

## WHEN LITERARY 'ARABIYYA ADOPTED FOR A RELIGIOUS MISSION

### The Quran and the Expansion of the Arabic Poetic *Koine*

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#### Abstract

*Much has been discussed regarding the nature of the language of the Quran, whose vocabulary, according to Muslim belief, is meaningfully chosen and perfectly structured, a contention that underlies the doctrine of its inimitability (i'jāz). For the majority of Muslims, the debates over the nature of the Quran's language have been relatively conclusive; it is the most fluent Arabic, derived mainly from the Quraysh dialect. Meanwhile, modern scholars working under the umbrella of critical philology and history refuse to take the above theory for granted. They link the language of the Quran with the idea of the literary 'Arabiyya, a poetic koine that was constructed much more within the culture of the pre-Islamic Arabs living in the area of Najd. This article exhibits theoretical discussions that may shed light on a new perspective of the theme. This study argues that the literary 'Arabiyya is adopted by the Quran as a mode of discourse to introduce a monotheistic message to its first audience. By doing so, the Quran works within the literary tradition of Arabic rhetoric, which was highly valued within the pre-Islamic Arab culture. As the Quran aimed at promoting monotheism by convincing as many followers as possible, it creatively expanded the boundaries of the literary 'Arabiyya by introducing*



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*sab'ah ahruf (variant styles of reading), through which it was able to address more and more audience.*

*[Banyak yang telah menulis tentang hakikat bahasa al-Quran, yang menurut kepercayaan Muslim, kosakatanya dipilih secara bermakna dan terstruktur dengan sempurna sehingga menjadikannya mukjizat yang mendasari doktrin tentang kemustahilan untuk menandingi. Bagi mayoritas Muslim, perdebatan mengenai hakikat bahasa al-Quran relatif sudah selesai, yakni sebagai bahasa Arab yang paling fasih, yang sebagian besar berdasarkan dialek Quraisy. Sementara itu, para sarjana modern dengan disiplin sejarah dan filologi kritis menolak untuk menerima teori di atas begitu saja. Mereka mengaitkan bahasa al-Quran dengan koine puitis, sebagai bagian dari Arab sastra, yang lebih banyak terbentuk dalam budaya Arab pra-Islam di wilayah Najd. Artikel ini menyuguhkan diskusi teoretis untuk menjelaskan perspektif baru dalam pembahasan tema tersebut. Penulis berpendapat bahwa unsur Arab sastra diadopsi oleh al-Quran sebagai sebuah cara berwacana dalam memperkenalkan pesan monoteistik kepada audiens pertamanya. Dengan demikian, al-Quran bekerja dalam tradisi retorika sastra, yang sangat dihargai dalam budaya Arab pra-Islam. Karena bertujuan untuk mempromosikan monoteisme dan menarik sebanyak mungkin pengikut, al-Quran secara kreatif memperluas cakupan Arab sastra dengan memperkenalkan konsep sab'ah ahruf (variasi gaya bacaan), yang dapat dipakai untuk menjangkau lebih banyak pembaca.]*

**Keywords:** literary 'Arabiyya, poetic koine, monotheistic message, sab'ah ahruf

## A. Introduction

The language of the Quran not only becomes one of the main topics in the Muslim literature of *'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, but also a subject often featured in modern scholarship, especially by non-Muslim scholars within the framework of Arabic philological studies as well as comparative studies of the Quran and the Bible. For most Muslims, the debates over its nature have been relatively conclusive; the language of the Quran is the most fluent Arabic, derived from the dialect of Quraysh. This opinion is based on the contention that the Quraysh tribe enjoyed an important political position in pre-Islamic times as the main residents of

the *ḥaram* land of Mecca and the administrators of the *Ka'ba*, which was commonly perceived as an important destination for Arab pilgrimage.<sup>1</sup> This opinion has also been expressed by such classical Muslim scholars as Abū Zakariyyā al-Farrā' (d. 207 H/822 CE),<sup>2</sup> Abū Uthmān al-Jāhiz (d. 255 H/868 CE),<sup>3</sup> and Abū al-Ḥusayn Aḥmad ibn al-Fāris (d. 395 H/1004 CE),<sup>4</sup> who based their arguments on the Quran being revealed to the Qurayshi Prophet and the perception of Quraysh's cultural supremacy.

Meanwhile, non-Muslim scholars who work under the umbrella of critical philology and history refuse to take the above theory for granted. Theodor Nöldeke is among those who argue that there is no significant difference between the language of the Quran and the dialects of the Arab tribes that helped shape the language of the Quran.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the Arabic of the Quran is a literary language that stands above different pre-Islamic Arabic dialects without exclusively being affiliated with a certain tribal dialect. A similar opinion is also expressed by Carl Brockelman, who opines about the existence of Arabic *par excellence*, which was nourished from the dialectal elements of the Arab tribes and had been widely known for its use in pre-Islamic poetry.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, attempts to link the origins of the literary '*Arabiyya*' with certain regions or tribes

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<sup>1</sup> Shawqī Dayf, *Tārīkh al-Adab al-'Arabī: Al-'Aṣr al-Jāhili*, vol. 1, 11<sup>th</sup> edition (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1985), pp. 131–7; Mannā' al-Qaṭṭān, *Mabāḥiṭh fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'an* (Cairo: Maktabat Wahba, 2000), p. 148; Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, *Fī al-Shi'r al-Jāhili* (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya, 1926), pp. 34–8.

<sup>2</sup> Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Iqtirāb fī Uṣūl al-Naḥw*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, ed. by 'Abd al-Ḥakīm 'Aṭiyya (Istanbul: Dār al-Bairūtī, 2006), p. 154.

<sup>3</sup> Abū 'Uthmān 'Amr ibn Baḥr Jāhiz, *Rasā'il al-Jāhiz*, vol. 4, ed. by 'Abd al-Salām Muḥammad Hārūn (Beirut: Dār al-Jil, 1979), p. 238.

<sup>4</sup> Abū al-Ḥusayn Aḥmad ibn Fāris, *Al-Ṣāhibi fī Fiqh al-Luḡa al-'Arabiyya wa Masā'ilihā wa Sunan al-'Arab fī Kalāmihā*, ed. by Aḥmad Ḥasan Basaj (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1998), p. 28.

<sup>5</sup> Theodor Nöldeke, *Neue Beiträge zur Semitischen Sprachwissenschaft* (Straßburg: Verlag von Karl J. Trübner, 1910), pp. 4–5; Theodor Nöldeke, *Beiträge zur Semitischen Sprachwissenschaft* (Berlin & Boston: De Gruyter Mouton, 2019), p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Carl Brockelman, *Geschichte der Arabischen Litteratur*, vol. 1, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Leipzig: Amelang Verlag, 1909), p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> In this article, I use the term "literary '*Arabiyya*'" to refer to the language used by the Quran as early Muslim grammarians, like Sibawayh (d. 180/796), used the term '*Arabiyya*' to refer to the language derived from the pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, the Quran, and the speech of the Arab nomads. Such terms as *fuṣḥā*, classical Arabic and pre-classical Arabic are also used by a number of scholars to designate the language of the pre-Islamic poetry and the Quran. Using the term, the literary '*Arabiyya*', I aim at giving more an emphasis on the idea of Arabic before the standardization of the *Al-Jāmi'ah*, Vol. 62, No. 1, 2024 M/1445 H

are shown by Carlo Alfonso Nallino, who associates it with the dialect of the Ma'add tribes who inhabited the area of Najd under the Kingdom of Kinda.<sup>8</sup> Chaim Rabin and Kees Versteegh similarly mention that the literary 'Arabiyya was closer to the language of the Arabs living in the middle and eastern part of the Arabian Peninsula than the language of those living in Hijaz, its western part. In this regard, Najd became a point of encounter between the eastern and western dialects.<sup>9</sup>

The different views above illustrate that there have been disagreements regarding the linguistic conditions in the pre- and early-Islamic periods, which in turn has implications for our understanding of the linguistic nature of the Quran, its variant readings, and the relation between the language of the Quran and its contemporary languages. Examining some important studies on the linguistic conditions of the Arabian Peninsula in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, this article aims to exhibit a theoretical discussion that may shed some light on the characteristics of the language of the Quran. This study argues that the Quran adopted the literary 'Arabiyya as a mode of discourse through which it brought its first audience into the realm of monotheism. By doing so, the Quran worked within the literary tradition of Arabic rhetoric, which was highly valued in Arab culture. Yet, it moved beyond the pre-Islamic use of Arabic by making the 'Arabiyya the bearer of monotheism, which had become a popular religious movement in Arabia and its surroundings. As the Quran intended to promote monotheism by convincing as many followers as possible, it creatively expanded the boundaries of the literary 'Arabiyya by introducing *sab'ah aḥruf* (lit. seven styles of reading) through which it could reach wider audiences.

