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The Amount of Arabic Language Science Necessary to Understand the Islamic Texts and Derive Legal Provisions

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ABSTRACT

The Arabic language may be one of the obstacles facing the researcher of legal texts due to the breadth of its vocabulary and the diversity of its structures, formulas and semantics. Moreover, its old age, foreign influence, limited environments of pure Arabic and lack of practice in its pure form even in Arab countries where it is often relegated to academic or religious settings have weakened people's mastery of Arabic. Allah decided to reveal His Book in Arabic, and chose Muhammad (PBUH) from the pure-tongued tribe of Quraish as His Prophet. As such, the researcher of Islamic texts, should, in principle, have reached mastery of Arabic similar to the language spoken by the Prophet (PBUH) and his companions. The righteous successors and Muslim scholars (Arab and non-Arab) have sought to preserve the purity of the Arabic language. The problem that arises is the role Arabic plays in deriving laws from Islam's legal texts, and what level of Arabic proficiency is required, the correct methodology for its study and its applicability, and the obstacles to applying this approach. We examine the importance of Arabic in understanding Islamic texts, the amount of Arabic to devise Islamic rulings, the best way to study and use it to understanding the legal texts and draw legitimate inferences, in addition to the obstacles to reaching valid inferences.

Keywords: Arabic, understanding of Islamic texts, fragmented destiny, employing Islamic texts, inference

The Importance of the Arabic Language in Understanding the Islamic Texts

The Arabic language illuminates the path to understanding the Quran and Sunnah of Muhammad (PBUH). Allah revealed the Quran in Arabic to an Arab Prophet - Muhammad (PBUH). As such, Arabic is central to understanding its meanings, wisdoms and laws. Allah he said, "Had We sent this as a Qur'an (in the language) other than Arabic, they would have said: "Why are not its verses explained in detail? What! (a Book) not in Arabic and (a Messenger an Arab?" (Fusilat: 44).

Allah, in His infinite wisdom, revealed the Quran in Arabic as the language of His Prophet (PBUH) and the immediate audience receiving its divine wisdom. Allah says, "We sent not a

messenger except (to teach) in the language of his (own) people, in order to make (things) clear to them" (Ibrahim: 4). The verse indicated that the wisdom of sending the apostles by the tongue of their people is to teach them the law of their Lord. This does not entail explaining every detail of the revelation. The people understood the Quran as it was revealed in their language. The Prophet (PBUH) explained to them those verses that they found ambiguous and only when asked concerning them. As such, not every detail of the Quran was explained.¹

Their knowledge of Arabic terms and their meaning enabled them to comprehend the will of Allah and his Messenger (PBUH) in the manner intended by Allah and His Messenger. Attaining this level of proficiency is required when seeking to extract meaning from the Quran and Sunnah. Al-Shatabi said: "The researcher of the Shariah must possess two qualities. First, not to speak of any matter unless h/she possess the Arab tongue such that he/she is aware of Arabic conventions. Imam al-Shafi'i said, whosoever is ignorant of Arabic conventions in the language and the language in which the Quran and Sunnah were revealed to the Prophet (PBUH) then he has adopted something that they do not understand completely. If this is the case, then he is unlikely to achieve the desired objective of that action. Even if he does, then it was unintended, Allah knows best. He is not excused for his mistake as he engaged in something for which he is not qualified and is unable to discern the difference between right and wrong."²

The lack of knowledge of Arabic language results in a lack or misunderstanding of the Islamic texts. Ibn al-Juni, may God rest his soul, says, "The majority of those who stray from the desired objective in the Shariah and depart from the recommended path do so due to weak proficiency in Arabic as the noble language of the divine texts."³ An example of this is that statement of Bishr al-Marisi (d. 218) who advocated the creation of the Quran and a leader of the Mutazila. Abdul Aziz bin Yahya al-Kanani (d. 240) in his famous debate with him about the creation of the Quran which Caliph al-Ma'mun judged, said to the caliph, Bishr advocates his position due to a lack of understanding and deficient knowledge of Arabic, and the meaning of Arab words and conventions.⁴

