

# The Use of Language in the Quran

YM 14-16 Circle

By Zain Arif



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# A bit about me (Zain Arif)...

- Studied Spanish and Arabic at UCL
- Diploma in Classical Arabic Language and Literature from Al-Salam Institute
- One of UK's leading Islamic Scholarship Institutes chaired by Shaykh Akram Nadwi



# Classical Arabic

- Languages naturally evolve - the Arabic spoken in 7th Century Makkah and Madinah is different to the Arabic spoken today
- Scholars look to the period between BH 150→ AH 150 (~472-772 CE) to discern the meaning of words and phrases used in Qur'an - **as they were understood at that time.**
- Everything written and memorised (e.g. poems) in this period can be used as a proof of argument for the meaning of words and phrases.



# Things to bear in mind

*“He who becomes excellent about Arabic grammar will become better at every subject”* - Imam Shafi

*“He who surpasses in knowledge of Arabic surpasses in all other sciences, he who is a beginner is a beginner in all sciences”* - Imam Shatibi

*“A house of wood whose door is made of iron”* - Persian proverb about studying Arabic

- Arabic is a human language and can therefore be conquered by human minds
- The Qur'an is not there to teach us Arabic: it is **not** a language textbook.
  - It was sent to give us guidance and how to worship
  - It can be quite hard to find nice simple examples of grammatical concepts
  - The word “*Kitaab*” is considered to have 18 different meanings



# Similes and Metaphors

- Likening or equating something to something else because it represents the desired characteristic better than anything else.
  - E.g. crystal clear, gentle as a lamb, brave as a lion
  - The sprinter flew round the track
- Well-known and understood by listener, varies from time to place

E.g. 1: Surah al-Qari'ah 101:4 <https://quran.com/al-qariah?translations=20%2C85%2C84>

E.g. 2: Surah ar-Ra'd 13:14 <https://quran.com/13?startingVerse=14>

E.g. 3: Surah al-Jumu'ah 62:5 <https://quran.com/62?startingVerse=5>

E.g. 4: Surah as-Saffat 37:48-9 <https://quran.com/37?startingVerse=48>



# 1: Surah al-Qari'ah 101:4

101:4



يَوْمَ يَكُونُ النَّاسُ كَالْفَرَاشِ الْمَبْثُوثِ

It is the Day when people will be like moths, dispersed,<sup>1</sup>

— Saheeh International

(It will happen) on a day when people will be like scattered moths,

— Mufti Taqi Usmani

“Like scattered moths” = Frenzy, chaos  
on the Day of Judgement



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## 2: Surah ar-Ra'd 13:14

13:14



لَهُ دَعْوَةُ الْحَقِّ وَالَّذِينَ يَدْعُونَ مِنْ دُونِهِ لَا يَسْتَجِيبُونَ لَهُمْ بِشَيْءٍ إِلَّا كَبَسِطَ كَفِّهِ  
إِلَى الْمَاءِ لِيَبْلُغَ فَاهُ وَمَا هُوَ بِبَالِغِهِ وَمَا دُعَاءُ الْكَافِرِينَ إِلَّا فِي ضَلَالٍ ﴿١٤﴾

Calling upon Him "alone" is the truth. But those "idols" the pagans invoke besides Him "can" never respond to them in any way. "It is" just like someone who stretches out their hands to water, "asking it" to reach their mouths, but it can never do so. The calls of the disbelievers are only in vain.

— Dr. Mustafa Khattab, the Clear Quran

The only true prayer is to Him: those they pray to besides Him give them no answer any more than water reaches the mouth of someone who simply stretches out his hands for it- it cannot do so: the prayers of the disbelievers are all in vain.

— Abdul Haleem

**"Like calling out to water"**

i.e. Dedicating prayer or putting reliance in anything other than Allah is of no benefit to anyone, e.g. calling water



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### 3: Surah al-Jumu'ah 62:5

مَثَلُ الَّذِينَ حُمِّلُوا التَّوْرَةَ ثُمَّ لَمْ يَحْمِلُوهَا كَمَثَلِ الْحِمَارِ يَحْمِلُ أَسْفَارًا  
بِئْسَ مَثَلُ الْقَوْمِ الَّذِينَ كَذَّبُوا بِآيَاتِ اللَّهِ وَاللَّهُ لَا يَهْدِي الْقَوْمَ الظَّالِمِينَ ﴿٥﴾

The example of those who were entrusted with "observing" the Torah but failed to do so, is that of a donkey carrying books.<sup>1</sup> How evil is the example of those who reject Allah's signs! For Allah does not guide the wrongdoing people.

