



ORIENTALISM AND THE CHALLENGE TO THE ORIGINALITY OF THE AL-QUR'AN LEXICON: A CRITICAL STUDY OF WESTERN PHILOLOGICAL APPROACHES

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Abstract

This study critically examines the philological and historical-comparative linguistic approaches developed by Western orientalist in analyzing the Qur'anic lexicon and their implications for the doctrine of the authenticity and purity of the language of revelation in Islam. It also explores Muslim scholars' responses to claims of foreign language influence in the lexical construction of the sacred text. Starting from the assumption that the Qur'an contains elements of Aramaic, Hebrew, Syriac, and Ethiopic languages, orientalist such as Theodor Nöldeke, Abraham Geiger, Arthur Jeffery, and Christoph Luxenberg attempted to interpret the Qur'anic text as an evolutive product of pre-Islamic Arabic culture and history. This approach, despite its contribution to the field of language history, has been criticized by Muslim scholars for ignoring the theological dimension and sacredness of the Qur'an as divine revelation. Using a qualitative method and a desk study approach, this

research analyzes key works from both orientalists and Muslim scholars. The results show that Western philological approaches to the Qur'ān are not scientifically neutral but contain historical-critical assumptions that often contradict the normative-transcendental approach in the Islamic tradition. In response, contemporary Muslim scholars have developed an integrative approach that balances linguistic studies with contextual interpretation and emphasizes the importance of taking into account the dynamics of classical Arabic, Qur'anic rhetorical structures, and the context of revelation. As such, this study affirms the importance of a multidisciplinary and dialogical approach in understanding the complexity of Qur'anic vocabulary in order to avoid methodological reductionism and maintain the epistemic integrity of the revealed text.

Keyword: Qur'anic Lexicon, Orientalism, Philology, Language Absorption.

A. Introduction

The Qur'ān's rich and complex vocabulary has become an object of multidisciplinary study spanning the fields of linguistics, history, philology, and semantics. As the primary religious text in Islam, the Qur'ān is not only positioned as a divine revelation by Muslims but has also become an important subject of scholarly study by non-Muslim scholars, especially Orientalists, who since the 12th century have shown great interest in studying the origins and character of Qur'anic language (Lestari, 2014). Orientalist approaches to the Qur'ān, particularly through the disciplines of philology and historical-comparative linguistics, often aim to identify linguistic elements, highlighting the possible influence of foreign languages and cultures on its lexical construction while rejecting both the theological dimension and the internal

authority of the Qur'ānic text. It is not uncommon for such a view to be perceived as reducing the dimensions of revelation to a mere product of evolving culture and language. In this context, several Western scholars such as Nöldeke (1909), Jeffery (1938), Wansbrough (2004), and Luxenberg (2007) proposes that some vocabulary in the Qur'ān is borrowed from other languages such as Aramaic, Hebrew, Syriac, or even Ethiopic. This challenges the claim of originality and purity of the Qur'ānic language, as believed in Islam, and contradicts Islamic principles that affirm the purity, authenticity, and nobility of the Arabic language in the Qur'ān as the *'lughah muqaddasah'* or sacred language.

In many cases, such studies are considered to represent a historically critical, Western-oriented epistemology that is often at odds with the transcendent and normative principles of Islamic epistemology (Saeed, 2006). By emphasizing historical and positivistic methodologies, they tend to ignore the theological and performative dimensions of the Qur'ān as revelation and reduce the text to a mere linguistic and cultural product. Hence, such approaches not only trigger academic debates but also create tensions between Western scientific approaches and Islamic epistemology, which views the Qur'ān as the eternal and transcendent word of God. Consequently, philological critiques of the Qur'ānic lexicon often rely on reductive assumptions and secular paradigms that are incompatible with the sacred nature of the text (Arkoun, 1994; Nasr, 2004).

