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# The Irregularity of the Uthmanic Orthography of the Holy Quran in Contrast with the Standard Orthography: A Pragmatic Reading

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## ABSTRACT

The Uthmanic orthography of the Holy Qu'ran is distinctively miraculous. In different contexts in Qu'ran, one word could exhibit a variety of distinct forms of orthographic constructions, either by adding or deleting a letter for example or even by a total change in the word from in comparison with its standard. This opens the door for new levels of meaning that go in harmony with their contextual use. By varying the written shapes of a word in different contexts of Qu'ranic verses, new dimensions of meaning can be elicited. This study aims at setting apart the differences between the Uthmanic orthography and the conventional Arabic writing system in writing certain words, and as a result what differences in meaning that variation could create. Hence the study stresses the need to examine why a word is written in different variants in different Qu'ranic verses: one variant complies with the conventional orthography, such as writing the medial long vowel alif /a/ in the form of alif mamdūdah in words: ءالء /Salah/ - prayer, ءاكز /zakah/ - charity, ءايء /hayah/ - life, ءادء /ghadah - dawn, ءاجن /najah/ - survival, ابرء /ribah/ - monetary illegal interest, ءاكشء /mishkah/ - a round hole in the wall; whereas in other Qu'ranic verses, the same word is shaped in a different variant following the Uthmanic orthography where the medial long vowel alif /a/ is written in the form of the Arabic letter /wa/ but with identical pronunciation, becoming ءولص /salah/, ءوكز /zakah/, ءوادء /ghadah, ءوجن /najah/, اوبرء /ribah/, ءوكشء /mishkah/, and ءويء /hayah/.

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# The Irregularity of the Uthmanic Orthography of the Holy Quran in Contrast with the Standard Orthography: A Pragmatic Reading

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## ABSTRACT

*The Uthmanic orthography of the Holy Qu'ran is distinctively miraculous. In different contexts in Qu'ran, one word could exhibit a variety of distinct forms of orthographic constructions, either by adding or deleting a letter for example or even by a total change in the word from in comparison with its standard. This opens the door for new levels of meaning that go in harmony with their contextual use. By varying the written shapes of a word in different contexts of Qu'ranic verses, new dimensions of meaning can be elicited. This study aims at setting apart the differences between the Uthmanic orthography and the conventional Arabic writing system in writing certain words, and as a result what differences in meaning that variation could create. Hence the study stresses the need to examine why a word is written in different variants in different Qu'ranic verses: one variant complies with the conventional orthography, such as writing the medial long vowel alif /a/ in the form of alif mamdūdah in words: صلاة /Salah/ - prayer, زكاة /zakah/ - charity, حياة /hayah/ - life, غداة /ghadah - dawn, نجاة /najah/ - survival, ربا /ribah/ - monetary illegal interest, مشكاة /mishkah/ - a round hole in the wall; whereas in other Qu'ranic verses, the same word is shaped in a different variant following the Uthmanic orthography where the medial long vowel alif /a/ is written in the form of the Arabic letter /wa/ but with identical pronunciation, becoming صلوة /salah/, زكوة /zakah/, غداوة /ghadah, نجوة /najah/, ربا /ribah/,*

*مشكاة /mishkah/, and حياة /hayah/. This variation in shaping the vowel alif implies meaning that this paper seeks to unveil in the light of pragmatic analysis, calling at the same time for utilizing such variants in our everyday writings and speeches to convey more dimensions of meaning intended in a way not accessible with conventional Arabic orthography. Using Qu'ranic orthography is historically established and acknowledged by Prophet Mohammad, Islamic nation through all generations.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The orthography cited in the Holy Quran, in many of its occurrences, is distinguished by its dissimilarity with the Arabic conventional system of writing. Such phenomenon has received considerable attention to understand, providing different interpretations. This study endeavors to open new horizons and perspectives of interpretation which looks beyond the narrow scope of the traditional conventions of the writing system strictly stated in text books or educational ones. Such strict and narrow treatment with the Arabic writing system does not cover the required dimension related to the variety of uses in real occurrences of communication. This study sets off from the concept that the variation and inconsistency of orthography inevitably imply a hidden meaning and an intended goal at the linguistic and social levels. To closely examine this rationale, the current study takes, as example, Quranic words where the mamdudah long alif (a:)

is written in the form of wa /wa:/, with an attempt to finding out the underlying meaning of such variation.