## **B. A Trans-dialectal Language in the Cultural Memory of the Pre-Islamic Arabs**

Only a few written sources at our disposal provide sufficient

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Arabic grammar, on the one hand, and to avoid some complexities of conceptual debates, on the other. Further discussions on the use of different terms, see Abū Bishr 'Amru ibn Uthmān ibn Qanbur Sibawayh, *Kitāb Sibawayh*, vol. 1, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, ed. by 'Abd al-Salām Muḥammad Hārūn (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khanjī, 1988); Chaim Rabin, *Ancient West-Arabian* (London: Taylor's Foreign Press, 1951), p. 3; Wolfdietrich Fischer, *A Grammar of Classical Arabic*, 3<sup>rd</sup> revised edition, trans. by Jonathan Rogers (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Rabin, *Ancient West-Arabian*, p. 17; Ḍayf, *Tārīkh al-Adab al-'Arabī*, 1: 131.

<sup>9</sup> Rabin, *Ancient West-Arabian*, p. 3; Kees Versteegh, *The Arabic Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 39.

information about the linguistic backgrounds of the Quran. The book itself is probably the oldest written source that records a language variant called the ‘fluent’ Arabic.<sup>10</sup> Together with the pre-Islamic poetry and the language of Arab nomads, the Quran became a main reference for the codification of Arabic by Kufan and Basran grammarians in the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century. A number of modern scholars indeed question the authenticity of the pre-Islamic poetry<sup>11</sup> because the literature of any pre-Islamic literary works began to be written by Muslim philologists only in the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century, although the tradition itself is often said to have originated from the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE. The two-century gap between the perceived emergence of pre-Islamic poetry and its codification makes some modern scholars cast doubt on the validity of this poetry as a source to understand the linguistic situation before the Quran.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, we may doubt the authenticity of the pre-Islamic poetry on the grounds of denying the validity of the oral traditions of the pre- and early Islamic Arab society and of the possible role played by Muslim philologists in editing or modifying the poetry they collected. However, it seems that even if falsification did occur in large numbers, we cannot immediately reject pre-Islamic poetry as a whole. A forged poem, as Toshihiko Izutsu argues, must have contained some truth because one could not forge it without clearly seeing the forged model.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Robert G. Hoyland views that a graffito from Mecca dated 98/717 quoting two lines of the pre-Islamic Arabic poetry attributed to a semi-legendary Arab figure, Quss ibn Sā‘ida al-Iyādī (d. 600 CE), helps to strengthen the argument that a large number of the pre-Islamic poetry

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<sup>10</sup> Indeed, there is abundant epigraphic evidence that shows us Arabic being written in various scripts —not exclusively in Arabic, which has been seen as a recent development— long before the emergence of Islam. Yet, the kind of Arabic being written in such inscriptions is not the kind of Arabic we mean here, i.e., the literary Arabic. Michael C.A. Macdonald, “Arabs, Arabias and Arabic before Late Antiquity”, *Topoi*, vol. 16, no. 1 (2009), pp. 277–332; Ahmad Al-Jallad, “Pre-Islamic Arabic”, in *Arabic and Contact-induced Change*, ed. by Christopher Lucas and Stefano Manfredi (Berlin: Language Science Press, 2020), pp. 37–55.

<sup>11</sup> David S. Margoliouth, “The Origins of Arabic Poetry”, *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 3 (1925), pp. 417–49; Ḥusayn, *Fī al-Shi‘r al-Jābilī*.

<sup>12</sup> Herbjørn Jenssen, “Arabic Language”, *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’an*, vol. 1, ed. by Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2003), p. 130.

<sup>13</sup> Toshihiko Izutsu, *God and Man in the Qur’an: Semantics of the Qur’anic Weltanschauung*, 2nd edition (Petaling Jaya: Islamic Book Trust, 2008), p. 118.

can possibly be originated from that period.<sup>14</sup>

Muslim historiographers and genealogists often mention three groups of Arabs: the 'lost' Arabs (*al-ʿarab al-bāʿida*), the 'real' Arabs (*al-ʿarab al-ʿāriba*), and the Arabized Arabs (*al-ʿarab al-mustaʿriba*). The 'lost' Arabs were linked to the people of ʿĀd, Thamūd, and Iram, who happen to be mentioned in the Quran. The 'real' Arabs were said to have a certain relation with the 'lost' Arabs because the former inherited the language and the culture of the latter. They were the southern Arabs, the descendants of Qaḥṭān. Meanwhile, the Arabized Arabs were originally non-Arabs but became Arabized in some later periods. They were the northern Arabs, the descendants of ʿAdnān, who was believed to be a descendant of Ismāʿīl ibn Ibrāhīm. Quraysh, Hudhayl, Tamīm, Qays, and Rabīʿa were among the tribes descending from ʿAdnān, while Aws, Khazraj, and Ṭayyiʿ were among those descending from Qaḥṭān, who had migrated to the north long before the emergence of Islam.<sup>15</sup> The above classification is not unchallenged because other classifications also come up from some other Muslim historiographers.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, Jawwād ʿAlī argues that the terms *al-ʿarab al-ʿāriba* and *al-ʿarab al-mustaʿriba* had already been known since pre-Islamic times, though with a different articulation from that of Muslim historiographers. In pre-Islamic times, *al-ʿarab al-ʿāriba* were understood as those Arabs living far away from the land of civilization (*arḍ al-ḥaḍāra*), while *al-ʿarab al-mustaʿriba* were those living close to metropolitan areas in the Fertile Crescent.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Robert G. Hoyland, "Epigraphy and the Emergence of Arab Identity", in *From al-Andalus to Khurasan: Documents from the Medieval Muslim World*, ed. by Petra Sijpesteijn et al. (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2007), p. 236; In the Muslim historiographic tradition, before his prophetic career, the Prophet Muḥammad is said to have seen Quss bin Sāʿida Al-Iyādī at the ʿUkāz literary event. More about Quss bin Sāʿida al-Iyādī, see Aḥmad al-Rabīʿī, *Quss ibn Sāʿida al-Iyādī: Ḥayātuhū, Khutubuhū, Shiʿrubū* (Baghdad: Maṭbaʿat al-Nuʿmān, 1974).

<sup>15</sup> Versteegh, *The Arabic Language*, pp. 37–8.

