**The Impact of Grammar on Qur’anic Exegesis**

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**Introduction**

Grammar, as a science, is the key to unlocking the structure and meaning of human language. It provides principles and mechanisms by which words are connected, meanings are formed and conveyed, and ambiguities are ameliorated. Across cultures, the science of grammar can serve as a means to achieve clear communication and precise understanding of one’s own native tongue or their second language. Each culture has its own grammatical tradition in how it views and understands its language. Together, and with a holistic understanding, these traditions reveal that grammar is not merely a set of technical rules taught in primary school, but a much more complex and ordered system serving as a window into how a language organizes, comprehends, and conveys meaning.

The grammatical tradition of Arabic is one that is ever so rich and plentiful and has been developed over the course of Islamic history. It boasts a sophisticated array of analytical tools, theoretical frameworks, and even by today’s modern linguistic standards, has made significant advancements to the field. From the foundational works of early grammarians such as Sibawayh (d. 180AH), Al-Farraʾ (d. 207AH), and Al-Farahidi (d. 173AH), to the nuanced commentaries of later scholars such as Ibn Hisham (d. 761AH) and Abu Hayyan (d. 745AH), Arabic grammar has not only served as a mechanism for linguistic precision but also as a critical instrument in the interpretation of the Qur’an. Many scholars sought the Arabic language and its grammar as its main source for their Qur’anic exegesis. Most famously, this includes scholars such as Al-Zamakhshari (d. 538AH), Ibn Attiyah (d. 541AH), Abu Hayyan (d. 745AH), Al-Alusi (d. 1270AH), Ibn Ashur (d. 1393AH), and Al-Farra’ (d. 207AH) among many others. This grammatical lens allows for a deeper exploration of verses whose meanings pivot on subtle syntactic arrangements or morphological nuances—instances where a shift in case ending or verbal form can dramatically alter exegetical outcomes.

There are two parts to this article seeking to explore Qur’anic exegesis in light of language. The first will outline a background to the development and purpose of grammar in the Arabic tradition while the second will provide examples of how grammatical analysis can impact the outcomes of exegesis.

**The Necessity of the Development of Grammar**

The field of linguistics and the development of a grammar is simply a process of modeling a language and putting it into a set of well-defined rules. The idea is to create a system that can fully account for anything a native speaker might say while correctly ruling out ungrammatical structures. This model of rules that we see in the books of grammar operates passively and subconsciously in the minds of native speakers. This model or grammar includes rules governing all aspects of language including phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics and the interfaces that link them together.

Throughout generations, and as language inevitably changes, the model of grammatical rules that existed in earlier generations of speakers will also change. The rules of what’s allowed and what isn’t change until eventually the model is completely different. To exemplify this, consider the parallel between the different stages of English development from Old English to Middle English, to Early Modern English, to the current Modern English. Similarly, the spoken Arabic changed from between the time of the Qur’an’s revelation over the course of the following two or three centuries.

The companions of the Prophet ﷺ and those who followed them, the first exegetes, natively spoke the language of the Qur’an. They shared its grammatical model and thus had complete access to its meanings along with their knowledge of the sayings of the Prophet ﷺ and the circumstances around which each verse was descended. However, as the generations went on, the language started to change, and the early companions and followers, such as Abu Bakr رضي الله عنه, Ali رضي الله عنه, Ibn Qutaybah (d. 276AH), and others began to notice people making speech errors. There are many narrations pointing out the errors in people’s speech.

*Abu Bakr said, “For me to read and forget a word is better for me then to read and err in speech.”* [[1]](#endnote-1)

*Ibn Qutaybah said, “A Bedouin heard a man calling the Athan saying ‘أشهد أن محمدًا رسولَ اللهِ’ with the word رسول in the accusative case, so the Bedouin called out saying ‘Woe to you! What has he done?’”* [[2]](#endnote-2)

*Yaaqut said, “Ali Ibn Abi Talib passed by a group of people who were shooting arrows poorly, so he rebuked them. They replied, ‘إنا قوم متعلمين’ (we are a people who are learning). So, Ali became angry and said, ‘By God, your mistake in your speech is worse to me than your mistake in your shooting.’”* [[3]](#endnote-3)

Among many others, the theme of speech errors seemed to become more common among the city folk and Bedouins alike as time progressed. It is said that Ali رضي الله عنه commissioned Abu Al-Aswad Ad-Du’ali (d. 69AH) to formulate a grammatical system in order for people to have a reference for their speech and most importantly, their understanding of the Qur’an.

