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A Conversation Analytic Perspective on Quranic Verses and Chapters

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Abstract

Applying a conversation-analytic framework to Quranic verses and chapters, the current qualitative study sought to shed new lights on the opening and closing verses in The Holy Quran. In effect, the study analyzed the opening and closing verses of 14 surahs to find out the central themes upon which they begin and come to a close. The analysis was conducted using the Persian translations of the verses as well as seeking help from the available Quran commentary or exegesis written in English. The analysis of the opening verses of the selected surahs revealed three central themes: (1) some surahs begin with words that praise and eulogize Allah, (2) some with imperative sentences or commandments addressed to the Holy Prophet, and (3) some related to specific events and times. Regarding the closing verses, the findings were not uniform across the selected surahs; while in some surahs the closing verses together with the opening verses deal with a similar topic or theme, in some other surahs the closing verses are concerned with different topics.

Keywords: The Holy Quran, opening verses, closing verses, conversation analysis.

1. INTRODUCTION

Conversation is most frequent type of speech in people's everyday lives. People tend to take conversation for granted as it is everywhere. Considering how much each day we spend engaging in conversation, we can guess that conversation might be the most prevalent form of communication. When we hold conversations with others, what matters is not just talking; rather it is about accomplishing things with others through

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talk. A major feature of conversations is that they are joint activities, and they cannot be achieved by the participants acting on their own.

The underlying assumption could be that contributing to a conversation takes the fruitful collaboration of conversant. Ideally, conversation constitutes the ideal site of sociality and social life on the one hand, and the fundamental natural environment or ecological niche of language on the other hand (Schegloff, 1986). Not only is conversation held to be one of the most widespread uses of human language but also it is the corner stone of human society. In other words, conversation portrays itself as an integral part of people's socialization in each and every community. Specifically, conversation is considered to be an ideal way of establishing social relationships and maintaining them. Thus, all human beings need it to develop and sustain their relationships. Another label to describe this phenomenon is talk-in-interaction which refers to various types of talk together with their accompanying body language that go on in daily life across settings from casual to institutional contexts.

Social interaction appears to be the obvious manifestation of spoken language. As a prime channel of social interaction, conversation has attracted a great deal of attention from various scholars in different fields of linguistics. Linguists and anthropologists have considered conversation as an essential component of the culture and tradition of all human societies. More often than not, linguists have focused on figuring out the rules through which conversations should be constructed and organized. These studies take the form of a set of prescriptive rules aiming at describing what a conversation should be like. Nevertheless, such approaches to conversation typically do not include the study of interaction and show little about conversation as an ordinary everyday human activity. As a matter of fact, they view conversation as an elite activity regulated by the conventions of polite society.

Conversation analytic research was originally set up in American sociology through the foundational work of Garfinkel and Goffman with a sharp focus on talk in conversations. As a matter of fact, the emergence of Conversation Analysis (CA) was triggered by Harold Garfinkel who developed a research paradigm which he termed *ethnomethodology*. His approach aimed at examining the social structure of everyday activities in order to find out how they are ordinarily and routinely created, developed and maintained (Garfinkel, 1967). In studying actual instances of social interaction, *ethnomethodology* practically ignores the information actually transmitted during interaction, focusing more on how the interaction is performed, and interestingly it turned out to be the underlying principle of CA paradigm. Another major force in the emergence of CA as a special style of sociological analysis based on observations of people in direct, face to face interaction was Erving Goffman who later called this promising area of research the "interaction order".

The works of Garfinkel and Goffman made significant contributions to the field by establishing a concern for understanding how order was attained in social interaction. In addition, mention must be made of the fact that CA is related to the pioneering research of Harvey Sacks who first investigated a corpus of recorded telephone calls to the Los Angeles Suicide Prevention Center (Schegloff, 2005). According to Schegloff (2005), with whom we do agree, the innovative study developed by Sacks helped to shape the way conversation analysts today treat social interaction. In the course of the foregoing investigation, Sacks entertained the likelihood of investigating utterances "as objects which speakers use to get things done in the course of their interactions with others" (Sacks, 1992, cited in Wetherell et al.,

2001, p. 51). It could be inferred that a key idea in Sacks' approach is the characterization of conversation as an activity by which interactants accomplish things and achieve their communicative goals.

