness and His pardon; my nation cannot bear that.' Then he came a third time and said: 'Allah commands you to recite the Qur'an to your nation on three *Ahruf*.' He replied: 'I ask Allah His forgiveness and His pardon; my nation cannot bear that.' Then he came a fourth time and said: 'Allah commands you to recite the Qur'an to your nation on seven *Ahruf*; whichever *Harf* they recite, they are correct.'"[2]

What necessitates distinguishing between the "First *Harf*" and those that followed is a matter of paramount importance for correcting research methodologies applied to foundational texts in Islamic sciences. This involves addressing a methodological flaw in how scholars historically examined foundational texts—namely, isolating these texts from the general epistemic environment in which they emerged. This isolation led to a failure to leverage the cross-disciplinary cooperation of Islamic sciences to interpret foundational texts within what is known today as **Interdisciplinarity** (*Bayniyyah*).[3]

We will endeavor to demonstrate how this interdisciplinary approach forces a specific type of understanding when interpreting this text, thereby resolving an epistemic dilemma that has exhausted scholars since the inception of research on this topic.

2.1 The Interpretative Problem of the Term *Harf*:

Scholars examined the Hadith and were thoroughly exhausted in clarifying two matters within it: first, the intended meaning of *Harf*, and second, the intended meaning of the number seven (*Tasbīʿ*).

- As for *Harf*, some placed it within verbal/lexical form, thus viewing the "seven" as dialects (*Lughāt*).[4]
- Others placed it within conceptual meaning, listing seven semantic categories they believed were intended by the number seven.[5]

Neither early nor later scholars succeeded in settling the issue, eventually arriving at forty different opinions, as noted by Al-Suyūṭī[6] and others.[7]

Following this, it became clear that the flaw was in the method of inquiry, not in the object of inquiry; the expressions of Islamic Law were established for clarity (*Ifhām*), not obscurity (*Ibhām*).[8]

The major flaw that led scholars away from understanding *Harf* and its sevenfold expansion—and blocked their path to a definitive interpretation—was isolating the language of the Hadith (its words and phrasing) from its communicative context (*Al-Mawqif Al-Tawāṣulī*), which inherently requires the integration of other contextual meanings that aid comprehension. What scholars did was extract the words "*Harf*" and "*Sab'ah*" (seven) from the Hadith, while turning away from situational and contextual components that would otherwise guide understanding toward a different category of explanatory meanings.

Isolating the Hadith from explanatory meanings that lie outside the specialized domain of Qur'anic Recitations (*Qirā'āt*) was the reason it became obscured to them. The result of this isolation was that their research was not interdisciplinary—meaning

it was not built upon opening the textual situation to all participating components that construct its overall and partial semantic significations.

2. Interdisciplinarity and Interdisciplinary Meanings in Interpreting the First *Harf* and Its Sevenfold Expansion

We wish to define Interdisciplinarity before presenting the meanings to which the Hadith text opens itself, inviting them to participate in yielding the intended understanding for this research.

2.1 Interdisciplinarity (*Al-Bayniyyah*):

In brief terms, it is the cooperation of two or more disciplines to explain a specific issue.[9] It is a concept built on the principle that academic fields inherently complement one another (*At-Takāmul*),[10] particularly those close in nature and methodology, making them adjacent and mutually inclusive of each other's components.[11]

What warrants consideration is that Interdisciplinarity arose from the realization that a single discipline stands helpless before many issues presented to it due to lacking all necessary components, and because—driven by disciplinary rigidity—it fails to consult adjacent fields that hold parts of the truth regarding the issue.[12]

2.2 Interdisciplinary Meanings:

These have a direct impact on interpreting *Harf* in general, and the "First *Harf*" in the Hadith in particular:

2.2.1 The Theological (*'Aqadī*) Meaning:

The addressee in the Hadith is the Messenger of Allah ﷺ. Between Muslims and their Messenger lies a set of attributes that must be firmly believed in regarding the Prophet whose prophethood they accept. It will become clear after presenting them how these attributes exert an interpretative influence.