It is the reason for the development of Arabic grammar that requires some attention. It was developed in order for people to not err from the language of the Qur’an no matter how much time passes, and that people who are learning Arabic may attain its understandings for themselves. It is the understanding of Qur’anic Arabic which is essential to its interpretation and not necessarily knowledge of its grammar overtly. The Prophet ﷺ, His companions, and those who came after them, had no conscious understanding of Arabic grammar as a formal system with rules, yet they were the most knowing and most acquainted with its meanings. The famous linguistic exegetical works mentioned in the introduction, grammatically parse each verse, not because it is necessary for Qur’anic understanding, but because it gives a detailed understanding of the language for those not already acquainted and perhaps an insight into how those native to the language understood concepts.

Thus, this model (being articulated grammatical rules) is not necessary for Qur’anic understanding or exegesis itself. However, this model is useful for other things which will be explained in the second part of this article. The second part will be demonstrating, by means of the grammatical model, how the grammar of the Qur’an and its grammatical interpretation can bring about different meanings.

**How Grammar Affects Qur’anic Understanding**

Before engaging in grammatical analysis, one must first have thoroughly studied and internalized the Arabic grammatical tradition in its full depth. Just as no one would issue legal rulings without a solid grounding in the principles of fiqh, or authenticate a hadith without mastery of hadith sciences, it is likewise untenable to interpret Arabic texts—let alone the Qur’an—without rigorous and comprehensive training.

Grammatical interpretation (i.e., sentence parsing), although an objective task and much like fiqh, can leave room for a range of possible conclusions left to the discretion of the one analyzing the sentence. It is possible that one sentence can be looked at in two different ways, with each one bringing about a different understanding. This phenomenon occurs in every language and is a common form of ambiguity and confusion in everyday speech. In the field of linguistics, it comes in two relevant forms:

1. When the difference in interpretation arises from the meaning of a word, it is known as a **lexical ambiguity**.
2. When the difference arises due to the word order, it is known as a **structural ambiguity**.

To demonstrate, I will present an example from English: *The British left waffles on the Falklands*.

There are two possible ways at parsing this sentence. The first is in which the word *left* is analyzed as a verb. Under this interpretation, the sentence means that the British people went to the Falklands, and left waffles there. The second is in which the word *left* is analyzed as a noun modified by the adjective *British* and the word *waffles* is a verb meaning to be indecisive. Under this interpretation, the sentence means that the British left wing party is being inconclusive over what to do with the Falklands.

Now we shall move to three examples from the Qur’an:

**Example 1 – Theological Impact of Ale-Imran 3:7**

هُوَ ٱلَّذِىٓ أَنزَلَ عَلَيْكَ ٱلْكِتَـٰبَ مِنْهُ ءَايَـٰتٌ مُّحْكَمَـٰتٌ هُنَّ أُمُّ ٱلْكِتَـٰبِ وَأُخَرُ مُتَشَـٰبِهَـٰتٌ ۖ فَأَمَّا ٱلَّذِينَ فِى قُلُوبِهِمْ زَيْغٌ فَيَتَّبِعُونَ مَا تَشَـٰبَهَ مِنْهُ ٱبْتِغَآءَ ٱلْفِتْنَةِ وَٱبْتِغَآءَ تَأْوِيلِهِۦ ۗ وَمَا يَعْلَمُ تَأْوِيلَهُۥٓ إِلَّا ٱللَّهُ ۗ **وَٱلرَّٰسِخُونَ** فِى ٱلْعِلْمِ يَقُولُونَ ءَامَنَّا بِهِۦ كُلٌّ مِّنْ عِندِ رَبِّنَا ۗ وَمَا يَذَّكَّرُ إِلَّآ أُو۟لُوا۟ ٱلْأَلْبَـٰبِ

*“It is He who has sent down to you, [O Muḥammad], the Book; in it are verses [that are] precise – they are the foundation of the Book – and others unclear. As for those in whose hearts is deviation [from truth], they will follow that of it which is unspecific, seeking discord and seeking an interpretation [suitable to them]. And no one knows its [true] interpretation except Allah.* ***But those firm in knowledge*** *say, “We believe in it. All [of it] is from our Lord.” And no one will be reminded except those of understanding.”*

