Influence of Symmetry Theory on Understanding the Qur'anic Ayas

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Received on: 22-12-2020 Accepted on: 7-6-2021

Abstract
Symmetry theory is a well-known mathematical theory, which has been applied to physics and chemistry as well as other scientific disciplines. Here, we apply the symmetry theory to language in general and to the Holy Quran in specific. We argue that there is ample evidence for this theory in language such as the X-bar theory, parallelism and the mirror image derivation across languages. We show that there are vertical as well as horizontal types of symmetry, some of which have a line of symmetry while others have a virtual point. The data is analyzed from a semantic angle with some reference to syntax. We focus on symmetry at the Aya (verse) level. The paper found that symmetry can help interpret Ayas of similar wording or similar structures. It also found that symmetry theory presents a solution for the either-or-pause Ayas. Further, it showed how symmetry theory help solve ellipsis in the Holy Quran. Finally, the paper revealed that there are symmetry-less sentences that communicate propositions without the need for a symmetrical image.

Keywords: Symmetry Theory, the Holy Quran, X’ Theory, Semantics, Discourse Analysis.

1. Introduction
Symmetry is an aesthetic aspect of everything in the universe. The human body is the best example of symmetry; almost every organ on the right has a left counterpart. Even when people design things physically or mentally, they tend to unconsciously have a symmetrical pattern, e.g. housing complexes, a PS console, a clock, clothes, shapes, and charts. Without a symmetric wing, a bird or a plane can’t fly.

Symmetry, as a notion, has been thoroughly studied in different disciplines and fields of sciences such as chemistry, mathematics and engineering. In the former a water molecule (H₂O) is symmetrical since the two hydrogen molecules appear on the right and left sides of the oxygen molecule (HOH). In math, every positive integer has a symmetrical negative counterpart.

A theory of symmetry attracted the attention of language scholars as well (Al-Rawajfeh 2018a; Al-Rawajfeh 2018b, Dgour and Al-Rawajfeh 2019, Al-Rawajfeh 2019, An’am 2017). However, these
research papers tackled symmetry at the whole Quran level and at the Surah level except for Dgour and
Al-Rawajfeh (2019) who also applied symmetry at the sentence level. Yet, the researchers were interested
in the verbal alternation and its semantic effect on similar verses with tri-consonantal and quadri-
consonantal past verbs. Our research, by contrast, focuses on applying the theory on the Aya level without
focusing on the morphology of the verb. It also tackles certain types of symmetry that were not addressed
in Dgour and Al-Rawajfeh (2019) such as the either-or Ayas and Ayas that incorporate some sort of
ellipsis. In addition, having this paper written in English will make it available to more audience as all
previous works were written in Arabic and thus targeted an Arab audience.

At the very start of this research, it is necessary that we define discourse. Fairclough (1989, 124)
states that:

"Discourses are different conceptions of the world, connected to the different
relations people have with the world, depending on their social positions. Discourses
are projective, imaginaries, representing possible worlds, which are different from
the actual world, and tied in to projects to change the world in particular directions”.

This entails that different discourses may impose different interpretations of the world. Here, we will
be concerned with the Quran discourse which addresses all humankind regardless of their cultures, races
or ethnicities. Specifically, we will show that this kind of discourse is very unique as it shows perfect
symmetry as the Sura (chapter) and Aya (verse) levels.

In Language, perhaps the notion of symmetry can be traced back to the theme-rheme dichotomy
which roughly states that “sentences in discourse contain some information which the speaker
presupposes to be known by the hearer and some information which the speaker asserts. The former is
often referred to as old or given information and the latter as new” (Hünig 199, 7). The theme-rheme
dichotomy can, then, be looked at from a different angle: the theme is an element and the rhyme is the
symmetrical image for that element.

Linguistically, symmetry has been referred to indirectly. For instance, in the X’ theory (Chomsky
1970), a sentence is divided into a subject NP and (usually) a verbal predicate. An XP (maximal
projection) has a head and a complement or an adjunct. The binary branching of every XP is a
manifestation of symmetry. On the sentence level, some sentences have symmetrical structures. For
example, an equational sentence consists of two nominals (say A & A’). The sentence structure is
symmetrical, e.g. I (am) Jim. The verb to ‘be’ can be overt or covert depending on the language.
Moreover, most complex sentences consist of a main clause and a subordinate clause which has a
connector (e.g. an if-clause sentence consists of an if-clause and a main clause).

Parallelism is another direct way of symmetry. Instructors of writing usually teach students to use
parallel structures especially for coordination or listing a series. For instance, a series that starts with a
gerund is most likely to remain in the gerund form for all items of the series. Syntactically, coordination
is taken as a test for identifying symmetrical XPs whether lexical or functional. This is a way of
establishing symmetrical phrases and structures that would otherwise lead to crashed derivation. In other
words, merge as a syntactic operation (Chomsky 1993) favors, inter alia, symmetrical structures. When
people write, they unconsciously follow a symmetrical pattern. For instance, their sentences and paragraphs are, more or less, of the same length. Rarely do we find a remarkably above-or-below-average sentences or paragraphs.

Unfortunately, X’ theory and parallelism look at sentences and clauses from a purely syntactic perspective. Additionally, they do not analyze several clauses in relation to each other. Finally, these theories have marginal reference to meaning (semantics). The Symmetry theory, by contrast, analyzes several clauses in relation to each other at the same time. It, also, takes the meaning in the first place and the structure second.

Inter-linguistically, symmetry has been proven to exist through mirror imaging (Brody & Michael 2000). Mirror maintains that “the syntactic relation ‘X complement of Y’ is identical to an inverse-order morphological relation ‘X specifier of Y’”. Moreover, morphological derivations are directly reflected into syntactic derivations (Baker 1985 & 1988). Halle and Marantz (1993) developed a mirror principle in Distributed Morphology which states that “a complex word is generated in a derivation with the root of a given word merging lower than all subsequent suffixes that attach to that word”.

