

AN APPRAISAL OF THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ARABIC LANGUAGE TO THE MUSLIMS

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Abstract

Learning Arabic is very significant not only because it is recognized as an international language, but also because of its spiritual/religious status. Arabic language is part of the religion of Islam as such knowing and understanding it becomes obligatory. This is because the ability to have a minimum degree of understanding the Qur'an is obligatory on every Muslim, and yet this cannot be realized without knowing and understanding Arabic. The Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was originally written in Arabic. Arabic, apart from being the language of the Glorious Qur'an and the Tradition of the Prophet (PBUH), is also the language through which other Islamic studies sources such as *Tafsir*, *fiqh* and *Tawheed* are properly documented. Because of this, the people of knowledge have concurred that proper understanding of the sacred texts can only be realized through adequate knowledge of Arabic Language. The paper aims at examining the significance and the role of Arabic Language among the Muslims regardless of race, tribe or geographical concepts.

Introduction

The Glorious Qur'an, the fountainhead of Islamic creed, and its exegeses (*tafsir*) are written in Arabic. Also in Arabic are the enormous *hadith* literature, being the only authoritative exposition of the Qur'an and the second source of Islamic law. In addition, the books of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) containing detailed rules of a Muslim's worldly and religious life are also compiled in Arabic. Arabic is rightly called the language of Islam; it is a language that unifies the Muslim. Indeed, the heritage of Islam cannot be fully appreciated and comprehended without the

knowledge of Arabic (Inayatullah 16). Indeed, Islam and the Islamic world could not be properly understood without an adequate knowledge of Arabic, which is indispensable for any understanding of the thoughts that sway the lives of the followers of the Prophet Muhammad, of the beliefs that they hold most sacred, and the principles of theology and ethics on which they are nurtured.

Presented in to five sections, the paper starts with an introduction, followed by discussion on the importance of Arabic, then the indispensable role of Arabic for understanding the message of the Glorious Qur'an, the Tradition of the Holy Prophet and other branches of Islamic sciences. Also addressed is the importance of Arabic in aspects of *Ibadah*. Arabic as the language of the *Ummah* (Muslim nation) is then presented; the paper ends with a short conclusion.

Importance of Arabic Language

Arabic (*al-arabīyah*), like Hebrew and Aramaic, is a member of the family of languages known as Semitic (*Assaamiyyah*), the family of languages which show a marked degree of similarity in their linguistic properties. The Semitic languages are traditionally divided on the grounds of both their structural properties and geographical provenance into three groups: Northwestern, Northeastern and Southwestern. Arabic is considered to be a member of the Southwestern group. Although dialect levels of Arabic with varieties are used in informal conversations, classical, and modern standard Arabic (*fusha*) are considered the correct formal type of Arabic (Al-Zayyat 15-16)

The classical is attested in Pre-Islamic Arabic inscriptions dating back to the 4th century; it has also been a literary language and the liturgical language of Islam since its inception in the 7th century for it is known to be the language of the Qur'an, the traditions of the Prophet (PBUH), and the language of Arabic-Islamic heritages, modern standard is used for communication in

the formal situations. *Fusha* is the variety that is used in reading and an writing in Arab society; it is also the official variety used in the any Arabic media. In terms of speakers, the Arabic macro language is vers the largest member of the Semitic language family. It is spoken by most more than 280 million people as a first language, most of who live are in the Middle East and North Africa, and by 250 million more as a second language (See: wikipedia.org/wiki/Arabic_language). an Furthermore, Arabic is used by 1.5 billion Muslims constituting ic, approximately one-fourth of the population of the world. On he account of its popularity and importance, it has been included et among the six official languages of the UNO, the other languages e being English, French, Spanish, Chinese and Russian (Whitaker e 759).

Arabic, the Language of the Glorious Qur'an, Hadith and Tafsir

The Glorious Qur'an

The unique Arab literary characteristics of the Qur'an, such as its wonderful rhythms and systematic images, remain formidable obstacles to translation. The Qur'an was the first prose book in Arabic and it has remained the model of excellence for Arabic literature. As a sacred book, the Qur'an has a value beyond that of literature, but it has also been judged by literary critics of the Arabic language to be artistically unequalled in its beauty. It was due to the position of the Qur'an in Arab Muslim society that Arabic became a world language (Imtiaz 273).

