

# Literal and Figurative Language with Reference to the Holy Quran

Iman M. Obied Al-Shemmery

College of Engineering/ University of Babylon

## Abstract

This study presents language as a means of conveying information. Language is at the core of human life .Without it, many of our most important actions are impossible. So, this paper deals with language literally and figuratively with reference to the Holy Quran.

## Introduction

### ١-١ Problem

Language serves as a means of communication and cognition; it enables us to cooperate and think for ourselves with other people in the community. Language is used for thinking but it is commonplace of the linguists and philosophical literature that the main issue of language is communication. It carries the impression of past things, present needs, and future plans. Therefore, it figures centrally in our lives. The study tries to answer the following question: How far does the reader know language literally, figuratively and their types?

### ١-٢ Aim

The study aims at investigating literal language, figurative one and their types as they found in some of the chapters in the Holy Quran.

### ١-٣ Hypotheses

It is hypothesized that:

- ١- Language is used literally and figuratively in the Holy Quran.
- ٢- All types of figurative language are found in the Holy Quran.

### ١-٤ Procedures

The researcher adopts the following procedures

- ١-Presenting material about literal language and figurative one.
- ٢-Identifying types of figurative language and giving example for each.
- ٣-Analysing some of these examples to give a complete picture about the implied type of figure of speech.

### ١-٥ Limit

The study is limited to some of the chapters in Holy Quran, as it is the most comprehensive literary text.

### ١-٦ Value

It is hoped that this study will be useful for those interested in semantics especially "meaning". Besides, the study might be useful for the researchers and readers.

### ٢- Literal Language

Literal language (i.e.) denotation meaning refers to words that do not deviate from their defined meaning, this means that words reveal the meaning they carry<sup>(١)</sup>. Palmer (١٩٧٦:٣٠) uses the term reference in talking about the denotation of words. Reference deals with the relationship between the linguistic elements, words, sentences, and the non- linguistic world of experience. Similarly, Crystal (٢٠٠٣:١٢٩) asserts that denotation meaning involves the relationship between a linguistic unit (lexical item) and the non- linguistic entities to which it refers. For example, the denotation meaning of dog is its dictionary definition of "canine quadruped". To sum up, denotation refers to the literal meaning of a word "the dictionary definition" (٢). The researcher is going to give examples from the Holy Quran to clarify the ideas presented in this study.

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

١- "إنا أعطيناك الكوثر" (١) سورة الكوثر

٢- "لقد خلقنا الإنسان في أحسن تقويم" (٤) سورة التين

### ٣- Figurative Language

Figurative language (i.e.) connotation meaning refers to words or groups of words that exaggerate or alter the usual meanings of the component words. It may involve analogy to similar concepts or other context, and may exaggerate. These alterations result in a figure of speech (١).

Palmer (١٩٧٦:٦٣) suggests that the term connotation refers to emotive or evaluative meaning. It is also used to refer to linguistic or even dialectal differences or even to the small differences that are found near synonyms.

According to Crystal (١٩٩٢:٨٠), connotation is the personal or emotional associations which are suggested by words, and which thus form part of their

meaning, for individual speakers; for example, the word automation may connote 'efficiency' to one person, and, 'rounder' to another.

On the other hand, Parker and Riley (٢٠٠٥: ٢٣) use "non literal locutionary acts" to refer to the connotation, they point out that "non literal locutionary acts" are those for which a literal interpretation is either impossible or absurd within the context of the utterance. For example, the famished husband who walks through the door and says to his wife, I could eat a horse (instead of, I am very hungry) is performing a non literal locutionary act. Finally, the researcher is in line with the view that figurative language does not always mean what is being said or read , but serves to make it more interesting , it helps painting a picture in the hearer/reader's mind.

#### ٤- Techniques of Figurative Language

Figurative language departs from literal meaning to achieve a special meaning or effect. Techniques for doing so will be the main concern for the following sections.

##### ٤-١ Idioms

Falk (١٩٧٨: ٤٢) declares that an idiom is any string of words for which the meaning of the whole expression can not be determined from the meaning of the individual morphemes that make up the string.

