«FOR YOU IS YOUR RELIGION, AND FOR ME IS MY RELIGION»: LINGUISTIC, STRUCTURAL AND RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF SURAH 'AL-KĀFIRŪN' IN THE QUR'AN

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Abstract. This article analyses the 109 Surah of Qur'an (Q 109) from linguistic and religious studies points of view. The Surah «al-Kāfirūn», despite its rather short length, serves as a quite useful source for contextual analysis of the time of its formation. Moreover, this passage could potentially shed some light on inter- textual connections in the whole Qur'an. Unfortunately, this Surah has never been a central focus of academic attention. Using communicative methods of word-by-word translations, the research reveals the complex nature of relationships between early Islamic community and other religious groups – Jews and Christians. Considering Q 109 in its historical context, the article demonstrates how Muslims, being a minority group at that time, attempted to negotiate its own existence with other religious groups. The research is therefore divided into two dimensions of analysis: micro-level where intra-structure of Q 109 is analyzed and macro-level where inter-textual coherence with other Surahs is scrutinized.

Keywords: surah, quran, early Islam, religious groups, al-kafirun, Muhammad

Introduction

It has been argued that the most prominent feature of the Qur'an is its dualistic nature, which divides all categories into two oppositions: this world and the next one, black and white, day and night, sun and moon, believers and infidels [1].

The Surah 109 Al-Kafirun («The Disbelievers») (Q 109) serves as a clear demonstration of where the borderline between «us and them» has been explicitly made. This Surah was, as Toshihiko Izutsu puts it, *«the formal declaration of independence on the part of Islam from all that was essentially incompatible with the monotheistic belief»* [2]. Muslim scholars have paid a great attention to Qur'an 109, saying that the one who recites this Surah recites a quarter of the Qur'an [3].

At first sight, one could assume that 'al-Kafirun' seems a relatively straightforward Surah due to its length and composition, especially comparing with other parts of the Qur'an. In fact, despite its length of six verses (ayat), Q 109 could shed some light not only on inter-textual consonance of the whole text of the Qur'an, but also on the actual environment and context of its formation.

Unfortunately, Q 109 has never been a proper focus of academic scholars, rather it has been merely mentioned in congruence and relation with other Surahs, or, at best, just some parts of it has been studied. So, this essay will elaborate and analyze Q 109 through the word-by-word observation of its linguistic, structural and rhetoric features.

Methodology

In terms of the translation, Peter Newmark in his work *«Approaches to Translation»* highlighted two types of translation: communicative and semantic translations. Generally, communicative translation tries *«to achieve a certain effect on its readers' mind»* as it was supposed to be in the original text, whereas in a semantic translation, the goal is to be as close as possible to the meaning of the source and it *«tends to be more complex…more detailed, more concentrated…»* [4].

Although each methods has its own advantages and flaws (communicative translation is inclined to undertranslate / semantic to overtranslate), the latter will be used as a methodological framework. It is not the aim of this essay to produce an adaptive version of the Surah into English language, but rather to convey the original semantic meanings of the words, even if it has several possible translations. It should also be mentioned that the incipit, *bi-smi llāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥīmi*, which appears before each Surah in the Qur'an (except 9) will not be touched, since, first of all, the scope of this essay is limited to the Surah itself, and, secondly, a lot of scholars have already done numerous attempts to explain the nature of it. In addition, the transliteration of the Surah will be employed where it is needed.

Transliteration and Translation

سُوۡرَةُ الكافِرون

بِسۡمِ ٱللهِ ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ
قُل يا أَيُّهَا الكافِرونَ
لا أَعبُدُ ما تَعبُدونَ
وَلا أَنتُم عابِدونَ ما أَعبُدُ
وَلا أَنا عابِدٌ ما عَبَدتُم
وَلا أَنتُم عابِدونَ ما أَعبُدُ
وَلِيَ دينِ لَكُم دينُكُم

Transliteration

bi-smi llāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥīmi
1. qul yā-ʾayyuhā l-kāfirū**na**
2. lā *ʾaʿbudu* mā taʿbudū**na**
3. *wa-lā* ʾantum ʿābidūna *mā ʾaʿbud***u**
4. wa-lā *ʾana* ʿābidun mā *ʿabadt***um**
5. *wa-lā* ʾantum ʿābidūna *mā ʾaʿbud***u**
6. lak**um** dīnuk**um** wa-liya dīni

The potential rhymes (l-kāfirūna – taʿbudūna; *ʿabadtum* – lakum – dīnukum) put in bold. The identically repetitive verses 3 and 5 are in italic.