Therefore, the righteous predecessors took care to annotate the Quran more than memorising it. Abu Obeid narrated in the virtues of the Qur'an about Abu Bakr al-Siddiq - may Allah bless him - said, "To annotate a verse is more beloved to me than to memorise a verse."⁵ This statement underscores how both Arab and non-Arab depend on correct annotation of the Quran to ensure its correct meaning and understanding as Abu Bakr was intimately aware of the language and yet took care in ensuring he understood it correctly. Perhaps the causes for this is that Quran contains more than one dialect and is not limited to the language of Quraysh, such

¹ It is narrated on the authority of 'Abdullah (b. Mas'ud) that when this verse was revealed: "It is those who believe and confound not their belief with wrongdoing" (vi. 82), the Companions of the Messenger of Allah were greatly perturbed. They said: Who amongst us (is so fortunate) that he does not wrong himself? Upon this the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) remarked: It does not mean that which you presume It implies that which Luqman said to his son: O my son, do not associate anything with Allah, for indeed it is the gravest wrongdoing (xxx. 13).

² Al-Shatabi, *Al-Itisaam*, 503.

³ Ibn al-Genie, *Al-Khasaa'is*. Egypt, Egyptian General Book Authority, Ed. 3, 245.

⁴ Abdul Aziz bin Al-Yahia bin Memon al-Kanani, 2002. *Response to those who Advocate the Creation of the Qur'an*, Trans. Nasser al-Qafi, Medina, Library of Science and Governance, Ed. 2, Vol. 1, 40.

⁵ Al-Qasim bin Salam, 1995. *Virtues of the Qur'an*. Trans. Group of Researchers, Damascus, Dar Ibn Al-Kabir. Ed. 1, 348.

as the language of Tay, Humair, Qais, Tamim and Hudhail... etc.⁶ That the companions and righteous predecessors preferred correct understanding over memorising the Quran supports the importance of Arabic as the key to understanding the intended meaning of the divine text.

It is no wonder that Imam Al-Shafi'i mentions that his goal of learning Arabic is to use it to understand religion. He says, "I am not asked about a question of jurisprudence unless I answered them from grammar."⁷ He also said, "He also said who has mastered grammar is guided in all the sciences."⁸ He also said, I am not asked about a question in fiqh, except that I answered it from the perspective of grammar. Muhammad ibn al-Hasan said to him: What do you say to the person who forgot to perform the prostration of forgetfulness, should he prostrate? Al-Shafi'i replied, no because the base is not debased.⁹ This inference is from a man who has mastered numerous sciences and who declared that the key to this was mastering grammar.

Past scholars invested heavily in Arabic to understand Islam. Muhammad said: My father left thirty thousand dirhams, so I spent half of it on grammar and poetry, and I spent the rest on jurisprudence.¹⁰ This is Muhammad ibn al-Hasan the companion and disciple of Abu Hanifa, known for his firmness in jurisprudence, eloquence and familiarity with Arabic to that extent that Imam al-Shafi'i said that if you were to state that the Quran was revealed in the language of Muhammad ibn al-Hasan, you would not be wrong.¹¹

We conclude that an in-depth understanding of Arabic is critical to understanding the Islamic texts, because the Quran is Arabic, the Prophet (PBUH) is Arab, and the people to whom it was sent were Arabs. As such, it is necessary for all those who want to understand the law of Allah to master Arabic.

The Amount of Arabic Required to Devise Islamic Rulings

Upon acknowledging that Arabic is a vital component for understanding the Islamic texts and deriving legal provisions thereof. Ibn Khaldun states that the pillars of the Arabic tongue are four, namely language, grammar, eloquence, and literature, all of which are essential knowledge for people of law.¹²

Grammar: Is the oldest and most noble of the Arabic linguistic sciences, as it helps the student to recognise the word and the composition of the sentence. Meaning cannot be derived without considering this knowledge,

Ibn Hazm says, "The jurist must be a scholar in the tongue of the Arabs to understand Allah Almighty and the Prophet (PBUH) and be aware of the way in which the Arabs arrange their

⁶ See Quran 12: 35, See Al-Mahtasib 1/343, The Rules of the Qur'an, 139, Chapters in Arabic Jurisprudence, 138.

