

Linguistics and Islamic Studies in Historical Perspective: the Case of Interdisciplinary Communication

Olga BERNIKOVA

**Laboratory for Analysis and Modeling of Social Processes,
St Petersburg State University,
11, Universitetskya emb.
St Petersburg, 199034, Russia, o.bernikova@spbu.ru**

and

Oleg REDKIN

**Laboratory for Analysis and Modelling of Social Processes,
St Petersburg State University,
11, Universitetskya emb.
St Petersburg, 199034, Russia**

ABSTRACT

Islamic Studies and the Arabic language are indivisible from each other starting from the appearance of Islam and formation of the Classical language. The present paper demonstrates correlation between linguistics and religion in historical perspective with regard to peculiarities of the Arabic language which distinguish it from other prophetic languages. Arabic is considered to be one of the most powerful examples of a sacred language in the history. The authors underline the role of written tradition in Islamic Studies and analyze the importance of the text of the Qur'ān for those who study Islamic civilization. Without understanding of the polyphony of this sacred text, indivisible unity of its form and content it is impossible to understand social developments both in present and past. The text of the Qur'ān like any other phenomenon is a multifaceted object that should be studied from different points of view.

Keywords: Arabic, linguistics, religion, Islamic Studies, Qur'ān.

1. INTRODUCTION

Linguistics and religion in the case of the Arabic language and Islamic Studies are indivisible from each other and could be regarded as a clear example of interdisciplinary communication in historical perspective.

Arabic is considered to be one of the most powerful examples of a sacred language in the history. No other linguistic culture has ever blended the language of God himself with that of human thought and culture on a comparable scale [1].

The study of Islam is always accompanied by a study of its history, Muslim art, culture, ethnography, etc. Besides that, interdisciplinarity manifests itself in the fact that it is necessary to study these disciplines, relying upon original sources in Arabic. That is why it is obligatory for any specialist in Islamic Studies to read and understand texts in Arabic. This paper demonstrates correlation between religion and language study on the example of the historical development of Islam and the Arabic language. In this regard the role of written tradition, and, foremost, the Qur'ān cannot be overestimated.

2. ISLAMIC STUDIES AND CLASSICAL ARABIC: MUTUAL CORRESPONDENCE

The Classical Arabic was a mean of oral communication among Muslims from different tribes and ethnic groups. This universal mean of communication existed in the environment of dialectal diversity of Arabia and the languages of indigenous people on the newly acquired territories of the caliphate during the initial period of the spread of Islam.

Nowadays we witness the tendency to use Modern Standard Arabic as a mean of communication among Muslims but on the quite new stage of social development. It is considered that every Muslim must read the Qur'ān in Arabic, that is why most of them should have at least some knowledge of Arabic.

Traditionally the Muslim world is considered to be represented by countries, in which various Arabic vernaculars are spoken (the Arab world) and countries in which national and official languages are not genealogically related to Arabic (Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, Indonesia, etc.). However due to the constant growth of Muslims worldwide as well as of intensification of migrations the present day Muslim world has no longer geographical and political boundaries.

On one hand this kind of reality led to a new wave of spread of the Arabic language in the world and hence to the growing interest to its study.

On the other hand, modern trends in social development, the current geopolitical processes, migrations and national security issues provided conditions for growing interest in Islamic Studies as well.

In past, the key object of so-called Classical or Academic Islamic Studies which relied upon the source study was Islam in its historical perspective. This approach was characterized by comprehensive source base, which rests upon the original Arabic writings, context-historical attitudes to the information contained therein; knowledge of the principal terminology and concepts of Islam and Academic Islamic Studies that reflects specificity and general principles of this religious system [2].

Today we face another tendency: the object of Islamic Studies now is focused on the classical original texts as it was before, and at the same times it also includes modern mass media covering current political and social events.

The latter frequently requires analysis of a Big Data set that can be provided by using special IT solutions (primarily for Arabic texts) [3].

