Intentional Linguistic Ambiguity and Interpretation of Aḥkām al-Qur’ān: A Relevance Theory-based Approach

Ambiguous expressions of all sizes and levels of complexity are commonplace in the Qur’an; they are observable at all planes of text and in various Qur’anic themes. This paper focuses on lexical ambiguity which is studied in tafsīr and ʿulūm al-Qurʾān under the auspice of alfāẓ al-wujūh and under al-mushtarak al-lafẓī in uṣūl al-fiqh and fiqh al-lughah. Interpreters and jurists often aim to disambiguate those lexical items by eliminating all their possible meanings (wujūh) except one, ‘al-wajh’ or ‘al-ma’nā ar-rājih’.

The questions perused in this paper are what type of ambiguity multiple-meaning lexical items in the Quran exhibit (a question of definition), whether they should be interpreted by resolving or maintaining their ambiguity and the impact of either approach on recipients’ understanding and application of the text (questions of interpretation).

The paper proposes a combination of a linguistic classification and a pragmatic approach to the interpretation of alfāẓ al-wujūh and applies it to a number of words found in ayāt al-aḥkām contexts. The categorisation is drawn from Zhang (1998) where multiple-meaning words are classified into fuzzy, vague, general and ambiguous. It aims to identify a number of alfāẓ al-wujūh under each category and propose a clearer understanding of the causes of their ambiguity than that offered by the classical approaches. The process of interpretation is then analysed using a pragmatic Relevance Theory-based approach to identifying the intended meanings and the implications of both disambiguation and maintaining the ambiguity.

The paper concludes that ambiguity in the Qur’anic text is an intentional communication tool utilised to broaden the scope of the text and allow wide-ranging applications and that by disambiguating an ambiguous expression without an explicit textual indication, the interpreter would be unjustifiably narrowing down the text’s intended broad range of meanings and thus defying the purpose for which the text is formed the way it is.

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