<sup>16</sup> Ibn Khaldūn, for example, introduces a different classification. To him, the people of ʿĀd, Thamūd, Ṭasm, and Jadīs belonged to the first generation of Arabs, the real Arab (*al-ʿArab al-ʿĀriba*). The second generation were the Arabized Arabs (*al-ʿArab al-Mustaʿriba*), who were the descendants of Qaḥṭān. The third generation were Arabized because they followed the Arabs (*al-ʿArab al-Ṭabīʿā li al-ʿArab*), who were the descendants of ʿAdnān. Meanwhile, the fourth generation was the foreignized Arabs (*al-Mustaʿjama*). Further reading, see ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn Khaldūn, *Dīwān al-Mubtadaʿ wa al-Khabar fī Tārīkh al-ʿArab wa al-Barbar wa man ʿĀṣarabum min Zawī al-Shaʿn al-Akbar*, vol. 2, ed. by Khalīl Shaḥāta (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 2000), pp. 19–21.

<sup>17</sup> Jawwād ʿAlī, *Al-Mufaṣṣal fī Tārīkh al-ʿArab Qabla al-Islām*, vol. 1, 2nd edition (Cairo: Dār al-Thaqāfa al-Dīniyya, 1993), p. 508.

The classification above is well known among Muslim scholars, yet they seem unaware of its implications, especially regarding their view about the superiority of the dialect of Quraysh in eloquence over other Arabic dialects. The perceived superiority then prompted them to associate the dialect of Quraysh with the language of the Quran,<sup>18</sup> which came to challenge its opponents to create such a fine utterance capable of contesting it. The question is, if Quraysh have to be seen as the most fluent speakers of Arabic, how can we explain that the descendants of the “Arabized people” suddenly came to excel the descendants of the “real Arabs” in producing highly fluent speeches? Ibn Fāris gives an explanation within the framework of the political, economic, and religious supremacy of Mecca, a theory that has often been questioned by modern critical (revisionist) scholars of Islam.<sup>19</sup> According to Ibn Fāris, Quraysh, who became the guardians of the *ḥaram* land, played an active role in selecting the best Arabic speeches from the tribes coming to Mecca. Their persistence later made them the owners of the most fluent Arabic dialect.<sup>20</sup> If we have to accept this explanation, the rise of Quraysh’s supremacy in language must occur only sometime before the emergence of Islam.

Examining the language of the Quran, we need a theoretical basis that goes beyond theological arguments. As mentioned above, Muslim grammarians of the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century made the Arab Bedouins, the pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, and the Quran important references for their codification of correct Arabic. In other words, the Quran was deemed to have shared the same language as the pre-Islamic Arabic poetry and the Arab Bedouins, i.e., the fluent Arabic superior to all other kinds of Arabic dialects. There is confusion, therefore, regarding the theory that associates the language of the Quran exclusively with the dialect of Quraysh because early Muslim grammarians did not include Hijaz, where Quraysh lived, in the reference list of their works. In addition, if the Quran used the same language as that employed in pre-Islamic poetry, the origins of the language of the Quran can be traced back from the origins of the language used in pre-Islamic poetry as well. It should be

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<sup>18</sup> Ḍayf, *Tārīkh al-Adab al-‘Arabī*, 1: 132.

<sup>19</sup> Patricia Crone, for example, questions the significance of Mecca in important trading activities in the Arabian Peninsula, that once connected the overland trade route between Southern Arabia and Syria. See Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (New Jersey: Gorgias Press).

<sup>20</sup> Ibn Fāris, *Al-Ṣāhibī fī Fiqh al-Luḡba*, p. 28.

borne in mind that none of the leading pre-Islamic poets came from the Quraysh tribe. The majority of these poets were even affiliated with the region of Najd.<sup>21</sup> Thus, it is difficult to accept that the dialect of Quraysh is the language employed in the pre-Islamic poetry, which in turn implies that the dialect unlikely constitutes the main feature of the language of the Quran—although we surely cannot deny the possibility of any Qurayshi elements existent in the Quran.

Abū Bishr ‘Amr ibn Uthmān ibn Qanbar, widely known as Sībawayh (d. 177/793), who is often seen as the first to codify Arabic grammar, made the Quran one of his sources following the pre-Islamic Arabic poetry and the natural language of the Arab Bedouins.<sup>22</sup> The inclusion of the nomadic informants in his source list indicates that the fluent Arabic (*‘Arabiyya*) was seen to be still living at that time. Sībawayh Arab excluded sedentary regions like Mecca and Medina from his targeted destinations because the regions did not belong to the nomadic culture anymore. Even more interesting is that Sībawayh does not make *ḥadīth*—which features many early transmitters from Hijaz—an essential source for his codification of Arabic grammar. Sībawayh indeed quotes a few *ḥadīth* in his book, but he does so in the context of giving an example of ordinary speech,<sup>23</sup> not an eloquent, poetic one. This practice strongly indicates that the literary *‘Arabiyya* was a language variant commonly used by the Arabs, not for everyday communication. Instead, it represented an important cultural heritage of the Arabs, who used to employ it in producing poetic speeches.<sup>24</sup>

Prior to the success of the monotheistic movement under the Prophet Muḥammad, there was no single dominant political unit capable of uniting the tribes in Arabia. The Arabs were divided into various social and political units where some might ally for certain purposes. Nevertheless, they felt united by a shared imagination about a common

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<sup>21</sup> *Al-Mu‘allaqāt* (the hanged poems) are often mentioned as the primary source of the pre-Islamic Arabic poetry featuring the works of some well-known pre-Islamic Arab poets. None of them came from the Quraysh tribe. Imru’u al-Qays (d. 544 CE) came from the Kinda tribe, ‘Amr ibn Kulthūm (d. 584 CE) from Taghlib, Ṭarafa ibn al-‘Abd from Rabī‘a, al-Nābigha (d. 604 CE) from Banū Dhubyān of Ghaṭafān, ‘Antara ibn Shaddād al-‘Absī (d. 608 CE) from Ghaṭafān, Zuhayr ibn Abī Sulmā (d. 609 CE) from Muzayna, al-A’shā (d. 625 CE) from Najd, and Labīd (d. 41/661) from Hawāzin.

<sup>22</sup> M.G. Carter, *Sībawayhi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 40–6.

<sup>23</sup> M. G. Carter, “Sībawayhi”, *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. 9, ed. by Clifford E. Bosworth et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1997), p. 526.

<sup>24</sup> See also Jenssen, “Arabic Language”.

language, i.e., Arabic. Inscriptions from the pre-Islamic times illustrate the ‘Arabization’ movement in the Arabian Peninsula as a response against the dominance of Aramaic and Greek.<sup>25</sup> The Kingdom of Kinda and the Qays confederation that ruled in the central and eastern parts of the Arabian Peninsula are often mentioned as the initiating force behind the emergence of ‘*Arabiyya* as a trans-dialectal language.<sup>26</sup> The popularity of this trans-dialectal language later underlay the emergence of an Arabic poetic *koine* commonly adopted for producing the pre-Islamic poetry and other rhymed speeches that constituted the Arabs’ literary monument. Abū ‘Uthmān al-Jāhiz said:

The Arabs in the *jābiliyya* (ignorance time) worked for their immortality by relying on poetry and rhymed utterances. This was their literary monument (*divān*). Indeed, poetry indicated the virtue of rhetoric for the poet who loved and praised and the virtue of the achievements of those who were loved and praised. The non-Arabs (*‘ajam*) chose to perpetuate their achievements with buildings.... Then, the Arabs wanted to emulate the ‘*ajam* in building, so they came specifically with poetry.<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, the perception of the nobility of poetry among pre-Islamic Arabs even gave rise to an ontological idea about the metaphysical origin of poetry. The pre-Islamic poetry, with its verbal beauty, was believed to have come from a supernatural source received by a poet, without which the poet could not compose a string of words that could affect the audience’s psychology. From this context, we can perceive the literary ‘*Arabiyya* as a ‘supernatural’ language. This also explains why the Quran has managed to become a paradigmatic text since its emergence. The Quran—claiming itself to be the fluent Arabic text of divine revelation—not only embraced the Arab cultural logic of speech originating from a metaphysical source like the pre-Islamic poetry,<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Hoyland, “Epigraphy and the Emergence of Arab Identity”, pp. 234–6.

