Journal of Interdisciplinary Qur'anic Studies

Shahid Beheshti University

Journal of Interdisciplinary Qur'anic Studies Vol.3, Issue 1, June 2024

An Analytical Study of Human Relationships in the Qur'an through the Lens of Conceptual Metaphor

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Article History: Received 11 March 2024; Accepted 8 May 2024

ABSTRACT:

Original Paper

Conceptual Metaphor Theory, a modern approach within cognitive linguistics introduced by Lakoff and Johnson in Metaphors We Live By (1980), posits that concepts are constituted not solely by inherent attributes but primarily by interactional characteristics. From this perspective, entities in the world do not possess fixed, intrinsic properties; rather, their meaning emerges only in relation to human action. Consequently, metaphors can assume the status of truth. Within the Qur'an, numerous injunctions and relational concepts can be interpreted through this theoretical framework as being grounded in interactional characteristics rather than in purely essentialist definitions. Adopting a descriptive–analytical method, this study examines several Qur'anic relationships, demonstrating how their meanings can be more adequately apprehended through the lens of Conceptual Metaphor Theory. The findings suggest that even human relationships in the Qur'an are not conceived as immutable or purely intrinsic. Instead, the Qur'an redefines relational concepts—such as mother, spouse, brother, and child—according to their roles, functions, and interactional qualities. Thus, notions such as the motherhood of the Prophet's wives for the Muslim community and the brotherhood of believers represent, in Qur'anic discourse, new conceptual realities that transcend mere metaphorical usage.

KEYWORDS: The Qur'an, Conceptual metaphor, Interactional nature of concepts, Lakoff and Johnson.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.37264/JIQS.V3I1.11

1. Introduction

The Holy Qur'an contains concepts that establish certain injunctions for Muslims: it names the Prophet's wives as "mothers of the believers" (Q. 33:6), refers to believers as brothers to one another (Q. 49:10), and rejects certain kinship relations. For instance, regarding Noah's son, it states that he is not of his family (Q. 11:46), and it identifies some wives and children as enemies (Q. 64:14). It also describes spouses as garments for each other (Q. 2:187). For example, in the verse:

> *Said He," O Noah! Indeed He is not of your family. Indeed he is [personification of] unrighteous conduct. So do not ask Me [something] of which you have no knowledge. I advise you lest you should be among the ignorant" (Q. 11:46).*

God tells Prophet Noah about his son, saying that he is not truly part of his family because he is a disbeliever (al-Ālūsī 1994, 12: 69). Does this imply that Prophet Noah did not recognize his own son? However, it can be argued that these verses possess hidden layers, which can be uncovered through Conceptual Metaphor Theory and the concept of interactional definitions of concepts, thereby reaching the core meanings of the verses.

This article, employing a descriptive-analytical method, examines some of these Qur'anic concepts and relationships based on conceptual metaphor and the interactional nature of concepts. The aim is to clarify the rationale behind these injunctions and to render the understanding of these concepts more tangible. Accordingly, this research does not address the various types of conceptual metaphors; rather, it focuses on defining specific human relational concepts in the Qur'an from the perspective that concepts are defined not solely by inherent features but primarily by interactional characteristics, in accordance with the principles of Conceptual Metaphor Theory. The significance of the issue lies in the pivotal role that Conceptual Metaphor Theory plays in interpreting Qur'anic verses. Although extensive research has been conducted, particularly in the field of Qur'anic studies, there remains scope for complementary investigations in this area. The present research aims to deepen the understanding of these concepts with particular regard to their interactional features. Consequently, it seeks to answer the following questions: 1) On what basis have certain injunctions arising from relational concepts—such as the Prophet's wives being considered mothers or believers being brothers to one another—been legislated in the Qur'an? 2) Are these injunctions merely metaphorical, or do they represent truths?

2. Literature Review

Numerous studies have been conducted on conceptual metaphor in the Holy Qur'an, facilitating a deeper understanding of its verses. Talebi Anvari and Mirdehghan (2022) analyzed conceptual metaphors in the final ten sections of the Qur'an. They identified the frequency of metaphors based on source and target domains and concluded that Qur'anic metaphors contribute to the formation of cultural and cognitive patterns. Saheb Obaid (2019) investigated the role of conceptual metaphor in understanding the Holy Qur'an. He argues that an overreliance on numerous interpretations can create difficulties, while the use of conceptual metaphor theory enables a clearer understanding of God's intended meanings. According to this view, divine attributes such as power, life, and knowledge are abstract and beyond full human comprehension, so God expresses these concepts in terms accessible to human understanding.