In response to this, contemporary Muslim scholars such as Nasr (2006), Arkoun (1994), and Amina Wadud (1999) ave sought to develop a more integrative approach

that not only considers the linguistic and historical dimensions of the text but also maintains the sacredness and normative authority of the Qur'ān (Nasr, 2006). This approach emphasizes the importance of understanding the rhetorical structure of the Qur'ān, the context of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), as well as the dynamics of Classical Arabic as a living, multivariate language in the pre-Islamic and early Islamic periods. Studies by Al-Zarkasyi (1990) in *Al-Burhān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, Al-Suyuthi (1988) in *Al-Itqān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, Al-Jawaliqi (1995), and Ya'qub (1982) confirm that the language of the Qur'ān contains dialectal variations from various Arab tribes but remains within the framework of "*al-'Arabiyyah al-Fuṣḥā*", thus still qualifying as a revelation in pure Arabic. Therefore, although Jeffery, in his monumental work "The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an", argues that the Qur'ān is not entirely in pure Arabic, the claim is refuted by Muslim scholars who emphasize that lexical diversity in the Qur'ān reflects the breadth of scope of Arabic itself, not an indication of the dominance of foreign languages. Thus, the contemporary Muslim approach does not reject philological studies altogether but invites an epistemological framework that respects the balance between the scientific and the sacred, between linguistic analysis and faith in revelation.

As such, this paper aims to critically examine the philological approach used by Orientalists in assessing the authenticity of the Qur'ānic lexicon. It will also highlight how such approaches challenge the Islamic doctrine of the purity and authenticity of revelation, and how the intellectual response of Muslim scholars to such critiques shapes contemporary dynamics in Qur'ānic studies. By

situating this discourse within a broader epistemological and methodological framework, this article seeks to bridge understandings between Orientalist approaches and traditional tafsir readings while proposing new directions in critical Qur'ānic studies that are more equitable and balanced.

B. Research Method

This research is a qualitative study using the library research method, which focuses on analyzing texts and discourses in the works of Western Orientalists as well as scholarly responses from Muslim scholars (Creswell, 2013). This research employs a philological approach. This approach was chosen because the problems studied are conceptual, historical, and interpretative. The study aims to evaluate the Orientalist critique of the authenticity of the Qur'ānic lexicon, as well as to explore the epistemological implications of this approach to the authority of sacred texts in Islam. The main data sources for this study consist of classic and contemporary Orientalist works such as *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an* by Jeffery (1938), *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran* by Luxenberg (2007), and *What Did Muhammad Borrow from Judaism* by Geiger (1998) in *The Origins of the Koran: Classic Essays on Islam's Holy Book* by Ibnu Warraq. In addition, traditional Islamic texts such as *Al-Itqan fi 'Ulum Al-Qur'an* by Al-Suyuthi (1988), *Al-Muhadzdzab Fi Ma Waqa'a Fi Al-Qur'an min Al-Mu'arrab* by Al-Suyuthi (1983), *Al-Mu'arrab min Al-Kalām Al-A'jami 'ala Hurūf Al-Mu'jam* by Al-Jawaliqi (1995), *Interpreting the Qur'an* by Abdullah Saeed (2006), and *Al-Burhan fi Ulum Al-Qur'an* by Al-Zarkasyi (1990) and various other references, are used as comparisons to understand the

methodological differences and epistemological assumptions between the two scholarly traditions.

The analytical technique used is critical discourse analysis, as developed by Fairclough (2013), which aims to identify power relations, ideologies, and discursive practices in orientalist narratives about the Qur'ān. Using CDA, this research maps how orientalist texts are not only descriptive-linguistic but also social and ideological constructions that shape a particular understanding of the Qur'ān outside the Islamic epistemic framework. In addition, a philosophical hermeneutic approach is used to explore the fundamental differences in the process of textual interpretation between the historical-critical Western paradigm and normative-transcendental Islam (Nasr, 2004; Palmer, 1988). All data were analyzed in a descriptive-critical manner in order to formulate a conceptual position on the validity of the orientalist philological approach, as well as to propose a framework for a fair and contextual evaluation of Western studies of the Qur'ān. Thus, this research is not only evaluative of orientalist methodology but also constructive in offering a dialogical approach between scholarly traditions.