Languages tend to perform the same syntactic operations in a mirror image pattern. Whereas English places adjectives and other nominal modifiers before the head noun, other languages such as Arabic and some Romance languages mirror image this order:

1. a. The very beautiful girl
   b. al- bint-u3 al-dʒami:la-tu2 dʒiddan1
   the-girl-NOM the-beautiful-NOM very

On the text level, some writing genres tend to follow a symmetrical pattern. The best example to list here is UN resolutions. As part of the resolution, the circumstances (preamble) are listed in the gerund form, whereas the decisions are listed in the infinitive-without-to form. MA theses, PhD dissertations and many research papers also follow a certain symmetrical pattern in certain parts. For instance, they all start with an introduction that is symmetrical with the conclusion. If there is a results part, then there is a symmetrical discussion part.

2. Types of symmetry

There are several types of symmetry that can be reflected either vertically or horizontally (Al-Rawajfeh 2018b). Suppose that we have two elements on the left (E1 & E2). To obtain a vertical symmetry, we assume that there is a virtual vertical symmetry line. Thus, we have E3 & E4 on the right. Either E1 is symmetrical to E3, and E2 to E 4 (the first on the left with the first on the right) or E1 is symmetrical to E4 and E2 to E3 (theouters and the inners) as shown in Figure 1 & 2 respectively.

![Figure 1: A first-first and last-last vertical symmetry](image-url)
This kind of symmetry is found in poetry; i.e. in stanzas that follow \textit{(ABAB)} rhyme scheme as in Robert Frost’s ‘Neither out Far nor in Deep’:

The people along the \textit{sand}
All turn and look one \textit{way}.
They turn their back on the \textit{land}.
They look at the sea all \textit{day}.
As long as it takes to \textit{pass}
A ship keeps raising its \textit{hull};
The wetter ground like \textit{glass}
Reflects a standing \textit{gull}.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{image}
\caption{Outers and inners vertical symmetry}
\end{figure}

This kind of symmetry can be found in research articles where the introduction is symmetrical to the conclusion, and the results are symmetrical to the discussion.

Horizontally, symmetry can take the following pattern:

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{image}
\caption{A one-to-one horizontal symmetry}
\end{figure}

This kind of symmetry can be found in discourse of questions and answers as in exams or interviews.

In all of the previous patterns, there is a virtual line of symmetry (i.e. a symmetry element). However, one can also find that there is a central real point between the symmetrical parts. In such a case, the central point serves as a basis for the symmetry and has a vital meaning for the symmetrical parts:

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{image}
\caption{A vertical symmetry with a central point (first-first and last-last)}
\end{figure}
Figure 5: A vertical symmetry with a central point (outers and inners)

This kind of symmetry is found in novels and stories where the central part is the plot. It is like a bell shape where the culmination represents the symmetrical line and the slope on the left is symmetrical to the one on the right. In open-ended stories, one of the symmetrical images is missing but that will be alright because readers can fill that image according to their understanding and expectation. Additionally, we will shortly see that this kind of line of symmetry (central point) also appears in verses (Ayas) of the Holy Quran. However, in some cases this point appears peripherally.

3. Approach and Research Questions

Cohesion as a framework, adopted by Halliday and Hasan (1976), focuses on the semantic relationships that link together sentences or paragraphs, units of discourse that are structurally independent of each other. On the other hand, the Systemic Functional Grammar is a linguistic theory that views and examines “language as shaped (even in its grammar) by the social functions it has come to serve” (Wodak 2009, 27). In this paper, we adopt Widdowson (2008) the Functional Systemic Approach which is concerned more with the semantic-syntactic analysis of different texts.

To achieve its objectives, the paper seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the different symmetry types in the Holy Quran at the Aya level?

2. How does the symmetry theory help understand Quranic Ayas?

3. How does the symmetry theory help understand Symmetry with Ayas of Either-or pauses?

4. How does the symmetry theory help understand help interpret ellipsis at Aya’s Level?

4. Analysis of symmetries in the Holy Quran at Ayas Level

This section is meant to answer the first research question. The Holy Quran is a unique book whose language is the most outstanding miracle. Here we will discuss symmetry on the Aya Level. Since there are many short Ayas that are better discussed on the discourse (Surah) level, all the examples discussed here will involve long Ayas that consist of at least two or more clauses.

4.1 Symmetry with Ayas of more than one clause

Here, we will tackle Aya’s that include more than one clause or one sentence. The Ayas are chosen randomly from different Surahs. We start with Aya (87) of Surat Al-Baqara:
We gave Moses the Scripture, and sent a succession of messengers after him. And We gave Jesus son of Mary the clear proofs, and We supported him with the Holy Spirit. Is it that whenever a messenger comes to you with anything your souls do not desire, you grew arrogant, calling some impostors, and killing others? (translated by Itani, 2014).

As shown in the Aya, there are five sentences: the first mentions Moses and the prophets who came after him, the second mentions Jesus and his support by the Holy Spirit, the third is the central sentence which summarizes the attitude of Bani Israel (Israelites) at those times towards the prophets, the fourth and fifth report what actions they took against the two groups: Moses and the following prophets, and Jesus and his followers.

In terms of symmetry, this Aya represents an outers-inners vertical symmetry with a line of symmetry/central point. The first two sentences are symmetrical with the last two clauses (bold green and underlined dark blue). So, the Israelis used to kill the prophets and they used to call Jesus and his followers imposters. This makes sense because Bani Israel used to kill the prophets who came after Moses. Moreover, the (second) sentence about Jesus tells that he gave them the clear proofs by curing the sick, resurrecting the dead as well as showing them other miracles and he was supported by the Holy Spirit (the angel Gabriel). However, they called him and his followers liars. On the other hand, the third (central) sentence gives the reference point: whenever a messenger comes to you with anything that your souls do not desire, you grew arrogant. Thus, killing prophets and calling them imposters stems from their arrogance against whatever their souls do not desire.

Furthermore, there is a very clear syntactic symmetry here. The first two sentences (in Arabic) have a VSO word order. By contrast, the last two have a marked OVS word order that embodies a topicalization (of Moses and the following prophets, and Jesus and his followers). The marked word order here is congruent with Bani Israel’s unexpected marked treatment of the prophets. Thus, the interrogative central third sentence is very suitable in the context as it paves the way for the marked word order and the unexpected treatment in the fourth and fifth clauses: why to kill good people who seek to save you in this life and in the hereafter?