To provide a basic description of CA development, it is possible to utilize the conceptions that [Thomas Kuhn \(1962\)](#) initiated in his *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Sacks, Schegloff and their collaborators were on the look-out for new possibilities to establish a framework for studying talk-in-interaction. Their theoretical framework generated a "paradigm" in Kuhn's parlance which served as model for their studies, and Kuhn referred to those periods of time when a paradigm began to dominate as "normal science". The upshot of the discussion is that through the presentation of their *Language* paper entitled "A simplest systematics for the organization of turn taking for conversation" ([Sacks et al., 1974](#)), CA instituted itself as a prime, cumulative undertaking of direct relevance to most social science disciplines as well as to linguistics.

CA has sought to carry out the task of figuring out and describing the machinery of conversation addressing questions such as "What do people actually do when they converse, how do people organize their ordinary conversation, and how is talk in interaction coordinated in an orderly fashion?" A fundamental assumption of CA as an approach to studying interaction is that participants share the same procedures for designing and interpreting talk, and CA has made an attempt to understand these shared procedures which participants employ to produce and realize meaningful action. As a sociological approach to the study of language and social interaction, CA strives to bring into focus the competencies persons use and depend on to co-construct orderly and mutually understandable courses of action. Given the discussion so far, it could clearly be seen that conversation analysis is relevant to the investigation of naturally-occurring talk.

Ever since its introduction, conversation analysis has been the topic of research in a wide range of disciplines including sociology ([Heritage & Stivers, 2013](#)), anthropology ([Cameron, 2008](#); [Schegloff, 2005](#)) psychology ([Pickering & Garrod, 2004](#)), and (applied) linguistics ([Fox et al., 2013](#); [Kasper & Wagner, 2014](#); [Schegloff et al., 2002](#)). As far as applied linguistics is concerned, CA has been employed to analyze bilingual and multilingual interactions across different cultural settings (e.g., [Gafaranga, 2005](#); [Torras, 2005](#)) and to investigate second, foreign, and lingua franca talk (e.g., [Dam, 2002](#)). [Schegloff et al. \(2002\)](#) presented the main areas of CA that have been addressed by researchers in linguistics, in general, and in applied linguistics, in particular. They divided the areas of investigation into three parts: (a) turn-taking, (b) repair, and (c) word selection. They also reviewed the studies on the institutional talk that takes place in such contexts as medical settings, pedagogical settings, business organizations, legal settings, counseling sessions, and airport control towers. Additionally, they addressed the studies in the realm of applied linguistics that focused on native, nonnative, and multilingual talk.

The current study, however, sought to apply the techniques of conversation analysis to The Holy Quran. This may seem odd at first glance since The Holy Quran is available in the form of a book (i.e., a sacred script), and the audience may ask: Why should we apply conversation analysis to a written text? When it comes to The Holy Quran, the picture is not that simple. Many distinguished Quranic researchers (e.g., Soroush, Nasr, inter alia) believe that the book is not a text but a conversation between the God and the Holy Prophet of Islam. Similarly, many Muslims, especially the Shia

who live in countries like Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, and other parts of the Middle East, believe that The Holy Quran is not a text or script but a conversation between Allah and the Holy Prophet, Muhammad, mediated by the angel Gabriel (Birkel, 2014). If we agree with this belief, then The Holy Quran can be readily submitted to conversation analysis. This is why the current study sought to approach this sacred script from the perspective of conversation analysis.

For the audience who is less versed in the field, it has to be said that The Holy Quran consists of 114 chapters (called *surahs* in Arabic); the sentences of each and every chapter have been numbered. Each separate sentence in each chapter is called a verse (or an *ayah* in Arabic). On the whole, the 114 chapters/*surahs* of The Holy Quran contain 6236 verses; in total this sacred book contains 77807 words.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

How interlocutors open and close conversations has been the concern of a number of studies in sociolinguistics, pragmatics and conversation analysis (Hopper, 1992; Kaukomaa et al., 2013; Pavlidou, 1994; Schegloff, 1986; Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). Conversation openings and closings in telephone communication represent one of the areas that have received a great deal of attention (e.g., Bowles & Pallotti, 2004; Godard, 1977; Lindström, 1994; Sifianou, 1989). However, there is a dearth of research in the related literature with regard to the way chapters or *surahs* in The Holy Quran open and close. To fill this gap, the present qualitative study will address the issue by finding out how Quranic *surahs* begin and how they come to a close.

