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# Parallel Structure in Qur'anic Discourse: Linguistic and Psycholinguistic Implications

by  
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## Abstract

This paper sets out to shed some light on the potential role of parallel structure in the creation and processing of Qur'anic discourse. To this effect, one «sura» (chapter) is analysed with a view to determining the frequency and distribution of parallel structure in this discourse type. Then the potential role of this device in creating and processing Qur'anic discourse is investigated. It is argued that such a linguistic device can immensely contribute to the cohesion and coherence of this type of discourse. By the same token parallelism can have a facilitatory impact on its processing and eventually understanding. Finally, it is tentatively assumed that the implications of this study may offer certain insights into the creation and processing of other varieties of Arabic written discourse.

## ملخص البحث :

يهدف هذا البحث الى القاء بعض الضوء على دور تراكيب المقابلة في عملية بناء وقراءة النصوص القرآنية. ولهذه الغاية، تم تحليل احدى السور من أجل تحديد تكرار وتوزيع التراكيب المتقابلة في مثل هذا النوع من النصوص. ثم درس دور هذه التراكيب في بناء وقراءة النص القرآني، وتبين أن لهذه التراكيب دور كبير في ترابط هذه النصوص وبالتالي في عملية بناءها كما تبين أن التراكيب المتقابلة لها أثر كبير في تسهيل عملية قراءة النصوص القرآنية وبالتالي فهمها. وأخيراً يجادل المؤلف بأن الاستدلالات التي يمكن الخروج بها من هذه الدراسة يمكن أن تنطبق على نصوص عربية مكتوبة أخرى.

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## 1. Introduction:

Parallel structure is the use of syntactically and/ or semantically identical or similar configurations in successive clauses or sentences. Besides its rhetorical and aesthetic force, parallelism is recognized as a powerful text-building device (Quirk and Greenbaum, 1973<sup>(1)</sup>; de Beaugrande, 1980<sup>(2)</sup>; Hartnett, 1981<sup>(3)</sup>; Koch, 1981<sup>(4)</sup>; Al-Jabr, 1987<sup>(5)</sup> among others). However, its comparative high frequency in some varieties of Arabic written discourse (e.g. argumentative discourse) has been viewed as a means of redundancy and unnecessary repetition.

Kock (1983)<sup>(6)</sup> argues that this phenomenon, which is typical of oral cultures, is primarily employed by speakers of Arabic as a means of presenting thoughts by repeating already established truths. It is clear that the linguistic, psycholinguistic and pragmatic functions of this phenomenon in Arabic discourse have not been adequately perceived. It is this assumption that the present paper attempts to attest. Precisely it sets out to investigate the potential role parallelism can play in the creation and processing of Qur'anic discourse. Selection of this particular type of discourse is justified in the next section.

## 2. Significance of the study:

This study acquires its relevance from the fact that the Holy Qur'an, the most sacred book to all moslims, is the reservoir from which Modern Standard Arabic has evolved and to which it still owes its survival. Therefore, a linguistic investigation of parallelism in this discourse type may have some bearing on its potential role in the creation of other varieties of Arabic written discourse. For many a linguistic phenomena typical of Arabic discourse can be traced back in the Holy Book, though its language is so immaculate that no Arab has ever been, nor will ever be, able to formulate only one short verse with such linguistic precision and adequacy.

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(1) Quirk, R, & Greenbaum, S, **"A University Grammar of English"**, London: Longman, 1973.

(2) de Beaugrande, R, **"Text, Discourse, and Precesses"**, London: Longman, 1980.

(3) Hartnette, CG. "How Cohesion Expresses Thinking", Unpublished Paper, Texas: College of Mainland, 1981.

(4) Koch, B,J, "Repetition in Cohesion and Persuasion in Arabic", Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1981.

(5) Al-Jabr, AM, "Cohesion in Text Differentiation", Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Aston University in Birmingham, 1987.

(6) Koch, BJ, "Presentation as Proof: The Language of Arabic Rhetoric", **Anthropological Linguistics**, Vol. 25. No. 1, 1983.