Finally, in light of the ideational function (Halliday 1971; Zhuang-g-lin 1988; Yumin 2007 among others), the first clause has two material processes: The Lord giving Moses the book, and the Lord sending other prophets after Moses. This clause is symmetrical with the last clause in the Aya which also has a material process: Bani Israel killing those prophets. As for the second clause, it has two material processes too: The Lord giving Jesus the proofs, and the Lord supporting him with the Holy Spirit. The
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symmetrical image for this clause is clause 4 which has a verbal process: Bani Israel belying Jesus and his follows. This process matches the process of being confronted with evidence. Interestingly, the symmetry line (clause 3) has two mental processes: not liking whatever does not follow their desires, and growing arrogant. It is because these processes are mental, their doers either fight back verbally by belying others or take action by killing whoever does not follow their desires.

The second Aya for our discussion here comes from Aya (221) from the same Surah:

The symmetry here follows the one-to-one horizontal symmetry. The first is about getting married to an idolatress. The symmetrical image is that a believing maid is better than an idolatress. The second symmetry is between marrying an idolater and the counter image is that a believing servant is better than the idolater. The third compares what the idolaters call to with what Allah calls to. The line of symmetry is located at the end of the Aya because it gives a moral: if it happens that a believer gets married to an idolater/ idolatress, they will find out that this was not the best choice and they will remember what Allah says.

The first and second symmetries are in the form of an imperative mood that serves as a warning or prohibition. The symmetrical images are some sort of advice in the form of emphasized statements. In other words, in each, a command is matched with a piece of advice. The syntactic structure in the symmetries is the same (imperative) and so is the syntactic structure in the images (an emphatic verbless sentence). The third symmetry is a statement that gives a rationale for the first and second symmetry. The symmetry here and its image have an SVO order: both start with a subject that is followed by the same verb ‘call to’. The line of symmetry has a structure that is different from all of the structures of the three

Figure 7: A one-to-one horizontal symmetry with a central point

Do not get married to idolatresses, unless they have believed.
A believing maid is better than an idolatress, even if you like her.
And do not marry idolaters, unless they have believed.
A believing servant is better than an idolater, even if you like him.
These call to the Fire,
but Allah calls to the Garden and to forgiveness, by His commands.
He makes clear His communications to the people, that they may remember them.

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symmetries and their images. It has a V(S)O structure where the verb is in the factual present tense in order to indicate that the moral holds for all times. Furthermore, the first two sentences included a ‘second’ person pronoun whether in the clause or in its image. The mood is imperative: The Lord wants people to listen carefully to what he commands and advises. By contrast, the third sentence (the clause and its image) have a third person pronoun because the Lord wants people to look at the big picture: the disbelievers whom one may get married to and become in-laws. They call to Hell Fire while Allah calls to the Garden if people follow His commands.

The first clause expresses a material process (marrying) but its symmetrical image is a relational process that attributes ‘goodness’ to a related goal (a believing maid is better than idolatress). The same applies to clause 2 and its image. Both clause 3 and its image have the same verbal/mental process (call to). The symmetrical line which happens to occur sentence finally has two mental processes: The Lord making clear His communications/ signs to people, and people may remember that. The mental processes (in the present tense) in the symmetrical line are meant to let people think about the Lord’s signs and to always remember what the Lord advises.

There is also a creative symmetry on the word level between the first and second sentence: tankihu: ‘(you) getting married to’ in the first sentence is in a symmetrical relationship with tankihu: ‘(you) marrying your daughters to (idolaters). This is because in Islam a woman needs her parents’ or guardian’s consent/ permission to get married while a man may get married without his parents’ or guardian’s consent.4

Finally, the “directive speech acts such as commands or orders may be used to enact power, and hence also to exercise and to reproduce dominance” (Van Dijk, 1993, 250). Moreover, more effective power is mostly cognitive, and enacted by persuasion, among other strategic ways to change or manage the mind of others (ibid). The Lord here is giving his servants commands regarding who to marry or get married to. These commands are supported by persuasion. The Lord is omniscient and all-knowing, and therefore, he is telling believers that a believing maid or servant is better than an idolater maid or servant even if you like them. The symmetry line, the last clause in the Aya, gives more support for the proposition by showing that the lord’s communications/ signs may serve to make them remember what the Lord said. Using Fairclough’s terminology (1989), the symmetry line connects the commands to people’s own lives (reflection). In addition, the language of the first two symmetries and their images is used to advance the creeds that the Lord communicates and makes them appear as common sense (systemizing and explanation).

4.2 Symmetry with Ayas of one clause

We have been discussing symmetry within a single Aya. Thus, we found that, for all Ayas that consist of more than one clause or sentence, there is a symmetry between each pair of clauses and sometimes this symmetry is accompanied by a reference point that may be central or peripheral. But what about the Ayas that consist of only one clause or sentence? There are many Ayas especially in the last five juz’s (the last sixth of the Quran) that consist of a single clause. For these Ayas, we will adopt the
‘identity operation’ which roughly means *doing nothing*. In chemistry, we get an identity operation when we have either 0° or 360° rotation.

In language, each sentence is a symmetry of itself if it does not have a symmetrical image. This level of symmetry is the simplest one and all humans can produce it for any sentence they utter or write. Of all creatures, it is only man who can produce language and thus has this kind of identity for the sentences he produces. In the Holy Quran, the Aya which consists of one clause has no symmetrical image except for itself. For example, the symmetry for the Aya "وَالنَّخلَ بَآسِقتٍ لَّهَا طَلُبٌ نَضِيدٌ" (And lofty palm trees have fruit arranged in layers) is the Aya itself.

Moreover, in some cases, the identity of an Aya is manifested by repeating the same Aya. Consider the ‘Disbelievers’ Surah (No. 109: 6 Ayas):

[Oh, Muhammed] Say, ” You, disbelievers (1). I do not worship what you worship (2). *Nor are you worshippers of what I worship* (3). Nor will I be a worshipper of what you worship (4). *Nor are you worshippers of what I worship* (5). For you have your religion, and for I have my religion” (6).

