An Analysis of the Opening and Closing Verses in the Holy Quran

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Abstract

The present qualitative study was concerned with 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.

Introduction

Conversation analysis (CA) 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, Thompson, Ford & Couper-Kuhlen, 2013; Kasper & Wagner, 2014; Schegloff, Koshik, Jacoby & Olsher, 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., van Dam 2002). Schegloff et al. (2002) presented the main areas of CA that have been addressed by researchers in applied linguistics. 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, Muhammed, 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; On the whole, this sacred book contains 77807 words.

**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, Peräkylä & Ruusuvuori 2013; Pavlidou, 1994; Schegloff, 1986; Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). Conversation openings and closings in telephone communication is 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, Brakhw, Nordin & ShaikIsmail, 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*.

**Research 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-Ikhlas, 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 Ibn 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, 2017). 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.

**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, Muhammed, 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.

**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 “wa 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 yakunu 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 end 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, “Inahoo laghafuron rahim”, means that Allah is forgiving, and merciful.

**Imperative Sentences (or Commandments)**

Such surahs as Al-Jinn, Al-Kafirun, An-Nas, Al-Falaq, and Al-Ikhlas 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-Ikhlas 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-Ikhlas 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-Ikhlas 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.

**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 relates to a close approximate 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.
Conclusions
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, Kanaan, Al-Shalabi, Nahar, and Bani-Ismail (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, Al-Yahya, Bahanshal & Al-Odah 2009; Alrabiah, Alhelewh, Al-Salman, & Atwell, 2014; Al-Taani & Al-Ghairaibe, 2010; Eldin, 2014; Hammo, Sleit, & El-Haj, 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 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.

References