⁷ Ibn Imad Al-Hanbali, 1986, Gold Nuggets in News of Gold. Annotated, Muhammad Al-Arnaout, Khreih Abdul Qadir Al-Arnaout, Damascus, Dar Ibn Kabir, Ed. 2, 407.

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid, Vol. 2, 408

¹² Ibn Khaldun, 1988, The History of the Arabs and Berbers and Their Contemporaries. Trans., Khalil Shehada al-Nasher, Beirut, Dater al-Fikr, Ed. 2, Vol. 1, 153.

words using different constructions.”¹³ Imam Al-Ghazali argued that the most problematic issues are answered with recourse to grammar. He says, “Knowledge of strange words is not required but it is necessary to know grammar as it will resolve most of the linguistic issues arising from the Quran.”¹⁴ Al-Zarkashi stressed, “The researchers of the Quran seeking to uncover its secrets looks at the word, its type, and other linguistic principles.”¹⁵ Weakness in language will result in fabricated meanings being associated with the Quran. Al-Asma’i says, “I fear most for the student of science who does not know grammar that they fall under the hadith, The Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) said: Whoever tells lies about me deliberately, let him take his place in Hell.”¹⁶ Therefore, Muslim scholars agree that grammar is a requirement of the legal scholar. Even if he was to collect all sciences, without Arabic grammar, they have not attained the rank of *ijtihad*.¹⁷

The righteous predecessors would study grammar before hadith so as not to misunderstand the texts which would be tantamount to lying to the Messenger of God, especially since narrating hadith according to its meaning is accepted among some scholars. The narrator who has not mastered grammar could misinterpret the hadith. Hajib ibn Sulaiman said, I heard Waqi say, I went to Al-A’mash to learn hadith and made a linguistic mistake. He said, “O father of Sofian, you have overlooked that which more important than hadith.” I said, Abu Muhammad, and what is more important than hadith? He said, “Grammar. So he taught me grammar then hadith.”¹⁸

Imam Al-Shawkani showed the books for the mastery of grammar which consisted of *Malhah al-rab*, *Kafiyyah* of Ibn al-Hijaab, *Mughni al-Labeeb*, *Alfiyyah* Ibn Malik, and *al-Mufassal* of Al-Zamakhshari.¹⁹ The student must master these books in order and often recourse to the book for Sibawayh. This is the undoubtedly the famous method in the East, particularly Yemen given the availability of many scholars. In North-Africa, they study the *Alfiyyah* of Al-Zawaawai as opposed to *Alfiyyah* Ibn Malik followed by the explanation of Ibn Hisham and the book of Sibawayh. The purpose of the books is the same despite differences in authors and presentation.

Linguistics: What is meant by the science of linguistics is to memorise a certain amount of Arabic vocabulary according to its meanings, enabling the student to understand the words of Allah Almighty and the words of His Prophet (PBUH), the companions with their eloquence and their descendants. They are the Arabs with classical language on whom the Quran descended in their language. Nevertheless, they still required clarification for certain terms due to two reasons:

The Quran descending in more than one language

The people of Yemen may not understand the words in the Quran and Sunnah which was revealed in the language of the Hijaz and vice versa. For example, Ibn Abbas commented on the

¹³ Ibn Hazm, 1983. *Excellence in the Origins of The Judgments*. Trans. Ahmed Shaker, Beirut, New Horizons House, Vol. 5, 126.

¹⁴ Abu Hamed al-Ghazali, 1998. *Sifting from the Comments of Jurisprudence*. Trans. Dr. Mohammed Hassan Hito, Beirut, Contemporary Thought House, Vol. 1, 572.

¹⁵ Zarkshi, 1957. *Al-Burhan in Quranic Sciences*. Lebanon, Dar al-Ihya, Vol. 1, 302.

¹⁶ *Sahih al-Bukhari* No. 107.

