

## **Inconsistent Linguistic Functional Behaviours of Particle هل in the Holy Quran: A Critique of the Holy Quran Translation**

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### **Abstract**

Buried in the quicksand of ignorance and drowned in the deep reticence of the sea of linguistics, Arabic particles in general, and particle هل in particular have received little attention on translators' part. This paper carefully examines the most widely-read translations of particle هل as held up through the Quran. It is a critique of the translation of the Quran. Contrary to the long-standing concept which perceives هل as solely an interrogative particle, this paper crosses t's and dots i's in relation to focusing translators' attention on other almost-overlooked linguistic functions carried by هل, i.e. corroborative, negative and imperative. It is found that particle هل in all contexts is dealt with from the same perspective in the translations. This entails the translators' failure to understand the inconsistent linguistic behaviors of هل. This paper has put efforts to plumb the depths of identifying the different functions expressed by هل, which have long stood in the face of translators, a knotty problem that has long escaped the notice of translators, and thus yielded inaccurate renditions of the هل. This paper may open up new horizons for scholars in their future studies, and act as a bedrock for researchers to follow suit.

*Keywords:* Corroborative, imperative, interrogative, linguistic functions, Particle هل, Quran, translation

**Cites as:** Bader Eddin, E. A.(2019). Inconsistent Linguistic Functional Behaviours of Particle هل in the Holy Quran: A Critique of the Holy Quran Translation. *Arab World English Journal for Translation & Literary Studies*, 3 (1) 66-73.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awejtls/vol3no1.5>

## Introduction

Any language is made up of components which are set off by spaces in orthography. These components, though can technically still be further broken down into smaller units known as morphemes, are known as ‘words; or ‘lexical items’. The words of any language must fall into one of its wider categories, known as ‘parts of speech’ or ‘word classes’. Parts of speech are words of which sentences structures are composed (Quirk and Greenbaum 1973). While Arabic is, according to Mahmoud (2012), very limited in its parts of speech which consist of a noun, a verb and a particle (to be analyzed further below), English parts of speech exceed their Arabic counterparts in number. English words belong to such parts of speech as verbs, nouns, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, pronouns, conjunctions and interjections (Leech & Svartvik 2003). However, it is worth noting that it is a misnomer to believe that the Arabic tri-nomenclature of word classes excludes the five seemingly extra ones in English. It is but a difference in categorization. For instance, the English word class of nouns covers in Arabic the word classes of nouns, pronouns, adjectives and adverbs. So, the tri-classification of Arabic parts of speech does not mean that English has more parts of speech than Arabic does. By the same token, the Arabic word class of ‘particles’ includes English prepositions, conjunctions and interjections.

The present paper explores the semantic functions carried by the ‘Arabic particle هل. Arabic particles are considered an umbrella term because they include such English parts of speech as prepositions, conjunctions and interjections. Particles in Arabic, referred to as حرف, can be further divided into two types of particles, namely. حروف مبنى (alphabetical letters) and حروف معنى (conjunctions). The former category helps construct words, and are thus considered the bricks which words are made up of. One example is ق in قرأ. The letter ق is said to be حرف مبنى (an alphabetical letter) as it is one of the letters which make up the word قرأ. Although the difference between a sound and a letter lies beyond the scope of this paper, we can in passing draw a firm dividing line between both by saying a sound is more specific than a letter in that each letter is a sound BUT NOT vice versa. One illustrative example is that while ‘K’ is both a letter and a sound, the initial sounds, i.e. affricates’ in ‘church’ or ‘judge’ are not letters because they are not members of the English alphabet. One more difference lies in how the same letter can be technically referred to as different sound acoustically speaking, depending on the neighboring sound preceding or following a certain sound in a word or in connected speech.