The Qur'an, which was sent through Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) contains the knowledge (*al-ilm*) imparted by Allah (SWT) and the guidance (*al-Huda*) for men who are righteous for all time to come. It is a declaration (*Bayaan*) of the truth and light (*Nuur*) to show the right path. It is the wise (*al-Hakim*) the complete exhortation (*maw'izat*) and the clear message (*al-Balaagh*). It is a rope of Allah (*Hablullah*) by holding which individuals and nations can achieve salvation. It is the reminder

(*al-Dhikr*) for all of us that Prophets will not come any more for our guidance. It acts as the criterion (*al-Furqaan*) to choose between the truth and the falsehood. As the final revelation (*Tanzil*) from Allah, it is the endowment of the fairest statements (*ahsan al-Hadith*) and Divine words of wisdom (*al Hikmah*) (Dei 21). Due to all the above mentioned attributes of the Qur'an, a sound knowledge of Arabic which is the language of the revelation becomes inevitable for the purpose of proper understanding of the contents of the of the Qur'an and *Sunnah* of the Prophet (SAW).

Adding to the significance is the fact that, the life of a Muslim begins with hearing the Arabic words of the *adhan* and ends with the recitation of Arabic from prescribed verses of Al-Qur'an during his agony of death (Al-Ihdar). Moreover, during the long span of his life he reads the text of the Qur'an in Arabic often without even understanding its meaning. The reading of the Qur'an without comprehending its meaning is itself an act of worship (*'ibadah*) that entitles an individual to a reward from Allah (SWT).

Furthermore, the reading of the Qur'an, on account of its miraculous soothing effect on the heart, provides much needed spiritual satisfaction to man (Imtiaz 273-274). The Qur'an says: {الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَتَطْمَئِنُّ قُلُوبُهُمْ بِذِكْرِ اللَّهِ أَلَا بِذِكْرِ اللَّهِ تَطْمَئِنُّ الْقُلُوبُ} "Indeed the remembrance of Allah (through recitation of the Qur'an) gives satisfaction of hearts", points to this very fact". (Q13:28.)

The Prophetic Hadith

Hadith, the record of the Prophet Muhammad's precepts, actions and life, which constitute his *Sunnah*, or example is accepted as a chief source of Islamic belief and practice and is second in authority only to the Qur'an. The six canonical Sunni collections of *Hadith*, which date from the 9th century, and the corresponding collections delineate the various relationships among individuals and between the individual and Allah (SWT). They include provisions of law, discussions of theological matters,

such as methods of fasting and prayer, and codes of personal, social, and commercial conduct. All these collections are compiled and written in Arabic, failure to have competence in Arabic will automatically result in misconception of Traditions of the Prophet which is the interpretation of the Glorious Qur'an and Islamic teachings.

Tafsir of the Glorious Qur'an

The unveiling of the meaning of the divine word and its correct interpretation became the subjects of a special branch of learning called *Tafsir*. Very strict requirements were laid down for a person to become a Qur'an commentator and discuss theological and legal issues such as Allah's attributes, free will, and predestination on the basis of the Qur'an. A person must be well versed in several disciplines and sub-disciplines known as "the sciences of the Qur'an." *Tafsir* comprises a vast body of knowledge representing all the major trends in Islamic theology and law. This complicated and comprehensive nature of *tafsir* has made understanding Arabic indispensable; in fact the sciences of the Qur'an extend even to the study of grammar, lexicography, and history.

Under some circumstances, the knowledge of Arabic is extremely essential not only to read the Glorious Qur'an, *tafsir* and the commentaries (*shuruh*) of canonical *hadith* works, but also to understand the original books on *fiqh* and *usul al-fiqh* by eminent scholars of different schools of Islamic legal system, because just a few translations are available only in parts. Almost all *fiqh* books still remain without translations, hence inaccessible to those who depend on translations (Imtiaz 276). Although it may be argued that one can also know this through translated words, similarly, the exegesis (*tafsir*) in one's own language and the translations of *hadith* and *fiqh* books give him a full understanding of Islamic teachings. It is obvious that relying merely on translations cannot render the real and exact meaning of the texts. In fact, an embarrassing situation may arise when someone is incapable of

understanding the Qur'an verses recited separately or in prayers. It is the result of the erroneous viewpoint that Arabic is unimportant for the study and teaching of Islamic studies.