¹⁷ Kamal al-Din bin Mohammed al-Anbari, 1971. *Glossy Evidence, in the Origins of Grammar*, Chapter 11, Dar al-Fikr, Ed. 2.

¹⁸ *The Morals of the Narrator and The Manners of the Listener*, Riyadh, Ed. 2, 26.

¹⁹ Al-Shawkani, 1998, *Etiquettes of Learning*. Trans. Yahya Al-Serhi, Beirut, Dar Ibn Hazm, 136-137.

verse: (125/الصافات) {أَنْدَعُونَ بَعْلًا} that it meant Lord in the language of Yemen. Qatadah commented that 'Balaa' means Lord in the language of Azdashana. {الْخَرَّاصُونَ} means liars and {سَطَطًا} means fabrication in the language of Kananah. {بَغِيًّا} means jealousy in the language of Tamim and {أَغْطَشَنَ} means to oppress in the language of Anmar. {اشْمَأَزَّتْ} means to turn away and repel in the language of the Ashareen. {يَنْفَضُّوا} means to leave in the language of Khazraj, {فَأَفْرُقْ} to judge in the language of Madyan²⁰ in addition to many more in the dialects of the different tribes.

The Breadth of the Arabic Language

The Arabic language is broad in terms of its vocabulary and the diversity of its methods, that it is difficult to take all of its vocabulary into account, until Imam Al-Shafi'i said, "The language can only be encompassed by a prophet."²¹ Ibn Abbas, with his high degree and ability in the science of interpretation, says: I am aware of all the Quran except four: {غَسَلِينَ} and {وَحَنَانًا} and {أَرْوَاهُ} and {وَالرَّقِيمِ}.²²

Umar recommended memorising Arab literature. This is supported by Ibn Abbas, may God bless him by saying: Poetry is the divan of the Arabs, and if anything from the Quran is obscure, we returned to the Arabic divan to clarify the meaning. He also said: If you find a strange word in the Quran, then refer to the poetry of the Arabs to clarify its meaning.²³

For example, Ibn Abbas was asked concerning the saying: "And they wanted the means to him" he said: the means refers to need. He said: And is this the custom of the Arabs? He said: Yes.²⁴

With regard to the books of this art which qualify a person to examine the Islamic texts, the researcher needs to know nouns, verbs and prepositions. These can be sourced from books in Arabic language such as Ibn al-Sayed's book, Al-Tahdheen of al-Azhari. Al-Muhkan of Ibn al-Sayyid, Al-Jami' of al-Qazzaz, Al-Sihah of al-Jawhari, to name a few.²⁵

The Science of Verbal Conjugation:

If grammar explores the annotation of Arabic words, the science of conjugation explores the state of the second to last letter of the word. It explores the usage of changing the second to last letter of a word and its effects on the meaning of the word. It is an essential part of the Arabic science. It determines the word in its original form and its modified, the affects of this on meaning and sentence construction. As such, a researcher of the Quran cannot dispense with it. Ibn Faris says, "Whosoever has neglected this knowledge is denied the meaning of the Quran. Allah has said, "But those who swerve,- they are (but) fuel for Hell-fire" (Jinn: 15) and "but if it complies, then make peace between them with justice, and be fair: for Allah loves those who are fair (and just)" (Al-Hujarat: 9) whereby the origin of the verb is the same but the meanings differ from injustice to justice due to verbal conjugation.²⁶

²⁰ Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti, 1974, *Mastery in The Sciences of the Quran*. Trans. Mohammed Abu Fadl, Egypt, Egyptian General Book Authority, Vol. 2, 106-121.

²¹ Ibid, Vol. 2, 126.

²² Ibid. Vol. 2, 4.

²³ Ibid. Vol. 2, 67.

²⁴ Ibid. Vol. 2, 69.

²⁵ Ibid. Vol. 2, 5.

²⁶ Zarkshi, 1957. *Al-Burhan in Quranic Sciences*. Lebanon, Dar al-Ihya, Vol. 1, 298.