On the other hand, حروف المعنى (conjunctions or particles) are meaningful in themselves, but do not refer to nouns or verbs. They include such many subdivisions as ‘prepositions’, ‘jurative particles, exception particles, warning particles, entreatment particles, interrogative particles, excitative particles, etc (Babity 2004). The major category of ‘Particles’ under which all the above-listed sub-classes can be divided into two classes: one-letter particles’ and ‘poly-letter particles’. The former includes 13 particles; some of which are اللام- الكاف- الفاء- السين- التاء- الباء- الياء- الناء- السين- الفاء- الكاف- اللام. The latter sub-class includes particles which are made up of two or more letters. It is under the latter category that هل falls, our point in focus in this paper. The poly-letter particles are over 82 ones (Babity 2004) whereas Al Murady (1992) extends them to 91 ones. Some of these particles include, but not limited to, من- أو- هل- لم- لن- إلى- على- لكن.

This paper scrutinizes the inconsistency of linguistic functions carried by the particle هل in Arabic. This paper makes an attempt to vividly show how the particle هل in Arabic does not stick to one linguistic meaning, bringing about grave mistakes in the most widely-read translations of the Holy Quran. This paper thoroughly explores the varied linguistic functions carried by هل in different contexts. Almost all Quran translators perceive هل as an interrogative particle, making their translations inaccurate.

### Literature Review:

The present paper is concerned with the Arabic semantic functional content, carried by the particle هل. In Arabic, particles are divided into 'effective or operative' and 'passive' عامل وعاطل. By the former, we mean that the occurrence of one particle before the noun it accompanies brings about what is grammatically known as 'declension' الإعراب. This means the last morpheme or inflection of the word carries a marker (diacritic mark) showing its grammatical case and category. Such particles, depending on what particles are used, may make the word they precede in the nominative, accusative, genitive or apocope case, that is حالة الرفع أو النصب أو الجر أو الجزم respectively. For instance, prepositions are considered one type of 'effective particles' as they transform the noun following them into the genitive case. The 'passive' particles, when preceding words, bring about indeclinability or invariability to those words. They enable the words they precede to keep adhering to one form, no matter where they occur حالة البناء (Eddin 2018).

Approaching the paper focal point further, the paper will shed light on 'the particle هل. Considered a passive particle, it has no effect on both the noun or verb it precedes (Mahmoud 2012). Although it precedes both nouns and verbs, it is more common for it to precede verbs.

One of the functions of particle هل is its use as an interrogative particle in Arabic as in هل رأيت محمداً (Did you see Mohammed?). It is always used in affirmative statements (Ghalaiyeeni 2015). If preceding a verb in the present tense, it indicates 'futurity' as in هل تسافر الآن؟. When it is used in the interrogative sense, it is usually realized as 'a non-negative operator' in English to form a yes/no question (Quirk & Greenbaum 1973). The operators include verbs to be, have, do and the modals. When operators are used in negative forms, we are left with what is called in Arabic استفهام إنكاري (negative interrogative). One example is أما رأيت زيدا اليوم؟ (Did you not see Zaid today?). Note that a negative interrogative in English is realized in Arabic by a word other than هل, i.e. أما. Operators are characterized by carrying the tense, aspect and mood of the statement in which they appear. It is worth mentioning that 'time' is a universal non-linguistic concept, and thus is expressed by adverbials or adjuncts (Quirk & Greenbaum 1973).

The particle هل has many other linguistic functions in other contexts, the most known is that of interrogative function. A considerable amount of efforts has gone into finding out the instances where هل has been held up through the holy Quran since particles lie beyond the index finders of statistical dictionaries as المعجم المفهرس by Abdulbaqi (2007). All uses of the particle هل have been identified throughout the Holy Quran. Eight nine uses of the particle هل have been found out through the Quran. These uses are categorized according to their context-specific functions, having based the study on different exegesis books (Al-Hamathani, Attantawi, Ibn

Ashour, Al Alousi, Azzamakhshari, Azzajaj, etc). Bringing the most widely-read translations by (Khan & Al Hilali, 1994) and (Abdullah Yusuf Ali, 1992) to compare them to the already-identified functions of هل.