In fact, all of these characteristics can be regarded as key professional competencies in Islamic studies programs and they are relevant worldwide, having no regional, cultural or ethnic restrictions. It is obvious that when we speak about training of highly skilled specialist in Islamic Studies we suggest his capability to read and understand classical sources (i.e. classical texts) in Arabic.

Classical Arabic is considered to be the language of God, therefore it is not a subject for any change. Also it has undergone some changes since 7th century, but compared with other language groups, the language change and variation in Standard Arabic has been reduced to a minimum [4].

3. THE ROLE OF WRITTEN TRADITION

The written tradition and written texts have played crucial role in the cultural history of mankind and have been always important source of information about ancient world and Middle ages. Among the variety of these kinds of documents the sacred texts are of special importance since they have greatly influenced the mindset of generations during hundreds of years. The core of each monotheistic religion - Judaism Christianity and Islam is implemented in their texts and in Islam first and foremost it is the Holy Qur'ān, as well as Sunnah and Hadith.

Ch. Ferguson, describing relationship between language and religion referred it to writing system: "whenever Islam spread it introduced Arabic script" [5].

Since the middle of the 7th century CE the Qur'ān exists in a written form as a single text. This kind of written codification ensured its continuity as well as guaranteed its transmission through time and space for many centuries. Thus hitherto except for some graphic innovations (diacritics, signs for vowels, etc.) which had been introduced during the first decades of *hegira* the text of the Qur'ān has remained unchanged. As for its translations into another language, as a rule they are commonly considered only as attempts of transmission of the original text and reflections of some aspects of its content and form.

4. INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF THE QUR'ĀN: THERE IS NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN

Beginning from the first decades of the *hegira* the scrupulous study of the Qur'ān required an interdisciplinary approach in the analysis of the sacred text and participation of not only theologians, but also linguists, as well as historians and specialists in textual matters.

Thus, during the reign of the caliph Osman (644-656 CE), the secretary of the Prophet - Zaid Ibn Thabit was assigned to collect all the existing Qur'ānic verses, to put them together and to write them down in a single manuscript. In order to implement this task Zaid Ibn Thabit was to be an expert both in religious problems and philology since along with compilation of the verses of the Qur'ān he had to convey in writing some special features of the speech of the tribe of Quraysh to which the Prophet belonged.

Later on, the consolidation of the text into one manuscript was followed by the development of the written system of Arabic, which was aimed at more accurate reflection of the characteristics of reading and, which is most importantly, adequate transmission of certain terms and expressions, in order to avoid misinterpretation of the sacred text and confusion of its meanings. The implementation of this task was also impossible without work of theologians and philologists and their consensus on this issue.

For instance, the solution of the problem of variability in reading required participation of theologians, philologists, as well followers of the prophet Muhammad. The above-mentioned techniques meant implementation of various methods and techniques of text analysis.

All further commentators of the Qur'ān were to be well aware of the linguistic and historical context, which accompanied the appearance of the sacred text, to master the methods of semantic and ethno-linguistic analysis, to know the history of the Arabs before and after Islam.

Besides that, it was in the beginning of the 7th century when commission from five scholars implemented methods of statistical analysis while calculating the number of characters (323 015) and words (77 439) in the Qur'ān [6].

5. THE ARABIC LANGUAGE AND THE QUR'ĀN

Nowadays the peculiarities of the modern Islamic word as a whole and the Arab world in particular are to great extent determined by a number of factors such as common religion and common language, history and cultural heritage, shared systems of spiritual values and codes of social behavior.

The advent of Islam marked not only emergence of another monotheistic religion, but also signified a completely new stage in the history of Asia, Africa and Europe. The rapid expansion of the caliphate in the first centuries of *hegira* was accompanied by the spread of the Arabic language which was first and foremost considered as the language of the new faith on the territories from Gibraltar to Ganges.