Translation

In the name of God the Compassionate and the Caring
1. Say: «O, you unbelievers [infidels; the ones who reject God [5]]; you who reject the faith [6]
2. I do not worship [serve [7]] what you (plural) worship
3. And you are not worshipping [and nor are you worshipers] what I worship
4. And I am not worshipping [and I am not a worshipper] what you have worshipped
5. And you are not worshipping [and nor are you worshipers] what I worship
6. For [to [7]] you your religion [faith; true religion; true faith; judgment [5]; (final) reckoning [6], and for [to] me my religion».

All words in bold are cornerstones of this Surah and will be discussed in this work. Alternative translations, which are given in brackets, will be thoroughly examined in the next sections of this essay as well.

Linguistic Features

Before proceeding to the core of this essay, the structural and rhetoric features of this Surah, a brief look at peculiar linguistic aspects of the main words will be made. In order to fully comprehend and understand this Surah the focus of this analysis will be on possible translations and derivations of these words, which could provide some insights about the meaning of the whole passage.

• *qul* – I stem, II-weak *(Verba mediae infirmae)* imperative verb [8] meaning «Say!» in a singular masculine, the root is q-w-l meaning «speech, talk, to speak, to say, to tell, to demand» [5]. Appears around   1618 times in the Qur'an.

• *yā-ʾayyuhā (yā +* ʾayyuhā*)* – a vocative expression (*yā*) with so-called «long-distance» particle implied by (ʾayyuhā *for masculine*).

• *l-kāfirūna* – a masculine plural active participle with the root k-f-r meaning «to cover, to hide, to deny God, to blaspheme» [5]. The root is Arabic, but might be influenced by Hebrew and/or Syriac [9].

• ʾaʿbudu/ *taʿbudūna/*ʿābidūna/ʿabadtum – a frequently repeated verb in this Surah, with the root ʾ-b-d meaning «to worship, to serve or to slave». The root is common Semitic, occurring in Hebrew, Aramaic and Syriac. Apparently, it «came to the Arabs from their neighbors in pre-Islamic times» [9].

• *mā* – a relative pronoun usually for «non-rational» subjects meaning «what, that, which» [5].

• *dīnukum/ dīni* – a noun with the root d-y-n, appears 92 times in the Qur'an as a noun. It could mean religion, faith, law, custom, code, judgment or   reckoning [5]. In sense of religion, the meaning came from Iranian and was borrowed, probably, from Jewish or Christian sources [9].

Structural features

Although the time when Surah 109 was produced has been disputed by Muslim scholars [10], Western scholars, such as Theodor Nöldeke, Gustav Weil or Régis Blachère, ascribed this Surah to the First (Early) Meccan Period [11] due to its typical short composition of Meccan Period [10].

Q 109 consists of a very common preface *bi-smi llāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥīmi* and six *ayat*, where two of them are absolutely identical. The structure can be analyzed in two dimensions: micro and macro levels, where micro-level is the intra-structure of Q 109 and macro-level is about inter-textual coherence with other parts of the Qur'an.