<sup>26</sup> Rabin, *Ancient West-Arabian*, p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> Abū ‘Uthmān ‘Amr ibn Baḥr Jāhiz, *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*, vol. 1, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, ed. by Muḥammad Hārūn, ‘Abd al-Salām (Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1965), p. 72.

<sup>28</sup> Izutsu, *God and Man in the Qur’an*, pp. 182–6; Michael Zwettler, “A Mantic Manifesto: The Sūra of ‘The Poets’ and the Qur’ānic Authority”, in *Poetry and Prophecy: The Beginnings of a Literary Tradition*, ed. by James L. Kugel (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 76; Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Mafḥūm al-Naṣṣ: Dirāsāt fī ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān* (Cairo: Al-Ḥai’a al-Miṣriyya al-‘Āmma li al-Kitāb, 1990); Alan Jones, “Poetry and Poets”, *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’an*, vol. 4, ed. by Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2004), p. 112; Munirul Ikhwan, “Legitimasi Islam: Sebuah Pembacaan Teoritis Tentang Wahyu Alquran”, *Mutawatir: Jurnal Keilmuan Tafsir Hadith*, vol. 10, no. *Al-Jāmi’ah*, Vol. 62, No. 1, 2024 M/1445 H

but also adopted the supernatural language as employed in the poetry. Suppose the literary ‘Arabiyya constituted a special language for a poetic speech. In that case, it can be fairly understood if it enjoyed a different position from colloquial languages used in the everyday life of a society destined to value verbal beauty. In this context, we may perceive the literary ‘Arabiyya as a *poetic koine* that coexisted with a number of Arab tribal dialects, which Muslim philologists often term *lugha* (lit. language), e.g., the language of Quraysh, Tamīm, Hawāzin and Hudhayl. Some elements of tribal dialects might find their way to the system of the literary ‘Arabiyya when they found acceptance from those concerned with literary works.

Adopting the literary ‘Arabiyya, the Quran equipped itself to enter the arena of poetic contestation and public communication to convey a monotheistic message. The Quran’s involvement in the contestation of poetic discourse was surely not without challenges from a number of its first audience even though the Quran had claimed itself to be an Arabic reading (*qur’ān*) in an Arabic tongue (*lisān*) (12:2; 16:103; 20:112; 26:195; 39:28; 41:3; 42:7; 43:3; 46:12). This response may be due to the fact the Quran did not strictly adopt the structures and rhymes of the pre-Islamic poetry. Moreover, it featured the Biblical material<sup>29</sup> and the doctrine of monotheism more frequently than the cultural and religious traditions of the pre-Islamic Arabs —although the Quran actually attempted to link both to create a new distinct monotheistic message.

Some of the first audiences of the Quran indeed perceived that some of the Quranic verses resembled the rhymed verses of the Arab poets and soothsayers. Accordingly, they regarded the Prophet as a poet or a soothsayer, a judgment that the Quran rejects (69:40-43). Against this backdrop, we may understand why the Quran challenged its first audiences to create literary works that might rival (17:88) or equal to its ten chapters (Ar: suwar [pl]/sūra [sing]; 11:13) or to produce one chapter the like (2:33; 10:38) or even just a few verses (52:34). The challenge

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1 (2020), pp. 144–69.

<sup>29</sup> The Biblical tradition was increasingly mentioned in the Quran during the period of ‘open’ preaching in which the Prophet Muhammad began to face serious resistance from a number of the leading Qurayshi figures. With the increasing pressure over the Prophet, the Quran began to more regularly mention the stories of the Biblical and Arab prophets in order to lend the Prophet Muhammad a sort of religious legitimacy for his mission. Munirul Ikhwan, “Drama Ilahi: Sebuah Upaya dalam Membaca Kronologi Wahyu Alquran”, *Mutawatir: Jurnal Keilmuan Tafsir Hadith*, vol. 10, no. 2 (2020), pp. 202–38.

shows the Quran's persistence in defending its Arabic status in the poetic realm, regardless of the distinct style of its rhetoric.

### C. 'Seven Letters' Binding the Quran's First Audiences

Some may be confused with two terms: *aḥruf sab'ah* (lit. seven letters) and *qira'ah sab'ah* (seven variant readings), and the relationship between them. The term *aḥruf sab'a* happens to be mentioned in several *ḥadīths* to indicate the Prophet's permission for his people to read the Quran in (seven) different styles. These different styles of reading seem to be related to the consequences of the increasing number of the Quran's first audiences, who not only came from diverse social classes, but also from different tribal backgrounds, especially during the Medinan period. The following report by 'Abdullāh ibn 'Abbās (d. 68/687), who grew up in Medina, illustrates the above fact:

Verily, the Messenger of God said, "Gabriel recited the Quran to me in one style of reading (*ḥarf*), then I learned it. Later, I asked him to add [another reading], and Gabriel added [another one] until they reached seven styles of reading (*sab'ah aḥruf*)."<sup>30</sup>

Lexically, *ḥarf* has various meanings,<sup>31</sup> but the above report indicates a "way of reciting". The Quran (22:11) itself mentions *ḥarf* with a strong indication of meaning as a way of doing something: "And among people is someone who worships Allah in a certain way (*ḥarf*)."<sup>32</sup> This way of worshipping is different from what is expected by the Quran due to one's inconsistency. Accordingly, many commentators link *ḥarf* in the above verse to the meaning of "doubt" (*shak*)<sup>32</sup> based on its meaning indication (*dalālah*); "...if he is blessed with something good, he is content with it; but if a trial befalls him, he turns away his face."

Meanwhile, *qira'ah sab'a* are seven variant readings of the Quran as codified by Abū Bakr ibn Mujāhid (d. 324/936) as a response to the general authorization of the 'Uthmānic codex backed by both theological

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<sup>30</sup> Abū 'Abdillāh Muḥammad ibn Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Damascus & Beirut: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 2002), p. 1276; Abu al-Ḥusayn Muslim ibn Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, vol. 1, ed. by Muḥammad Fu'ād 'Abd al-Bāqī (Cairo: Dār Iḥyā' al-Kutub al-'Arabiyya, 1991), p. 561.

<sup>31</sup> Ibn Manẓūr mentions several meanings of *ḥarf*, including letter, border, edge, side, manner, way, and dialect; Muḥammad ibn Mukarram Ibn Maẓūr, *Lisān al-'Arab* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1981), pp. 836–840.

<sup>32</sup> Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āyī al-Qur'ān*, vol. 16, ed. by 'Abdullāh ibn 'Abd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī (Cairo: Dār Hajar, 2001), pp. 472–5. *Al-Jāmi'ah*, Vol. 62, No. 1, 2024 M/1445 H

and political factors.<sup>33</sup> The ‘canonization’ of readings by Ibn Mujāhid certainly did not find any precedent from the Prophet Muḥammad nor the first Muslim generation. Early Muslim scholars collected as many variant readings of the Quran as possible from various accessible sources without specifying any particular readings as ‘canonical’. Scholars like Abū ‘Ubayd al-Qāsim ibn Sallām (d. 224/838), Ismā‘īl ibn Ishāq al-Mālikī (d. 282/896), and ‘Abdullāh ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) are mentioned to have collected approximately 20 variant readings.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, many classical Muslim scholars disagreed with the idea of the canonization of the Quranic readings, let alone limiting them to seven variants only, because they were concerned if it would be misunderstood as *sab‘ah aḥruf* as mentioned in the *ḥadīth*.<sup>35</sup>

We are here exposed to some questions with no certain answers. If the word *aḥruf* is defined as the ways of reciting, does it designate Arabic dialects or other meanings? Does *sab‘a* here mean a definitive number between 6 and 8, or does it indicate a metaphor for multiplicity as the Arab culture used it?<sup>36</sup> Associating *sab‘ah aḥruf* with a number of Arab dialects is conceivable because the first audiences of the Quran came from different tribes, each of which had its own way of speaking. However, limiting the number to 7 is difficult to imagine due to the fact that more than seven Arab dialects existed during the revelation of the Quran. In this regard, it is safe to say that *sab‘ah aḥruf* is understandable

<sup>33</sup> Frederik Leemhuis, “Readings of the Qur’ān”, *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’an*, vol. 4, ed. by Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2004); Afrida Arinal Muna, “Politik Kuasa Kanonisasi Qira’at Sab‘ah Ibnu Mujahid dalam Kitab al-Sab‘ah”, Master Thesis (Yogyakarta: Pascasarjana UIN Sunan Kalijaga, 2021).

