Al-Azhār

Title	Saussure's Concept of Binary Oppositions: Looking through the Lens of the Holy Qur'an	
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Received on:	26 June, 2021	
Accepted on:	27 May, 2022	
Published on:	25 June, 2022	
Citation:	Nasim Gul, Athar Farooq and Dr.Akbar Ali "Construction: Saussure's Concept of Binary Oppositions: Looking through the Lens of the Holy Qur'an," Al-Azhār: 8 no, 1 (2022): 111-119	
Publisher:	The University of Agriculture Peshawar	Click here for more

Saussure's Concept of Binary Oppositions: Looking through the Lens of the Holy Qur'an

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Abstract

Our world is the combination of opposite things. Black opposes white, water opposes fire, right opposes wrong. According to Ferdinand De Saussure language is also considered a system of Binary oppositions. Therefore, the main aim of this article is to exhibit Saussure's theory of binary oppositions through the Holy text of Qur'an. This has been demonstrated through 15 verses of Surah As-Shams. Terms are placed opposite to each other in this surah for comprehension. Three kinds of binary oppositions are identified and explained through the selected verses. The first is binary pair i.e. two opposites in one like God. Second, opposites in two different beings like the Sun and the Moon. The third one includes two absolute oppositions i.e. the existence of one means the non-existence of the other. For instance, Sin and Righteousness, Day and Night etc. The first two types of binary oppositions contribute to the first type of opposition because these are the instances of God creatures. The study further demonstrates that binary opposition also brings aesthetic or stylistic effects in the Holy text of the Holy Quran and other texts as well.

Keywords: Binary oppositions, the Holy Qur'an, the Holy Surah As-Shams, Ferdinand de Saussure, Structuralism.

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Introduction

According to the Holy Quran, this world is the combination of opposite things or even full of opposites. In language study, this opposition is called the System of Binary Oppositions (SBOs). These oppositions has organized and made human society ideal. The system of binary opposition generally consists of two absolute oppositions; that is to express the presence of one thing means the absence of the other. It implies that one thing gives meanings or values to other thing. It implies that the System of Binary Opposition is also associated with Associative Chain Theory which demonstrates a sentence comprises of a chain of associations between individual words in a sentence. In other words, each and every word in a sentence serves as a stimulus for the next word, and thus the entire sentence is produced left to right, it is always true at least for European language (Carroll D.W, 1986).

As we know right doings with the help of wrong. Likewise, black with white, man with woman, day with night, lightness with darkness, tall with short and so on. This opposition is the beauty of the world because owing to this we are able to understand and distinguish things. Otherwise, there would be chaos and off course in the entities in the world. The verse in the Holy Quran reads, "O mankind, we [God] have created you[human] from a male and female, and made you into races [nations] and tribes, so that you may identify[know] one another"(49:13). Man and woman two different beings, opposite of one another and of different colours, mainly black and white. Similarly, the Quran quotes, the example of two opposite parties "The example of two groups [believers and non-believers] is that of blind and a deaf person, on the one hand, and a seeing and hearing on the other. Are the two equal when compared? Would you still pay no heed?"(11:24). It is the description of a believer and a nonbeliever person. The believers are compared with the people who can see and hear, while the nonbelievers are with the blind and deaf. This exhibits a comparison of different pairs of binary oppositions. In such oppositions there are specific values for each of the terms. These values help in defining each term involved in the linguistic structure of binary oppositions. It may also help in understanding the system of a language and its capacity to construct meanings through understanding not the similarities but the oppositions.

Aims and objective of the Study

i. To investigate the concept of binary opposition in Surah As-Shams of the Holy Quran.

ii. To explore the effects of binary opposition in comprehension of the Quranic text and general text.

Review of Literature

Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, the founder of Modern linguistic and Structuralism developed the concept of language as the system of binary

oppositions. This binary opposition is one of his many thoughts (Putri. A & Sarwoto P. 2016). For Saussure language is a set of signs. Each sign contains signifier and signified. Signifier is the form of a linguistic sign, sound pattern or its printed form rather than the meaning it expresses and signified is the meaning, concept, idea, thought expressed by the linguistic sign. These signs help us comprehending ideas in the text as cited in (Ali et al, 2022) while defining comprehension.