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On the other hand, the spiritual influence of the Holy Qur'an on Muslims is so immense that a great number of them, some being illiterate, voluntarily learn the entire book, or most of it, by heart. Some Qur'anic suras (chapters) constitute one of the major subjects on the school syllabus. Mastery of reading and even the rote learning of some of those suras is imperative on the pupils' part. Besides furnishing them with the relevant religious knowledge, learning Qur'anic suras may enable those pupils to master reading and learning Arabic written texts in general. One of the major devices that is held to facilitate this reading/ learning process is parallel structure. Thus, pinning down the facilitatory function of parallelism in processing Qur'anic discourse may offer insights into its psycholinguistic impact on other varieties of Arabic written discourse.

Thus selection of this particular discourse type is motivated by the assumption that the implications offered by investigating Qur'anic discourse may hopefully have a great bearing on Arabic written discourse in general.

However, it is worth pointing out from the outset that the cognitive interpretations attempted in this paper are mere speculative assumptions which require empirical validation. Such a significant task can be further pursued by future research.

### **3. Parallel structure in Qur'anic discourse:**

In order that the role of parallelism in the creation and processing of Qur'anic discourse is succinctly spelled out, a bird's eye view of the frequency and distribution of this device in this type of discourse is deemed worth attempting.

#### **3.1 Frequency of parallel structure in Qur'anic discourse-**

Although parallel structure is of a tripartite nature in English written discourse (Al-Jabr, 1987)<sup>(7)</sup>, a string of eight clauses/ sentences<sup>(8)</sup> can run in parallel in Qur'anic discourse. This fact invalidates Beeston's (1970)<sup>(9)</sup> assertion that only two and occasionally three parallel structures exist in Arabic. High frequency of this device is displayed in the following example.

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(7) Al-Jabr, 1987

(8) The Arabic sentence assumes only two structures: svo or vso. As such it is sometimes equivalent to the English dependent clause. However, for the purpose of this corpus, a sentence refers to the unit which is syntactically independent of previous and following units and which conveys a complete thought.

(9) Beeston, AFL, **"The Arabic Language Today"**, London: Hutchinson and Co. Ltd., 1971.

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- (1) 1. 'ida 'al-shamsu kuwwirat  
When the sun  
(With its spacious light)  
Is folded up;
2. wa-'ida 'al-nujuumu 'inkadarat  
When the stars  
Fall, losing their lustre;
3. wa-'ida 'al-jibaalu suyyirat  
When the mountains vanish  
(Like a mirage);
4. wa-'ida 'al-'ishaaru ?uttilat  
When the she-camels,  
Ten months with young,  
Are left unattended;
5. wa-'ida 'al-wuhuushu hushirat  
When the wild beasts  
Are herded together  
(In human habitations);
6. wa-'ida 'al-bihaaru sujjirat  
When the oceans  
Boil over with a swell;
7. wa-'ida 'al-nufuusu zuwwijat  
When the souls  
When the oceans  
Boil over with a swell;  
Are sorted out,  
(Being joined, like with like);
8. wa-'ida 'al-maw'uudatu su'ilat  
When the female (infant),  
Buried alive, is questioned.
9. bi-'ayyi danbin qutilat  
For what crime  
She was killed;
10. wa-'ida 'al-suhufu nushirat  
When the Scrolls  
are laid open;
11. wa-'ida 'al-samaa'u kushitat

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- When the World on High  
Is unveiled;
12. wa-'ida 'al-jahiimu su??irat  
When the Blazing Fire  
Is kindled to fierce heat;
13. wa-'ida 'al-jannatu 'uzlifat  
And when the Garden  
Is brought near;
14. ?alimat nafsun maa 'ahdarat  
(Then) shall each soul know  
What it has put (forward) <sup>(10)</sup>-(11)

In this example, a string of eight clauses/ sentences are juxtaposed in parallel. A short pause then ensues followed by another four parallel clauses and finally the sequence closes with a clause which violates the continuum. All of those clauses demonstrate identical structure: each begins with the temporal «'ida» (when) followed by a noun phrase and a passive verb. Thus, the example offers an obvious evidence of the high frequency of parallel structure in this discourse type. However, it is worth noting that the above example is the exception rather than the norm. That is despite its high frequency in Qur'anic discourse, parallelism does not always exist in all other suras (chapters) with such regularity and frequency. Nor is it necessarily maintained throughout the entire sura in the same manner. For instance, parallelism is neither regular nor dense in the remaining clauses of the above sura.