It is disappointing and a hard fact that occasionally not only the graduates of Islamic studies but also the holders of Master's and Doctoral degrees in Islamic studies are unable to go to direct Arabic sources of classical texts due to their incompetence in Arabic language. The reason for this lack of proficiency in Arabic is very obvious; they had studied all subjects including the prescribed *tafsir* and *hadith* courses in English or other local languages while the Arabic language had not found its proper place in their curricula of Islamic studies. It could be inconvenient, if not embarrassing, that despite being qualified in the discipline of Islamic studies they cannot translate or explain a given text from standard works on *hadith* or *fiqh* or *usul al-fiqh*.

Arabic, the Language of 'Ibadah

The importance of Arabic language cannot be underestimated in a Muslim's life, particularly in the context of worship ('*Ibadah*). A Muslim does not need the knowledge of Arabic only for intercultural interactions or for economic and trade competitive reasons, but also for rendering his mandatory service to Allah (SWT), the Creator. The main responsibility of all human beings according the teachings of Islam is to worship Allah the Creator. In other words, the purpose of creating *jinn* and man is that they should offer '*Ibadah* only for Allah (SWT). This relationship in Islamic teachings is described in Islam as one of gratitude and indebtedness. Indeed, the Qur'an has described Worship as the central obligation of individuals. Allah says:

{وَمَا خَلَقْتُ الْجِنَّ وَالْإِنْسَ إِلَّا لِيَعْبُدُونِ}

"I created the *Jinn* and human kind only that they might worship Me" (Q 51:56).

The relationship of Islam and the Qur'an to Arabic involves more than just the use of a language to communicate a divine

message; it is implicit that anyone professing Islam cannot ignore the role Arabic plays in his faith. Embracing Islam, therefore, entails exposure to, and familiarity with, the Arabic language. Such familiarity is necessitated by the fact that memorization and recitation of Qur'an verses in their original language is necessary for the performance of the daily rituals. That Arabic language plays a pivotal role in a Muslim's life is evident from the fact that the obligatory five daily prayers can be performed only in this language. Similarly, the call to prayers (*adhan*), also made five times daily, and the formal words of greeting when two Muslims meet, are all expressed in Arabic language. The use of Arabic language in prayers and *adhan* is so indispensable that even new converts to Islam are permitted to offer prayers in their own mother tongue or any foreign language only for a short period of time after which they have to use the Arabic formulae (Ibn al-Humam 1:285).

Furthermore, Prayer, which is the second pillar of Islam after the testimony of faith, is one of the central practice and worship. Indeed, Prayer, in the ritual sense, is an obligation of the faith, to be performed five times daily. In Islam, prayer is of two types. The first one is ritual prayer which has formal requirements and manners which are essential to its correct observance; this is called *Salaat*. The other one is supplication, and in its more general sense, represents an open-ended conversation with Allah, which may occur at any time or any place, with few restrictions or requirements; this is called *du'au* (Imtiaz 276-277).

The ritual prayers are bound by detailed obligations and structure. It encompasses both obligatory (*fard*) prayers, which are observed five times daily at specified intervals, and the voluntary prayers, which are performed by worshiper before or after the obligatory prayers as well as at other time. Despite the different categories of ritual prayers, the significance of Arabic emerges in the sense that a Muslim is obliged to recite in Arabic when observing all the components of prayers. All Muslims perform

their religious rites and worship of Allah, including the daily five time prayers, in Arabic. In the course of these prayers, some verses of the Qur'an and other sentences, are uttered so as to express the Greatness and Glory of Allah, the Creator, and the humbleness and insignificance of human beings, the creatures. This is done in the same wordings by all Muslims, Arabs and non-Arabs alike, even by those who do not understand Arabic. This system of prayers in one common language was in practice during the life time of the Prophet (SAW) and has continued after him, and so it will for more than 1400 years. Indeed, it is a fact recognized by the linguists that the Arabic language has the best ability to express wide and deep thoughts and to explain important subjects in short and precise words (Imtiaz 276). Moreover, it has been proved that no language, except Arabic, is capable of presenting such deep spiritual, moral and ethical expressions in such an eloquent manner. Therefore the choice of Arabic for Islamic prayers is not to be wondered upon.