C. Result and Discussion

This research reveals that the study of Qur'ānic vocabulary by Western orientalists is rooted in philological and historical-comparative methodologies that are fundamentally different from traditional Islamic exegetical approaches. The findings show that figures such as Nöldeke (1909), Jeffery (1938), Wansbrough (2004), Geiger (1998) and Luxenberg (2007) have consistently highlighted the possibility of foreign

language influence on the Qur'ānic lexicon, especially from Semitic language families such as Aramaic, Syriac and Hebrew. For example, Jeffery (1938) in *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an* identifies over 300 words in the Qur'an that he believes are of foreign origin, including words such as *istikhlaf*, *firdaws*, and *zakat*, which are considered to have equivalents in other languages. Another example is Katchs (1954) in his work entitled *Judaism in Islam: Biblical and Talmudic Backgrounds of the Koran and its Commentaries*, who concluded that the teachings brought by the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) adopted many Jewish traditions that had developed previously due to the interaction between Muhammad (SAW) and the Jews, which had been established for a long time. In pre-Islamic times, many Jewish immigrants had built settlements on the Arabian Peninsula, leading to interaction between the Arabs and the Jews (Katchs, 1954). This also indirectly influenced the interaction of the languages used. Language can develop alongside the cultural development of a society. Language changes occur due to the association of people in situations where they use different languages, so it is not surprising if vocabulary from one language is found in another. Sometimes, language absorption is used directly, or there may be adjustments to the absorbing language, such as the words *إسماويل* and *سراويل* changing to *إشماويل* and *شراويل* and the word Avraham changing to Ibrahim in Arabic (Al-Jawaliqi, 1995; Rippin, 2007; Wafi, 2004).

Ibnu Faris (1993), as a Muslim scholar, disagrees with the existence of non-Arabic vocabulary (*a'jami*) in the Qur'an. *Firstly*, he explains that the similarity of some words in the Qur'an with non-Arabic languages does not necessarily prove

that those words come from outside Arabic. Similarities between languages may arise from common roots or cultural encounters, but that does not render the word 'foreign' in the Qur'anic context. *Secondly*, Ibn Fāris argues that since Allah affirms in the Qur'ān (QS. Yusuf: 2), "*Innā anzalnāhu Qur'ānan Arabiyyan la'allakum ta'qilūn*", there cannot be any foreign vocabulary in it. According to him, the presence of even one non-Arabic word contradicts this divine statement. He adds that "*if the Qur'ān contained a language other than Arabic, it would be quite natural for the Arabs to be unable to create anything similar to the Qur'ān because there are some languages unknown to them*". Thus, even if there are vocabulary words in the Qur'ān that are similar or have equivalents in other languages, especially cognates such as Hebrew, Suryani, or others, it does not mean that those words are of foreign origin. He asserts that if the words had been used by the Arabs and entered their vocabulary before the revelation, then they were already part of the Arabic language. In his view, there is no such thing as a 'foreign-derived word' in the Qur'ān because all the words are Arabic in both linguistics and usage. Thus, Ibn Faris completely rejects the notion that there is non-Arabic vocabulary (*a'jamiy*) in the Qur'ān.