Before explicating the method of the present study, it is important to review the studies carried out on different aspects of the Holy Quran. A line of such studies has been concerned with the linguistic analysis of Quranic translations. These studies (e.g., Abdul-Raof, 2005; Ali et al., 2012) identified linguistic difficulties associated with the translation of The Holy Quran from Arabic to other languages — particularly to English. In this regard, they point out some lexical, syntactic and semantic problems that compromise the task of translation. Abdul-Raof (2005) showed that the target language repertoires more often than not fail to capture the proper meaning of the source text. Referring particularly to The Holy Quran, he argued that translating a text by relying on grammatical transposition might be more appropriate for modern standard Arabic than for the classical Arabic text of The Holy Quran. Ali et al. (2012) carried out a study to identify linguistic difficulties in translating The Holy Quran from Arabic to English. They found that the linguistic and rhetorical features of The Holy Quran continue to remain a serious challenge for translators trying to communicate the intended meanings of Quranic verses or chapters from Arabic to English. To overcome this problem, the authors recommended that translation of the Holy Quran be carried out by a committee comprising of experts in the language, culture, history and science of The Holy Quran. Also, they recommended using various dictionaries as well as consulting commentaries of The Holy Quran to obtain appropriate interpretations of Quranic verses. Along the same line, Tabrizi and Mahmud (2013), applying a discourse structure perspective, compared the English translation of The Holy Quran and its Arabic text. They found that different translations vary according to structures and word domains. Exploring the metaphors of natural phenomena in The Holy Quran, Wyrod (2008) found five major metaphorical classifications: (1) metaphors of rain, (2)

metaphors of mountain, (3) metaphors of wind, (4) metaphors of light, and (5) metaphors of darkness. Quranic exegesis and understanding the text of The Holy Quran was another issue investigated by the researchers. In this regard, [Haleem \(1993\)](#) argued for the importance of the context and internal relationship as the important method contributing to the understanding of The Holy Quran.

3. METHOD

As far as the current literature is concerned, and to the best of the researchers' knowledge, no attempt has been made yet in the field of applied linguistics to investigate how *surahs* or chapters in The Holy Quran begin and come to a close. As stated above, the studies carried out thus far are confined to issues associated with Quranic translations. The objective of the current qualitative study was to fill the existing gap. In practice, the study was carried out to answer the following research question: How do *surahs* in the Holy Quran begin and come to a close?

The research design of the present study was qualitative. Due to the fact that analyzing all *surahs* of The Holy Quran was not feasible, the researchers chose 14 *surahs* through a purposive sampling procedure. The *surahs* included in this study were Al-Fatihah, Al-An'am, Al-Kahf, Saba', Fatir, Al-Furqan, Al-Mulk, Al-Jinn, Al-Kafirun, An-Nas, Al-Falaq, Al-Ikhlās, Al-Waqi'a, and Al-Infitar. The opening and closing verses of all of the selected *surahs* were analyzed through consulting the Persian translations of the verses and the English commentary by [Kathir \(1999\)](#). The reason why the researchers used both the English Quranic commentary and the Persian translation to conduct the analysis is that each verse in any *surah* in The Holy Quran is grounded in different social, cultural, and historical events — in terms of the notion of possible worlds (cf., [Capone & Salmani Nodoushan, 2014](#); [Salmani Nodoushan, 2015, 2018](#)). The information about such events which require an in-depth analysis is hard, if not impossible, to glean only through Quranic translations. As such, the English commentary at hand helped the researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the events relevant to the revelations of a *surah*.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the opening and closing verses showed that there are three central themes upon which the selected *surahs* of The Holy Quran start:

- (1) some *surahs* begin with words that praise and eulogize Allah,
- (2) some with imperative sentences commanded to the Holy Prophet of Islam, Muhammad, and
- (3) some related to specific events and times.