Therefore, the study seeks to answer the following research question:

1. Why are the Quranic words، مشكوة، نجوة، صلوة، ربوا زكوة، غدوة، حيوة written in the wa (و) instead of their conventional form with alif (ا), such as الزكوة written الزكاة?

Some of Arabic modern scholars believe that the dissimilarity of the writing system followed in Quran came in consistency with the usage common in its time of descending. In this respect, Alhamad (1986) conducted a contrastive study between the writing system in Quran and that found on the Islamic and Pre – Islamic inscriptions. He concluded that the Uthmanic Quranic system of writing is not unusual or odd; rather it represents a recognized stage in the history of development in the Arabic writing system, following the prevailing conventions of its early time of existence. Alhamad added in another reference that the Uthmanic orthography remained, for a considerably long time, the system followed by Prophet Mohammad's followers and second followers even in their everyday practice. In line with the aforementioned, according to the writing system development known in the history of the Arabic language, the unconventional word forms cited in the Quran actually came in harmony with the usage of the time in its descending and decades before so that the Quranic verses could be read and understood by its people (Alhafni,1988). Thus, Quran copiers since then used their own common writing rules of their time. As a testimony of this rationale, Ibn Qutaiba explained the phenomenon of writing the long alif as wa in words such as صلوة، زكوة، حيوة as following the norm and usage of their time i.e. Arabs in the time of early Islam used to normally write with wa instead of alif, such as the Arabs of Quraysh, therefore those Arabs who were entrusted to copy the Holy Quran followed this way of writing of such words. While other Arab tribes such as Hatheel, and

Thaqif did not adopt the wa in writing such words (Aldani,1983). This is proved in the words of the Prophet's follower Othman bin Affan when he said that if the copier of the Quran was from Hatheel or Thaqif, he would write in a different way in spite of their remarkable competence in the Arabic language (Aldani,1983).

In a later stage, there appeared the need to unify the rules of the writing system, seeking to maintain the consistency between writing and pronunciation of words to be easier to learn and apply (Alsamarqandi, 1986). Hence, Arabic language scholars established a set of rules based on the syntactic and morphological parameters (Alhamad, 2001). Such movement commenced in the time of bloom for books production written in Arabic in cities as Basra and Kufa (Alsa'e'd,1967). Since then, the conventions of the writing system in Arabic have been standardized and unified, drifting away from the old and archaic word forms. However, the Quran copiers have not adopted this trend; rather they maintained the old Uthmanic system of writing as exactly was written in the time of Othman bin Affan, the Prophet follower.

Such inconsistency of word forms in Quran (of Uthmanic writing) in comparison with the conventional known system of writing nowadays has created a debate of various views among Arab scholars for the sake of comprehensible interpretation. Some said that it was based on instructions from Prophet Mohammad for divine reasons (Alkurdi,1365 H; Almubarak,1306 H; Alzarqani,1943); while others defied the fact that Prophet Mohammad dictated how to copy the Quran since there is no Hadith to testify the existence of such instructions, adding that it was the choice of his followers to adopt the Uthmanic system in copying. Other modern scholars go far to claim that such dissimilarity and unconventional writing was a mistake made by old followers or the copiers of Quran (Ibn Qutaiba,1954, Ibn Qutaiba,1326 H; Ibn Khaldun,1956; Alfera',1955; Aldani,1983). Whereas some other scholars believe that it is possible to have words with different forms that

are considered correct with regard to the variant readings of the Qura'n (Qira'at). (Alzarqani,1943; Alsayoti,1967; Alqastalani,1972). Others see that such forms are originated from one of the languages of old Arabs (Ibn Jini,1952, Ibn Jini,1954; Saybawi,1317 H.). In the same vein, some scholars refer the unconventional word forms to their origin of usage in old times as identical to what they used to be in both letter and sound (Alanbari,1971; Aldani,1983; Hammodah, 1948; Alhamad,2001). Aldani,(1960) stated in this regard that old Arabs of the Prophets' followers through generations were known by their language competence and eloquence; hence, their choices of written words in Quran must have been built within the limits of accuracy and correctness. In other interpretations, Arab scholars attribute this unconventional written word forms in Quran to a kind of shifting from common forms to other uncommon though correct ones (Aldani,1960). Among Arab scholars are those who consider such a phenomenon as being purposeful and intended for reasons only known by its producers (Alkurdi,1365 H.). Alkurdi (1365 H. ) added that the Prophet Mohammad's followers, all passed away, were the ones who copied the Quran, hence the interpretations nowadays are mere speculations and assumptions. He added that the writing system adopted by the followers was intended for a specific purpose, not accessible to people in the present time.