Within the Surah, the third Aya has an identity symmetry with the fifth. In fact, the whole Sura can have different symmetry patterns. The first is ABC B’C’A’:

You, disbelievers (1).

You have your religion, and I have my religion (6)

*I do not worship what you worship* (2)

*Nor will I be a worshipper of what you worship* (4)

*Nor are you worshippers of what I worship* (3)

*Nor are you worshippers of what I worship* (5)

It can also have the first-first last-last pattern (ABC A’B’C’):

You, disbelievers. (1)

I will not be a worshipper of what you worship (4)

*I do not worship what you worship* (2)

*Nor are you worshippers of what I worship* (5)

*Nor are you worshippers of what I worship* (3)

*For you have your religion, and I have my religion* (6)

In such a case, the symmetrical image of ‘*Nor are you worshippers of what I worship*’ (3) results in ‘*For you have your religion, and I have my religion*’ (6). On the other hand, ‘*Nor are you worshippers of what I worship*’ (5) is the symmetrical image of ‘*I do not worship what you worship*’ (2).

Moreover, the Sura can have the outers inners symmetry pattern: ABC C’B’A’:

You, disbelievers (1).

You have your religion, and I have my religion (6)

*I do not worship what you worship* (2)

*Nor are you worshippers of what I worship* (5)

*Nor are you worshippers of what I worship* (3)

*Nor will I be a worshipper of what you worship* (4)
Finally, the Surah can also have a horizontal symmetry (A,A’; B,B’; C,C’). The four patterns can be respectively represented in the following diagrams:

Note finally that the whole Surah is set in the second person pronoun because, at that time, there was a real conflict and confrontation between Muhammed and his followers on the one hand and the disbelievers on the other. So, it was necessary to tell these clear-cut principles to them in their faces.

Recall that power is one of the central concepts in CDA. “Power does not necessarily drive from language but language can be used to challenge power, subvert it, or alter the distribution of power in the short and the long term ….” (Wodak and Meyer 2009, 10).

Power can be seen as mind management which controls social beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of people of a certain society (Ghazali 2004).
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Fairclough (1995), Van Dijk (1998), Woda and Fairclough (1997) and Imani and Habil (2015) state that pronouns are textual elements that reflect pragmatic, ideological, and social values such as solidarity, power relations, status, image-making, as well as self-positioning and self-presentation. It is a way of image-building to include oneself in and/or exclude oneself from special groups, positions, ideologies, or activities. This is exactly what this Surah expresses: We Muslims against you idolaters. We can say that Muhammed, who was weak at the time when this Surah was revealed to him, gained much power because it was him who was rigorously telling the idolaters that he does not worship what they worship. Language here was like a defiance that gave Muhammed and his followers power over the disbelievers. It is the use of the pronoun ‘I’ [Muhammed] that creates an ideological stance on the audience. By contrast, ‘you’ [disbelievers] here creates a face-threatening effect.

In Surat ‘Al-Rahman’ (the Most Merciful), the Aya ﻓَﺑِﺄَيِّ آﻻَءِ رَﺑِّﻛُمَﺎ ﺗُﻛَذِّبَﺎنِ’ has recurred (31) times. Although it seems that this Aya has an identity symmetry, it is, in fact, a symmetrical image for other Ayas. Except for the introduction of the Surah (the first ten Ayas), almost every 1-3 Ayas have this image: ‘So which of your Lord’s marvels/ favors would you deny?’ It is impossible for any human writer to master and dare to give one symmetrical image for different propositions. Here, we give the translation of Ayas 10-25 of this Surah:

10. And the earth; He set up for the creatures.
11. In it are fruits, and palms in clusters.
12. And grains in the blades, and fragrant plants.
13. So which of your Lord’s marvels will you deny?
14. He created man from hard clay, like bricks.
15. And created the jinn from a fusion of fire.
16. So which of your Lord’s marvels will you deny?
17. Lord of the two Easts and Lord of the two Wests.
18. So which of your Lord’s marvels will you deny?
19. He merged the two seas, converging together.
20. Between them is a barrier, which they do not overrun.
21. So which of your Lord’s marvels will you deny?
22. From them emerge pearls and coral.
23. So which of your Lord’s marvels will you deny?
24. His are the ships, raised above the sea like landmarks.
25. So which of your Lord’s marvels will you deny?

Although the signs that the Lord mentions are all narrated as third person, the symmetrical Aya for each ‘So which of your Lord’s marvels will you deny?’ is in the second person pronoun just to make these signs lively and graphic in the minds of man and jinn.

Other examples include immediate identity symmetry as in Surat Al-sharh between Aya 4-5:

“Did We not expand for you, [O Muhammad], your breast? (1) And We removed from you your burden (2) Which had weighed upon your back (3) And raised high for you your repute. (4) For indeed,
with the hardship [will be] ease. (5) Indeed, with the hardship [will be] ease. (6) So when you have finished [your duties], then stand up [for worship] (7) And to your Lord direct [your] longing. (8)"

Interestingly, the identity symmetry here has some bearings on the semantics of the proposition of the Aya: ‘Hardship’ is definite in both Ayas, whereas ‘ease’ is indefinite. This indicates that the Lord asserts that two ‘eases’ come with a single hardship.

5. Symmetry with non-specific Ayas

Having presented the different types of symmetry at the Aya level, we will answer the second, third and fourth researcher questions in this section. We aim here to show the influence of the symmetry theory on the understanding Quranic Ayas. Although other theoretical perspectives help interpret and understand Quranic verses, the symmetry theory, adopted here, gives new insights that help look at Quranic Ayas from a different perspective. The paper extends Al-Rawajfeh’s (2018) theory of symmetry. However, it applies the theory on the Aya level rather than on the Surah level. It also addresses three aspects that were not tackled before.

5.1. Aya’s similarity and symmetry

In all genres of any discipline, writers have certain ideas or propositions that they want their readers to understand in one and only one way. Thus, they try to avoid ambiguity and vagueness. They are very keen that those ideas be understood in the same way whenever they appear. In the Quran, the story is different. The Lord says that there are unspecific Ayas. These maybe similar in wording or in structure, but dissimilar in terms of propositions.