In this verse, the word *waar-rāsikhūn* (and those firm in knowledge)can be parsed in two different ways based on what you consider it to be conjoined with. In one analysis, the conjunction *waw* before the word *ar-rāsikhūn* starts a new sentence and is not conjoined to a particular word in the previous sentence. This is known as *waw al-istiʾnāf* (the waw of beginning). The word *ar-rāsikhūn* is then the subject of this new sentence, i.e., *al-mubtadaʾ*, and the following verb *yaqūlūn* is its predicate, i.e., *al-khabar*. Given this reading, the interpretation is that God alone knows the reality of the underspecified or unclear verses and that those firm in knowledge (*ar-rāsikhūn*) simply believe and accept them without their having any knowledge of their meanings.[[4]](#endnote-4) [[5]](#endnote-5)

The second parsing is that the word *ar-rāsikhūn* is conjoined, i.e., maʿṭūf, to the subject of the previous sentence – being Allah. Thus, the interpretation is that it is not only God who knows the meanings of the ambiguous verses, but also those firm and established in knowledge. Both these interpretations are grammatically valid yet lead to two differed theological conclusions with the former being the interpretation of the majority.[[6]](#endnote-6)

**Example 2 – Jurisprudential Difference of Al-Ma’idah 5:6**

يَـٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ إِذَا قُمْتُمْ إِلَى ٱلصَّلَوٰةِ فَٱغْسِلُوا۟ وُجُوهَكُمْ وَأَيْدِيَكُمْ إِلَى ٱلْمَرَافِقِ وَٱمْسَحُوا۟ بِرُءُوسِكُمْ **وَأَرْجُلَكُمْ** إِلَى ٱلْكَعْبَيْنِ

*“Oh, you who have believed, when you rise to [perform] prayer, wash your faces and your forearms to the elbows and wipe over your heads* ***and wash your feet*** *to the ankles*.*”*

In this verse, the case marking on the word *arjulakum* (your feet) can lead to a difference in interpretation. Nafiʿ (d. 169AH), al-Kisaʾi (d. 189AH), Ibn ʿAmir (d. 118AH), Yaqoub (d. 205AH), and Hafs (d. 180AH) read this verse with the word *arjulakum* marked accusative (nasb/with a fatha).[[7]](#endnote-7) Given this type of Case marking, the word *arjulakum* is conjoined to the word *wujahukum* (your faces) and is an object of the verb *ighsilu* (wash).[[8]](#endnote-8) Thus, it gleaned from this that what is mandatory in wudu is washing the feet (*ghusl*) and upon this interpretation are the majority of the scholars including the four main schools of Islamic jurisprudence.[[9]](#endnote-9)

The readings of Ibn Kathir (d. 120AH), Abu ‘Amr (d. 154AH), Hamza (d. 156AH), Shuʿbah (d. 193AH), Khalaf (d. 229AH), and Abu Jaʿfar (d. 130AH) read this verse with the word *arjulakum* marked genitive (*khafḍ/jar/*with a *kasra*).[[10]](#endnote-10) Given this Case marking, the word *arjulikum* is conjoined to the word directly preceding it and as the object of the preposition *bi*.[[11]](#endnote-11) Thus, it is gleaned that what is mandatory in wudu is the wiping of the feet (*masḥ*(. This is a minority opinion with only few of the scholars maintaining this including Ibn ʿAbbas (d. 68AH), Anas ibn Malik (d. 93AH), ʿIkrimah (d. 105AH), ash-Shaʿbi (d. 103AH), Abu Jaʿfar al-Baqir (d. 114AH), and the imamate Shias.[[12]](#endnote-12) Abu Jaʿfar at-Ṭabari (d. 310AH) maintains that due to this ambiguity, one can choose between washing (*ghusl*) and wiping (*masḥ*).[[13]](#endnote-13)

A third reading of this verse is that of the al-Ḥasan al-Baṣri (d. 110AH) and al-Aʿmash (d. 148AH) in which they read the word *arjulakum* in the nominative (*rafʿ*/with a *dumma*). Under this reading, the word *arjulukum* is the subject of a sentence with the predicate being elided and interpreted something as *wash/wipe them until your ankles*.[[14]](#endnote-14) It can be viewed as meaning wash (*ghusl*) or wipe (*masḥ*) based on how one interprets the overall verse.