Crystal (٢٠٠٣: ٢٢٦) states that some linguists refer to idioms as ' ready made utterances ' ; others refer to idioms as ' habitual collocations'. Matthews (٢٠٠٧: ١٨٣) mentions that an idiom is a set of expressions in which two or more words are syntactically related , but with a meaning like that of a single lexical unit: e.g. 'spill the bean' is someone has spilled the beans about the bank raid, or ' put one's foot in it ' is her husband can never make a speech without putting his foot in it.

In other words, Hurford. et al. (٢٠٠٧: ٣٢٨) say that idioms are multi-words phrases whose overall meanings are idiosyncratic and largely unpredictable, reflecting speaker meanings that are not derivable by combining the literal senses of the individual words in each phrase according to the regular rules of the language.

٣- " قالوا أتعجبين من أمر الله رحمت الله وبركته عليكم أهل البيت انه حميد مجيد" (٧٣) سورة هود

٤- "وفدينه بذبح عظيم " (١٠٧) سورة الصافات

In the above example, (أهل البيت) refers to the family of the Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him; (حميد مجيد) refers to Allah .

#### ٤-٢ Metaphors and Similes

Leech (١٩٦٩: ١٥٦) states that a metaphor is a covert, and simile is an overt comparison. This means that for each metaphor, we can devise a roughly corresponding simile, by writing out tenor a vehicle side by side, and indicating the similarity between them i.e. by like or some other formal indicators, for example: 'the ship ploughs the waves' is a metaphor may be transferred into simile as ' the ship goes through the waves like a plough ploughing the land'.

Palmer (١٩٧٦: ٦٦) points out that metaphor is one of the most familiar kinds of relationship between meanings where a word appears to have both a 'literal' meaning and one or more 'transferred' meanings, for example: the leg of a chair or table, the eye of a needle or a potato. On the other hand, Aitchison (١٩٩٢: ٩-١٠) asserts that metaphor is the use of a word or phrase in place of another in order to suggest a likeness between them.

Crystal (١٩٩٢: ٢٤٩) denotes that a metaphor is a semantic mapping from conceptual domain to another, often using anomalous or deviant language, for example: to lose the thread of an argument. He (ibid.: ٣٥٤) adds that simile is a figurative expression which makes an explicit comparison, typically using words as (like or as), as in : It rains like the wind.

٥- "الم تر كيف ضرب الله مثلا" كلمة طيبة كشجرة طيبة أصلها ثابت وفرعها في السماء" (١٠٧) سورة إبراهيم.

٦- "ثم قست قلوبهم فهي من بعد ذلك كالحجارة او اشد قسوة ----" (٧٤) سورة البقرة

٧- ويقوم لا يجرمنكم شقاقي إن يصيبكم مثل ما أصاب قوم نوح أو قوم صالح وما قوم لوط منكم ببعيد (٨٩) سورة هود.

٨- "إن الذين يأكلون أموال اليتامى ظلما" إنما يأكلون في بطونهم نارا" وسيصلون سعيرا" (١٠) النساء.

#### ٤-٣ Metonyms and Synecdoche

According to Crystal (٢٠٠٣: ٢٩١) metonymy is a term used in semantics and syntax, referring to a figure of speech in which the name of an attribute of entity is used in place of the entity itself. On his side, Yule (٢٠٠٦: ١٠٨) considers metonymy as a type of relationship between words based simply on a close connection in everyday experience. This connection can be based on a container- contents relation (bottle / water, can / juice) or a whole- part relation (car / wheels, house / roof) or a

representative- symbol relationship ( king / crown, the President / the White House) Hurford et al.(٢٠٠٧: ٣٣٨) emphasize that metonymy is a kind of non-literal language in which an object is used to refer to another that is associated with in some way e.g. metonymic concepts ' allow us to conceptualize one thing by means of its relation to something else'.

Leech (١٩٦٩:١٤٨) suggests that synecdoche is identified with a rule which applies the term for the part to the whole. Matthews (٢٠٠٧:٣٩٦) declares that synecdoche is a figure of speech in which an expression denoting a part is used to refer to the whole, for example: (all hands on desk ) is (all men on desk).

٩- "إن الصفا والمروة من شعائر الله فمن حج البيت أو اعتمر فلا جناح ....."(١١٦) سورة البقرة.

١٠- " نزل عليك الكتاب بالحق مصدقا" لما بين يديه وانزل التوراة والإنجيل" (٣) سورة آل عمران.