In the current study, it is entirely excluded that this dissimilarity in word forms between the Uthmanic orthography and the present Arabic writing system refers to a mere mistake. Rather, the Uthmanic choice of word forms or shapes in Quran is not random, but it contributes to the meaning considerably whatever was the reason or interpretation behind using it. Moreover, choices made exhibit the great competence and delicacy of language that our followers and copiers of Quran used to enjoy. Such deep understanding of language meaning made them write the words in the way it meant more than the way it should be written with. In this regard, Aldani (1983) stated that if the Arabs of the tribes Thaqif and Hatheel

were entrusted to copy the Quran and not the Arabs of Quraish, they would have followed the spelling of words as commonly used without giving the required attention to meaning. Alkurdi (1365 H.) also argued that the Prophet's followers who copied the Quran at that time were fully aware of the Arabic orthography and different varieties of word forms. He added that their decisions how to write imply specific effect (Alkurdi,1365 H.) and intended meaning (Aldani,1983).

Therefore, the authority Arab scholars in consensus have recommended that the Uthmanic orthography must be maintained in copying the Quran (Aldani,1983; Alsayoti,1967; Alkurdi,1365 H.); moreover, this system should be learned (Almarghini,1995). For example, the authority Ibn Hanbal stressed on the obligation to copy Quran by using the Uthmanic writing and considered any change of this practice as forbidden in Islam (Alzarkashi,1957; Alsayoti,1967).

In the current study, the researcher believes that the Arabic language like any other languages witnesses a historical development in its orthography and writing system. What was common in a stage is not necessarily common in another. In the course of development, changes and alternations are very possible. Such changes could be equated with the current social and contextual conditions of each stage (Alhafni,1988; Alhamad,2001). In the early era of Islam, Quran addressed people of various social environments and backgrounds with their own language and writing system – as an attempt to establish a context of effective communication and open channels of understanding. The unconventional Uthmanic orthography, hence, made possible the achievement of more comprehensive meanings in the context of past times. In addition, the system we know today is a different stage of writing that aims to provide easier manners of orthography and spelling than those of old times. However, abandoning the old Uthmanic system, we could argue, has led to unrecoverable loss of meaning pertaining to the word forms or shapes.

In line with the aforementioned, the study takes the use of the wa /wa:/ instead of the mamdoudah long alif /a:/ in the words صلاة، زكاة، غداوة، حياة، نجوة، مشكوة، ربوا to be intended for another level of pragmatic meaning. In this perspective, this distinguished form of writing will merit those words with other shades of meaning, in addition to more value and recognition so as to be more clearly notable from other surrounding words (Aldayeh,2010). For instance, Al Marakishi (721 H.) gives explanation to the use of the wa in words cited in Quran as in } (Ala'araf surah) to add more distinction to the word to be noticed by readers, driving them to think deeper of the threat embedded in the verse line (Al Marakishi,1957).

The researcher believes that the word صلاة (prayer), which is normally written as صلاة, is used in both forms in Quran for a pragmatic meaning that serves the context in which it was used. When Quran refers to the prayer in general, the word was written normally with alif صلاة and that is cited in (9) Quranic verses (Shamlul, 2000). While the word prayer was written with the wa (صلاة) in (67) Quranic verses in contexts that exhibit its distinguished value and pillar significance in Islam, in the relation between humans with Allah their Creator and this dimension of meaning is particularly activated in the words of the Prophets when in dialogue of persuasion aims either with believers or with the disbelievers (Aldayeh, 2010).