Thus, a signifier represents the form and signified the meaning. Without one, the other is impossible. In the same way, in order to understand 'good' we need to understand 'bad'. The same goes further, for 'beautiful' there is 'ugly' and for 'noisy' there is 'silent'. This notion is also given by the Structuralists and Post-Structuralists critics. It was their belief that "things cannot be understood in isolation- they have to be seen in the context of the larger structures they are part of" (Barry, 2002: 39). The binary oppositions enable us to explain and comprehend chaotic and abstract concepts more easily and in a better way by putting them in juxtaposition. Some examples of such juxtapositions from Surah Ash-Shams are demonstrated in the following table:

1	Sun	Vs	Moon
2	Day	Vs	Night
3	Sky	Vs	Earth
4	Soul	Vs	Body
5	Evil	Vs	Piety
6	Success	Vs	Failure
7	Purification	Vs	Pollution

Table 1: Examples of Binary oppositions from Surah Ash-Shams

It means that by thinking about the sun and the day, in fact, we imagine light, brightness, righteousness, purity and goodness, in contrast with the moon and night, which could bring darkness, evils and wrongdoings to our minds. Similarly, good deeds lead to purification (to the sky, to Heaven) from the earth. Without soul, body cannot exist. Success is the opposite of failure.

 Based on this discussion, sin can be known with comparison to righteousness, truth with reference to lies, death with relation to life, strong in terms of weak etc. Putri and Sarwoto assert that: it can be concluded that binary opposition is one of many systems that governs human's mind to comprehend and derive meaning of concept and idea (Putri and Sarwoto, 2016).

In this regard Saussure presented a theory on Structuralism in which he explains

[Binary opposition is] the means by which the units of language have values or meanings; each unit is defined in reciprocal determination with another term, as in binary code. It is not a contradictory relation but a structural, complementary one.

For Saussure language is not a nomenclature. It does not refer to a list of things. The relation between signifier and signified is entirely arbitrary. He further argues that a sign (word or symbol) has not only got a meaning but also above all a value. The latter being quite different from the form. It is on the basis of one word's value i.e. the Sun in the mentioned in the first verse of Surah (Ash-Shams) gives value to the word 'moon' in the second verse, day gives value to night, in the third verse, sky gives value to earth mentioned in the fourth verse and so on.

According to Saussure, language is an entirely "self-enclosed" or "self-supporting" system. In this system the elements i.e. signs do not refer to things beyond the system but to other signs within the system. That is why language is sometimes defined as the system of the systems (Feiler, P. H. et al, 2006).   It is an entirely autonomous system. While giving such definitions of language; he mostly refers to English language. To some extent this notion may also be true in case of the Holy Quran language. For instance, in Quran one instruction (Idea) is once mentioned very briefly but latter on the same is explained in details in other terms. Furthermore, sometimes we need to take help from the sayings of the Holy prophet (PBUH).

Ahmadi et al. (2013) conducted a research study on the topic "Binary Opposition in the Structure of Masnavi Stories" yielded important results. They identified binary oppositions in Masnavi text (stories) written in Persian language. They first analyzed the lexical meanings of binary opposition in the text. Then they added that structuralism and post-structuralism are the novel scientific methods for studying binary opposition in Persian language. An analysis of the structural relationships among the components of a text can ultimately lead to the comprehension the text.   According to this theory, each structure has some defined characteristics like change in one part of the structure may result in change in the other parts. Based on the above points, it may be argued that change in many components could change the whole structure.

In binary opposition system, the essence (in terms of understanding) of everything relate to the opposing concepts. As Caddon (1999) cited in Ahmadi et al. (2013) states that, "knowledge about things depends on our knowledge about what is in opposition with them". The same structure could be witnessed in the Holy Quran. We know things with reference to their relation with other things in accordance with our understanding. For

Ahmadi et al. (2013), "The universe is binary because every fact is material and mental". In fact the same is the essence of the Surah Ash-Shams.

Ahmadi et al. (2013) quoted from Ghazali's Meshkatol Anar that "if darkness and evil have not appeared, we would not have been aware of light. The realization of deficiency is the first step toward perfection". It means that feeling of illness or disease (patient) leads to doctor's treatment. With the closer investigation of the Surah (Ash-Shams), we can realize that binary oppositions are used to express the intended message, i.e. this world (life) is not forever and another world (afterlife) may help us in understanding the true value of this world.