### 3.2 Distribution of parallel structure in Qur'anic discourse

As for its distribution, parallelism in the present example embraces a wide range of linguistic levels. It operates on the phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic levels. Phonological and morphological parallelism is quite evident in the /t/ phoneme and the (rat) or (lat) morphemes at the end of each of those clauses. Semantic parallelism is embodied through using semantically-related items such as sun-stars, mountains-oceans, camels-beasts, etc. Finally, syntactic parallelism is quite evident in the use of syntactically identical/ similar clauses. Elaborating on these levels is well beyond the scope of this limited paper, an issue that will be addressed by the author in a forthcoming research.

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(10) Sura (chapter) "attakwiir", no. 81, verses: 1-14.

(11) Translation of Qur'anic verses is taken from **"The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation & Commentary"**, State of Qatar: Kamil Muslim Trust for the Islamic Propagation Center.

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It can be tentatively assumed that such frequency and distribution of parallelism may be partly affected by the rhetorical purpose of the sura. Consequently, it might be plausible to find differences in this respect between «madany» suras (those revealed in Madina) and «Makky» suras (those revealed in Makka), an issue which may be worth tackling by future research.

#### **4. Role of parallelism in Qur'anic discourse:**

As stated earlier, parallelism can be a powerful device which contributes to the organization and the processing of text. The following two organization and the processing of text. The following two sections attempt to explore the linguistic and psycholinguistic functions of parallelism in Quranic discourse.

##### 4.1 Linguistic function

A well - formed text must display (among other textual features) cohesion and coherence (Widdowson, 1978<sup>(12)</sup>; de Beaugrande, 1980<sup>(13)</sup>). The first refers to the surface connectivity of the text (Halliday and Hassan, 1976<sup>(14)</sup>); the second to its underlying conceptual connectedness (Widdowson, 1978<sup>(15)</sup>; de Beaugrande and Dressler, 1981<sup>(16)</sup>). How parallelism contributes to these two text-building factors is explicated in what now follows.

Parallel structure has been recognized as a powerful cohesive device (Quirk et al, 1973<sup>(17)</sup>; de Beaugrande, 1980<sup>(18)</sup>; Koch, 1981, 1983<sup>(19)</sup>; Hartnett, 1981<sup>(20)</sup>). As such, it immensely contributes to the connectedness of the surface structure of text. Quirk et al (1973: 308)<sup>(21)</sup> argues that recurrence of «identical or very similar structures» in adjacent sentences functions as a linking device connecting those sentences into one unified text. This is quite evident in the above example which manifests identical structures, the thing that makes the reader/ hearer recognize them as constituting one whole text.

Parallelism is even more «transparent... if the word order is not the normal one, even if otherwise there is little structural similarity» (Quirk et al, 1973: 308)<sup>(22)</sup>.

(12) Widdowson, HG, **“Teaching Language as Communication”**, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978.

(13) *ibid.*

(14) Halliday, MAK, & Hassan, R, **“Cohesion in English”**, London: Longman, 1976.

(15) *ibid.*

(16) de Beaugrande, R, & Dressler, W, **“Introduction to Textlinguistics”**, London: Longman, 1981.

(17) *ibid.*

(18) *ibid.*

(19) *ibid.*

(20) *ibid.*

(21) *ibid.*

(22) *ibid.*

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The following example is an instance of this type of parallelism.

(2) wa-ssammaa'a rafa?ahaa; wa-wada?a-l miizaan

And the Firmament has He

Raised High, and He has set up

The Balance (of justice)<sup>(23)</sup>

Here, two sentences of varying word order are juxtaposed. The first, a nominal sentence, starts with a noun phrase followed by a verb of process; the second, a verbal sentence, begins with a verb of process followed by a noun phrase. The varying word order of these two parallel clauses may attract the reader/ hearer's attention more strongly than does identical word ordering. The reader/ hearer is expected to recognize them as belonging to one unified whole.

Parallelism is also obvious when a string of parallel subordinate clauses weave their way across the text and acquire structural completion later in the text. In example (1), for instance, the first thirteen subordinate clauses run in parallel and their structural completion is suspended until the very last clause. The reader/ hearer will inevitably recognize them as forming one text, since they all make up one structural unit. In this way parallelism contributes immensely to the connectedness of the entire surface text.

