

**Dr Salwa El-Awa**

## Intentional Linguistic Ambiguity and Interpretation of *Aḥkām al-Qurʾān*: A Relevance Theory-based Approach

Ambiguous expressions of all sizes and levels of complexity are commonplace in the Qurʾān; they are observable at all planes of text and in various Qurʾānic themes. This paper focusses on lexical ambiguity which is studied in *tafsīr* and *ʿulūm al-Qurʾān* under the auspice of *alfāz al-wujūh* and under *al-mushtarak al-lafzī* 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, *ʿal-wajh* or *ʿal-maʿnā 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 *alfāz 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 *alfāz 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 Qurʾānic 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.



**Dr Salwa El-Awa**  
**Swansea University**

Dr Salwa El-Awa is a Senior Lecturer in Arabic and Islamic Studies at Swansea University. Her research and teaching interests include Arabic linguistics and modern linguistic analysis of Arabic and Islamic text, notably the Quran and researching contemporary Islamic movements. She previously was a lecturer in Qurʾānic studies in the University of Birmingham's Department of Theology and Religion (2001-2010), where she taught Quran and Hadith Studies. She also taught Arabic philology and linguistics at Ain Shams University in Cairo from 2010 to 2015. Dr El-Awa authored several publications on the Qurʾānic text, including two monographs, *Textual Relations in the Qurʾān: Relevance, Coherence and Structure* (2005), *ʿAl-Wujūh Wa an-Nazaʿir: Dirasa fi Siyaq al-Quran* (1998) and a number of academic articles on the issues of text coherence and structure in the Qurʾān. Her current research focuses on the textuality of the Qurʾānic sura, Arabic discourse markers, the role of discourse markers as indicators of textual relations within the Qurʾānic sura.