It is important that among the mentioned above factors religion and language stand on the top of the paradigm of the self-identification labels for most of the Arabs. Besides that, the language alone often stands as a marker of national and religious identity. While arguing on other issues sociolinguists almost unanimously agree on the existence and importance of the inter-relationship between language and religion. Talking about co-relation between written and oral word Ron Holt points out that "language is at the very heart of both faith and theology" [7]. John E. Joseph echoes him with the statement that "religion bound Christian Europe to Latin, the Islamic world to Arabic, and Jews to Hebrew. Yet when Christianity underwent an East–West split the use of Latin vs. Greek became its most potent symbol. The islands of Christians within the western Asian lands ruled by Muslims pegged their identities to Syriac, Chaldean and other languages" [8]. This row of quotations may be continued.

The character of inter-relationship between the language and religion becomes particularly eloquent on the example of the dichotomy of the principle text of Islam - the Holy Qur'ān and the Arabic language. On one hand, according to the Moslem tradition the Qur'ān was sent to the prophet Muhammad in Arabic, and as it is said in the Holy Book: "Indeed, We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur'an that you might understand" (12:2) [9]. The expression "The Arabic language" for the first time may be found in this sacred text.

On the other hand, the text of the Qur'ān had a decisive impact on the formation and development of the classical Arabic language which remained almost unchanged (except for minor innovations)

for almost fourteen centuries. To a large extent, the need to study the Qur'ān and its language has caused the emergence of grammar schools in the 7th and 8th centuries CE in the cities of Baṣra and Kufa. At that time the Arabic language had been considered as one of the major markers which indicated belonging to the Arab-Muslim civilization and ability to read the Qur'ān in Arabic had turned into one of the cornerstones of the self-identification of every Muslim.

6. CURRENT RESEARCHES AND TECHNIQUES

For more than millennium the Qur'ān has remained almost completely in the sphere of Moslem theologians and grammarians and only in the 19th-20th centuries CE European scholars have contributed to its study. For instance, they developed and improved the previous system of chronology of *suras* (chapters), studied terminology and vocabulary and interrelations between pre-Islamic oral tradition and the language of the Qur'ān. In fact, in the West the Qur'ānic studies remained mostly in the sphere of interests of historians and philologists.

The renaissance of Islam in the beginning of the 21st century and growth of common interest to it brought along the scrupulous attention to the sacred texts. Besides that, new technologies and as well as Data Mining came into being and old methods of research were revisited, which brought into being new scholar projects aimed at study of the sacred text.

Besides the abovementioned corpus, a group of computer researches from universities of Saudi Arabia using technologies of data mining are planning to initiate "a series of research studies that aim to serve the Holy Qur'ān and provide helpful and accurate information and knowledge to the all human beings. Also, the planned research studies aim to lay out a framework that will be used by researchers in the field of Arabic natural language processing by providing a "Golden Dataset" along with useful techniques and information that will advance this field further" [10].

7. CONCLUSIONS

Islamic Studies and Linguistics are indivisible from each other starting from the invent of Islam and formation of the Classical language.

In historical perspective, the Arabic language remains a powerful tool for the expression of Islamic rhetoric being a prophetic language. No other language in the world has preserved its stability for more than 14 centuries. Islam is considered to be one of the most important factors which secures this stability.

The analysis and study of the text of the Qur'ān is of special importance for those who study Islamic civilization, its role in the destinies of the mankind, its values and virtues. Without understanding of the polyphony of this sacred text, indivisible unity of its form and content it is impossible to understand social developments both in present and past.

Since the first years of Islam the Qur'ān has been in the center of attention of Moslem scholars, and in the center of attention of theologians, historians, philologists, jurists, mathematicians. Only quite recently it became an object of analysis of the specialists of computer technologies.

In Arabic and Islamic Studies mediaeval texts, i.e. textual documents are considered the main source of information. Hence the analysis of the multiplicity of various texts and finding of interconnections among them help to set scattered fragments of the riddle into a common and eloquent picture of the past, which reflects the state of the society on certain stages of its development.

The text of the Qur'ān like any other phenomenon is a multifaceted object that should be studied from different points of view. As a result, this complex study will allow to obtain a three-dimensional image rather than a flat picture alone.

8. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The funding no. 15.61.2219.2013 from Saint Petersburg State University (Russia) to support this research project is gratefully acknowledged.

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