- **2.2.2.1 Definition of Prophethood:** Ibn Taymiyyah said: *"Prophethood is an intermediary between the Creator and the creation in conveying His Law."*[13] Knowledge of the prophets' state and what must be believed regarding them is an obligation. Ibn al-Qayyim stated: *"There is no path to happiness and success, in this world or the Hereafter, except at the hands of the Messengers. There is no way to know the good from the bad in detail except through them. Allah's pleasure cannot be attained except through them... Thus, the servant's need for the Messengers is far greater than the body's need for its soul, the eye for its light, or the soul for its life..."*[14]

- **2.2.2.2 Necessary Attributes of Prophethood:** Theologians established a set of attributes that must be believed regarding Prophets. The implication of this is to keep these attributes in mind (*Istiṣḥāb*) in every context where the Prophet ﷺ is in a position of explaining a religious meaning. This application is what we will rely upon to understand *Harf* and its sevenfold expansion in the Hadith of Ubayy. Ṭāhā ʻAbd Allāh Al-ʻAfīfī stated regarding the Prophets: *"An inescapable necessity of this is the obligation to believe in the superiority of their innate nature, the soundness of their intellects, their truthfulness in speech, their trustworthiness in conveying what they were entrusted to convey, their infallibility (*ʻIṣmah*) from anything that tarnishes human character, and the safety of their bodies from what repels sight or sound taste..."*[15] These necessary attributes are: **Truthfulness (*Aṣ-Ṣidq*), Trustworthiness (*Al-Amānah*), Conveyance (*At-Tablīgh*), and Sagacity (*Al-Faṭānah*).**[16]
- **2.2.2.3 Prophethood and the Meaning of *Harf* and Its Sevenfold Expansion:** What must be believed in this situation is that when the Prophet ﷺ was addressed with the First *Harf*, he stood between two states: either he understood his Lord's intent regarding the meaning of *Harf*, or he did not. The second state is impossible, because if he did not know, he would have been obligated to ask for clarification, yet he did not.

Thus, the first state remains: he knew what was intended by *Harf*, supported by two evidences:

1. He did not ask for clarification.
2. He requested facilitation (*Taysīr*).

The second point is decisive in showing that he ﷺ understood the meaning of *Harf*. Therefore, it becomes clear to the researcher that its meaning must be sought through contextual clues (*Qarā'in*). Among these clues is that *Harf* represents a **verbal/lexical reality**, not a purely conceptual one, because facilitation applies to verbal recitation rather than conceptual meanings. From this, we move to seeking the intended verbal reality of the First *Harf* and how it was established in the Prophet's prior knowledge:

- The verbal reality intended by the First *Harf* is the dialect/language in which the Qur'an was revealed from the beginning of its revelation until the command of the Seven *Ahruf* was given—which is **exclusively the dialect of Quraish**.
- The way it was established in the Prophet's sagacity (*Faṭānah*) that the First *Harf* was the dialect of Quraish is its general, continuous usage in reciting the Qur'an; the command regarding the First *Harf* was not restricted to a specific Surah or section of the Qur'an. Thus, the reality of the First *Harf* generally encompassed all recited text in a majority sense, rather than an absolute sense.[17] This majority usage does not negate its generality, and there was no dialect broader than Quraish in Qur'anic recitation prior to the sevenfold expansion.

When the Prophet ﷺ sought ease, permission was granted to move beyond the First *Harf* to the second. Here again, the obligation of maintaining the attributes of Prophethood applies: the Prophet ﷺ stood between knowing it specifically (*Ta'yīn*) or not knowing it specifically.

The first state is impossible because it could not have been previously known through his sagacity, as reading in that specific manner had not previously occurred on a general scale. As for what was recited contrary to the dialect of Quraish, it varied among Arab dialects:

- **The dialect of Banū Al-Ḥārith ibn Ka'b**[18] in the verse: *"They said, 'Indeed, these two are divine sorcerers who want to drive you out of your land with their sorcery and destroy your exemplary way'"* [Ṭāhā: 63]. This Surah is Meccan, yet this was not a general grammatical rule for all dual nouns preceded by accusative or genitive particles in the Qur'an.
- **The dialect of *"Akalūnī Al-Barāghīth"* (The fleas ate me)**[19] in the verse: *"With their hearts distracted. And those who do wrong conceal their private counsel, [saying], 'Is this any more than a human being like you? Would you then approach sorcery while you are aware?'"* [Al-Anbiyā': 3]. This Surah is also Meccan, yet this construct was not a general rule applied to every verb preceding a plural subject.[20]

This points to seeking its specific designation, which did not occur from him ﷺ. Thus, the state of total lack of knowledge remains impossible (as he did not seek clarification). The only remaining conclusion is that one thing was already understood through the Prophet's sagacity: **the Second *Harf* intended absolute numerical multiplicity (*Muṭlaq At-Takthīr*), rather than a restricted, specific designation (*Muqayyad At-Ta'yīn*)**.