Micro-level analysis

Unfortunately, Neal Robinson in his great work «Discovering the Qur'an: A contemporary approach to a veiled text» only very briefly mentioned Q 109 and did not decode this Surah as he did the rest of the Meccan Surahs. Interestingly, he sees Q 109 and   some of its verses as later additions from the Late Meccan Period due to its «too theological» nature [12, p. 122]. Nevertheless, according to his pattern

of the breakdown, all Surahs have one or more sections: polemical, eschatological, messenger, revelation, sign and narrative sections. There are also didactic questions and miscellaneous Surahs recognised as separate categories. Moreover, Robinson considered Q 109 as having a miscellaneous context. A miscellaneous section, in its turn, consists of prayers and other formulaic utterances, polemic against polytheism, exception clauses (*illā*), explanatory sentences (with one *ayah* being longer than the others) and attribute lists (the divine attributes). As can be seen from the translation of Q 109 above, although «to you your religion, to me my religion» can be considered in some sense as a polemic against polytheism, it still does not have most of the listed subsections of a miscellaneous section, hence it could be argued that this Surah is rather a part of a *polemic section*.

The polemic section has also been subdivided into seven major groups (but the content varies and is not concrete): woes, curses, categorical denunciations, reproaches («addressed to specific groups of human beings» [12, p. 116]), warning, lampoons and apostrophes addressed to unbelievers (unbelievers «addressed in person, either in the singular «thou»…or in the plural as «you»… [12, p. 119]).

In order to demonstrate that Q 109 has a polemic context, it could be logical to appeal to Robinson's pattern once again. He has considered all the Meccan Surahs as having single, two, three, four and more, so-called, «registers» [12, p. 125-126]. It, as a rule, depends on the length of Surah: for instance, Surahs with verses up to 11 have only one register; two registers are usually Surahs with 11-29 *ayat* [12, p. 126-154]. Since Q 109 has only six verses, it could be considered as having a single polemic register. Additionally, following Robinson's design, the rhymes and ending assonances of each verse are denoted in brackets:

Surah 109
v.1 *Say! (Muhammad)* + apostrophes addressed to unbelievers (reproaches?) {-na}
v.2-5 Negotiation + contrast with unbelievers {-na, -u, -um, -u}
v.6 Apostrophes + contrast {-ni}

So, it could arguably have more of a polemic context, as a 'dialogue' or some type of «negotiation» with *kāfirūna,* rather than a miscellaneous one. This argument will be examined more thoroughly throughout the remainder of this article.

Macro-level analysis

It has been claimed that the cohesive correlation between different Surahs is the prominent feature of the Qur'an as a text [13]. The end of one Surah corresponds with the beginning of the next one. Thus, *lakum **dīnukum** wa-liya **dīni*** in Q 109 are somewhat homophonic with Q 110:2, *wa-raʾayta n-nāsa yadkhulūna fī **dīni** llāhi* ʾafwājan* («and you see the people entering Allah's religion in throngs») [12]. From a literary perspective, Hussein Abdul-Raof claims that the exegetical meaning of *lakum dīnukum wa-liya dīni* is that *dīn* – the religion (i.e. Islam) is perfect and has no defects, which is continued in Q 110 by stating how the people will enter Islam in great numbers because of its perfection [14].

Angelika Neuwirth has rightly pointed out that compositions and narratives of almost all Meccan Surahs could be found in later Periods [15]. It also, of course, applicable to Q 109. For example, similar structural tone of «to you your religion and to me my religion» is represented in Q 2:139 (The Medinan Surah [11]): «Say: «Do you dispute with us about God, when He is our Lord and your Lord? To us our deeds and to you your deeds. We are devoted to Him» [7, p. 15]. The same phrase can be found in Q 28:55 and 42:15 (both are from the Third or Late Meccan Period).

One could see the structural features of Q 109 being used as a way of representing polemic context at a micro-level within the rest of the Surah as well as its inter-textual similarities with other Surahs. Interestingly, the same polemic construction we have identified in these micro-level can be shifted to a macro-level where a similar structural skeleton is represented in dealing with the 'Others' (i.e. infidels and the People of the Book) in different Surahs.

Rhetorical Features

If one looks at the Qur'anic text as a literary text, one can easily find a number of typical literary or rhetorical devices, such as alliteration, assonances, metaphors, similes and so on. The relevant question is «What kind of rhetorical tools can be found in Q 109?»