<sup>34</sup> Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Jazarī, *Al-Nasb fī al-Qirā’at al-‘Asb*, vol. 1, ed. by ‘Alī Muḥammad al-Ḍabbā‘ (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya), p. 34.

<sup>35</sup> Ahmad ‘Alī al-Imam, *Variant Readings of the Qur’an: A Critical Study of Their Historical and Linguistic Origins* (London & Washington: The International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT), 2006), p. 7; Jazarī, *Al-Nasb fī al-Qirā’at al-‘Asb*, 1: 46.

<sup>36</sup> Ibn Mazūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, p. 1924. Badr al-Dīn al-Zarkashī summarizes the opinions of Muslim scholars on the meaning of *sab‘ah aḥruf*. According to him, the majority of Muslim scholars are of the opinion that *sab‘ah* indicates a definitive number, yet these seven styles of reciting the Quran applied only to the Prophet’s time. At the end of the Prophet’s career, the archangel Gabriel was believed to have come to him to determine one style of recitation because the first generation of Muslims were considered ready for it. However, this opinion appears to be too speculative because Muslim conflicts around the styles of recitation and the fact about the emergence of the variant readings of the Quran (*qirā’āt*) after the death of the Prophet tell us the opposite. Badr al-Dīn al-Zarkashī, *Al-Burhān fī ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān*, vol. 1, ed. by Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm (Cairo: Dār al-Turāth, 2000), pp. 212–3.

as a variety of 'legitimate' styles of reciting the Quran as endorsed or acknowledged by the Prophet.

As mentioned earlier, the Quran adopted a trans-dialectal language that constituted a symbol of the cultural pride of the Arabs, who would voluntarily abandon their local dialects when they came to the production of noble and eloquent speeches. Dialectal elements considered to make Arabic fluent and archaic might be adapted within the rhetorical structure of the literary '*Arabiyya*' when they gained wide acceptance from the Arabs who shared the same concern. Since the literary '*Arabiyya*' was a peculiar language treated beyond those dialects commonly used for daily communication in the Arabian Peninsula, it becomes plausible if the Quran's closest audiences were, in fact, not those ordinary Arabs. They came from the class of Arab intellectuals or literates familiar with the verbal beauties of the literary '*Arabiyya*'. Ibn al-Jazarī (d. 833/1429) said:

The Arabs to whom the Quran was revealed in their language spoke different dialects and various tongues. It was difficult for one of them to move from his own dialect or from one style of speech to another. Some of them might not be able to do so, neither by learning nor with therapy, especially the elderly, women, and those who were not capable of reading. If they were to be forced to change their dialects and move from their tongues, surely there would be imposition that could not possibly be carried out.<sup>37</sup>

The majority of Muslim scholars who think that the language of the Quran stems from the dialect of Quraysh establish their position on the following arguments: (1) Quraysh were the first audience of the Quran (14:4), (2) the Prophet Muḥammad himself came from the Quraysh tribe, and (3) the Qurayshi companions' style of speech was in accordance with the language of the Quran.<sup>38</sup> However, if we look into the collection of the Quranic vocabulary by Ibn Ḥasnūn (d. 386/996) based on a transmission from Ibn Abbās, the dominance of the Qurayshi vocabulary in the Quran is not proven. Even in the Meccan *sūras* (chapters revealed before the Prophet's emigration to Medina), which had Quraysh as the main audience, the Qurayshi vocabulary does not represent the majority. Ṣalāh al-Dīn al-Munajjid examines the vocabulary collected by Ibn Ḥasnūn and shows that the number of the Qurayshi vocabulary in the Quran is still below that of Kināna, Oman-Azad Shanū'a-Khath'am,

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<sup>37</sup> Jazarī, *Al-Nasb fi al-Qirā'āt al-'Ashr*, 1:22.

<sup>38</sup> Imam, *Variant Readings of the Qur'an*, p. 60.

Hudhayl, and Ṭayyi'-Madhhij-Madyan-Ghassān.<sup>39</sup>

Suppose we have to accept the idea about the supremacy of the Quraysh dialect in the Quran's language system. In that case, the Meccan part is probably the main niche because, at the time, its first audiences were predominantly Quraysh. However, following the success of the Prophet's mission, the cultural backgrounds of the Quran's audience became varied. Therefore, the accommodation of other Arab dialectal elements into the 'Arabīyya system of the Quran becomes a reasonable move. The report ascribed to Ibn 'Abbās above explains this development. However, this idea is seemingly not supported by strong evidence because the Quran itself had already contained non-Qurayshi vocabulary since the early Meccan period, e.g., *rujz* (74:5) from Hudhayl, *wabīl* (73:16), from Himyar, *lanmāḥa* (74:28) from Azad Shanū'a, *bussat* (56:5) from Kinda, and *aghṭasha* (79:29) from Anmar.<sup>40</sup> The members of the Quraysh tribe even did not always understand every vocabulary of the Meccan chapters due to probably its archaic nature or because it derived from a non-Qurayshi dialect. It is reported that Ibn 'Abbās did not understand the meaning of *fāṭir al-samāwāt wa al-arḍ* (35:1) until he confirmed it from a Bedouin source. Ibn 'Abbās said: "I did not know the meaning of *fāṭir al-samāwāt wa al-arḍ* until I met two Bedouins who were fighting over a well. One of them said: *ana faṭartubā*, meaning I have started it (*ibtada'tubā*)."<sup>41</sup> It should be borne in mind that during the revelation of the Quran, the Quraysh tribe did not belong to the nomadic culture anymore because the economic growth in Mecca was sufficient for them to live sedentarily.

The presence of non-Qurayshi vocabulary needs to be seen from the framework of *ahruf sab'ah*. Many exegetes associate the word *bakka* (3:96)<sup>42</sup> with the city of Mecca. The question is, why does the Quran use *bakka* to designate the city of Mecca in the verse, whereas it employs the word *makka* in another chapter (48:24)<sup>43</sup> for the same purpose? Why does

<sup>39</sup> Despite this fact, al-Munajjid himself defends the theory of the supremacy of the dialect of Quraysh. See Ismā'īl ibn Ḥasnūn, *Kitāb al-Lughāt fī al-Qur'ān*, ed. by Ṣalāh al-Dīn al-Munajjid (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Risāla, 1946), p. 6.

<sup>40</sup> See Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Itqān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, vol. 2 (Cairo: Dār al-Turāth, 1985), pp. 89–104.

<sup>41</sup> Abū 'Abdillāh al-Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmi' li Ahkām al-Qur'ān*, vol. 17, ed. by 'Abdullāh ibn 'Abd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risāla, 2006), p. 340.

<sup>42</sup> QS 3:96, "Indeed, the first house (of worship) built for humans was the one in *bakka*."