A text can also maintain cohesion through recurrence of different cohesive devices in contiguous parallel clauses/ sentences. Frequency of such devices reinforces the surface connectivity of the entire text. For instance, in example (1) many instances of pronominal reference, lexical cohesion, and conjunctions take place. Fourteen instances of pronominal reference occur in that example. In each of those parallel constructions, an enclitic, is implicit in the passive verb alluding to the entity given in the respective clause. Of course, a clause is coherent by virtue of its structure (Halliday and Hassan, 1976)<sup>(24)</sup>. Nevertheless, occurrence of the same type of pronoun (i.e., the singular feminine pronoun) yields more cohesion to those parallel structures, and hence they would most probably be identified as making one text.

The cohesive function of parallelism is remarkably evident in the consistency of tenses occurring within parallel structures (Hartnett, 1981)<sup>(25)</sup>. This aspect is clearly maintained throughout the present example. In the first example the (unreal) past tense weaves its way throughout the entire text. Similarly, in the other example

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(23) Sura "'al-rahmaan", no. 55, verse: 7.

(24) *ibid.*

(25) *ibid.*

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the same tense is used in the parallel clauses/ sentences. This consistency coupled with the use of the same voice (i.e. passive or active) brings about the relatedness of actions which in turn results in relatedness of ideas (Hartnett, 1981)<sup>(26)</sup>. In this way, parallelism also reinforces the surface cohesion and the underlying conceptual coherence of the text. Finally, Kock (1981)<sup>(27)</sup> maintains that “listing parallelism” creates cohesion by creating classes of new items. This is particularly so in the present examples where several new lexical items are created in those adjacent parallel clauses/ sentences.

By the same token, Qur’anic discourse derives much coherence from parallel structure. For example, the use of semantically related items (e.g. the sun, the stars, the mountains, the oceans; the camels, the beasts; souls, female infant; the Blazing Fire, the Garden etc.) which represent the entire universe relate those clauses to one hyper - topic. Thus, use of lexical equivalences such as these intensifies the semantic relationships across parallel structures (Quirk et al, 1973)<sup>(28)</sup>. This ensures relatedness of the underlying conceptual propositions of the text.

In fact, the mere juxtaposition of parallel sentences reinforces their underlying conceptual relationships (de Beaugrande, 1980)<sup>(29)</sup>. Such juxtaposition, therefore, assists the reader to work out those relationships without being overtly expressed.

What highlights the coherence of Qur’anic texts is the frequent use of “wa” (and) to connect parallel constructions. This is evident in all of the above examples. Connecting those parallel clauses/ sentences with the asyndeton “wa” brings about relating their underlying proposition into one coherent text. This is especially so in the given examples because “wa” serves one conjunctive function, that is of addition. It is unlikely that a reader/ hearer may fail to recognize those parallel units as forming one unified text. Thus, parallel structures can assist in establishing coherence as well as cohesion in Qur’anic discourse.

#### 4.2 Psycholinguistic function

It must be made explicit from the outset that delving deeply into the intricate aspects of text processing is beyond the scope of this paper to tackle. Rather, some of the issues pertinent to the purpose of the present study are touched upon here. Furthermore, the issues raised in this section will be matched against example (1).

A text is normally processed in two complementary ways: bottom - up and

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(26) *ibid.*

(27) *ibid.*

(28) *ibid.*

(29) *ibid.*



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top - down. According to the former, the processor (reader/ hearer) analyses surface structures (e.g., letters, words, phrases and sentences) and attempts to link incoming information with ongoing one. In the top - down model, the processor integrates hypotheses about the material by drawing on his own world knowledge and experiences «to constrain understanding and fill in materials» (de Beaugrande, 1981: 263)<sup>(30)</sup>. Therefore, the processor's textual knowledge and world knowledge are brought into play during the processing operation.

Text processing and comprehension can be largely affected by some factors. Firstly, the way the textual information is organized considerably affects the processing and understanding of text (Bowe, 1976;<sup>(31)</sup> Thorndyke, 1977<sup>(32)</sup>).

Efficiency and ease of processing is partly contingent upon the ease and efficiency implemented in linking incoming with ongoing information. To adequately do so, given anaphors have to be tied with their antecedents which lie either in the prior text or in the context of situation (i.e., the real world). This linking process instigates a memory search so that the given anaphor is properly interpreted. The shorter the memory search, the faster and more efficient the processing is. Consequently, when an antecedent lies in an adjacent clause/ sentence, the given anaphor is rapidly and easily interpreted and eventually processed. Clark and Haviland (1977)<sup>(33)</sup> suggest that when two sentences are placed side by side, the first sets up a context in the light of which the second sentence is interpreted.