The word زكاة (Islamic Charity), normally written with long alif زكاة, is cited with wa in all instances of 32 verses in order to give this pillar of Islam its obligation and sense of unavoidable commitment to spend for the sake of Islam and Allah (Shamlul,2000; Aldayeh,2010). Such Islamic duty requires deep faith and effort, therefore, it is difficult to perform if not a true believer of all times. This is why the wa was chosen to be written with in all its occurrences, since the writing of the wa requires also more effort to draw than the long alif. In general, the two pillars of Islam the regular daily five prayers Al Salah and the spending of Islamic Charity Al Zakah are actions that call for determination, and strength spiritually and

physically, thus, their shape with the letter wa will be more expressive to convey such sense than with the long alif.

The word غداوة (the dawn), normally غداة with alif, is cited in Quran two times with the wa (Alan'am surah, and Alkahf surah) with the purpose of showing the significance of prayers or Al Salah at this specific time (Shamlul,2000). Getting up from deep sleep at dawn to wash and pray this faridah (duty) is performed with spiritual strength and physical effort endowed only in true believers. Therefore, copiers chose the wa to add this shade of meaning, where both require more zeal and effort.

Interestingly, the word حياة (life) was written with the wa instead of alif in 71 instances in Quran when equated with the Muslims and true believers, implying a difficult life of jihad, challenges and determination on the righteous track (Shamlul,2000), as the curved/crooked shape wa is more expressive of such difficulty than the long straight alif. Whereas the same word life was written in the conventional way with alif حياة in 5 occurrences in the contexts equated with the life of non muslims.

The word نجوة (survival) was written with wa instead of the conventional alif in one place in Quran (Ghafir surah) to draw attention to the context of a dialogue between one of the believers of the Prophet Moses to his tribe or people under the rein of Egyptian Pharos, inviting them to join the believers as the only way of real survival (Shamlul,2000). This wa form of نجوة was intentionally and carefully chosen to emphasize the difficulty of survival of those believers from the tyranny of the Pharos.

Another example is the word الربوا (monetary illegal interest), which is normally written as الربا, is cited in 7 verses in the Holy Quran. It came in the wa to draw people's attention to the threat of such forbidden practice in their financial matters. In contrast, the same word was used in its conventional form with the long alif in one verse only as referring to its basic concept, being

compared with Zakah (Alrum surah). Moreover, the end alif was added to both forms in all instances, of الربوا and يربوا while the normal spelling is without that end alif, i.e. الربو and يربو. By this, another level of pragmatic meaning is being implied to emphasize the danger of such sin as if this end long alif borders the wa to give time to readers to contemplate on the round and curved shape of the wa, being crooked as the deed itself.

The word مشكوة, originally written as مشكاة, was cited only one time in Quran and was written with the wa (Alnour surah). This selected shape of wa is probably used in order to evoke in the mind of readers the shape of this word, similar to the shape of wa, as it means a round hole in the wall in which the light was used to be placed.

In conclusion, the study seeks to argue that the shapes in which the unconventional Uthmanic writing system exhibited in many word forms in Quran are not randomly selected and are capable of evoking other levels of meaning in the minds of readers. And those meanings could vary as the perception of people of them could vary, i.e. this current study does not say that there is only one meaning to be equated with a specific shape, and interpretations of the meaning of those shapes are open to the imagination and understanding of readers in accordance with their experiences as well as their contextual environments. Hence, in such processing of meaning, the attempts made by readers to perceive and comprehend meaning could be acceptable for some and unacceptable by others (Alfarmawi,1977).

It is possible to say that some interpretations of meaning could be incomprehensible in the current time, lost in the course of history due to the absence of concern to teach the rules and orthography of Quran (Alhusaini, 1432 H.; Almarghini,1995; Alfarmawi,1977).

Therefore, the study calls for reviving this important science of Uthmanic Orthography, including it in the curricula of schools and universities. In addition, this study invites our

Arabic language scholars to take into their careful understanding and application the levels of meaning that the Uthmanic Quranic orthography render. Moreover, the study recommends that this science is worpractices of language use instead of abandoning it in the modern time, being ranked as odd and archaic. This Uthmanic system of writing will maintain to be part of the Arabic writing system in all its stages of development, enriching our Arabic language with more varieties and dimensions of meaning.

As well, one of the major tendencies that this study argues to pursue is to consider and include as an integral part of meaning the forms or shapes of words particularly those that deviate from the standard orthography. Hence, it is of paramount importance to create and establish a translation theory pertinent to the Uthmanic orthography of the Quran. Such theory could provide effective framework and strategies to reach a more comprehensive realization of meaning in the Holy Quran.

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