<sup>43</sup> QS 48:24, "And the One who withheld their hands from you and your hands from them within [the area of] Mecca (*Makka*) after He caused you to overcome them..."

the Quran not use the same word (*makka*)<sup>44</sup> In his commentary, Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī mentions a number of opinions which explain the meaning of *bakka* in the Quran in relation to Mecca. These opinions lead to at least two major explanations: first, *bakka* is Mecca itself, and second, *bakka* is the centre of Mecca where the place of worship was located, where people thronged around (*yatabakkūna fihā*).<sup>44</sup> The question of *bakka* in the Quran can be more convincingly explained in terms of *ahruf sab'ah*. *Makka* is a word for the city of Mecca in the Qurayshi and Hijazi dialects, while *bakka* is another word that served the same meaning according to the dialect of Banī Māzin (from Hawāzin of the Qays Confederation), who used *bā'*, instead of *mīm*. They would say *bā' smuka*, instead of *mā' smuka* for a question “what is your name?”<sup>45</sup>

#### D. The Foreign Vocabulary of the Quran

The Quran's affirmation that it is an Arabic reading (12:2; 20:112; 39:28; 41:3; 42:7; 43:3) or revelation in a ‘clear Arabic tongue’ (*lisānun arabīyyun mubīn*; 16:103) is often interpreted by some scholars as a postulate for the absence of foreign elements (vocabulary) in the Quran. Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī mentions that al-Imām al-Syāfi'ī, Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, Abū 'Ubayda, al-Qāḍī al-Bāqillānī, and Ibn Fāris are among the prominent scholars who reject the existence of any foreign vocabulary in the Quran with an argument for the “Arabicness of the Quran” (16:103; 41:44).<sup>46</sup> Abū 'Ubayda affirms that the Quran was revealed in clear Arabic, and “whoever thinks that it contains non-Arabic (vocabulary), he must have exaggerated.” Ibn Jarīr considers the presumed existence of foreign elements in the Quran to be seen from the perspective of linguistic co-occurrence (*tawārud al-lughāt*).<sup>47</sup> All these arguments underlie the view that the Quran is a pure Arabic text devoid of any foreign elements.

However, a contrasting view can be seen from the earlier Muslim generation. Reports ascribed to the companion Ibn 'Abbās acknowledge

<sup>44</sup> Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āyi al-Qur'ān*, vol. 5, ed. by 'Abdullāh ibn 'Abd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī (Cairo: Dār Hajar, 2001), pp. 594–8.

<sup>45</sup> Ḍayf, *Tārīkh al-Adab al-'Arabi*, 1: 126.

<sup>46</sup> QS 41:44, “Had We revealed the Quran as a non-Arabic reading, they would have certainly argued, ‘If only its verses were made clear in our language.’ What! A non-Arabic revelation and an Arab (messenger)?”

<sup>47</sup> Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Muhadḍab*, ed. by Al-Tahājī al-Rājī al-Hāshimī (Rabat: Ṣundūq Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-Islāmī, 1995), pp. 57–9.

the existence of foreign vocabulary in the Quran.<sup>48</sup> In Muslim exegetical tradition, Ibn ‘Abbās has been known as “*turjumān al-Qur’ān*” (the translator of the Quran) with such famous pupils as Mujāhid ibn Jabr (d. 104/722), ‘Ikrima (d. 105/723), Sa‘īd ibn Jubayr (d. 95/713), ‘Aṭā’ ibn Yasār (d. 94/712), and Aṭā’ ibn Abī Rabāḥ (d. 115/733). Abū Manṣūr al-Jawālīqī (d. 539/1144), a grammarian from Baghdad, considers that the position of the first generation of Muslim exegetes regarding the foreign origins of some Quranic vocabulary cannot be simply ignored with a different opinion from the subsequent Muslim generations. He emphasizes that “they were more knowledgeable in exegesis than Abū ‘Ubayda (*fa-bā’ulā’i a‘lam bi al-ta’wīl min Abī Ubayda*) —who was of the opinion to reject any foreign vocabulary in the Quran.” Al-Jawālīqī offers a mediating opinion between the two contrasting opinions above; these words came from non-Arabic sources, but later had been Arabicized.<sup>49</sup> In other words, the Quran employs these ‘foreign words’ but only after they have been adapted to the Arab tongue.

Arthur Jeffery provides an interesting explanation regarding the differences among Muslim scholars above. Jeffery links the rejection of foreign elements in the Quran with the introduction of the *ījāz* doctrine (the inimitability of the Quran),<sup>50</sup> which became an established doctrine in the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century. Abū ‘Ubaydah was a pioneer in approaching the Quranic vocabulary within the framework of the *ījāz* doctrine. Although he used poetic verses as evidence (*shawāhid*) in his book *Majāz al-Qur’ān*, his aim was more oriented toward demonstrating the unique characteristics of the Quranic *ījāz* rather than pure literary pursuit.<sup>51</sup>

Foreign vocabulary in the Quran can be divided into two: first, names of persons which do not need “al-“ for their definitive forms, such as *Mūsā* and *‘Isā*, and second, names of objects that require “al-“

<sup>48</sup> Andrew Rippin who is known as one of the leading revisionist scholars of the Quran doubts if *al-Lughāt fī al-Qur’ān* really comes from Ibn ‘Abbās. According to him, the attribution to Ibn ‘Abbās was intended to give the text more credence because it was linked to an early prominent figure of Islam. Andrew Rippin, “Ibn ‘Abbās’s *Al-lughāt fī l-Qur’ān*”, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, vol. 44, no. 1 (1981), pp. 15–25.

<sup>49</sup> Abū Manṣūr al-Jawālīqī, *Al-Mu‘arrab*, ed. by F. ‘Abd al-Raḥīm (Damascus: Dār al-Qalam, 1990), p. 92.

<sup>50</sup> Arthur Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur’ān* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2007), p. 5.

<sup>51</sup> Claude Gilliot, “Exegesis of the Qur’ān: Classical and Medieval”, *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’an*, vol. 1, ed. by Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2002), p. 108.

for their definitive forms such as *dībāj* and *istabraq*. Names such as Ādam, Nūḥ, Ibrāhīm, Iṣḥāq, Mūsā, Dāwūd, and Sulaimān are among the names of persons known in the Old Testament. More in-depth observation even shows a lot of non-Arabic vocabulary in the Quran. Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) has identified some foreign vocabulary in the Quran from such languages as Ethiopian, Persian, Greek, Indian, Syriac, Hebrew, Nabatean, Coptic, Turkish, and Barbarian.<sup>52</sup>

The identification of a number of Quranic words with foreign origins by such Muslim scholars of later generations as al-Suyūṭī put an end to the polemics about the presence or absence of foreign elements in the Arabic Quran. More importantly, it was also related to the growing idea about the universality of the Quran in the Muslim world. Abū Maṣṣūr al-Tha‘ālābī (d. 429/1038), as quoted by al-Suyūṭī, said, “There is no language in this world unless it is contained in the Quran.”<sup>53</sup> This opinion seems to be a response to the widening territories of the Islamic world, which reached beyond the Arabian Peninsula, and the growing number of Muslim converts from different cultural backgrounds. The existence of (Arabicized) foreign vocabulary in the Quran was even seen positively; it was linked to the theory of the Quranic eloquence because those words of foreign origins served a unique function in the Quran, which other words could not replace.<sup>54</sup> This development depicts that the theory completely rejecting the existence of non-Arabic vocabulary in the Quran had become obsolete.