The above mentioned study summarized the views of Rumi, while applying the theory of binary oppositions. They quoted examples of opposition from the text such as soul and self (body), existence and non-existence, good and evil, figure and sense, Adam and Satan, man and woman, love and wisdom, positive and negative, vice and virtue, true followers and sinful people. They further added that the oppositions between man and woman and Adam and Satan, love and wisdom are the major concepts in the binary opposition system. This article also discusses this concept through the lens of Quran.

Addition to this, another study was conducted on "Binary opposition and Binary pairs, from Derrida to Islamic Philosophy" by Shafieyan Mahdi. He added the concept Derrida who rejected the idea of binary opposition, though who himself inspired by the theory given Saussure. For Derrida there is no true opposition between the two binary pairs. He has given the notion of difference, refers to differences. The author mentioned example of the two parties (blind and deaf and seeing and hearing) from the Holy Quran while explaining binary opposition. He added that the verse emphasizes on the two groups that are considered opposite and this opposition is based on the comparison between the two. It implies that binary opposition can be made when we give rank to one word as against to another.

Doughty and Manji (2005) believe that the world is full of oppositions. She mentions that there is opposition in things such as 'big' and 'small', 'strong' and 'weak; and 'young' and 'old'. She thinks that the concept of binary oppositions is the most interesting one because it organizes human culture. It is the tendency of how people assign values to pairs of things that is why hierarchy in societies is created. These oppositions are different from the normal oppositions because they assume deeper meanings. Further, she added that binary oppositions have affected our society today i.e. male vs. female. On the basis of this opposition associations are made such associations are that female are fragile, emotional, beautiful and protector of children on the other hand male is considered powerful, strong, and dominant. Males are considered rational and females are considered emotional that is why the former are placed higher in hierarchy of societies.

In fact, society is the name of these hierarchies. Thus, generally, binary opposition lies almost in everything in the world i.e. in society, culture, relation, religion, colours and in human nature. Saussure gave this notion with reference to language. For him binary opposition is the source by which components of language have values (each component is defined with contrast to what it is not). These values lead to meaning.

Methodology

The main focus of this article is on the structural analysis of the selected verses of the Holy Quran, in order to recognize binary oppositions in the language. For this purpose the Saussure's theory of structuralism is applied to the text.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Based on the literature and Ferdinand de Saussure theory of structuralism it can be predicted that binary opposition is found in Surah Ash-Shams. All terms are placed in contrast to each other for the sake of comprehending the intended meanings of the text. God swears by the sun and moon which shows the importance and greatness of them in the universe. The sun (the great star that shines in the sky during day and gives the earth heat and light) is placed against to the moon (the object that moves around the earth once every 271/2days and shines at night by light reflected the sum). Sun is followed by the moon in his light. According to the Arabic grammar sun is masculine and moon is feminine i.e. pronoun he is used for sun and she is used for the moon. At day time we see things with the light comes from the sun at night with its vice versa. Day is mentioned with reference to night that is why the system of binary opposition is reflected. The earth is spread as vast as we can see and the sky is built over it. Body has a deep relation with its soul because without one the other is nothing. Similarly, evil and piety are two distinct concepts and are always kept in sharp contrast. With Piety human can achieve success and purification of soul. Evil is darkness and it leads to failure and pollution of the soul. Transgressions are the rejections of God's obeying and committing sins. Torment is prepared by the God upon the violation of His of instructions and He is not afraid of its consequences as against humans.

Text and Translation of Surah Ash-Shams (24. 15 verses).

بِسْمِ اللهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِيْمِ

With the name of Allah, the All-Merciful, the very Merciful.