— Dr. Mustafa Khattab, the Clear Quran

Those who have been charged to obey the Torah, but do not do so, are like asses carrying books: how base such people are who disobey God's revelations! God does not guide people who do wrong.

— Abdul Haleem

**"Like donkeys carrying books"** - These scholars might have been learned people but **useless**, didn't do anything with it. Knowledge is only beneficial if it transforms into action.





# Examples of similes & metaphors

Literal translations:

1. The man is like an ocean (generous)
2. The man is a mountain (patient, unaffected by the weather, remains still)
3. The woman rides like lightning (fast)
4. The man is a fox (evil, wicked)
5. The child is like an ostrich (coward, buries head in the sand)
6. The man is like a donkey (foolish)
7. The man is like a fire on a mountain (generous, famous, everyone guided to him)



# Sounds

وَالَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا لَهُمْ نَارُ جَهَنَّمَ لَا يُقْضَىٰ عَلَيْهِمْ فَيَمُوتُوا وَلَا يُخَفَّفُ عَنْهُمْ مِنْ عَذَابِهَا كَذَٰلِكَ نَجْزِي كُلَّ كَافِرٍ

*And (as for) those who disbelieve, for them is the fire of hell; it shall not be finished with them entirely so that they should die, nor shall the chastisement thereof be lightened to them: even thus do We retribute every ungrateful one. (35:36)*

هَٰذَانِ خَصْمَانِ اخْتَصَفُوا فِي رَبِّهِمْ فَأَلْذِينَ كَفَرُوا قُطِعَتْ لَهُمْ ثِيَابٌ مِنْ نَّارٍ يُصَبُّ مِنْ فَوْقِ رُءُوسِهِمُ الْحَمِيمُ \* يُصْهَرُ بِهِ مَا فِي بُطُونِهِمْ وَالْجُلُودُ \* وَلَهُمْ مَقْمِعٌ مِنْ حَدِيدٍ

*As to those who disbelieve, for them are cut out garments of fire, boiling water shall be poured over their heads with it shall be melted what is in their bellies and (their) skins as well. And for them are whips of iron (22:19-21)*

Ones on the left hand side of the screen are harsh and choppy.

- Lots of shaddas, Qaafs, Ayns, Jeems (even Arabs don't like saying these)
- Talks about hell and punishment

الرَّحْمَنُ ۝ عَلَّمَ الْقُرْآنَ ۝ خَلَقَ الْإِنسَانَ ۝ عَلَّمَهُ الْبَيَانَ ۝ الشَّمْسُ وَالْقَمَرُ بِحُسْبَانٍ ۝ وَالتَّجَمُّ وَالشَّجَرُ يَسْجُدَانِ ۝ وَالسَّمَاءَ رَفَعَهَا وَوَضَعَ الْمِيزَانَ

1. The Most Merciful
2. Taught the Qur'ān,
3. Created man,
4. [And] taught him eloquence.
5. The sun and the moon [move] by precise calculation
6. And the stars and trees prostrate.
7. And the heaven He raised and imposed the balance

Right hand side

- Lots of Fathas, "aah" sound is easy to say, rhymes, it's light on the tongue
- Talks about Allah's mercy



# Sounds cont.

'Usrah' (with Ayn) means 'difficulty'

'Yusrah' means 'ease', which is much easier to say!

94:5



...

For indeed, with hardship [will be] ease [i.e., relief].

فَإِنَّ مَعَ الْعُسْرِ يُسْرًا ٥

94:6



Indeed, with hardship [will be] ease.

إِنَّ مَعَ الْعُسْرِ يُسْرًا ٦



# Questions

Allah SWT asks lots of Questions in Qur'an

**Why? He SWT knows everything anyway?**

- Asking questions is one of the most important elements of eloquence  
**Eloquence** = saying the most appropriate words that the current circumstance requires.
- A well-timed appropriate question makes the subject explained, proved better and settled in the minds of the people.
- It also forces us to think about the Question, so we have something in our minds to compare when the true answer follows.
- Makes the explanation much more influential



# Types of Questions asked

## 1. Incite curiosity

- Do you know what's in my pocket?
- *"Have you heard about the ghashiya (overwhelming event)?"* (88:1)
- *"Have you heard about the story of Musa?"* (79:15)

## 2. Wish/desire

- Does anyone have a fiver on them?