It is He who has sent down to you, [O Muhammad], the Book; in it are verses [that are] precise - they are the foundation of the Book - and others unspecific. As for those in whose hearts is deviation [from truth], they will follow that of it which is unspecific, seeking discord and seeking an interpretation [suitable to them]. And no one knows its [true] interpretation except Allah. But those firm in knowledge say, "We believe in it. All [of it] is from our Lord." And no one will be reminded except those of understanding. (Al Imran: 7) (https://quran.com/?local=en).

In another reading (and thus another interpretation and translation), ‘no one knows its [true] interpretation except Allah and those firm in knowledge’. (Maulana Muhammad: http://www.aaiil.org/text/hq/trans/ma_list.shtml). So, let’s see how this unspecificity/similarity communicates the miraculous language of the Quran through the lens of symmetry.

Symmetry can help interpret similar Ayas. To see how this works, let’s consider the following two similar Ayas: (we will use \( A, B, C \) for the first part of the symmetry and \( A', B', C' \) for the counter images).

And whoever does righteous deeds, whether male or female \( (A) \), while being a believer \( (B) \) - those will enter Paradise \( (B') \) and will not be wronged, even as little as the speck on a date seed \( (A') \). (Al-Nisa 124)
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Whoever did righteousness, whether male or female (A), while being a believer (B), we would surely cause him to live a good life (A'), and we would surely give them their reward [in the Hereafter] according to the best of what they used to do (B'). (Al-Nahl. 97)

The symmetry in the first Aya has the pattern (AB B'A'), whereas the second has the pattern (AB A'B'). According to (Al-Nisa 124) whoever does righteous deeds, whether male or female (A), they will not be wronged, even as little as the speck on a date seed (A'). This applies to all people regardless of their faith. On the other hand, whoever does righteous deeds, whether male or female while being a believer (B), those will enter Paradise (B'). In other words, believing is a precondition to entering Paradise. The symmetry is set in the present tense which expresses the habitual and progressive aspects of the AB; while, the images A'B' are set in the future (will not be wronged, and will enter Paradise). The Aya can be rendered as a conditional type 1 sentence.

As for (Al-Nahl: 97), whoever did righteousness, whether male or female (A), would be guaranteed to live a good life (A') regardless of their belief, whereas if they did that while being believers (B), they would surely be given their reward in the Hereafter according to the best of what they used to do (B'). In other words, believers will be rewarded twice: in this life and in the hereafter. Interestingly, the first clause is similar to the past tense of conditional type 2 sentences. However, due to not having an equivalent to ‘would’ in Arabic, the symmetrical verb in the second and third clause were set in the imperfective form which again does not necessarily match a present tense.

In Surat Ghafir, a similar Aya (40) has two levels of symmetry that can be represented on a coordinate grid as follows (read from left to write):

On the outer level, the symmetry is between those who do evil deeds against those who do righteous deeds. On the inner level, each group will get what they deserve: the wrongdoers will not be recompensed except by the like thereof, whereas the righteous people will enter Paradise.

As for modality, we find out that the image of the first clause, which talks about the wrongdoers, has double negation (laa 'will not', and ?illa 'except'): Wrongdoers will not be compensated except by the like. This, in fact expresses a strong affirmation modality. On the other hand, the image of the second clause, which talks about righteous people, has positive affirmation modality. Perhaps, the stronger affirmation for wrongdoers was intended to reassure how just the Lord is. Finally, as discussed in the previous example, the sentences in this Aya reflect a type 2 if-clause since the first clause of each
sentence is a past tense verb (did), while the symmetrical images are in the imperfective form which is better be equivalent to ‘would + base’ in this case.

Thus, in line with Zhuang-lin (1988, 315), although these three sentences/Ayas may have similar ideational and interpersonal functions, they may be different in terms of textual coherence.

It is also possible for very similar Ayas to have a slight difference in meaning if taken to have the same symmetrical pattern. In Al-Baqara (the cow) Surah, there are two Ayas that have almost the same wording except for the order. Let’s adopt an (ABA’B’) pattern for both.

وَاتَّقُوا يَوْمًا لَا يَتَجْزَى نَفْسٌ عَن نَفْسٍ شَيْئًا // وَلَا ﺗَنَفْعَ ﻣِنْهَا شَفَاعَةٌ // وَلَا ﮔُؤُذَ ﺳَرَا // وَلَا نَتَنَفَّعُ ۔ (48)

And fear a Day when no soul will suffice for another soul at all (A), nor will intercession be accepted from it (B), nor will compensation be taken from it (A’), nor will they be aided (B’) (Al-Baqara48).

وَاتَّقُوا يَوْمًا لَا يَتَجْزَى نَفْسٌ عَن نَفْسٍ شَيْئًا // وَلَا ﺗَنَفْعَ ﻣِنْهَا شَفَاعَةٌ // وَلَا ﮔُؤُذَ ﺳَرَا // وَلَا نَتَنَفَّعُ ۔ (123)

And fear a Day when no soul will suffice for another soul at all (A), and no compensation will be accepted from it (B), nor will any intercession benefit it (A’), nor will they be aided (B’) (Al-Baqara123).

In both Ayas, the A & B’ are the same. However, it is the counter images A’ & B that make the difference. In Aya (48), the reason for ‘And fear a Day when no soul will suffice for another soul at all’ (A) is that ‘no compensation or ransom will be taken from any soul’. Furthermore, since no will intercession be accepted from anyone (B), they will not be aided (B’).

On the other hand, in Aya (123), the reason for ‘And fear a Day when no soul will suffice for another soul at all’ (A) is that no intercession will be accepted from anyone. Moreover, as no compensation or ransom will be taken from any soul (B), they will not be aided (B’).

5.2. A three-dimension symmetry

There are cases where we have a three-dimension symmetry where an Aya consists of three sentences. Two of them are symmetrical and both are also symmetrical to the third. Abstractly, A’ is the image of A, and B is the symmetrical image to (A & A’). The three-dimension symmetry is very common in the Quran:

الذِي خَلَقَ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ ۖ اِنْظُرِ ۗ الْعَزِيزُ ﻓِي ﻛُلِّ شَيْءٍ (الملك 3)

‘[And] who created seven heavens in layers (A). You do not see in the creation of the Most Merciful any inconsistency (A’). So, return [your] vision [to the sky]; do you see any breaks? (B’)’ (Al-Mulk: 3).