### Research Questions

The present paper addresses critical issues in relation to هل and its linguistic functions in the Holy Quran along with their translations. The key issues dealt with can be demonstrated through the following questions:

- Do all the frequent uses of particle هل, held up throughout the Holy Quran, carry the same function or meaning, i.e that of interrogative function?
- What other functions does the particle هل have in different contexts (of course other than serving as an ‘interrogative particle’)?
- How accurate are the mostly-read translations of the Holy Quran regarding the particle هل?
- Why did the translators in question of the Holy Quran fail to capture the function of the particle هل, and thus gave inaccurate translations?

### Discussion and Analysis

Having identified the 89 appearances of the particle هل throughout the Holy Quran, I have categorized the major linguistic functions of the particle. I came up with 7 different major linguistic functions of the particle هل (see Table 1 in Appendix). While the basic function indicated by هل is ‘interrogative’, it can be used to denote other different functions (Al Murady 1992). I selected to discuss only the last three functions in Table 1 of Appendix, i.e. Corroborative particle, Negative Particle and imperative particle. Additionally, other linguistic functions of the particle هل included Interrogative particle, Interrogative sarcastically-veiled particle, Remorse particle and Despair particle. Readers may refer to Table 1 to see the 7 different functions along with the instances from the Holy Quran which include the particle هل. It is noticed that the same particle in Arabic carries different linguistic functions in different contexts. Some illustrative examples have been identified, and tabulated in Table 1.

#### A. Particle هل as a corroborative particle

It shall start by the particle هل as it functions as a corroborative particle to give emphasis to the act expressed by the verb it precedes. In this case, هل precedes a verb in the past tense, and the linguistic function expressed here is ‘emphasis’. One example is quoted from lines said by the Prophet’s companion Zaid Al-Ta’y as he says

سائل فوارس يربوع بشدنتنا ... أهل رأونا بسفح القاع ذي الأكم

Here it is noticed that هل is used to give emphasis to the verb رأونا, and it is thus a ‘corroborative particle’ rather than a question (Ibn Yaesh 2001, and Al Sayouty 1907). The Holy Quran exhibits many instances where هل is used in the same sense. A few examples are هل أتاك حديث الغاشية and هل أتى على الإنسان حين من الدهر لم يكن شيئاً مذكوراً. Table 2 in the Appendix shows some examples from the Holy Quran where هل is used to carry the function of emphasis, and can be replaced with قد (Al Murady 1992).

Looking at Table 2 shows how two of the most widely-read translations of the Holy Quran, i.e. Khan and Al Hilali and Abdullah Yusuf Ali, have understood the particle هل superficially. They understand it as an interrogative question, leading them to translate the particle in this context as a simple polar question, initiated with an operator as discussed above. This has yielded a different message from the one intended, flouting the ultimate goal of translation. In other words, while readers take the translated Quranic verses as interrogatives, the intended message to be conveyed is that the verses in question are ‘emphasized statements’.

### B. Particle هل as a negative particle

Another different linguistic function expressed by هل is that of ‘negation’ (See Table 3 in the Appendix). In this case, هل is usually followed by إلا. One example is فهل على الرسل إلا البلاغ المبين (16:35). More examples can be هل يصلح العطار ما أفسد الدهر and هل يقدر على هذا غيري؟ (Al Muradi 1992). In the above-mentioned examples, the particle هل is not an interrogative particle; rather it is a negative particle, equal to ‘not’. Table 3 exhibits examples from the Holy Quran where هل appears to carry the linguistic function of ‘negation’. In the translations provided by Khan and Al Hilali and Abdullah Yusuf Ali (see Table 3), it is clear that they both fail to capture the subtle meaning intended that they render the particle هل into interrogatives, starting with an operator and ending in a question mark, in a means which further boosts their interpretation of هل here as an interrogative particle. Because the aim of translation is to render the intended message, the particle هل in Table 3 must be translated into a negative particle, taking the aspect into context.