The existence of loan words in the Quran is also admitted by modern (western) scholars of the Quran, who take a critical stance toward the position of pre-modern Muslim scholars on this issue. Nevertheless, scholars like Arthur Jeffery argue that the classification of foreign vocabulary by al-Suyūṭī above is not always accurate. According to him, India as a source of the Quranic vocabulary is difficult to explain because the interaction between the first audiences of the Quran and the Indian culture was not supported by solid evidence. Syriac sources from pre-Islamic and early Islamic times identified India as South Arabia. Early Muslim philologists used to link the origins of certain vocabulary, which could not be clearly identified, with such distant regions as India.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Jawālīqī, *Al-Mu‘arrab*; Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Mutawakkilī* (Damascus: Maktabat al-Qudsī wa al-Budayn, 1891).

<sup>53</sup> Suyūṭī, *Al-Muhadhdhab*, p. 61.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>55</sup> Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur’an*, pp. 18–9.

Jeffery also sees that the identification of Coptic vocabulary by al-Suyūṭī is inaccurate because Coptic was a language of liturgy, while the Egyptian society at the time of the Prophet Muḥammad communicated in Greek. In addition, the Egyptian Arabic dialect that developed after Islam was filled more with Greek-loaned vocabulary than Coptic, although Coptic has been a living liturgical language among the Egyptian Coptic Christians until today.<sup>56</sup>

Does the mention of foreign vocabulary in the Quran indicate the diverse cultural backgrounds of the Quran's first audiences? Various studies about the chronology of the Quranic revelation suggest that the worldview of the Quran developed from a small social scope (Quraysh) and then gradually covered larger horizons within a period of approximately 20 years. If so, does it mean that the foreign vocabulary does not appear in the early revealed chapters of the Quran? Or on the contrary, the foreign vocabulary is equally distributed in the Quran, including in the early revealed Quranic chapters. If the latter is the case, it shows that the first audiences of the Quran had been in various ways aware of the cultural horizons of the surrounding non-Arab communities.

The latter condition features what really happens in the Quran. Foreign vocabulary has been mentioned in the Quran since the revelation of its early chapters. The word *sijjil*, for example, is found in Chapter al-Fil (105): 4, which is counted as one of the earliest revealed chapters. According to Muslim philologists, *sijjil* came from Persian and indicated the meanings of *sang* (stone) and *gil* (clay).<sup>57</sup> It should be borne in mind that the Persian language known in pre-Islamic and Quranic times was Pahlavi, the official language of the Sasanian Empire (226-640 CE).<sup>58</sup> Another example is the word *ṭūr* (2:63, 93; 4:154; 19:52; 20:80; 23:20; 28:29, 46; 52:1; 95:2), which Muslim philologists viewed to have originated from Syriac, and is referred to the meaning of “mount”.<sup>59</sup> In two Meccan chapters (23:20 and 95:2), the word *ṭūr* is juxtaposed with the words *sainā'* and *sinīn* (Sinai), while in another part of the Quran, the word *ṭūr* stands alone without being followed by Sinai, but is still linked to the meaning of Mount Sinai. In addition to the Syriac sources, al-Suyūṭī also

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 28–9.

<sup>57</sup> Jawālīqī, *Al-Mu'arrab*, p. 363; Suyūṭī, *Al-Muhadhdhab*, pp. 96–7; Abū Muḥammad ibn Qutayba, *Adab al-Kātib*, ed. by Muḥammad al-Dālī (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risāla, 1999), p. 496.

<sup>58</sup> Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an*, p. 15; F. 'Abd al-Raḥīm, “Muqaddima”, in *Al-Mu'arrab* (Damascus: Dār al-Qalam, 1990), p. 31.

<sup>59</sup> Ibn Qutayba, *Adab al-Kātib*, p. 496; Jawālīqī, *Al-Mu'arrab*, p. 435.

presents another opinion (from al-Ḍaḥḥāk) that the Nabatean people used to refer to a mountain with the word *ḥūr*.<sup>60</sup> As far as the phrase *ḥūr sainā*' in the Quran is concerned, for Jeffrey, it is very likely that the word originated from Syriac.<sup>61</sup>

Besides, the Syriac imprints have also been apparent in names such as Noah, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Solomon, and Pharaoh, often mentioned in the Meccan chapters. The pronunciation of those names in the Quran, according to Alphonse Mingana, is closer to Syriac than any other languages, e.g., Hebrew and Ethiopian.<sup>62</sup> It becomes evident, therefore, that foreign elements had been adopted in the Quran since the earlier phases of its revelation. It, in turn, confirms what has been widely argued in the recent scholarship of the Quran that the 7<sup>th</sup>-century Arabs were not an isolated society; they were culturally connected with their neighbouring societies. The Arabian Peninsula had already been an open space for cultural and linguistic interactions since the pre-Islamic period. In this regard, Syriac seems to have channelled the Arabs with the existing monotheistic tradition. However, the Biblical tradition, which the Quran frequently mentions, did not seem to be directly known by the first audiences of the Quran through Hebrew as much as through Syriac, which had become an important language for churches and people living in southern Syria and particular other part of Arabia.<sup>63</sup> Several studies also confirm the same thing: Arabic was more closely related to Syriac-Aramaic<sup>64</sup> than to any other languages: Greek, Persian, Hebrew, and Ethiopian.

## E. The 'Uthmānic Codex and the Supremacy of the Dialect of Quraysh

The scholars of *qirā'āt* did not make *sab'ab aḥruf* a starting point when dealing with their codification.<sup>65</sup> The traces of *sab'ab aḥruf* as certain styles of recitation endorsed by the Prophet might still be

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<sup>60</sup> Suyūṭī, *Al-Muḥadḥab*, pp. 113–4.

<sup>61</sup> Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an*, pp. 206–7.

<sup>62</sup> Alphonse Mingana, "Syriac Influence on the Style of the Kur'an", *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, vol. 11, no. 1 (1927), pp. 77–98.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 79–80.

<sup>64</sup> Al-Jallad, "Pre-Islamic Arabic".

<sup>65</sup> Ibn Mujāhid, for example, determines the validity of the variant readings of the Quran based on three main criteria: 1. in conformity with one of the five Ottoman manuscripts, 2. being transmitted through reliable channels, and 3. in conformity with the rules of Arabic grammar. See Leemhuis, "Readings of the Qur'an", 4: 356.

reflected in *qirā'āt* because *qirā'āt* were codified based mainly on the orthographic system (*rasm*) of the 'Uthmānic codex, which is believed to have accommodated *sab'ab aḥruf*.<sup>66</sup> Unfortunately, our knowledge of *sab'ab aḥruf* is very limited. Much of the information about *sab'ab aḥruf* is scatteredly obtained from some discussions in the works of early Muslim commentators and philologists. The consensus of Muslim scholars that links the language of the Quran to the dialect of Quraysh may be based on the popularity of Quraysh's way of recitation. Yet, the question about the extent to which other variants of *sab'ab aḥruf* were justly maintained should also be raised. Extra Quranic sources show how the first caliphs of Islam—all of whom were from Quraysh—defended the dialect of Quraysh when dealing with the Quran. 'Umar ibn Khattāb (d. 24/644) once renounced Ibn Mas'ūd (from the Hudhayl tribe), who read the Quran according to the dialect of Hudhayl—'*attā ḥīn* instead of *ḥattā ḥīn* (23:25). Umar then wrote a letter to Ibn Mas'ūd demanding that he teach Muslims to read the Quran according to the dialect of Quraysh—not anymore in that of Hudhayl.<sup>67</sup>

The inclination toward the supremacy of the dialect of Quraysh was also evident in the Quran codification policy by the Caliph 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān (d. 35/656). Although 'Uthmān is believed to have accommodated *sab'ab aḥruf* in his codices, the composition of the codification committee showed this tendency. Zayd ibn Thābit (d. 45/665), who came from a non-Quraysh tribe, from the clan of al-Najjār of the Khazraj tribe, was indeed appointed as the chairman of the committee. Yet, the other members of the committee came from the Quraysh tribe: 'Abdullāh ibn al-Zubayr (d. 73 /692) from the clan of Asad, Sa'īd ibn al-Āṣṣ (d. 58/678) from the clan of Umayya, and 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn al-Ḥārith ibn Hishām (d. 43 /663) from the clan of Makhzūm. Moreover, 'Uthmān has been reported to give clear instruction to those three Qurayshi members of the committee to favour the dialect of Quraysh if disputes over the styles of recitation took place between them and Zayd ibn Thābit on the grounds that the Quran was revealed in Quraysh's dialect.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>66</sup> Jazarī, *Al-Nasb fi al-Qirā'āt al-'Ashr*, 1: 31.