Arabic as the Language of *Ummah*

All Muslims, regardless of their linguistic, cultural and racial backgrounds, form one community of believers. This community is based on their shared faith in One Almighty Allah (SWT), one Book, one *Qiblah* and one Prophet (SAW). The Muslim community, which is constructed through self-conscious testimony and performance of the fundamental religious rituals, is a borderless community, a community not bound by geographic, national, ethnic and racial consideration but united only by a single testimony: There is no god worthy of worship but Allah and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah. It is a community united like a single solid body (Munirul-Huq 17). Almighty Allah invests the concept of the unity of human race with fundamental significance; this concept is clearly articulated in the Qur'an: Almighty Allah says:

{وَإِنَّ هَذِهِ أُمَّتُكُمْ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً وَأَنَا رَبُّكُمْ فَاتَّقُونِ}

“Surely, this community of yours is one and I am your Lord, so fear Me.” (Al-Mu’minun: 23: 52). Arabic thus serves as a common language among this diverse community of believers.

Since Islam wants to build a stable international community, it has identified one language, of course which is Arabic, for the unification of various speech communities. While the texts of the Qur’an recognizes the variation of languages as natural process, it also stresses the importance of preserving the Qur’an in Arabic language; thus encouraging Muslims to learn a common language shared by all as the language used by Allah (SWT) for revealing His last message. Arabic as the language in which revelation had been given could lead to its acceptance as the language of everyday life; wherever the Islam came, the Arabic language spread. In fact Arabic being the language of the Qur’an and the ritual prayers in Islam cements the Islamic brotherhood and emphasizes the universal character of Islam. Islam has come for the entire human beings regardless of race, geographical and linguistic differences. Arabic provides a cementing bond to Muslims belonging to various linguistic groups and nationalities. The ideal Islamic language situation would be one in which the language of the people is allowed to be used as the medium of mutual communication and Arabic as the common language of all Muslims at all times and of all linguistic backgrounds (Syed 550).

In addition, the lack of emphasis on Arabic in a particular Muslim linguistic group decreases mutual understanding of Islam and appreciation of common Islamic bonds and Islamic cultural heritage; failure to recognize Arabic as a unifying language for the Muslim nation and, in fact, failure to encourage its teaching would result either in the weakening of the international bonds of the Muslim *Ummah* and in making the original sources of Islam inaccessible to the common Muslims, or lowering the understanding of Islam.

Conclusion

Islam is a universal religion; its noble Prophet, Muhammad (SAW), was an Arab. Its revealed scripture (the Qur'an), was revealed and written in Arabic. The unique wonderful nature of the Qur'an remains formidable obstacles to translation. As a sacred book, the Qur'an has been judged by literary critics of the Arabic language to be artistically unequalled in its beauty. It was due to the position of the Qur'an in Muslim society that Arabic became a world language and of course, indispensable for all aspects of their intellectual endeavors. On reaching the age of puberty, the five daily prayers become obligatory and a Muslim recites the opening chapter (*Surat al-Fatihah*) of the Qur'an and a few other verses during these prayers, and often, if not daily, he reads the Qur'an texts in Arabic. As such a Muslim uses the Arabic language throughout his life, even before he learns it as a discipline. It is, therefore, desirable for all Muslims in general, to acquire familiarity and for students and teachers of Islamic studies in particular, to learn this language as an academic discipline (Imtiaz 276). Therefore in order to establish and consolidate a proper understanding of Islam and its heritage, one needs to be acquainted with Arabic language to a certain degree. Indeed, considering Arabic as a language of Islam will also strengthen the bases of Muslim unity and promote greater understanding among their communities; ways and means should be devised to popularize our common Islamic language, Arabic. This will develop greater communication between Muslims and a better appreciation of each other's problems and difficulties.

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