

## **A Cognitive Study of Metaphors in the Glorious Qur'an: From a Linguistic to a Conceptual Approach**

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### **Abstract**

The current study investigates the use of conceptual metaphors in the glorious Qur'an, focusing on four abstract concepts represented in the Qur'an through metaphors. These concepts are REWARD, HUMILITY, HYPOCRISY, and ARROGANCE, which recur in many positions in the Qur'an. The researcher takes up selected Qur'anic verses that carry these abstract concepts and analyzes them at two levels: linguistic and conceptual. The study's main theoretical contribution is to show how a linguistic approach can be transformed into a conceptual one and how this enriches our understanding of abstraction. The linguistic analysis of the verses is supported by translations of Qur'anic meanings, interpretation of the verses, and cultivating the use of Arabic and English dictionaries. To perform the cognitive analysis, the researcher uses Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), which examines metaphor from two domains: the target domain, which is the abstract concept to be explained and the source domain, which is the mental mapping that helps us understand that abstract concept. The study finds that metaphors in the Qur'an are meant to be understood not only linguistically but conceptually too. It concludes by emphasizing the significance of a conceptual approach to the study of metaphor in the Qur'an not only for conceptual metaphor theory but also for the interpretation of the Qur'an and for Arabic linguistics.

*Keywords:* abstract concept, cognitive, linguistic metaphor, conceptual metaphor, Qur'an, source domain, target domain

**Cites as:** AlAjmi, M. (2019). A Cognitive Study of Metaphors in the Glorious Qur'an: From a Linguistic to a Conceptual Approach. *Arab World English Journal for Translation & Literary Studies*, 3 (2). 114-121. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awejtls/vol3no2.10>

### **Introduction: Metaphor Definition in Language and Psychology**

*Metaphor* in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is defined as “a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable.” It is employed for the sake of making an implicit comparison between two different objects (Knowles & Moon, 2006). Geraghty (2013) notes, however, that Arabic does not have one single term for ‘metaphor’, but rather three more specific terms covering different aspects of the concept specifically than how it is in English. Abd Al-Qahir Al-Jurjani, known as a “master of Arabic grammar,” devised the theoretical framework that describes poetic imagery in Arabic and presents these terms: *tashbih* (تشبيه), *tamthil* (تمثيل), and *isti'arah* (استعارة) (Geraghty, 2013, p.1). *Tashbih* can be translated as ‘simile’, in which two unlike objects are compared explicitly. *Tamthil* is similar to ‘extended metaphor’, where the comparison between unlike objects needs a deeper kind of analysis to infer the meaning. *Isti'arah* also roughly means ‘metaphor’, but a comparison made by referring explicitly to only one of the two meaning-elements that compose the comparison. These definitions, however, are purely linguistic, and do not get at the concept of metaphor held in the field of cognitive psychology, which involves mapping one experience into another through analogies in order to understand complex concepts (Vosniadou & Ortony, 1989).

### **Conceptual Metaphor Theory**

In the field of cognitive linguistics, which is rooted in cognitive psychology (Moser, 2000), the word *conceptual* was first assigned to the word *metaphor* in 1980, when George Lakoff and Mark Johnson proposed Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) in their book *Metaphors We Live By*. According to them, metaphor should not be viewed as part of “extraordinary language,” but as something that is common in our daily life, language, and thinking (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 4). Knowles and Moon (2006) similarly describe metaphor as “a basic phenomenon that occurs throughout the whole range of language activity” (p. 2). In fact, metaphor in this view is not exclusively language-related; instead, metaphors also structure our thoughts and actions—the way the conceptual system in our brain works is “metaphorical in nature” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 4). Lakoff and Johnson (1980) state that “the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another”(p.5). Thus, understanding metaphor thoroughly involves investigating not only its linguistic aspect but also how language helps people acquire an understanding of abstract concepts in daily life.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) examine metaphor from two levels: those of the *source domain* and the *target domain*. The latter relates to the abstract concept to be examined, while the former relates to the mapping process that occurs in the brain to understand that concept. In order to demonstrate how their theory works, Lakoff and Johnson give an example that we encounter frequently in our daily life. ARGUMENT is an abstract concept that can be processed mentally through the use of the conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR. They suggest that WAR is a physical experience that involves the existence of proponents and opponents, in which each side must or is generally expected to either lose or win. Processing such an experience in such terms mediates our understanding of what the abstract concept ARGUMENT means and what actions are usually associated with it.