<sup>67</sup> Aḥmad ibn 'Alī ibn Muḥammad Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, *Fath al-Bārī*, vol. 9, ed. by 'Abd al-Bāqī, Muḥammad Fu'ād (Cairo: Al-Maṭba'a al-Salafiyya wa Maktabuhā), p. 27.

<sup>68</sup> Abū 'Abdillāh Muḥammad ibn Ismā'il al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Damascus & Beirut: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 2002), p. 1275. It has been reported that within the committee there was a dispute regarding the reading of *al-tābūt*, whether it had to be read *al-tābūt* according to the dialect of Quraysh with the suffix *tā'* or *al-tābūb* with the suffix *bā'*. This dispute reached 'Uthmān who finally ordered that the committee write it down

It should be borne in mind that certain *qirā'āt* emerged and gained wide acceptance in the context of the supremacy of the 'Uthmānic codex, which greatly favoured the dialect of Quraysh. The 'Uthmānic codex itself adopted a *rasm* (orthography), which had not been equipped with diacritical marks, which in turn allowed for the possibility of various readings. Until the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century, the 'Uthmānic codex did not possess a direct effect in determining the limitation of reading variants arising from a different *rasm*. Ibn Mas'ūd's codex, which adopted a different *rasm* and style of recitation, was still popular among certain circles of Muslims. The circulation of Ibn Mas'ūd's reading among early Muslims showed "equal orthodoxy" between reading variants originating from the 'Uthmānic codex and other codices. Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 161/778) and 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Ṣan'ānī (d. 211/827) in their commentaries did not mention any rejection against Ibn Mas'ūd's reading.<sup>69</sup> Until the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century, Ibn Mas'ūd's reading was still mentioned in the work of Abū Zakariyā Yahyā al-Farrā' (d. 207/822). In 56:75, for example, Ibn Mas'ūd read *fa-lā uqsimu bi-mauqī'i n-nujūm* (So I swear by the place where the stars circulate), instead of *fa-lā uqsimu bi-mawāqī'i n-nujūm* with the plural form of *mauqī'*. We may say that the difference occurs only at the reading level because both read and shared the same style of *rasm* devoid of any diacritical mark, موقع. Ibn Mas'ūd read *waw* with a zero-vowel (*sukūn*), while other readings read it with a long /a/ (*fathā*).<sup>70</sup> However, in 44:54, Ibn Mas'ūd's reading is different both in terms of the style of recitation and *rasm*. Ibn Mas'ūd reads *wa amdadnāhum bi-ʿisīn ʿin* (and we gave them white angelic women with beautiful eyes), while the 'Uthmānic codex reads *wa ẓawwajnāhum bi-ḥūrīn ʿin* with the same meaning.<sup>71</sup>

In the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century, there emerged a common idea that *qirā'āt* should be in accordance with the 'Uthmānic *rasm*, which was increasingly seen as the only authoritative *rasm*. Ibn Qutayba, in his *Ta'wīl Mushkūl al-*

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according to the dialect of Quraysh on the grounds that the Quran was revealed according to their dialect. Aḥmad ibn 'Alī ibn Muḥammad Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, *Fath al-Bārī*, vol. 9, ed. by 'Abd al-Bāqī, Muḥammad Fu'ād (Cairo: Al-Maṭba'a al-Salafiyya wa Maktabuhā), pp. 19–20.

<sup>69</sup> Leemhuis, "Readings of the Qur'ān", 4: 354–5.

<sup>70</sup> Abū Zakariyā Yahyā ibn Ziyād al-Farrā', *Ma'ānī al-Qur'an*, vol. 3, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Beirut: 'Ālam al-Kutub, 1983), p. 129. Hamza al-Zayyāt (d. 156/773) and 'Alī al-Kisā'ī (d. 189/804), two reciters of the Quran in Ibn Mujāhid's collection, also read as such. Abū Bakr ibn Mujāhid, *Kitāb al-Sab'a fī al-Qirā'āt*, ed. by Shauqī Ḍaif (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1972), p. 624.

<sup>71</sup> Al-Farrā', *Ma'ānī al-Qur'an*, 3:44.

*Qur'ān*, asserts that the reading variants of the Quran were only accepted as long as they were still within the possibilities of reading allowed by the 'Uthmānic *rasm*. Ibn Qutaybah recognizes that Muslims from earlier generations were allowed to read the Quran in reading variants outside of the 'Uthmānic *rasm* only because they enjoyed the privilege of living closer to the period of the Quran. This condition, according to him, does not apply to Muslims of later generations, who have to read the Quran following the 'Uthmānic *rasm*.<sup>72</sup> Ibn Mujāhid's codification of seven reading variants, which he called authoritative, happened in a context where the 'Uthmānic *rasm* had been widely accepted as the only authoritative *rasm*. This authorization includes Arabic grammar as a parameter in validating reading variants.<sup>73</sup> The defective character of the 'Uthmānic *rasm*, which did not exhibit all phonemic distinctions and therefore gave rise to different reading variants, appeared to be the main reason for any attempt toward validating and authorizing certain reading variants.

## F. Concluding Remarks

The literary '*Arabīyya*, which constituted a poetic *koine* in the collective memory of the pre-Islamic Arabs, facilitated the Quran to step up in an arena of literary contestation. Taking a different stance against the pre-Islamic literary works, the Quran employed the literary '*Arabīyya* to convey its monotheistic message to an audience who, to some extent, had been familiar with the similar message through their interaction with the Jewish and Christian religious traditions. Since the literary '*Arabīyya* was not accessible to all Arab social classes, the Quran took the initiative to introduce *aḥruf sab'ah* to expand the scope of the literary '*Arabīyya* beyond the class of the Arab intellectuals and elites. Accordingly, the monotheistic message of the Quran became more accessible to a wider audience as *aḥruf sab'ah* made the first audience of the Quran feel more attached to the Prophet's religious mission. In other words, their traditions of speech were given more nuance in this monument of religious literature.

The Caliph 'Uthmān's codification of the Quran marked not only a transformation of the Quran from a predominantly oral tradition to a written text, but also the initiating attempt that later affected the Muslim

<sup>72</sup> Abū Muḥammad ibn Qutayba, *Ta'wīl Mushkil al-Qur'ān*, ed. by Aḥmad Ṣāqar (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya), p. 42.

<sup>73</sup> Leemhuis, 'Readings of the Qur'ān', 4: 356.

perception of the supremacy of the dialect of Quraysh. ‘Uthmān’s introduction of an official orthography (*rasm*) brought about the systematic extinction of variant readings that the ‘Uthmānic *rasm* could not anymore accommodate. Accordingly, variant readings that developed after the general acceptance of the ‘Uthmānic codex had to be adjusted to the ‘Uthmānic *rasm*. We, therefore, are not well informed about the true nature of the language of the Quran based merely on its existing reading variants, which were authorized mainly based on the defective ‘Uthmānic *rasm*. Our investigation of the language of the Quran should rather give more weight to variant dialectal elements (*sab‘ah ahruf*), which reportedly underlie the linguistic features of the Quran.

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