Here, we must maintain what is necessary regarding Prophethood: through his sagacity (*Faṭānah*) and obligation of conveyance (*Tablīgh*), the Prophet ﷺ fully understood his Lord's intent in both the First *Harf* and the Second *Harf*. The First was the dialect of Quraish, and the Second was the permission to step outside its strict boundaries.

As for what transpired between him and his nation regarding his duty of conveyance (*Tablīgh*), it displays supreme elegance and beauty: when he ﷺ knew that the linguistic custom of his people was not to express "multiplicity" through the dual form (two), he continued to repeat his request for facilitation until permission came for the third. He knew regarding the third what he knew regarding the second, so he continued—with his supreme eloquence and elevated speech—to repeat requests for ease until it reached the linguistic usage that aligned with expressing "multiplicity" (*At-Takthīr*) in the speech of his people (i.e., seven).

The correctness of this view is definitively proven by the sevenfold concept found in the second foundational Hadith text on this topic: the Hadith of 'Umar and Hishām. It is reported in the two Sahihs that 'Umar said:

"I heard Hishām ibn Ḥakīm ibn Ḥizām reciting Sūrat Al-Furqān during the lifetime of the Messenger of Allah ﷺ. I listened to his recitation and noticed that he recited it according to many *Ahruf* that the Messenger of Allah ﷺ had not taught me. I was about to jump on him during prayer, but I exercised patience until he said the Taslīm. I then grabbed him by his cloak and said: 'Who taught you to recite this Surah I heard you reciting?' He replied: 'The Messenger of Allah ﷺ taught it to me.' I said: 'You have lied! For the Messenger of Allah ﷺ taught it to me differently.' So I led him to the Messenger of Allah ﷺ and said: 'I heard this man reciting Sūrat Al-Furqān with *Ahruf* you did not teach me!' The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said: 'Release him. Recite, O Hishām.' He recited the reading I had heard him recite. The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said: 'Thus was it revealed.' Then he said: 'Recite, O 'Umar.' I recited the reading he had taught me. The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said: 'Thus was it revealed; indeed, this Qur'an was revealed upon seven *Ahruf*, so recite whatever is easy from it.'"[21]

The intended meaning of "seven" (*Sab'ah*) here is unequivocally **multiplicity** (*At-Takthīr*). If a specific enumeration were intended, 'Umar would have sought its exact specification from the Messenger of Allah ﷺ, and the Prophet ﷺ would have detailed it in accordance with his duty of conveyance (*Tablīgh*). He would have explained the details of the seven as was his habit whenever he mentioned a specific number.[22] If the Prophet ﷺ intended specific enumeration, why did he not specify them?

Conclusion

It becomes clear through this analysis that **Interdisciplinarity** (*Al-Bayniyyah*) is a scientific, methodological, and religious necessity for understanding foundational texts in Islamic culture. Not least among its great benefits is restoring the text—with its words, phrasing, and rhetorical norms—to its true, living context, thereby distributing its semantic facets across all contributing components to achieve vital cross-disciplinary cooperation and integration.

From this, the following conclusions are established:

- The confusion among scholars in interpreting this issue stems from the absence of an interdisciplinary approach in their comprehension.
- **The First *Harf*** in the sevenfold framework is the **dialect of Quraish**, in which the Glorious Qur'an was recited for over twenty years. This is what the Prophet ﷺ knew from his Lord through his prior sagacity regarding the general prevalence of the Quraish dialect in reciting the Qur'an.

- **The remaining six *Ahruf*** are nothing other than a manifestation of prophetic perfection in eloquence—expressing speech in accordance with Arabic linguistic norms to denote multiplicity for the purpose of facilitation (expressed as "seven"). This fulfilled his duty of conveyance (*Tablīgh*) with supreme rhetorical beauty, for true beauty in speech observes the linguistic customs of the people.