Binarity

Michel Cuypers argues that, as in the Biblical world, binarity or bi- polarity as a rhetoric instrument plays a huge role in the Qur'an [16]. As was mentioned in the introduction, the Qur'an has a very dualistic nature, always putting two opposite linguistic/semantic elements alongside to produce certain emotions in the readers. The similar technical term for binarity is *antithesis*, where one element clearly contrasts with another one [14]. However, not all Qur'anic binary models necessarily follow that rule because in some cases compared elements do not always strictly contradict each other, but rather, to some extent, overlap with each other. Thus, we suggest using the term *binarity* or *bi-polarity* rather than the somewhat stronger meaning of *antithesis.*

In Q 109 the binarity model is inflicted in the usage of the opposite pronouns. «You» and «Your» pronoun appear seven times versus «I» and «Me» which occur five times. It has been claimed that the usage of such «thick» direct pronouns (especially putting them next to each other and making a bi-polar model in order to express some strong statements) is one of the effective devices both in poetic speech and in the Qur'an [17].

It could also be argued that using the structure «Say: O, *you* unbelievers» can serve as an implicit binarity, where the border between Muhammad (*You - Muhammad* have to say to *them - disbelievers*) is drawn.
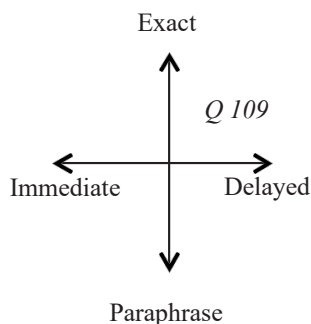
Here the word *qul* is of particular interest. It is an imperative opening (command) [12], which works as a tool that gives a much stronger emphasis than a direct

statement. *Qul* is usually directly addressed to Muhammad and known as *alqaqīl cluster* (see also the openings of Q 112, 113, 114) or to the whole   community of believers. Following *yā-ʾayyuhā l-kāfirūna* could function as *al-dhamm* – blame [18]. This expression in the second person appears only twice in the whole Qur'an (Q 109 and Q 66:7). Usually if the direct addressee is the unbelievers the third person is used and the second person employed mostly for believers. In addition, *yā-ʾayyuhā* is a «phrasal tie» to catch the attention of the audience [14; 19]. So, this first *ayah* predetermines the whole tone of the Surah by blaming unbelievers and setting up a bi-polar model for the rest of Surah.

Repetition

Repetition as a rhetorical device is so prevalent in the whole text of the Qur'an that its role cannot be overestimated [20]. Moreover, some Muslim scholars, such as Ibn al-Jawzi or Abu Ja'far Muhammad, also agree that this rhetorical method is used to emphasise a statement [3]. Generally, repetition is a very common feature of the early Meccan Surahs [21]. The theory of different types of repetition by Deborah Tannen can be helpful to demonstrate the repetitions in Q 109. According to her theory, words or sentences can be repeated exactly in the same linguistic form or just as a paraphrase of the original text/speech. Repetitions can also either follow on from one other immediately without any interference between the two, or more, elements or they might be delayed by using other linguistic components between the repeated subjects [22]. Andreas Jucker's theory is illustrated in Figure 1:

Figure 1 *A. Jucker's theory of repeated subjects*

As it can be seen, Q 109 is placed in the exact-delayed dimension, which means that all potential repetitions are of one linguistic structure and has some intervening linguistic items [20]. The repetition of the pronouns has already been mentioned above. There is also the repetition of whole of verses 3 and 5 as inter-*ayat* repetitions. Another type of repetition is the word *religion* appears twice in the same *ayah* and both are put very close to each other with just *wa-liya* as an

intervention: *lakum **dīnukum** wa-liya **dīni***. Another small remark regarding this word should be made. The root *d-y-n* can also be translated as «reckoning» which gives a new angle to approaching this *ayah*. «*A reckoning for you and a reckoning for me*» gives the specific implication that, in spite of having your own reckoning for now, everyone will «receive a just and final reckoning at the proper time» [6]. In addition, a *wa-lā* series is repeated three times at the very beginning of 3-5.