Ignorance of the science of verbal conjugation would result in fabricating meanings associated with Allah. For example, al-Zamakhshari mentioned in the interpretation of the verse *سول لهم* in Quran 47: 25, that it means that it is easy for them to commit sins. It is derived from *الاسترخاء* with its relaxation. People have derived it from the Arabic *السؤل* who do not have sufficient knowledge of verbal conjugation.²⁷

As for the books that qualify people in this science, Al-Shawkani mentioned that it is essential to memorise Al-Shaafiyyah followed by its explanation.²⁸ This is followed by the Lamiyyah of Ibn Malik as taught in North Africa.

Eloquence:

Eloquence refers to the variety of ways a single meaning can be expressed such as truth, metaphor, and analogy. Those who have not mastered eloquence cannot understand much of the semantics of the Quran and sunnah. The science of meanings is refers to the art of proper expression, presentation, delay, deletion, proof, and other things required in expression to ensure efficient communication. It is a science by which the linguistic miracle of the Quran is recognised.

Al-Shawkani states that gaining prominence in this art requires memorising short summaries such as the Al-Talkhees, and the explanation of al-Saad, which are topped off by the books of Abd al-Qahir al-Jarjani and Al-Sakaki.²⁹ Perhaps he refers to the book Al-Sakaki's Miftah al-Ulum which includes eloquence, grammar, conjugation and rhetoric.

All these sciences complement each other. The student gains a robust linguistic foundation and that enables him to clarify obscure meanings of verses and hadiths, while also ensuring the intended message is understood correctly. As such, they are indispensable for the researcher of the divine law.

The Exemplary Approach to Studying and Applying these Sciences for Deriving Laws

One of the living examples that hinder the employment of the linguistic sciences is the testimony of Imam Ibn Badis on the reality of the Arabic language curriculum at The University of Zitouna in 1931, which was considered a beacon of science and understanding intended by students of science from all over the world. He says, "The student spends a large share of his life in mechanical sciences, without having studied portions of simple Quranic interpretations, such as the interpretation of Jalalin. He delves into verbal rivalries between Sheikh Abdul Hakim and his companions in the rules that the student thought are necessary, and the student graduates without knowing anything from the truth of interpretation on the pretext that they apply the rules to the verses, as if the interpretation is being studied in order to apply the rules and not to understand the laws and the rules."³⁰

"Instruction of the linguistic sciences requires applying rules to verbal speech to gain mastery. Learning without applying it is a waste of time with little reward."³¹

²⁷ Ibid., Vol 1., 298.

²⁸ Al-Shawkani, 1998, *Etiquettes of Learning*. Trans. Yahya Al-Serihi, Beirut, Dar Ibn Hazm, 139.

²⁹ Ibid., 141.

³⁰ Jalal al-Din al-Qazwini, *Illustrator in the Sciences of Rhetoric*. Trans. Abdel Moneim Khafaji, Beirut, Dar al-Jil, Ed. 3. Vol. 1, 108.

³¹ Ibid, Vol. 1, 108.

Abu Hamed al-Ghazali explained the amount of linguistics required, saying "The amount with which the Arab discourse is understood, and their habit of use to the extent that it distinguishes between the frank, the obvious, its manifestation, totality, its reality, metaphor, general, absolute, restricted, etc. It is not necessary to reach the proficiency of the likes of Al-Khalil and Al-Mubarrad and to know all the details of language and grammar, but it is necessary to the extent to which one understands the intents and purposes of the Quran and Sunnah."³²

The only way to benefit from the sciences of Arabic language is to apply these linguistic tools whether that is to poetry or prose, or the word of Allah and His Messenger (PBUH). Doubtless the divine text is the highest calibre of Arabic possible, and is best suited to students of Islamic sciences because it leads them to understand the messages intended by Allah and His Messenger, from which they can then derive valid legal provisions.

Research Summary and Results

Given the above discussion, we conclude that the Arabic language is necessary for those who seek to delve into the Islamic sciences to enable them to understand the Islamic texts. A student should reach the required level of mastery in vocabulary, grammar, eloquence and conjugation. The best approach is to apply it in language while taking care to avoid being caught up in minute grammatical differences so that they possess the linguistic proficiency while also being able to derive Islamic legal provisions.

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