In contrast to Ibn Faris, Al-Suyuthi (1988) in *Al-Itqān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, argues that there is some foreign vocabulary in the Qur'ān that has been absorbed and Arabized long before its revelation, so that its use became part of everyday Arabic prior to the revelation. Examples include the words "سندس واستبرق" from Persia, «قسطاس» from Greece, "سجیل" from Persia "زنجیل" from India/Persia. Ya'qub (1982), who is also a Muslim scholar, argues that in the Qur'an there are words

that are Arabized (*mu'arrab*). Among these words are those taken from Persian (أباريق, سجّيل, إستبرق, دينار, ياقوت, مسك), Greece (جهنم), Habsyi/Ethiopia (الرقيم, الصراط, القسطاس, الشيطان, إبليس), Turkey (ملائكة, أخذود), India (غساق), dan dari Nabataean/Coptic (مَشْكَاة), (هيت لك). He also added that the Qur'an does not include *mu'arrab* vocabulary as long as it was revealed using Arabic, while Arabic is not a new invention of human languages that influence each other and lend each other vocabulary as long as there is closeness or interaction between languages for any reason and purpose. Another Muslim scholar, Wafi (2004), asserts that many non-Arabic vocabulary words have entered the Arabic language, especially those related to civilization. This is due to the interaction between Arabs and other nations long before Islam came, particularly because the Arabian Peninsula (Hijaz) was a silk route. Therefore, interactions occurred in economic, cultural, political aspects, and so on. Thus, it does not rule out the possibility of non-Arabic vocabulary in the Qur'an, but these vocabularies can still be understood because they were used before the advent of Islam.

Historically, the Hijaz region was not only inhabited by Arabs but also by various non-Arab communities such as Jews, Persians, Nabateans, and Habashah. They brought their languages, cultures, and social practices that influenced the development of Arabic vocabulary, especially since language is not only a medium of communication but also reflects the culture of the language users (Ghufron et al., 2023). For example, the Jewish community has long inhabited the area between Palestine and Medina, as well as in Yemen, Yamāmah, 'Arūd, and Makkah. They engaged in trade and

economic practices such as interest-bearing loans, indicating social and economic interaction between Arab and non-Arab groups (Guillaume, 1955; Watt & McDonald, 1988). This fact raises the possibility that the Qur'ān, despite being in Arabic, contains a certain amount of vocabulary absorbed from other languages. Philological studies show that there are words in the Qur'ān that have their roots in foreign languages such as Hebrew, Syriac, Persian, Habashic, and so on. Thus, the statement that the Qur'ān is entirely in Arabic needs to be understood in a dynamic and inclusive linguistic context. The Arabic language used in the Qur'ān is not static but reflects the linguistic reality of the cosmopolitan Arab society. Therefore, the presence of foreign vocabulary in the Qur'ān does not diminish its authenticity or miraculousness but rather shows that revelation comes down in a language that is alive and adaptive to cultural interaction. Abu Zaid (2013) emphasizes that the Qur'ān, as a revelation, was not revealed in a vacuum, which means that everything is adapted to the recipient of the revelation. Thus, it shows that divine communication considers linguistic and cultural aspects so that the message conveyed can be effectively received by humans. In various verses, the Qur'ān emphasizes that it was revealed *bi-lisānin 'arabiyyin mubīn* (in clear Arabic), as stated in Surah Yusuf [12]:2 and Surah ash-Shu'arā' [26]:195. This statement emphasizes the importance of clarity and comprehensibility of language as the medium of revelation. However, in linguistic studies and the social history of pre-Islamic Arabia, critical questions arise regarding the extent to which the Qur'ān fully utilized pure Arabic, given the intense cultural and linguistic interaction in the Arabian Peninsula.

Thus, the approach used by orientalists was initially aimed at unraveling the historical dimension of the Qur'ān as a text that, according to them, developed in a multilingual and multicultural environment in pre-Islamic Arabia. However, this approach raises a number of epistemological and methodological problems. *First*, the basic assumptions employed by orientalists often overlook the Qur'ān's spiritual and performative function as divine revelation. By categorizing the Qur'ān as an ordinary literary text, orientalists tend to reduce the meaning of revelation to mere linguistic constructs subject to the laws of language evolution (Saeed, 2006). *Secondly*, the claim of a "foreign language" in the Qur'ān has been refuted by classical Muslim scholars such as Al-Zarkasyi (1990) and As-Suyuthi (1988), who explain that the terms fall within the scope of legitimate Arabic dialects used by various Arab tribes at the time. Even terms considered to be absorbed, according to them, have undergone Arabization and have been internalized into the semantic system of Classical Arabic. Thirdly, the orientalist approach also fails to account for the importance of the context of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) and the characteristics of the Qur'ānic rhetorical structure. The study found that most criticisms from contemporary Muslim scholars, such as Nasr (2006) and Arkoun (1994), highlight that the orientalist philological approach often operates within the framework of Western secular epistemology, which is not compatible with the Islamic scientific methodology that integrates *naqliy* (text) and *'aqliy* (reason) in understanding revelation. Furthermore, the results of the study indicate a new development in Muslim academia that seeks to integrate modern linguistic studies