In the example (٩), the word (البيت) refers to (الكعبة المشرفة); in the example (١٠), the word (الكتاب) refers to (القران الكريم).

#### ٤-٤ Euphemisms

Crystal (١٩٩٢:١٢٨) defines euphemism as the use of a vague or indirect expression in place of one which is thought to be offensive, embarrassing or unpleasant. He (ibid.) adds that euphemisms are typically used to replace expressions associated with sexual activity, death, and other functions ; examples include ( powder my nose) (for go to the toile), (pass on ) (for die). Fromkin et al. (٢٠٠٣: ٤٧٩) assert that the existent of taboo words and ideas stimulates the creation of euphemism which is a word or phrase that replaces a taboo word or serves to avoid frightening or unpleasant matters.

On the other hand , another viewpoint considers euphemism as not merely a response to a forbidden matter ; rather, it provides a way to speak about the taboo, that is , about those concepts banned from public domain and removed from our conscious (٤). Additionally, euphemism can be achieved through antithetical means, e.g. by circumlocution, abbreviation, acronym or even complete omission and also by one-for-one substitution; by part for whole substitution; by general for specific, by hyperbole and understatement; by the use of learned terms or technical jargon instead of common terms, and by the use of colloquial instead of formal terms (٣).

١١- "ورأوته التي هو في بيتها عن نفسه وغلقت الأبواب وقالت هيت لك -----" (٢٣) سورة يوسف.

١٢- قالت أني يكون لي غلام ولم يمسسنى بشر ولم اك بغيا(٢٠) سورة مريم .

#### ٤-٥ Dysphemisms and Cacophemisms

In language both dysphemism and cacophemism refer to the usage of an intentionally harsh word or expression instead of a polite one; they are rough opposites of euphemism. Dysphemism may be either merely humorously or offensive, whereas cacophemism is usually deliberately offensive, for example, 'dead tree edition' for the paper version of an online magazine; 'shit on a shingle' for the common breakfast of creamed chipped beef on toast (٥). On his part Crystal (١٩٩٢: ١١٢) claims that dysphemism is the use of an offensive or disparaging expression instead of a neutral or pleasant one, such as mug for face, boneshaker for car.

Dysphemistic terms of insult found in personal disputes of a colloquial nature include:

- ١- Comparing people with animals conventionally ascribed certain behaviour, e.g. a louse, bird, rat, cat, mouse, pig, cow....etc.
- ٢- Epithets derived from tabooed bodily organs, sexual behaviour, and bodily exuviae such as idiot, fool, fuckwit, nincompoop, certain maniac etc.; spastic weakling, baldy, for eyes etc.
- ٣- There are terms of insult of disrespect, some of which invoke slurs on the target's character e.g. biddy, crone, hag, bag, battle-axe, codger, geezer, fuddy-duddy, fuss-budget, grump, foggy, galoot,...etc (٣).

١٣- "تبت يدا ابي لهب وتب" (١) سورة المسد.

١٤- "ويل لكل همزة لمزة" (١) سورة الهمزة.

#### ٤-٦ Hyperboles

The literal Greek meaning of hyperbole is 'overshoot', it is a figure of speech using deliberate exaggeration or overstatement. Hyperboles often have a comic effect; however, a serious effect is also possible. Often, hyperbole produces irony (٧). Leech (١٩٦٩: ١٦٧) states that a hyperbole is an exaggeration in colloquial talk that is incredible because at variance with known fact, for example, 'he has got acres and acres of garden' for 'he has a very large garden'. Palmer (١٩٧٦: ١١) believes that a hyperbole is used to express stronger to weaker meaning such as astound for 'strike with thunder'. In the same line of action, Leech (١٩٨٣: ١٤٥) declares that a hyperbole refers to a case where the speaker's description is stronger than warranted by the state of affairs described, such as : it made my blood boil.

Additionally, when we want to stress or impress we use hyperbole all the time such as 'we have ton of work' for heavy work, 'he never speaks to her' that is very

long time (٦). Hyperboles are found in euphemism like 'flight to glory' referring to 'death' or 'villa in a premier location by the bay' meaning 'a dilapidated artisan's cottage, five streets away from the bay'(٣).