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Footnotes

1. See in detail: *Al-Aḥruf al-Sab'ah*, Maḥmūd Muḥammad Shākir, ed. Khālid Fathī, rev. Fihr Maḥmūd Muḥammad Shākir, Al-Quds Publishing, 1st ed., 1443 AH / 2022 CE, p. 92.
2. Narrated by Ubayy ibn Ka'b | Hadith Scholar: Muslim | Source: *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Hadith No. 821.
3. *Al-Tafkīr al-Baynī*, Ṣāliḥ ibn Ramaḍān, p. 25; *Al-Dirāsāt al-Bayniyyah: Al-Mafhūm wa al-Uṣūl al-Ma'rifiyyah*, Muḥammad Makākī, p. 271; *Al-Dirāsāt al-Bayniyyah wa Ishkāliyyat al-Muṣṭalaḥ*, Āmnah Bal'alā, p. 303.
4. *Al-Burhān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, Al-Zarkashī, 1/226.
5. *Al-Nashr fī al-Qirā'āt al-'Ashr*, Ibn al-Jazarī, 1/24.
6. *Al-Itqān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, Al-Suyūṭī, 1/164.
7. *Manāhil al-'Irfān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, Al-Zarqānī, 1/183.
8. *Al-Muwāfaqāt*, Al-Shāṭibī, 2/101.
9. *Al-Tafkīr al-Baynī*, Ṣāliḥ ibn Ramaḍān, p. 25; *Al-Dirāsāt al-Bayniyyah*, Muḥammad Makākī, p. 271; *Al-Dirāsāt al-Bayniyyah*, Āmnah Bal'alā, p. 303.
10. *Takāmul al-Ma'ārif wa Dawruhu fī Fahm al-Dīn*, Al-'Ayyāshī Adrāwī, p. 208; *Al-Takāmul al-Ma'rifī bayna Uṣūl al-Fiqh wa al-'Aqīdah*, Sulaymān al-Najrān, p. 133.
11. *Al-Takāmul al-Ma'rifī wa Atharuhu fī Salāmat al-Fahm*, Riḍwān al-Khashīn, 2018 CE.
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13. *Al-Nubuwwāt*, Ibn Taymiyyah, 1/20.

14. *Zād al-Ma'ād*, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, 1/168.
15. *Al-Ṣifāt al-Wājibah wa al-Mustaḥīlah wa al-Jā'izah fī Ḥaqq al-Rusul*, Ṭāhā al-'Afīfī, p. 20.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
17. *Al-Ḥadīth fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān wa al-Ḥadīth*, Ḥasan Muḥammad Ayyūb, p. 82.
18. See: *Naẓarāt Naḥwiyyah fī Lughat Banī al-Ḥārith ibn Ka'b*, Dr. Maḥmūd Fajjāl, p. 166; *Lughat Banī al-Ḥārith ibn Ka'b*, Dr. Nawāf al-Ḥārithī, p. 5.
19. See: *Lughat "Akalūnī al-Barāghīth"*, Dr. Muḥammad al-Dālī, p. 399; *Lughat "Akalūnī al-Barāghīth": Dirāsah Tārīkhiyyah*, Dr. Muḍyān al-Rashīdī, p. 186.
20. Attention must be drawn to a crucial distinction: the generality intended regarding the adherence to the dialect of Quraish is understood within the system of language (= Syntax/Grammar), not its corpus (= Lexicon). Hence, we provided two examples in syntax/structure rather than the lexicon, because stepping outside a dialect occurs via structural shifts rather than vocabulary shifts. Furthermore, the Qur'an adopted lexical items from numerous Arab tribes into its vocabulary, negating exclusivity to a single tribe's lexicon alone.
21. Narrated by 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb | Source: *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, 1/17; also recorded in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (2419) and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (818).
22. This refers to what may be termed the Prophet's ﷺ customary manner of speech (*'Ādat al-Nabī fī al-Khiṭāb*), which is a fundamental principle in understanding prophetic discourse. His habit when mentioning a number was to follow it with explicit details:

- He said: *"Three qualities, whoever possesses them will feel the sweetness of faith: that Allah and His Messenger are more beloved to him than anything else..."* [Narrated by Anas ibn Mālik | *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi'*, No. 3044; recorded in Al-Bukhārī (16) and Muslim (43)].
- He said: *"Five are from the Fitrah (natural disposition): circumcision, shaving pubic hair, plucking armpit hair, trimming nails, and clipping the mustache."* [Narrated by Abū Hurayrah | *Al-Wahm wa al-Īhām*, 5/599; recorded in Al-Bukhārī (6297) and Muslim (257)].