Regarding the closing verses of the *surahs*, the findings were not uniform across the selected *surahs*; while in some *surahs* the closing verses together with the opening verses deal with the same topic, in some other *surahs* the closing verses are concerned with different topics. In the following, the themes of the opening and closing verses are explicated separately.

4.1 Allah to be Praised and Eulogized

The opening verse of such *surahs* as Al-Fatihah, Al-An'am, Al-Kahf, Saba', Fatir, Al-Furqan, and Al-Mulk begins with "Alhamdulillah," praising and thanking Allah. For instance, Al-Fatihah glorifies and eulogizes Allah by introducing his most beautiful names and attributes. Al-An'am begins with praising Allah and underscoring the unity of Allah, or monotheism, Prophecy, and Resurrection. In Al-Furqan, in the first verse, Allah praises himself for The Holy Quran he has revealed to the Holy Prophet.

While the opening verses in the above-mentioned *surahs* praise Allah, the closing verses deal with a different theme; the closing verse is centered on two themes which refer to the misguidance of disbelievers and the punishment/torment that awaits them, and to the mercifulness and power of Allah. Al-Fatihah ends with a warning against choosing and following the path of misguidance. It refers to the Day of Resurrection clarifying that no one on this day will be gathered with those who indulge in sins. Al-Kahf ends with "*Was la yoshrek bi ibadehi rabbe ahada*" emphasizing that, in the worship of Allah, man associates none as a partner for Allah; it refers to the notion of Allah's uniqueness and that there is only one God. Saba' comes to a close with "*Innahom kanu fi shakkon murib*" referring to the people who have been in grave doubt in the world. In his commentary about this verse, Ibn Kathir states that 'in this world they had doubts, so their faith will not be accepted from them when they behold the punishment with their own eyes'. Al-Furqan ends with "*Fasowfa yakuno lizama*" which means that the denial of Allah and his holy messenger will lead to punishment and torment. The last verse of Al-Mulk "*Faman yatiakom bi maa'en maeen*" raises a question about the supply of flowing water and mentions that no one is able to do this (i.e., to supply you with water) except Allah. It implies that it is because of Allah's mercifulness and his grace that He makes water run across the various regions of the earth. Fatir which ends with "*Fa innallah bi ebadihi basira*" points out the fact that Allah is all-seer of his servants. He is aware of their deeds and intentions. The last verse of Al-An'am, "*Innahoo laghafuron rahim*", means that Allah is forgiving, and merciful.

4.2 Imperative Sentences (or Commandments)

Such *surahs* as Al-Jinn, Al-Kafirun, An-Nas, Al-Falaq, and Al-Ikhlās begin with imperative sentences commanded from Allah to the Holy Prophet. Al-Jinn starts with "*Qol uhi*", Al-Kafirun with "*Qol ya ayuhal kafiroon*", An-Nas with "*Qol auzu bi rabinnas*", Al-Falaq with "*Qol auzu bi rabilfalaq*", and Al-Ikhlās with "*Qol huwallahu ahad*". In his commentary about the opening verse of Al-Jinn, Ibn Kathir states that 'Allah commands his messenger to inform his people that the Jinns listened to the Quran, believed in it, affirmed its truthfulness and adhered to it'. In Al-Kafirun, Allah commanded the Holy Prophet to express disavowal from disbelievers. In Al-Falaq, the Holy Prophet was commanded by Allah to seek refuge with Allah from the evil of all wicked creatures, wicked men, jinn, animals, and evil happenings. The opening verse of Al-Ikhlās commanded the Holy Prophet to say that Allah is the one with no peer or assistant.

As to the closing verse of these *surahs*, it should be noted that they come to a close almost with the same theme. In other words, the whole *surah* is related to one central theme from the start to the end. For instance, the central theme in Al-Ikhlās is

the uniqueness of Allah; this theme remains throughout the *surah* emphasizing that there is no assistant and rival for Allah, and he is not compared and equal to anyone. Al-Kafirun ends with a verse in which Allah commanded the Holy Prophet to say to the disbelievers that “you cherish your religion and I cherish my religion”. The closing verse of Al-Falaq is related to taking refuge from evil-nature creatures, a theme that the *surah* begins with.