**Example 3 – Linguistic Difference of Al-Burooj 85:14-15**

وَهُوَ ٱلْغَفُورُ ٱلْوَدُودُ \* ذُو ٱلْعَرْشِ ٱلْمَجِيدُ

*“And He is the Forgiving, the Affectionate \* Honorable Owner of the Throne”*

In this last example, we consider these two verses and their differing in Qur’anic recitation. The majority of reciters including Nafiʿ (d. 169AH), Ibn Kathir (d. 120AH), Abu ‘Amr (d. 154AH), Ibn ʿAmir (d. 118AH), ʿAṣim (d. 123AH), Abu Jaʿfar (d. 130AH), and Yaqoub (d. 205AH) all recite the word *al-majidu* (honorable) in the nominative (*rafʿ/*with a *dumma*).[[15]](#endnote-15) In Classical Arabic, being a language with what is known as noun-adjective agreement/concord, any adjective modifying a noun must agree (copy) its features – those being case, definiteness, gender, and number. When reading the word *al-majidu* in the nominative case, it is thus an adjective not of the noun preceding it due to the difference in marking, being *al-ʿArsh*, but of the one before it with which it agrees – being the subject pronoun *huwa.* So, with this reading, the adjective modifies the word *huwa*, along with *al-Ghafuru* and *al-Wadudu*.

However, in the reading of Hamza (d. 156AH), Khalaf (d. 229AH), and al-Kisaʾi (d. 189AH), the word *al-majidu* is read as *al-majidi* in the genitive case (*khafḍ/jar*/with a *kasra*).[[16]](#endnote-16) The word *al-majidi* remains an adjective but it is agreeing with (modifying) a different noun. The only candidate is the one directly preceding it – being *al-ʿArsh*. Thus, it is an adjective modifying *al-ʿArsh* changing the meaning to something like *“And He is the Forgiving, the Affectionate \* Owner of the honorable throne*.”

**Conclusion**

The intricate relationship between grammar and Qur'anic exegesis underlines the depth and precision required to unravel the divine text’s layered meanings. While the earliest generations of Muslims understood the Qur'an through their innate command of Arabic and contextual knowledge, the subsequent development of a formalized grammatical system became essential as linguistic fluency declined over time. This system preserved the language’s integrity and served as a tool to guard against misinterpretation.

Through the examples explored, it has been made evident that grammatical analysis can lead to divergent exegetical outcomes—some with significant theological or legal consequences. Whether through parsing ambiguities, analyzing variant readings, or observing shifts in case and syntactic structure, grammar operates not merely as a technical exercise but as a lens through which deeper truths are revealed. Yet, it is crucial to remember that grammatical interpretation is not an end in itself; rather, it is a means to access the original clarity, subtlety, richness, and plurality of meanings intended in the Qur'anic message.

Therefore, the role of grammar in exegesis is both preservative and illuminative as it safeguards the text from distortion and simultaneously unveils layers of meaning that might otherwise remain obscured. In the hands of those firmly grounded in both language and tradition, grammar becomes not a constraint but a key to divine guidance.

**References**

1. نشأة النحو وتاريخ أشهر ص 50-51 دار القلم [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. نشأة النحو وتاريخ أشهر ص 50-51 دار القلم [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. نشأة النحو وتاريخ أشهر ص 50-51 دار القلم [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. البحر المحيط ج 5 ص 191-192 دار الرسالة العالمية [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. تفسير القرطبي ج 5 ص 28 مؤسسة الرسالة [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. البحر المحيط ج 5 ص 192 دار رسالة العالمية [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. مصحف القراءات العشر من طريقة الشاطبية والدرة ص 108 دار الغوثاني [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. تفسير ابن عطية ج 3 ص 440 دار الأم [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. تفسير القرطبي ج 7 ص 342 مؤسسة الرسالة [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. مصحف القراءات العشر من طريقة الشاطبية والدرة ص 108 دار الغوثاني [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. تفسير ابن عطية ج 3 ص 441 دار الأم [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. البحر المحيط ج 8 ص 79 دار الرسالة العالمية [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. البحر المحيط ج 8 ص 80 دار الرسالة العالمية [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. لبحر المحيط ج 8 ص 81 دار الرسالة العالمية [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. مصحف القراءات العشر من طريقة الشاطبية والدرة ص 590 دار الغوثاني [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. مصحف القراءات العشر من طريقة الشاطبية والدرة ص 590 دار الغوثاني [↑](#endnote-ref-16)