### **Types of Conceptual Metaphors**

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) classify conceptual metaphors into three types: structural, orientational, and ontological. A structural metaphor is one in which the subject concept, that is, the target domain, can be understood and explained through the source domain it corresponds to. A good example is ARGUMENT IS WAR, given above: the source domain, WAR, “structures the actions we perform in arguing” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p.5).

The second type of conceptual metaphors is orientational metaphors. As the term suggests, these are based on orientation in relation to space: “up-down, in-out, front-back, on-off, deep-shallow, central-peripheral” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p.15). This kind of spatial orientation does not explain the target domain in terms of the source domain, as in structural metaphors; instead, concepts are organized with respect to one another—an example given is HAPPY IS UP, in which the source domain, which is UP, imparts an orientation to the target domain which is HAPPY. The same goes for SAD IS DOWN, for example. Such metaphors can be found in many utterances used in everyday communication, such as *I am feeling high/low*.

The third type is ontological metaphors, which go beyond orientational metaphors in the rich basis they give us for understanding and interpreting complex abstractions. Through ontological metaphors, our experiences are explained in terms of objects, entities, or substances that can be referred to, counted, and/or categorized. These entities can include ideas, emotions, and events. An example is INFLATION IS UP, where the experience of prices increasing is perceived as an entity through the noun *inflation* (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

### **Studies on Conceptual Metaphor in the Holy Qur'an**

The Qur'an is well known as the foundation of Islamic faith, viewed by Muslims as the most glorious book, from which they take guidance for this life and the hereafter. The language of the Qur'an manifests the richness of the Arabic language across realms of knowledge and expression. It is viewed by believers as a miraculous book that contains incomparably eloquent rhetorical language that cannot and will never be matched by humans. Furthermore, it is understood to include news from the past, the present, and the future, making it a wonder (Salamah, 2002). Gaining more knowledge about and from the Qur'an has helped many people develop different and better explanations of what they may encounter in life.

Studying the use of conceptual metaphor in the Qur'an is a new way of appreciating this glorious book and the Arabic language. Some studies of metaphor in Arabic tackle how abstract concepts are rendered and clarified through the use of metaphor with specific reference to the Qur'an but without referring to any theoretical framework. For instance, the way Al-Handiyani (2008) examines the use of metaphor in Surat Al-Baqarah (the second chapter of the Qur'an), is at a purely linguistic, superficial level. Al-Turk (2011) studies metaphors in the Quran in relation to their meaning, but only descriptively, grouping them under abstract concepts without explaining the mental mapping process that occurs to allow the reader to grasp such concepts. Hypocrisy, stinginess, forgiveness, and patience are some abstract concepts she includes in her study. She classifies such concepts into two groups: prohibited attributes/manners Muslims should avoid and

good attributes/manners Muslims should have. Al-Ameer (2007) published a book on how description is employed rhetorically in the Qur'an, including a chapter on how abstract concepts in the Qur'an are represented through physical experiences in order to transfer something abstract to something concrete. Al-Ameer (2007) and Al-Turk (2011) illuminate our knowledge of the effectiveness of these Qur'anic metaphors to illustrate abstractions, but this knowledge needs to be systematized into a theory to enrich Arabic linguistics and our knowledge of the language of the Qur'an. This is basically what Lakoff and Johnson's CMT provides.

However, there are a few studies that give a theoretically supported cognitive-linguistic analysis of metaphors in the Quran. Berrada (2006) examines the metaphorical meanings of LIGHT and DARKNESS in the Qur'an using a CMT approach, relating LIGHT to positive qualities and DARKNESS to negative ones. He stresses that the Qur'an (like any other text) must be interpreted using a conceptual approach to show how metaphors assist the process of comprehending complex concepts, because this is what metaphors were meant for, that is, intrinsically how they work. Sani and Ruma (2014) investigate the use of conceptual metaphors in the Qur'an supported by Lakoff and Johnson's theory, focusing on LIFE and DEATH as target domains, concretized in source domains such as the life cycle of plants, which germinate, bloom, and wither.