### C. Particle هل as an imperative particle

Inconsistent in its linguistic functions, the particle هل continues to change its function according to the context. Table 4 in the Appendix shows that particle هل appears to carry an imperative function. The selected Quranic verses in Table 4 exhibit particle هل as an imperative particle, rather than an interrogative particle as rendered and understood by the two translations. When هل is used as an imperative particle, it precedes addressee pronouns, i.e. أنتم. Table 4 vividly shows that هل has been understood as an interrogative particle, bringing about a different function than the intended particle. In Table 4, particle هل should be translated into an imperative form of verb. Again, it is noticed that the translators in focus could not spot the exact meaning carried by هل.

### Conclusion

As we have noted above, Particle هل translation has not been explored thoroughly, bringing about inaccurate translation. Translators do not dive deep into the real functions of particles, and they take meaning superficially instead. Translators apparently have a nodding acquaintance with the linguistically-deeply running functions of هل. A considerable gap of translators’ linguistic knowledge needs to be filled. All uses of the particle هل have been perceived and understood the same by the translators as ‘an interrogative particle’. A deeper thorough knowledge of linguistic nuances of the source text brings about new results, and thus a new translation can be launched in the light of such important differences. Having paved the way for other researchers, the researchers can set off on an epic journey to further explore the translation of other particles in the Holy Quran.

It is a strong call to delve into the sea of the translation of the Holy Quran to come up with new pearls for discussion and analysis. Researchers may roll up their sleeves to take this study steps further with tenacity; they can bring into focus other particles, and the suprasegmental features accompanying the newly-explored linguistic functions of هل. Analysis of the richness of the particles in Arabic as used in the Holy Quran could take this study further until it reaches its apogee.

### Acknowledgement

The author would like to express his gratitude to King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia for providing administrative and technical support.

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Appendix

Table 1 shows the different functions of particle هل as classed in different contexts

Different Functions of هل, classed in different contexts	
هل-containing Quranic verse	Function (meaning)
إذ قال الحواريون يا حسبي ان عزيم هل ينقطع ريثك ان نزل علينا مائدة من السماء (المائدة، 112)	Interrogative particle حرف استفهام
من كان يظن ان لن ينصره الله في الدنيا والآخرة فليتبسبب الى السماء ثم ينقطع فليظن هل يذهبن كذبا ما يخبط (الحج، 15)	Interrogative sarcastically-veiled particle حرف استفهام مبطن بالتهكم
فيقولوا هل نحن منظرون (الشعراء، 203)	Remorse particle حرف استفهام غرضه الحسرة
قلوا ربنا انما اتيناك فتنين فاعرفنا بآياتنا فهل اى خروج من بيني (عمر، 11)	Despair particle حرف استفهام غرضه اليأس حد القنوط والاستحالة
هل لك حيث صلب إبراهيم المكرمين (التارىت، 24)	Corroborative particle حرف استفهام معناه التوكيد
هل ارايتكم ان انطق خات الله بعهة او حجرة هل يهبط الا القوم الظالمون (الاعراب، 47)	Negative interrogative Particle حرف استفهام بغير النفي
قل لئن اوحى الي انما ابلغكم لانه واحد فهل تمشيتمون (الانباء، 108)	Imperative Particle حرف استفهام بغير النفي ير والامر والتخصيص

Table 2 shows particle هل, acting as a tool for carrying the meaning of ‘a corroborative particle’ in different Quranic verses