As for creating the seven heavens (A), one cannot find any inconsistency in this creation (A’). By the same token, if we look at the heavens, and we do not find any inconsistency, will there be any breaks in any of His Creation (B)?

One of the most complex and unique phenomena in the Quran is the fact that there are some long Ayas which may have more than one pattern of symmetry. Here, we will go over Al-NurAya (the Light verse: 35) in Surat Al-Nur and show how symmetry works:

اللّهُ ﺍﻟْبِرّ ﻛَﻣِّرَةٌ ﻓِي ﺍﻟْأَرْضِ (اللّه) ۚ ﺍﻟْبِرَاءُ ﻓِي ﺍﻟْقُدُّوسَةِ (الملك 2)

Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth

The example of His light is like a niche which has a lamp...
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The lamp is within glass, the glass as if it were a pearly [white] star lit from [the oil of] a blessed olive tree, neither of the east nor of the west

whose oil would almost glow even if untouched by fire

Light upon light

Allah guides to His light whoever He wills

And Allah presents examples for the people

And Allah is Knowing of all things

If we can take the first-first, last-last pattern ABCD A’B’C’D’, we will have the sentences paired as follows: 1/5, 2/6, 3/7, 4/8. Alternatively, we can take the outers-inners pattern ABCD D’C’B’A’, and thus have the pairs: 1/8, 2/7, 3/6, 4/5. Let’s see now how each pattern works.

In the first pattern, ‘Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth’ as this light is the light of the earth and the universe as well as the light of all heavens (1/5). ‘The example of His light is like a niche within which is a lamp’ and it is Allah who guides whoever wills to the niche of His light (2/6). ‘The lamp is within glass, the glass as if it were a pearly [white] star lit from [the oil of] a blessed olive tree, that is neither of the east nor of the west’. Allah presents this example as well as others to people (3/7). Finally, ‘the oil would almost glow even if untouched by fire’. This is a foretold fact about light energy. Dr Royal R. Rife (1888-1971) found that all foods emit frequencies due to the movement of the atoms in them. Surprisingly, the scientist found that most food items emit less than 60 frequencies while olive oil emits around 320 frequencies that are transformed into light. It was further discovered that the energy in the oil is so huge that it can help in the cure of many diseases including cancer since this energy raises the energy of the body cells and thus helps fight defected cells. Since these frequencies are still relatively small, we cannot see the light. However, this light becomes much more glowing if the oil is burnt. Due to this fact which was not discovered at the time when the Quran was sent to the Arabs almost 1400 years ago, the symmetrical image for this part of the Aya was ‘Allah is all knowing of all things’.

Now we turn to the outers-inners pattern. ‘Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth’ since He is all knowing of all things. Without His light, people and all creatures will know nothing (1/8). ‘The example of His light is like a niche within which is a lamp’ and this example, as well as all examples, are presented by Allah who is knowledgeable of all analogies (2/7). ‘The lamp is within glass, the glass as if it were a pearly [white] star lit from [the oil of] a blessed olive tree, neither of the east nor of the west’. Interestingly, scientists found that olive trees grew first in the Mediterranean areas which are not in the east nor in the west. It is Allah who guided people to this and other facts (3/6). Finally, ‘the oil would almost glow even if untouched by fire. If it is burnt, it will glow much more. Therefore, it becomes like light upon light (strong light) (4/5).

5.3. Symmetry with Ayas of Either-or pauses

One of the unique syntactic, semantic and prosodic phenomena in the Quran is what we dub here as ‘either-or’ pause, also known as ‘embracing’ or ‘opposing’ pauses. This is marked by a three-dot mark
that are placed on the two words on which one can pause. These words usually occur at a clause boundary. According to Muslim scholars, one can pause on either word but not on both. This kind of ambivalence that can result in one word or constituent to be parsed in two different clauses, hence giving two different interpretations is ONLY found in the holy Quran. In fact, this case is attested in more than 30 places in the Quran. To clarify, let’s take the second Aya from Al-Baqara:

‘That is the book no doubt in it: a guidance for the pious’

The prepositional phrase fiihi ‘in it’ can be parsed as the last constituent of the first clause: that is the book ‘the Quran’, no doubt in it. In the second case, it is a preposed predicate for the postposed subject hudanill-muttaqueen ‘guidance for the pious’ is in it. From a translation perspective, ‘doubt’ does not take a prepositional phrase complement, i.e. *that is the book, no doubt* is preferred to *that is the book, no doubt in it*. In terms of symmetry, the prepositional phrase ‘in it’ can be part of the A or A’ as shown in Table 1 below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Symmetry Aya 2 of surat Al-baqara</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>فيه لک الکتاب لا ريب هذى للمتقين</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That is the book and there is no doubt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That is the book, no doubt.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Let’s take another example; Aya (26) of Surat Al-Ma’iedah ‘the banquet’:

[Allah] said, "Then indeed, it is forbidden to them for forty years [in which] they will wander throughout the land. So do not grieve over the defiantly disobedient people."

When Moses commanded Bani Israel to fight the people who were dwelling Jerusalem, they refused claiming that there are very fierce and ferocious people in the Holy Land. As a punishment, the Lord prohibited them from entering it. Thus, in the first reading, they are forbidden from entering the Holy land for forty years. During that period and perhaps a longer period, they wander aimlessly in al-teeh ‘the lost land’ without finding a way out. In the second reading, they are forbidden to enter Holy Land. They will wander aimlessly in the lost land for forty years. Put differently, if ‘forty years’ was the final constituent of the first clause, they may get lost for forty years or more, but at least they cannot get into the Holy land for forty years. On the other hand, if ‘forty years’ was the first constituent of the second clause, the duration of their state of loss is specified by ‘forty years’.