١٥- " يا أيها الذين امنوا اجتنبوا كثيرا" من الظن إن بعض الظن إثم ولا تجسسوا ولا يغتب بعضكم بعضا" أوجب أحدكم إن يأكل لحم أخيه ميتا" فكرهتموه واتقوا الله إن الله تواب رحيم" (١٢) سورة الحجرات.  
١٦- "ثم استوى إلى السماء وهي دخان فقال لها وللأرض ائتيا طوعا" أو كرها" قالتا أتينا طائعين " (١١) سورة فصلت.

#### ٤-٧ Understatements

An understatement (litotes) is a word or phrase that replaces another where a lesser expression is used than what would be expected (١). Leech (١٩٦٩:١٩٦) states the effect of understatement therefore depends a great deal on what we know of the situation. Then, he adds (١٩٨٣:١٤٥) that understatement was used to deceive the addressee.

An understatement is related to hyperbole in that it is the opposite of hyperbole and it implies more than is actually stated (٢). There are euphemistic understatements like sleep for 'die'. Many general-for specific euphemisms are understatements, e.g. thing for whatever ( water break in, genitals) or deed for 'act of murder' or whatever, understatement like ' he is not very bright' meaning ' he is as thick as two short planks' fall into this class (٣).

١٧- " وان يروا كسفا" من السماء ساقطا" يقولوا سحاب مركوم " (٤٤) سورة الطور.  
١٨- " وان يروا آية يعرضوا ويقولوا سحر مستمر " (٢) سورة القمر.

#### ٥- Conclusions

There is no doubt that some products of our mind and language seem literal whereas other figurative. All human beings are able to alter their language according to the needs of the situation. It is something important to know how that is happened and also to keep an eye on how normal communication skills can be changed to manipulate people. From the researcher's point of view, literal language and figurative one are two sides for the same coin, and both of them are used in the Holy Quran. In addition to that, all the types of figurative language are employed in the mentioned text.

#### Bibliography

Aitchison, J. (١٩٩٢) *Teach Yourself Linguistics* , Hodder &Stoughton. Crystal, D. (١٩٩٢) *An Encyclopedic Dictionary of Language and Languages*. Blackwell Publishing, USA.

- (٢٠٠٣) *A Dictionary of Phonetics and Linguistics*,  
Blackwell Publishing, USA.
- Flak, J.(١٩٧٨) *Linguistics and Language*. John Wiley & Sons, New York  
Santa Barbara./ Chi Chester /Brisbane/ Toronto.
- Fromkin, V., Rodman, R. and Hyams, N. (٢٠٠٣) *An Introduction to  
Language* . Thomson and Heinle , USA.
- Hurford,J., Heasley, B. and Smith, M. (٢٠٠٧) *Semantics: A Course Book*.  
Cambridge University Press.
- Matthews, P.(٢٠٠٧) *Oxford Concise of Dictionary of Linguistics*. Oxford  
University Press.
- Lecch, G. (١٩٦٩) *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry*. Longman ,  
London and New York.
- (١٩٨٣) *Principles of Pragmatics*. Longman Group Limited.
- Palmer, F. (١٩٧٦) *Semantics*. Cambridge University Press. London,  
New York, Melbourne.
- Parker, F. and Riley, K. (٢٠٠٥) *Linguistics for Non\_ Linguists*. Boston,  
New York, San Francisco.
- Yule, G. (٢٠٠٦) *The Study of Language*. Cambridge University Press.

### Sited Webs

- ١-en.wiktionary.org/wiki/Wiktionary:Literal\_and\_figurative\_language
- ٢-[www.eng.fju.edu.tw/English\\_Literature/terms/denotation.htm#Denotation](http://www.eng.fju.edu.tw/English_Literature/terms/denotation.htm#Denotation)
- ٣- Latrobe.edu.au/linguistics/vo ١ / content
- ٤-www.ling.helsinki.fi/sky/julkaisut/SKY٢٠٠٦/Fernandez.pdf
- ٥- <http://www.wikinfo.org/index.php/Dysphemism>
- ٦- cc٣.k١٢.in.us/Creekside/Teams/Teachers/Bloy/Figurative language ppt
- ٧-teachers.sduhsd.k١٢.ca.us/ppennock/AP Resource Packet.pdf