Abu Libdeh (2015) studies the way human beings are conceptualized through metaphors and how such metaphors represent our actions. He explains how the human body represents human actions. An example is the HEAD, the upper part of human body; in Arabic culture, raising one's head is associated with dignity, a positive quality that is thus associated with the upper part of the body, while the lower part is undignified. Like the other writers cited in the previous paragraph, Abu Libdeh too emphasizes that Qur'anic metaphors should be conceptualized to reach a better translation of the meanings of the Qur'an.

### **Methodology and Data Analysis**

In this study, the researcher employs a qualitative research method, describing the focal metaphors used linguistically first and conceptually second. Nassaji (2015) states that "qualitative research collects data qualitatively, and the method of analysis is also primarily qualitative. This often involves an inductive exploration of the data to identify recurring themes, patterns, or concepts and then describing and interpreting those categories" (pp. 129–130).

The resources that have supported the researcher are several. The first one is, obviously, the glorious Qur'an itself, which, as an article of Muslim faith cannot be translated and remains miraculous in itself, only approximated. The second resource is then Al-Hilali and Khan's English translation of the Qur'an (1984). The third is the exegeses of the Qur'an by Ibn-Katheer, Al-Tabari, and Al-Qortoby compiled in the King Saud University Online Electronic Qur'an Project. The classical Arabic dictionary the *Lisan Al-Arab* (Ibn Manzur, 1290) and several English dictionaries were consulted to examine the linguistic meaning of key words related to the metaphor investigated. The abstract concepts the researcher selected are REWARD, HUMILITY, HYPOCRISY, and ARROGANCE, each of which recurs in multiple places in the Qur'an. Last

but not least is research presenting the theoretical framework of CMT, primarily Lakoff and Johnson (1980), which shifts the interpretation of metaphors from a linguistic to a conceptual orientation. Using these works, the researcher attempts to show how the conceptual approach of analysis contributes to the linguistic interpretation of metaphors in the Qur'an.

### Abstract Concepts Represented through Metaphors in the Qur'an:

#### 1. REWARD:

"مَنْ ذَا الَّذِي يُقْرِضُ اللَّهَ قَرْضًا حَسَنًا فَيُضَاعَفَهُ لَهُ" سورة الحديد آية ١١

'Who is he that will lend to Allâh a goodly loan so that He may multiply it to him many times? And it is Allâh that decreases or increases (your provisions), and unto Him you shall return.'

(Sura 57:11)

The metaphor in this verse comes in the form of a question. Linguistically, the two objects being compared in this verse are a man who lends money to whomever needs it and a man who lends money to Allah. The difference between the two loans is that the man who lends to somebody in need may not get his money back, and will take a loss, whereas the person who lends Allah money will see his money multiplied by Allah, which has been stated by Al-Tabari. The comparison was made to explain the unseen reward a Muslim gets from the deity when he gives his money to people in need (LENDING TO THE NEEDY IS LENDING TO GOD).

The linguistic interpretation provided above can be transformed into a conceptual one through CMT as follows. The metaphor employed in this verse concertizes the abstract concept REWARD that a Muslim will get in the hereafter. REWARD as a concept deals with feelings that cannot be expressed physically. This is where CMT is needed. In this verse, the source domain is INVESTMENT. The amount of money s/he gets back will be much more than what s/he may expect; this represents the REWARD s/he will get in the hereafter.

#### 2. HUMILITY:

"وَاخْفِضْ لَهُمَا جَنَاحَ الذَّلِّ مِنَ الرَّحْمَةِ وَقُلْ رَبِّ ارْحَمْهُمَا كَمَا رَبَّيَانِي صَغِيرًا" سورة الإسراء آية ٢٤

'And lower unto them [parents] the wing of submission and humility through mercy, and say: "My Lord! Bestow on them Your Mercy as they did bring me up when I was young."'