With regard to symmetry, the clauses and their symmetrical images are presented in Table 2:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2: Symmetry Aya (26) of Surat Al-Ma’iedah</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ل فاذئها محورة عليهم  اربعين سنة</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Allah] said, then indeed, it is forbidden to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>them for forty years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>فإن فاذئها محورة عليهم</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>زربعين سنة كتيهون في الأرض</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Allah] said, then indeed, it is forbidden to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>them.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Finally, the last clause of the Aya ‘So do not grieve over the defiantly disobedient people’ is the image (B’) for the two clauses together, i.e. A&A’ represent B: As long as they disobeyed you (Moses), they will get lost for forty years or more. So, do not grieve over them (Al-Rawajfeh 2018c).

In a nutshell, the Quran discourse in linguistically unique. It is impossible to find any writer who can master having sentences that are syntactically, semantically or prosodically parsed in two different ways to give two different interpretations, hence having two different symmetrical images.

5.4. Symmetry and Ellipsis at Aya’s Level

At the beginning of this paper, we mentioned that the Quran is a linguistic miracle since no human of any superpowers can create even one Aya. Here, we show that though symmetry is attested on the Aya, Surah and the Quran levels, it sometimes breaks the canonical rules of writing in a way that is even more eloquent.

In the previous sections, we found that all Ayas that consist of more than one clause show one or more of the symmetry patterns. However, unlike what humans are familiar with, in some cases, the Quran deliberately omits the symmetrical image for different reasons. Arab traditional syntacticians (900-1100 AD) mention that the omission in the Holy Quran denotes the importance and loftiness of the omitted part. Sometimes, an utterance is omitted because it is known to the addressee. More importantly, deleting a phrase or an utterance makes the addressee’s imagination rich and wild. By contrast, if the deleted phrase was uttered, it would not give the hearer various options to think of. Nonetheless, the context helps the reader or hearer to think of a set of possible options. Aya (31) of Surat Al-Ra’d ‘The Thunder’ is a good example here:

وَإِنْ قُرْآنٍ سُرِّىَتْ بِهِ الْجَبَالُ أَوْ قَطَعَتْ بِهِ الأَرْضُ أَوْ كُلِّمَ بِهِ اﻟْمَلْكُ أَوْ تَوَلَّى اﷲُ ﻋَلَىْ اﻟْإِبْرَاهِيمَ وَيَوْمَ تُوْلِدُ اﷲُ اﻟْإِبْرَاهِيمَ وَيَوْمَ ﻓُلْوَادُ اﷲُ ﻋَلَىْ اﻟْإِبْرَاهِيمَ وَيَوْمَ ﻓُلْوَادُ اﷲُ ﻋَلَىْ اﻟْإِبْرَاهِيمَ وَيَوْمَ ﻓُلْوَادُ اﷲُ ﻋَلَىْ اﻟْإِبْرَاهِيمَ وَيَوْمَ ﻓُلْوَادُ اﷲُ ﻋَلَىْ اﻟْإِبْرَاهِيمَ وَيَوْمَ ﻓُلْوَادُ اﷲُ ﻋَلَىْ اﻟْإِبْرَاهِيمَ وَيَوْمَ ﻓُلْوَادُ اﷲُ ﻋَلَىْ اﻟْإِبْرَاهِيمَ وَيَوْمَ ﻓُلْوَادُ اﷲُ ﻋَلَىْ اﻟْإِبْرَاهِيمَ وَيَوْمَ ﻓُلْوَادُ اﷲُ ﻋَلَىْ اﻟْإِبْرَاهِيمَ وَيَوْمَ ﻓُلْوَادُ اﷲُ ﻋَلَىْ اﻟْإِبْرَاهِيمَ وَيَوْمَ ﻓُلْوَادُ اﷲُ ﻋَلَىْ اﻟْإِبْرَاهِيمَ وَيَوْمَ ﻓُلْوَادُ اﷲُ ﻋَلَىْ اﻟْإِبْرَاهِيمَ وَيَوْمَ ﻓُلْوَادُ اﷲُ ﻋَلَىْ اﻟْإِبْرَاهِيمَ وَيَوْمَ ﻓُلْوَادُ اﷲُ ﻋَلَىْ اﻟْإِبْرَاهِيمَ وَيَوْمَ ﻓُلْوَادُ اﷲُ ﻋَلَىْ اﻟْإِبْرَاهِيمَ وَيَوْمَ ﻓُلْوَادُ اﷲُ ﻋَلَىْ اﻟْإِبْرَاهِيمَ وَيَوْمَ ﻓُلْوَادُ اﷲُ ﻋَلَىْ اﻟْإِبْرَاهِيمَ وَيَوْمَ ﻓُلْوَادُ اﷲُ ﻋَلَىْ اﻟْإِبْرَاهِيمَ وَيَوْمَ ﻓُلْوَادُ اﷲُ ﻋَال
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ellipsis here could be that there cannot be any interpretation other than This Book. However, the Aya indicates that even if they witnessed these miracles, they would not believe. There are other interpretations which give other options for the omitted part. In all cases, the symmetrical image is omitted here because it is more eloquent to leave it to the hearer to fill it in according to what he/she can imagine and think of in such a given context.

Another example is Aya (36) of Surat Al-Furqan [The Criterion] in which Allah addresses Moses and is brother Aaron:

فَقِيلَ اذْهَبَا إِلَى اﻟْﻘَوْمِ الَّذِينَ كَذَّبُوا بِآﯾَاتِنَا فَذَمْرُوهُمْ ﺗَدْمِﯾرًا (36)

“(Then) We said: ‘Go to the nation who have belied Our signs. And We utterly destroyed them’.