In light of this factor, parallel structure can facilitate the processing and understanding of Qur'anic discourse. Parallel clauses/ sentences are placed side by side and hence the memory search would be short and each other pair of the parallel unit would be interpreted in the light of the immediately preceding one. It must be acknowledged, however, that antecedents for the given anaphors in example (1) reside outside the boundary of the text (in the real world). For example, «the sun» has no antecedent in the given text, yet drawing on his world knowledge, the reader/ hearer is expected to easily interpret this unique entity. In addition,

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(30) de Beaugrande, R, "Design Criteria for Process Models of Reading", **Reading Research Quarterly**, 1981: No. 2, 261-315.

(31) Bower, GH, "Experiments on Story Understanding and Recall", **Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology**, 1976: 28, 511-534.

(32) Thorndyke, PW, "Cognitive Structure in Comprehension and Memory of Narrative Discourse", **Cognitive Psychology**, 1977: 9, 77-110.

(33) Clark, HH, & Haviland, SE, "Comprehension and the Given - New contract", In: Freedle, Ro, ed., **Discourse Processes: Advances in Research and Theory**, Norwood: N. J. Albx Publishing Co., 1977: 1-40.

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the first clause ('when the sun.. is folded up) sets the context in light of which the second ('when the stars fall, losing their luster) is interpreted. Reading/ Hearing the first clause, the processor hypothesizes the occurrence of another clause which addresses a similar calamity (i.e., the falling of the stars). The same process is carried out in the rest of the parallel clauses of that text. Thus, the top-down process, which is quite important to grasping the overall feel of the text (de Beaugrande, 1981)<sup>(34)</sup>, seems to be activated more frequently than the bottom-up process in the processing and interpretation of example (1). This might apply to the processing and understanding of Qur'anic discourse in general, an issue that is worth empirical investigation by future research.

Secondly, text processing is further affected by the semantic relationships obtaining among anaphors and antecedents. This relationship is similarly affected by the degree of "conjoint frequency" of given anaphors (Wilkins, 1971)<sup>(35)</sup>. The more frequent and eventually familiar an anaphor, the faster and more efficiently it is processed and understood. In the first example, the semantic relationships between the anaphors and their antecedents has to be retrieved from the context. And, as stated above, this is not a difficult process since the given anaphors are mostly unique entities which are quite frequently used, and hence they must be easy to interpret. This semantic relationship is further emphasized by the concurrence of entities which belong to the same class (e.g., "the sun", "the stars" and "the mountains" represent natural phenomena).

Thirdly, overt antecedents which reside in the textual environment are held to facilitate and expedite processing better than covert ones. Implicit antecedents require the reader/ hearer to draw on his world knowledge so that they are linked with their given anaphors. This is not expected to have any strenuous mental impact on the processing of the anaphors given in the first example. Simply, the use of unique entities which are well - known to even illiterate hearers are expected to be easily tied with their referents in the real world and therefore easy to interpret.

One final point is that intra- and inter-sentential relations tend to be overtly expressed by "wa" (and) in the given examples. de Beaugrande (1980)<sup>(36)</sup> argues that overt realization of conjunctive relationships facilitates processing since processors will not have to activate their world knowledge in order to supply them.

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(34) *ibid.*

(35) Wilkins, AJ, "Conjoint Frequency, Category Size and Categorization Time", **Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behaviour**, 1971: 10, 383-385.

(36) *ibid.*

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Although “wa”, like its English counterpart “and”, can serve different conjunctive relationships, it is primarily used as an additive conjunction in those examples. Deciphering the additive relationship obtaining among those parallel clauses is not expected to pose any problems to the processor.

Furthermore, the use of “wa”, which approximates the text to narrative discourse, enables readers/ hearers to process large chunks of the text at a time, and hence expedites as well as facilitates processing Qur’anic discourse.

To sum up, parallel structure seems to have a facilitatory effect on the processing and interpretation of Qur’anic discourse. Being placed side by side, those parallel units entail the activation of a short memory search which renders processing fast as well as efficient. No wonder then that even illeterate moslims, a great number of them are non-Arabs, can competently learn whole chapters, if not the entire Book, by heart. A final word of caution is that learning the text does not necessarily ensure adequate understanding of its actual meaning. This issue may be worth attempting by future research.