(Sura 17:24)

This verse involves a compound metaphor that comes in the form of an imperative structure. The first comparison made is between the man who acts with mercy towards his parents and a bird that lowers its wings when landing. The second metaphor, 'the wing of submission and humility', compares humility to a bird that lowers its wings. The two comparisons together explain the meaning of the humility and submission that people should have towards their parents in Islam (Ibn-Katheer). Lowering the bird's wings reflects the man's affection towards his parents (Al-Qortoby). Humility as represented by the verb root form in the past tense (تواضع) means 'to put something down', hence the opposite of holding something up (Ibn Manzur, 1290).

Thus, HUMILITY IS LOWERING SOMETHING. Humility, the target domain, is figured as a bird's wing, which the bird lowers in love, respect, and care, much as Muslims bow down and

kneel when they pray, indicating submission and humility before Allah, or as Western people traditionally took off their hats when greeting someone to show respect.

### 3. HYPOCRISY:

"صُمُّ بُحْمٌ عُمْيٌ فَهُمْ لَا يَرْجِعُونَ" سورة البقرة آية ١٨

‘They are deaf, dumb, and blind, so they return not (to the Right Path)’

(Sura 2:18)

Hypocrisy is defined in the *Cambridge Dictionary* as “a situation in which someone pretends to believe something that they do not really believe, or that is the opposite of what they do or say at another time.” In Arabic, as explained by Ibn Manzur (1290), the concept is culture-specific, dealing with hypocrites’ attitude to Islam and Muslims (Ibn Manzur, 1290). The two definitions show that in both languages hypocrisy can be explained through what hypocrites do. The verse above describes hypocrites as deaf, since they chose not to hear what the Prophet Muhammad says; “dumb” or mute, in the sense that they can’t even talk about Islam; and blind, since they chose not to see where the right path (which is Islam) is (Ibn-Katheer).

In these three (sub-)metaphors of deafness, muteness, and blindness, the recurring theme is loss of the senses and abilities that can help the person to rightly perceive and reason about the things around him or her. Deaf people have “lost” their sense of hearing; mute people, their ability to speak; and blind people, their sight. The metaphor emerges because hypocrites do not physically lose such senses and abilities, but choose to be like the deaf, blind, and mute in order to disbelieve or disregard what Allah has expressed through his messenger Muhammad (peace be upon him). Thus, HYPOCRISY, which is the target domain, can be explained through the conceptual metaphor HYPOCRISY IS A DELIBERATE LOSS, where DELIBERATE LOSS is the source domain. When a person deliberately decides to lose something or somebody, it means that s/he will not pay attention to or care about that thing anymore, or will not listen or speak to that person. That is, loss means a reduction to zero in all aspects. The process of mental mapping between the two domains help us understand who hypocrites are and what they do.

### 4. ARROGANCE:

"فَقَالَ أَنَا رَبُّكُمُ الْأَعْلَى" سورة النازعات آية ٢٤

‘Saying: “I am your lord, most high.”’

(Sura 79:24)

The metaphor drawn in this verse is direct: Pharaoh compares himself, illegitimately, to Allah, Almighty, saying he is the “lord” and “most high”—that no one can be higher or above him (Al-Tabari). This metaphor conveys Pharaoh’s arrogance—thus, the conceptual metaphor that best corresponds to it is ARROGANCE IS ABOVENESS, in which the target domain is the abstraction ARROGANCE and the source domain is ABOVENESS. In our physical world, if something is put onto something else, nothing below it can be seen unless you remove it. This applies to people as well as objects—someone high up may be unable to see or hear what is below him/her. The researcher chose ABOVENESS as a source domain and not HIGHNESS because ‘above’ is a

relative term, entailing being 'superior' to someone, whereas 'high/the highest' is truly applicable only to Allah Almighty, carrying the meaning of 'elevation' (*Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary*, 2019).

### Conclusion:

The present study has taken up the CMT approach to metaphors, which shifts them from the linguistic to the conceptual domain, revealing their source and target domains and the relation between them, and has asserted its significance for and applied it to the analysis and interpretation of metaphor in the Holy Qur'an. The examples explored have provided insight how linguistic interpretations of abstract concepts can be transformed into conceptual ones. Lakoff and Johnson's theory proved significant in the way it shows how metaphors concretize abstract concepts, allowing them to be grasped more easily. Arabic linguists should be advised to adapt this scientific linguistic theory to Arabic and formulate new theories informed by it that enrich the way Arabic and the Qur'an are studied.

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