In this Aya, it is plausible to say: ‘Go to the nation who have belied Our signs’, so they went to those people but they belied ‘and We utterly destroyed them’. The complement of the Aya ‘destroyed them’ makes it clear that the two prophets went to Pharaoh and his people but they indeed belied. In terms of symmetry, there are two symmetrical images that are omitted. Instead of having (A-A'; B-B'), we have A Ø ØB’ as illustrated in Table 5 where the bold italicized phrases stand for the omitted images Ø:

Table 3: Symmetry and ellipsis of Aya (36) of Surat Al-Furqan

| ‘Go to the nation who have belied Our signs’ (A) | so they went to those people (A') |
| they belied (B) | We utterly destroyed them’ (B') |

It is common in the Quran to delete the symmetrical image especially in conditional sentences. There are at least (30) Ayas that involve omission of the symmetrical image as in Aya (93) in Surat Al-An’aam ‘The Cattle’:

وَﻟَوْ ﺗَرَىٰ إِذِ اﻹِظْلَامُونَ فِي ﻏَمَرَاتِ اﻹِلْمَوْتِ وَاﻹِﻣَرَاءَاتِ ﺑَأَسْطِوٰ أَیْدِیٰهُمْ أَخْرَجُوا أَﻧْفُﺳَكُمُ ﻋَلَى اﷲِ ﻋَزِزِ ﺔَلِّحقَ ﻋَلَى ﺎَیَوْهٍ ﺑِمَآ أَحْرَضُوهُمْ ﺑِمَآ ذَآءَتْهُمْ ﺑِمَآ أَحْضَرُوهُمْ (93)

And if you could but see when the wrongdoers are in the overwhelming pangs of death while the angels extend their hands. [saying], "Discharge your souls! Today you will be awarded the punishment of [extreme] humiliation for what you used to say against Allah other than the truth and [that] you were, toward His verses, being arrogant.”

The conditional in this Aya is something like “if you could but see when the wrongdoers are in the overwhelming pangs of death while the angels extend their hands, you would see a horrible scene/ you would see some great scene/ you would see their horrible destiny, etc). Again, the symmetrical image has been omitted because the addressee can fill it in with some imaginative option. Put differently, as long as a certain proposition can be expressed by one clause without giving the symmetrical image which completes it, it is more eloquent to leave it open to the hearer to complete it with a suitable option from their own. In light of informativity, one needs not tell the audience something that would sound redundant or something they can fill in by themselves.

Remarkably, the first clause is narrated in the third person pronoun ‘the wrongdoers’. However, the symmetrical image is narrated in the second person. In other words, to make the proposition more
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rigorous, the Lord talks about the wrongdoers, then shifts abruptly to talk to them. The second person pronoun symmetrical image of the third person pronoun makes the Aya sound more vivid.

In fact, the above-mentioned example is known as al-iltifaat 'person/ pronoun shift’. This kind of pronoun shift is very unique to the Holy Quran. Humans stick to one pronoun in one proposition. By contrast, it is common in the Quran to shift from the second person to the third pronoun, third to first, singular to plural etc. This shifting renews the style and refreshes the addressee’s attention. It also embodies power as well. For example:

وَقَالُوا اﺗﱠﺧَذَ اﻟرﱠﺣْﻣَٰنُ وَﻟَدًا

(They) say, "The Most Merciful has taken [for Himself] a son."

And they say, "The Most Merciful has taken [for Himself] a son."

You have done an atrocious thing.

Note here, the first clause is set in the third person ‘they’. However, its symmetrical image is set in the second person ‘you’ because the Lord wants to scold them and denounce what they say. Moreover, this pronoun shift manifests power exercise. The Lord judges their wrongdoing as an atrocious thing. In addition to making the whole scene more picturesque, the pronoun shift enables language to reflect power. It is like telling them that ‘I (the Lord) am not unaware of what you claim. YOU have done an atrocious thing that you will be punished for.

6. Conclusion

This paper proposed a symmetry theory of language applied to the Holy Quran at the Aya level. It showed that there are several types of symmetry, which may have an overt or a covert central point (line of symmetry). The analysis of the data was based on semantic and syntactic grounds. The paper also discussed some phenomena that may help understand the Quranic Ayas such as the three-dimension symmetry analysis, the either-or pauses and the symmetry-less sentences. As this approach to linguistic analysis is still new, its tenets are still basic. Therefore, researchers are invited to develop it as well as to apply the theory to other pieces of discourse.
أثر نظرية التناظر في فهم آيات القرآن الكريم

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الملخص

نظرية التناظر هي في الأساس نظرية رياضية تطبّق على علوم الفيزياء والكيمياء، وحقول معرفية أخرى. في هذا البحث نطبق هذه النظرية على اللغة، وعلى القرآن الكريم بوجه خاص. وقدمنا هنا مجموعة من الحجج والبراهين تثبت وجود هذه النظرية في اللغة، مثل نظرية الانقسام الثنائي (X-bar)، والتماثل البنائي والاشتتاق التناظري في لغات العالم. كما نبين أن هناك أنواعاً أفقية من التناظر وأخرى عمودية، يظهر في بعضها خط للتناظر، في حين يكون هذا الخط وهمياً في البعض الآخر.

قام الباحثون بتحليل الخطاب في هذه الدراسة من منظور داللي مع بعض الأشارات إلى النحو، وتركيز هنا على التناظر على مستوى الآية. وجدت الدراسة أن نظرية التناظر تساعد في فهم الآيات متشابهة المعنى أو متشابهة البناء اللغوي، وتبين أيضاً أن هذه النظرية تقدم حلًا لفهم آيات تعانق الوقف، علاوة على ذلك تتعامل النظرية مع الظاهرة الحذف في القرآن الكريم. وأخيراً تبين الدراسة أن هناك آيات أو أجزاء منها تقدم معنى كاملاً أو حتى معنى أبلغ دون أن يكون لها صور تناظرية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: نظرية التناظر، القرآن الكريم، نظرية الانقسام الثنائي (X-bar). علم الدلالة، تحليل الخطاب.
Endnotes

1 Arabic is written and read from right to left.
3 In Arabic, the prefixal enclitic *la-* that appears after *wa* (and) is one way of emphasizing a proposition.
4 In fact, out of respect, even Muslim men ask their parents’ permission to get married.
5 The Arabic word ‘*mutashaabihat*’ is translated as ‘unspecific’, but the literal meaning is *similar* (plural feminine).
6 Recall that the present/imperfective form in Arabic may represent different tenses, moods and aspects (see Benmamoun 2000).
7 This is a literal translation of what Quran scholars dubbed in Arabic.
8 Most prominent Arab linguists belonged either to the Basra School or Kufa School, and both were named after two Iraqi cities.

References