## 3. Negation

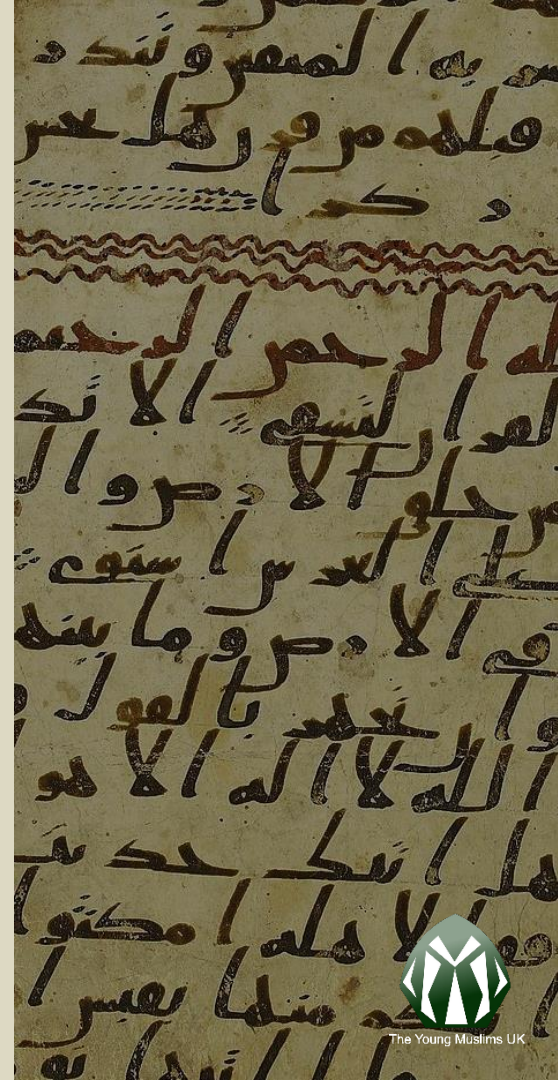
- *"Are those equal to those who don't"* (39:9)

## 4. Rhetorical

- How do you explain.....
- *"Would any of you like to eat the flesh of your dead brother?"* (49:12)

## 5. Affirmation

- *"Am I not your Lord"* (7:172)
- *"Are you a more difficult creation or is the heaven?"* (79:27)



# Reason and Rhetoric

Reason and rhetoric in the Quran deserves a whole class on its own to do it justice, as with all these.

**Questions are used by Allah SWT to invite us to use the faculty of reason HE SWT gave us.**

- He gave us the ability to weigh things up, to make considered judgements. Then, he presents us with a convincing argument and invites us to be the judge. He could have told us simply to believe so and so, without any supporting arguments.
- But no, Allah wants us to be utterly convinced, deep down, in our heart and soul, that what He revealed in the Quran is the Truth, and that the truth can stand up to any scrutiny.
- Questions are used so that we question our own judgements





# Reason and Rhetoric

39:29



...

ضَرَبَ اللَّهُ مَثَلًا رَجُلًا فِيهِ شُرَكَاءُ مُتَشَكِّسُونَ وَرَجُلًا سَلَمًا لِرَجُلٍ هَلْ  
يَسْتَوِيَانِ مَثَلًا الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ بَلْ أَكْثَرُهُمْ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٢٩﴾

Allah sets forth the parable of a slave owned by several quarrelsome masters, and a slave owned by only one master. Are they equal in condition? Praise be to Allah! In fact, most of them do not know.

— Dr. Mustafa Khattab, the Clear Quran

Ibn Abbas relates that this is a parable about **those who worship multiple idols compared to One God**, as found in Tafseer of Ibn Katheer.

The slave owned by several quarrelsome masters will always be confused because their masters will always give them conflicting orders—similarly, one who worships multiple gods will never find peace between them.

**This parable is a logical argument against the existence of multiple gods**, since each god would try to covet what it created.