The verb ʾ-b-d appears nine times in six verses, which makes it an extremely repeated word. Although these verbs are not of the precise same linguistic structure, they are not paraphrases either hence it could be concluded that this common root ʾ-b-d might be considered as exact repetition. Interestingly enough, despite its frequent appearance in only six short *ayat*, «worship» never appears in an exact-immediate structure but is always interrupted by the same word *mā* (what). From a semantic point of view, first, it has been done in order to stress the subject of worship, to demonstrate that Muhammad does not serve Gods of unbelievers; and second, from a linguistic perspective, it was done to preserve the grammatical structure of sentences.

As for the word «what» itself, it appears four times in four different verses (2-5). The nature of it has been discusses by Muslim scholars since God is addressed by a word «what» but not «whom», («You are not worshiping **what** I worship» Q 109:3, 5). For instance, Al-Tusi claims that this word is used due to harmony with the previous verse («I do not worship **what** you worship» Q 109:2, 4), so it «stands as a counterpart» to earlier verse [3].

Thus, almost all the words of Q 109, except the entire first *ayah*, are repeated at least once. In seeking to interpret this Surah, one could ask why this Surah is so repetitive and purpose might it serve?

First, as already stated before, «thick» pronominality in this Surah might be used to demonstrate to the readers/listeners of the Qur'an a clear demarcation of believers from unbelievers (I and You, Mine and Yours). Second, the exact delayed repetition of Q 109:3 and 5, could serve as a tool to enhance «the contextual effect» and give emphasised knowledge that unbelievers will never be the same as believers («You are **not** worshiping **what** I worship»). Third, the constant appearance of "what" highlights the importance of a subject and enhances a given statement. The repetition could also say something about «the degree of the speakers' commitment» and his/her attitude [22].

Qur'an literally means «the recitation» and this sense is a crucial factor when one looks at the potential oral functions of the repetition in this text. It has been suggested that if a text is structured to be performed orally, the repetition plays a vital role [21]. Such permanent repetition of the whole *ayahs* as well as separate words could, as one can say, double-emphasise the importance of the recited text. Thus, it could be asserted that the Surah «al-Kāfirūn» is defined by its rhetorical core: a highly repetitive text framed in a binary model which might be done in order to emphasise the significance of differentiation between believers and unbelievers.

Another Features

While the opening verse could serve as a starting point of setting a binarity model for the rest of the Surah, the word *qul* might also have been inserted to persuade the audience of the mantic authority of the text, not merely a speech of Muhammad but words that had been revealed from a divine power [23].

Another extremely peculiar and complex issue is the phrase «*wa-lā ʾana ʿābidun mā ʿabadtum*», where suddenly the past tense of «worship» appears. This shift from imperfect to perfect tense might be considered as a case of *iltifāt*. Although an *iltifāt* structure usually means the shifts between pronouns (for example, Q 27:60, 80:3, 47:23), Abdel Haleem says that change in the tense of the verb might also be related to *iltifāt* [1]. However, a reason for that shift in the case of Q 109 is quite ambiguous. Some traditional commentators such as Ibn al-Jawzi suggested that the change between present and past tenses in these repetitive lines is done to demonstrate the permanence of unbelief [3]. He tried to paraphrase the Surah to illustrate it: «I do not worship what you worship **now** (2); and you are not worshiping what I worship **now** (3); And I will not be a worshipper in **the future** of what you have worshipped in **the past** (4); And you will never be worshippers in **the future** of what I worship **now** and in **the future** (5)» [3]. However, as the first and second sections of this essay show, this interpretation is somewhat dubious due to the grammatical elements: *wa-lā ʾana ʿābidun* is not in the future tense, but rather an active participle, which can be translated either as «and I am not a worshipper» or «and I am not worshipping»; the same is with verse 5. So, the reason for the past tense in *abadtum* is very uncertain, it might be a mere grammatical error due to editorial nature of the Qurʾan or, as al-Zarkashī says, it is a device for «safeguarding his (hearer a/n) mind from the boredom» [18].