4.3 The Specific Events and Time

Some *surahs* or chapters of The Holy Quran are related to specific events or times. Two of these *surahs*, Al-Waqi’a and Al-Infitar, were selected to be analyzed based on their opening and closing verses. Al-Waqi’a starts with “*Iza waqa’atil waqi’a*” in which Allah mentions Al-Waqi’a, one of the names of the Day of Resurrection. Allah assures people of the arrival of this day because it is real and will happen. The opening of Al-Infitar which starts with “*Iza samaun fatarat*” is concerned with what will happen on the Day of Judgment, when the heaven is split.

The closing verse in each of these *surahs* comes to a close approximately with the same theme. For instance, Al-Waqi’a ends with the verse “*Fasabi bismi rabikal azim*” in which man is urged to glorify and praise Allah, the last verse of Al-Infitar, “*Yowma la tamliko nafsen linafsan shaya wal amru yowma izin lillah*” refers to the same day — i.e., the Day of Judgment — when no person shall have power for another and all decisions on that day will be with Allah.

5. CONCLUSION

The overall findings of the present qualitative study revealed that the opening and closing verses in the *surahs* of The Holy Quran are not organized haphazardly; rather, Allah revealed the verses based on specific events in a coherent way. Arguing along the same line and drawing on Relevance Theory, [Khajehei and Shakarami \(2012\)](#) found that explicit linguistic devices are not necessarily the determiners of textual relations and should not be the only focus of studies dealing with the interplay of Quranic verses. They argued that communicators, rather than language itself, can communicate thoughts and information that are presented in a coherent way in Quranic *surahs*. Moreover, the findings of the study were in accordance with the study carried out by [Al-Kabi et al. \(2005\)](#) that found the unity of the theme in different verses — and similarities in the *surahs* of Al-Fatihah and Yaseen. In practice, the findings of the present study extended the present literature that has attempted to classify the verses of The Holy Quran using different theories or frameworks. So far, researchers (e.g., [Al-Khalifa et al., 2009](#); [Al-Taani & Al-Gharaibeh, 2010](#); [Alrabia et al., 2014](#); [Eldin, 2014](#); [Hammo et al., 2007](#)) have used text-based, stem-based, synonyms-based system, semantic opposition, diacritic, and corpus-based approach, and cognitive metaphorical analysis to explore concepts throughout Quranic verses. However, the opening and closing verses which were engaged in this study — as another method to classify Quranic verses — have not been addressed in the above-mentioned studies.

In summary, the objective of the current qualitative study was to analyze the opening and closing verses of 14 *surahs* or chapters of The Holy Quran. In effect, the study sought to find out how each *surah* begins and comes to a close. The findings of

the study revealed that not all of the selected *surahs* or chapters of The Holy Quran begin and close with the same theme; rather, they vary mainly due to the fact that The Holy Quran was revealed to the Holy Prophet over a period of 23 years covering a huge range of events and topics. As far as the opening and closing verses analyzed in the current study are concerned, some *surahs* begin with praise and glorification of Allah, some begin with imperatives and commands from Allah to the Holy Prophet, and some cover specific events and time. As for the closing verses, the findings were not uniform across the sampled *surahs*; while in some *surahs* the closing verses together with the opening verses deal with the same topic, in some other *surahs* the closing verses are concerned with different topics.

The findings of the study imply that the Shia belief about The Holy Quran being a conversation has its roots in reality. A text has an introduction, a body, and a conclusion, and is focused on a topic. The nature of conversation, however, is often times 'topical' in that the interlocutors jump from topic to topic depending on the setting of the conversation (Brown & Yule, 1983); this is what the current study observed. Since the number of the *surahs* that were analyzed in the current study was limited, our findings cannot be strongly generalized. It is therefore recommended that similar studies be carried out in which other *surahs* of The Holy Quran are also analyzed, and if their findings support the findings of the current study, then claims about the conversational nature of this sacred scripture will be ever more valid.

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