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# Questions contingent on listeners

## Qs can also be divided into types of listener

- Different questions are intended for different listeners
- Different questions also elicit different responses in listeners
  - E.g. non-believers, hypocrites, believers

1. **Neutral listener**, will listen because no reason not to
  - E.g. your mum
2. **Hesitant listener**, need more emphasis to convince this person
  - Your friend/your sibling
3. **Dismissive, hates you** and everything about you
  - BNP voting teacher whose homework you haven't done all term
  - (Hint: put a challenge on them)



# Metonymy and Hypallage

- **A characteristic or effect is alluded to without directly saying it**
  - E.g. "his door is always open", "the office is busy sorry"
  - "Check out my wheels" (really means "check out my car")
- **Sensitive to listener**
  - "I'm around the corner" (could be the corner or 20 mins away)
  - "I'm going to my mate's house" (mate at the end of the street or mate in another city?)
- **Sensitive to time and space**
  - "Hassan sleeps at the time of forenoon" = A sign of laziness
  - OR "Zahra sleeps at the time of forenoon" = A sign of nobility, praiseworthy, she's wealthy, served, not the server
  - "High nose" = In Classical Arabic it means nobility - doesn't bow to anyone or ask others of things
- **Issue comes up when we apply our own understandings to these phrases**
  - Each of these phrases were well understood in their contexts, so to understand them *in the Qur'an*, we need to put ourselves *back in that context*.



# Examples

71:7

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وَإِنِّي كُلَّمَا دَعَوْتُهُمْ لِتَغْفِرَ لَهُمْ جَعَلُوا أَصْبِعَهُمْ فِي آذَانِهِمْ  
وَاسْتَغْشَوْا ثِيَابَهُمْ وَأَصْرُوا وَاسْتَكْبَرُوا اسْتِكْبَارًا ﴿٧﴾

*Sahih International*

And indeed, every time I invited them that You may forgive them, they put their fingers in their ears, covered themselves with their garments, persisted, and were arrogant with [great] arrogance.

59:18

to top

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا اتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَلْتَنْظُرْ نَفْسٌ مَّا قَدَّمَتْ لِغَدٍ  
وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ خَبِيرٌ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٨﴾

*Sahih International*

O you who have believed, fear Allah . And let every soul look to what it has put forth for tomorrow - and fear Allah . Indeed, Allah is Acquainted with what you do.

42:7



وَكَذَلِكَ أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْكَ قُرْءَانًا عَرَبِيًّا لِّنُنذِرَ أُمَّ الْقُرَى وَمَنْ حَوْلَهَا وَنُنذِرَ يَوْمَ الْجُمُعِ لَا  
رَيْبَ فِيهِ فَرِيقٌ فِي الْجَنَّةِ وَفَرِيقٌ فِي السَّعِيرِ ﴿٧﴾

And so We have revealed to you a Quran in Arabic, so you may warn the Mother of Cities <sup>1</sup> and everyone around it, and warn of the Day of Gathering—about which there is no doubt—  
“when” a group will be in Paradise and another in the Blaze.



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وَإِنِّي كُلَّمَا دَعَوْتُهُمْ لِتَغْفِرَ لَهُمْ جَعَلُوا أَصْبِعَهُمْ فِي آذَانِهِمْ  
وَأَسْتَغْشَوْا ثِيَابَهُمْ وَأَصْرُوا وَاسْتَكْبَرُوا اسْتِكْبَارًا

*Sahih International*

And indeed, every time I invited them that You may forgive them, they put their fingers in their ears, covered themselves with their garments, persisted, and were arrogant with [great] arrogance.

- Obviously they can't put their **whole** fingers in their ear, but a small part of it
- **True meaning:** 'they closed up their ears so that they could not hear what I was calling them to.'
  - This is similar to what Allah said about the disbelievers of the Quraysh



وَكَذَلِكَ أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْكَ قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا لِّنُنْذِرَ أُمَّ الْقُرَى وَمَنْ حَوْلَهَا وَنُنْذِرَ يَوْمَ الْجُمُعِ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهِ فَرِيقٌ فِي الْجَنَّةِ وَفَرِيقٌ فِي السَّعِيرِ



And so We have revealed to you a Quran in Arabic, so you may warn the Mother of Cities<sup>1</sup> and everyone around it, and warn of the Day of Gathering—about which there is no doubt—  
“when” a group will be in Paradise and another in the Blaze.