Conclusion

Despite its short content, the Surah 109 provides many new angles towards understanding the structure and rhetorical meaning of not only itself, but also of the Qurʾan as a whole. Its polemic context could also shed some light on the actual life of Muhammad and his struggle with the surrounding religions. Since it was produced in the Early Meccan Period, this Surah represents Islam as being a minority group and attempting to negotiate its own existence with other groups. Q 109 shows once again an essential feature of the Qurʾan as a text: its extremely dichotomic nature. Thus, it makes use of rhetorical devices such as binarity to introduce a disavowal of the unbelievers [12] and repetition to persuade its audience to demarcate themselves from the 'Others'. This Surah also intra-textually corresponds with other parts of the Qurʾan (Q 2:139, 28:55, 42:15), showing that all contents of Meccan Surahs are also found in the Medinan Surahs. Further research might be done in two directions in particular: analysis of a polemic context of the Surah and the reason of *iltifāt* speech in Q 109:4.

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«Сендердің діндерің өздеріне менің дінім өзіме тән»: Құрандағы «Әл-Кафирун» сүресін лингвистикалық құрылымдық және риторикалық талдауы

Аңдатпа. Ұсынылған мақалада Құранның 109-шы сүресін лингвистикалық және дінтанулық негіздерге сүйене отырып зерделеу мақсат етілді. «Аль-Кафирун» сүресі, мәтіндік ықшамдылығына қарамастан, оның пайда болу уақытын контекстуалды талдау үшін өте пайдалы дереккөз болып табылады. Сонымен қатар, аталған сүре Құрандағы барлық мәтінаралық байланыстарға жаңаша көзқараспен қарауға жол ашуы мүмкін деп есептейміз. Өкінішке орай, бұл Сүре көп жағдайда зерттеушілердің назарынан тыс қалып жатады. Осы ретте мақалада әрбір сөздің аудармасын саралауға негізделген коммуникативті әдістер қолданылып, алғашқы ислам қауымдастығының өзге діни қауымдармен, яғни еврейлер және христиандармен болған күрделі қарым-қатынастар көрсетіледі. Сүренің пайда болуының тарихи жағдайы талданып, сол кезде азшылық болған мұсылмандар өздерінің қаупсіздігі үшін айналадағы діни топтармен диалог құру әрекеттері қарастырылды. Зерттеу жұмысы екі аспекті бойынша талданды, атап айтқанда Құранның 109-шы сүресінің ішкі құрылымын зерделеуге бағытталған микро деңгей және өзге сүрелермен мәтінаралық үйлесімділікті қарастыруға мақсатталған макро деңгей назарға алынды.

Түйін сөздер: сүре, Құран, бастапқы ислам, діни топтар, әл-кафирун, Мұхаммед

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«У вас есть своя религия, у меня – своя»: лингвистический, структурный и риторический анализ Суры «Аль-Кафирун» в Коране

Аннотация. В этой статье анализируется 109 сура Корана с лингвистической и религиоведческой точек зрения. Сура «аль-Кафирун», несмотря на свое довольно короткое содержание, служит довольно полезным источником для контекстуального анализа времени ее формирования. Более того, данная сура потенциально может пролить новый свет на межтекстовые связи во всем Коране. К сожалению, эта Сура никогда не была в центре внимания исследователей. Используя коммуникативные методы пословного перевода, исследование раскрывает сложный характер взаимоотношений между ранней исламской общиной и другими религиозными группами – евреями и христианами. Анализируя Суру в его историческом контексте, в статье демонстрируется, как мусульмане, будучи в то время меньшинством, пытались вступать в диалог с другими религиозными группами с целью собственного выживания. Таким образом, исследование разделено на два аспекта анализа: микроуровень, где анализируется внутренняя структура 109 суры Корана, и макроуровень, где тщательно изучается межтекстовая согласованность с другими сурами.

Ключевые слова: сура, Коран, ранний ислам, религиозные группы, аль-кафирун, Мухаммед.