1-	I swear by the Sun and his broad light,	وَالشَّمْسِ وَضُحٰهَا
2-	and by the Moon when follows him	وَالْقَمَرِ اِذَا تَلٰهَا
3-	and by the Day when it shows his brightness,	وَالنَّهَارِ اِذَا جَلّٰهَا

4-	and by the Night when it envelops him,	وَاللَّيْلِ اِذَا يَغْشٰهَا
5-	and by the Sky, and the One who built it	وَالسَّمَآءِ وَمَا بَنٰهَا
6-	and by the Earth, and the One who spread it,	وَالْاَرْضِ وَمَا طَحٰهَا
7-	and by the Soul, and the One who made it (Body)well,	وَنَفْسٍ وَّمَا سَوّٰهَا
8-	then inspired it with its (instincts of) Evil and Piety	فَاَلْهَمَهَا فُجُوْرَهَا وَتَقْوٰىهَا
9-	Success is really attained by him who Purifies it,	قَدْ اَفْلَحَ مَنْ زَكّٰهَا
10-	and failure is really suffered by him who Pollutes it	وَقَدْ خَابَ مَنْ دَسّٰهَا
11-	(The people) denied the truth because of their transgression	كَذَّبَتْ ثَمُوْدُ بِطَغْوٰىهَآ
12-	When rose of the one who was the most wretched of them	اِذِ انْبَعَثَ اَشْقٰهَا
13-	So, the messenger of ALLAH said to them "Be careful of the she came and her to drink."	فَقَالَ لَهُمْ رَسُوْلُ اللهِ نَاقَةَ اللهِ وَسُقْيٰهَا
14-	But they rejected him and killed her, so, their Lord sent eradicating torment upon them because of their Sin, and made equal for all.	فَكَذَّبُوْهُ فَعَقَرُوْهَا فَدَمْدَمَ عَلَيْهِمْ رَبُّهُمْ بِذَنْبِهِمْ فَسَوّٰهَا
15-	And He has no fear of its consequences	وَلَا يَخَافُ عُقْبٰهَا

In the aforementioned Surah of the Holy Quran, the highlighted words/terms are going in contrast to one another or each other which leads to the concept of Binary oppositions. These opposite concepts or opposition help the readers in understanding meaning of the verse and the whole Surah. Three kinds of binary oppositions are identified and explained through the selected verses. The first is binary pair i.e. two opposites in one like God. Second, opposites in two different beings like the Sun and the Moon. The third one includes two absolute oppositions i.e. the existence of one means the non-existence of the other. For instance, Sin and Righteousness, Day and Night etc. The first two types of binary oppositions contribute to the first type of opposition because these are the instances of God creatures. Furthermore, the sun is placed opposite to the Moon. Both the sun and the moon are visible and untouchable. They are the unique entities in the world. Their uniqueness is considered universally. The sun is the star that shines in the sky during the day and gives the earth heat and light. On the other hand, the Moon refers to the round object that moves around the earth once every

27 1/5 days and shines at night by light reflected from the sun. It implies that when the sun disappears the moon appears.

Second example of binary opposition is the sky and the earth. The sky is the space above the earth. It is seen from the earth and stars on the sky. On the other hand, the earth refers to the land, the hard surface of the world that is not the sky and the sea. Interestingly. We can touch the earth and not the sky. Though both are visible.

Third example of binary opposition the Day and Night, sin and righteousness, purity and pollution etc., which leads to the third type of binary opposition i.e. the existence of one causes the non-existence of another. For example, the existence of the day is always the cause for the non-existence for the night.

Conclusion

Our world is the combination of opposite things. Black opposes white, water opposes fire, right opposes wrong. According to Ferdinand De. Saussure language is also considered a system of Binary oppositions. The same concept is reflected in the Holy Surah Ash-Shams of the Holy Quran. This has been demonstrated through 15 verses of Surah As-Shams. For instance the Sun and the Moon, Day and Night, the Sky and the earth, soul and body, evil and piety, purity and pollution, are the opposite concepts which elucidate and contribute to the hidden meanings of the same Surah. Furthermore, there are three kinds of binary oppositions identified and explained through the selected verses. The first is binary pair i.e. two opposites in one like God. Second, opposites in two different beings like the Sun and the Moon. The third one includes two absolute oppositions i.e. the existence of one means the non-existence of the other. For instance, Sin and Righteousness, Day and Night etc. The first two types of binary oppositions contribute to the first type of opposition because these are the instances of God creatures. One of the functions of Binary oppositions could be aesthetic effects.

Recommendations

The following points are recommended for the future research.

i. Research could conducted on the other Surah of the Holy Quran in order to investigate the concept of binary opposition in more detail.

ii. Research studies in future could be conducted on the relationship between binary opposition and stylistic/aesthetic effects.

iii. The research and scholar could also unfold the effect of binary oppositions on the process of comprehension of the Holy Quran text.

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