## Context!

- Makkah is called **Umm Al-Qura** (the Mother of the Towns) because it is nobler than all other lands
- E.g. one prayer is worth 100,000 within Makkah
- Haram - what is halal outside is sacredly protecting inside e.g. Hunting is haram within Makkah
- Allah chose this city to reveal His final Message





# Match these...

1. Salim's hands are clean
2. Zaid has a lot of ashes
3. Khalid's back is strong
4. Aishah is holding the olive branch
5. The ship of the desert
6. He has a long sword scabbard
7. His tent has a big pole
8. Remember often the destroyer of pleasures

- Hard worker
- Looking to reach out to restore a relationship
- Camels
- Trustworthiness
- Wealthy, nobility
- Death
- High praise, cooks a lot, serves guests, generosity
- Tall



# The answers!

- 
- |  |   |
|--|---|
| 1. Salim's hands are clean                   | Hard worker (3)   |
| 2. Zaid has a lot of ashes                   | Looking to reach out to restore a relationship (4)      |
| 3. Khalid's back is strong                   | Camels (5)  |
| 4. Aishah is holding the olive branch        | Trustworthiness (1)                                     |
| 5. The ship of the desert                    | Wealthy, nobility (7)                                   |
| 6. He has a long sword scabbard              | Death (8)   |
| 7. His tent has a big pole                   | High praise, cooks a lot, serves guests, generosity (2) |
| 8. Remember often the destroyer of pleasures | Tall (6)  |



# Breakout Rooms

*Discuss: What do these mean?  
Find their context in the Qur'an.*

36:39 “Moon like an old date stalk”

65:11: darkness into light

13:14 “Calling to water”

62:5 “Donkey carrying books”

64:8 Qur'an as the light

61:8 “Put out His light with their mouths”

71:7 “Fingers in Ears”

42:7 “Mother of Cities”

40:13 “rizq from the sky”

3:107: “live in God's grace”

59:18 “put forward for tomorrow”  
/ “And let every soul look to what it has put forth for tomorrow”



# Suggested answers/notes to prev. slide verses



36:39 “Moon like an old date stalk” = the way the moon curves →

65:11: darkness into light  
Darkness plural, light singular

Meaning, out of the darkness of disbelief and ignorance into the light of faith and knowledge. Allah the Exalted called the revelation that He has sent down “light”, on account of the guidance that it brings.

13:14 “calling to water”

Dedicating prayer or putting reliance in anything other than Allah is of no benefit to anyone e.g. like calling water. It’s useless because water won’t respond and neither will false gods and people. Only Allah will.

62:5 “donkey carrying books”

Learned people but useless, don’t do anything with it.  
So knowledge is only beneficial if it transforms into action!



# Suggested answers/notes to prev. slide verses

## 64:8 Qur'an as the light

- 'Light' fulfils two functions: First, it is itself luminous. Second, it makes other things luminous and bright.
- The Qur'an, on account of its miraculous nature, is itself luminous, AND it illuminates what pleases or displeases Allah: the sacred laws, injunctions and commands, and the realities of the Hereafter, which human beings ought to know.



- 61:8 “Put out His light with their mouths”

The disbelievers intend to put out the Light of Allah with their mouths. Meaning that **the disbelievers will try to contradict the truth with falsehood.**

Their attempts are similar to if you attempt to extinguish the sun or a fire with your mouth, which is impossible → Likewise is the case of their attempt to extinguish truth.

- 71:7 “Fingers in ears” - obviously they can’t put their whole fingers in their ear, but a small part of it!

Meaning, ‘**they refused to listen**/closed their ears so that they could not hear what I was calling them to.’ This is similar to what Allah said about the disbelievers of the Quraysh.

- 42:7 “Mother of Cities/Towns” - Makkah is called Umm Al-Qura (the Mother of the Towns) because it is nobler than all other lands, E.g. one prayer worth 100,000

Allah chose this city to reveal His final Message.





- 40:13 “rizq from the sky” – rizq = sustenance, provisions.

**Here it means rain!** Allah sends rain, which helps grow crops which you can then sell, eat etc.

Rain, through which crops and fruits are brought forth, which with their different colors, tastes, fragrances and forms are a sign of the Creator. It is one kind of water, but by His great power He makes all these things different.

The system of rains is a natural phenomenon symbolic of God’s inspiration. Just as rains are useful for fertile land and useless for barren land, **similarly the inspiration from God brings forth fruit in some but not in others.** This ‘rain’ enters the souls of those who have kept their hearts open and makes their existence lush green.

3:107 “live in God’s grace”

**Here, ‘God’s grace’ means Heaven!** The mercy/grace in which the believers shall rest will not be temporary; it will be forever and eternal. This blessing will never be taken away or reduced in their case.

59:18 “And let every soul look to what it has put forth for tomorrow” meaning, hold yourselves accountable before you are recompensed, and contemplate the deeds that you will present on the Day of your return and will be paraded before your Lord.

Visually picture the idea of you putting forward your deeds and demonstrating them to Allah SWT on the Day of Judgement.