Source Text	Target Text 1 (Khan and Al-Hilali)	Target Text 2 (Abdullah Yusuf Ali)	Actual Function	Wrongly understood function
هل اناك حديث الغاشية (الغاشية، 1)	Has there come to you the narration of the overwhelming (i.e. the Day of Resurrection)?	Has the story reached thee of the overwhelming (Event)?	Corroborative particle هل	Interrogative Function realized as an auxiliary verb used to form a question.
هل اناك حديث موسى (النازعات، 15)	Has there come to you the story of Musa (Moses)?	Has the story of Moses reached thee?	Corroborative particle هل	Interrogative Function realized as an auxiliary verb used to form a question.
هل اثنى على الانسان حين من الدهر لم يكن شيئا مذكورا (الانسان، 1)	Has there not been over man a period of time, when he was nothing to be mentioned?	Has there not been over Man a long period of Time, when he was nothing - (not even) mentioned?	Corroborative particle هل	Interrogative Function realized as an auxiliary verb used to form a question.

Table 3 shows particle هل, acting as a tool for carrying the meaning of ‘a negative particle’ in different Quranic verses

ST	TT 1 (Khan and Al-Hilali)	TT 2 (Abdullah Yusuf Ali)	Actual Function	Wrongly understood function
فَهَلْ تَرَىٰ لَهُمْ مِن بَاقِيَةٍ (الحاقة، 8)	Do you see any remnants of them?	Then <b>seest</b> thou any of them left surviving?	<b>NEGATIVE PARTICLE</b> هل	Interrogative Function realized as an auxiliary verb used to form a question.
هَلْ جَزَاءُ الْإِحْسَانِ إِلَّا الْإِحْسَانُ (الإحسان، الرحمن، 60)	Is there any reward for good other than good?	Is there any Reward for Good - other than Good?	<b>NEGATIVE PARTICLE</b> هل	Interrogative Function realized as an auxiliary verb used to form a question.
فَهَلْ يُهْلَكُ إِلَّا الْقَوْمَ الْفَاسِقُونَ (الاحقاف، 35)	But <b>shall</b> any be destroyed except the people who are Al-Fasiqun (the rebellious, disobedient to Allah)	But shall any be destroyed except those who transgress?	<b>NEGATIVE PARTICLE</b> هل	Interrogative Function realized as an auxiliary verb used to form a question.

Table 4 shows particle هل, acting as a tool for carrying the meaning of ‘an imperative particle’ in different Quranic verses

ST	TT 1 (Khan and Al-Hilali)	TT 2 (Abdullah Yusuf Ali)	Actual Function	Wrongly understood function
إِذَا يُرِيدُ الشَّيْطَانُ أَنْ يُوقِعَ بَيْنَكُمُ الْعَدَاوَةَ وَالْبَغْضَاءَ فِي الْخَفَرِ وَالْمَيْسِرِ وَيُصَدِّقْكُمْ عَلَىٰ ذَنْبِ اللَّهِ وَحِينَ الصَّلَاةِ <b>فَهَلْ</b> أَنْتُمْ مُنْتَهَوُونَ (الماندة، 91)	So, <b>will</b> you not then abstain?	<b>Will</b> ye not then abstain?	Imperative Particle بمعنى انتهوا	Interrogative Function realized as an auxiliary verb used to form a question.
قُلْ إِنَّمَا يُوحَىٰ إِلَيَّ أَنَّمَا إِلَهُكُمُ إِلَهٌ وَاحِدٌ <b>فَهَلْ</b> أَنْتُمْ مُسْلِمُونَ (الأنبياء، 108)	<b>Will</b> you then submit to His Will (become Muslims and stop worshipping others besides Allah)?"	<b>Will</b> ye therefore bow to His Will (in Islam)?"	Imperative Particle بمعنى أسلموا	Interrogative Function realized as an auxiliary verb used to form a question.
وَقِيلَ لِلنَّاسِ <b>هَلْ</b> أَنْتُمْ مُجْتَمِعُونَ (الشعراء، 39)	<b>"Are</b> you (too) going to assemble?"	<b>"Are</b> ye (now) assembled?-	Imperative Particle بمعنى اجتمعوا	Interrogative Function realized as an auxiliary verb used to form a question.