with the tafsir approach. This approach places Qur'ānic vocabulary in the context of Arabic history while maintaining a theological framework that views the Qur'ān as a divine text. For example, Al-Suyuthi (1983), Al-Jawaliqi (1995), and even Neuwirth et al (2010) offer a more moderate perspective by understanding the Qur'ān as a rhetorical and performative text in its historical context without necessarily negating its uniqueness as revelation. Herein lies the methodological shift: from a confrontational approach between Islam and orientalism to a dialogical approach that seeks to bridge the two different epistemologies.

Thus, the results of this study affirm that etymological problems in Qur'ānic vocabulary studies are not merely linguistic issues but are closely related to epistemological, theological, and methodological assumptions. The different paradigms between Orientalist studies and classical and contemporary Islamic exegesis demand an integrative approach that can accommodate both the scientific and spiritual dimensions of the sacred text. Future Qur'ānic vocabulary studies need to consider the linguistic plurality in pre-Islamic Arabia, the socio-historical context of revelation, and the integrity of the rhetorical structure of the text while still respecting the sacredness and normative function of the Qur'ān in the Islamic tradition.

D. Conclusion

This study asserts that the philological approach applied by Orientalists in studying the Qur'ānic lexicon cannot be separated from the Western epistemological framework based on the historical-critical and secular

paradigm. This approach fundamentally departs from the assumption that sacred texts, including the Qur'ān, should be analyzed like any other historical text, namely as cultural products born in particular social and linguistic contexts, thus ignoring the transcendent and theological dimensions inherent in the Islamic tradition. While such an approach contributes significantly to reconstructing the origins and historical development of the Arabic language, as well as tracing possible lexical influences from other Semitic and non-Semitic languages, such as Hebrew, Aramaic, or Persian, it tends to reduce the Qur'ān to a mere linguistic artifact or historical document. Consequently, the performative value and normative function of the Qur'ān as divine revelation in the eyes of Muslims are neglected. Instead, Muslim scholars, both classical and contemporary, have developed a more holistic and integral approach that not only considers the historical-linguistic aspects of Qur'ānic vocabulary but also situates the sacred text within the theological and normative framework of Islam. In this view, allegedly foreign vocabulary is not necessarily seen as evidence of external influences that undermine the authenticity of the Qur'ān; rather, it is understood as part of a legitimate Arabization process, in which foreign words have undergone phonological, morphological, and semantic adaptations to become integral to the Arabic language. This process reflects the linguistic dynamics of pre-Islamic Arabia and confirms that revelation was delivered in a living language capable of accommodating a plurality of cultural and historical expressions.

Thus, the study of the Qur'ānic lexicon requires a multidisciplinary and dialogical approach that bridges the rigor

of philological analysis with a commitment to the sacredness and authority of revelation. Such an approach creates space for a more inclusive and contextual methodology of tafsir, which is sensitive to the historical and linguistic complexities of pre-Islamic Arab society while remaining faithful to the theological understanding that underlies the Qur'ān's position in the Islamic tradition. The implications of these findings necessitate a reformulation of the Qur'ānic studies paradigm, based on a critical interaction between the Islamic scientific tradition and modern humanities methodologies, without compromising the theological integrity of the sacred text.

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