Abdelhameed (2019) investigated linguistic and conceptual metaphors in selected verses of the Qur'an, focusing on the metaphor "PRAYER IS A BUILDING." Using the conceptual metaphor framework of Lakoff and Johnson, along with the Pragglejaz model for metaphor identification, he examined how this metaphor contributes to the experience of inner peace for Muslims. The study highlighted three types of metaphors: structural, ontological, and orientational. Salhb al-Quraishi (2023) examined the role of metaphor in the Qur'an from a dynamic cognitive perspective. This study highlighted the distinction between the concepts of thought, experience, and reality as understood in cognitive linguistics. Unlike psycholinguistics, which focuses on the cognitive processes involved in language learning and understanding using empirical data, cognitive linguistics emphasizes the relationship between thought and experience. The study also raised important questions about the connection between the mind and reality.

Given that conceptual metaphor plays a significant role in understanding the verses of the Qur'an, the present research aims to complement previous studies. The distinct contribution of this study lies in its focus on conceptual metaphors relating to human concepts and relationships in the Qur'an, particularly those defined by interactional characteristics, in order to elucidate their meanings more clearly. For instance, God states that believers are brothers to one another, and the Prophet's wives are the mothers of the believers. This study seeks to explain the basis upon which God has mandated these rulings and relationships—specifically, whether these designations are merely metaphorical or whether they express a form of truth.

3. Theoretical Framework

Conceptual metaphor is an active process within the human cognitive system, with linguistic metaphors functioning merely as symbols or vehicles of this process (Lakoff & Johnson 2008). In other words, language is not an isolated domain of the mind or brain; rather, imagination—as one of the cognitive faculties—involves mapping some concepts onto others (Barcelona 2003). Over the past thirty years, experimental studies in cognitive science have emphasized that metaphor extends beyond mere language, figurative speech, rhetoric, and eloquence (Nemati et al. 2021). Indeed, one of the key aims of conceptual metaphor is to provide illumination (Hasanzade Neery & Hamidfar 2020). These metaphors are so naturally and spontaneously integrated into our lives that they often pass unnoticed in daily practice (Qasemzadeh 2012).

To better understand the nature of metaphor, it can be said that in conceptual metaphor we understand one domain of experience in terms of another. The source domain—used to understand the target domain—is typically more physical, more directly experienced, and better known. The target domain is usually more abstract, less directly experienced, and less well known (Kovecses 2015). In conceptual metaphor, elements from the source domain are systematically mapped onto elements of the target domain (Hooshangi & Seyfiporgoo 2009). Each mapping is a systematic set of ontological correspondences between entities in the source domain and entities in the target domain (Lakoff & Johnson 2008). The notion of "mapping," which originates from mathematics, is the most fundamental aspect of conceptual metaphor (Afrashi & Afkhami 2017). A mapping constitutes a systematic network of correspondences between the elements of the source and target domains (Barati 2018).

It should be noted that patterning in conceptual metaphor is relative: if the patterning and structuring were complete, the two concepts would merge into one (Pourebrahim 2009). Even naming itself can be considered a form of metaphor. However, the prevailing formal view in the literature is that objects and meanings have a true and original designation, which is sometimes extended to other things on an occasional basis (Davari Ardakani et al. 2012). In this sense, even the names we assign to people are metaphorical rather than absolute realities. Therefore, metaphors are primarily related to modes of thinking and only secondarily and incidentally manifest in language and linguistic expressions (Geeraerts 2010).

Consequently, concepts are defined not just by their inherent characteristics, but primarily by their interactional characteristics. Lakoff

and Johnson (2008), in their discussion of interactional concepts, explain that most of our concepts are understood on the basis of interaction—namely their roles, functions, and purposes. That is, the concepts we consider "real" possess inherent characteristics only to a certain extent, and are defined to some extent by interactional characteristics. For example, (LOVE) is defined only to some extent by inherent characteristics such as infatuation, passion, affection, sexual desire, and the like; that is, love is understood through what we call interactional characteristics.

To clarify, consider the concept of a gun. You might think that this concept is fully described by its inherent physical characteristics, such as its shape, its weight, how to connect its elements, and so on. But when this concept is used with different descriptors, it goes beyond these characteristics. For example, consider the difference between the descriptors BLACK and TOY when they are used with GUN. We normally assume that a "real" gun (a gun that shoots) is a gun, whereas a toy gun is not. However, this assumption is incorrect. Why do we think a toy gun is not a gun? This is because a toy gun does not perform the actual function of shooting. If we insist that a toy gun is not a gun, we face unanswerable questions: If it is not a gun, then what is it? A bowl of soup? A giraffe? We must understand how TOY preserves the concept of GUN; a TOY gun must be able to preserve what we call the motion characteristics of a real gun. Furthermore, having a TOY gun implies fulfilling some of the purposes of a real gun (e.g., to threaten, to be used in play, and so on). What makes a gun a TOY gun is that it cannot function like a real gun. If it could shoot, it would not be a toy; it would be real. Ultimately, it cannot be made for the purpose of functioning like a real gun. Therefore, the descriptor TOY preserves some types of gun characteristics and discards others: thus, a gun is not a well-defined concept specific to a particular object, but rather is defined to some extent by interactional characteristics related to perception, motion, purpose, function, and so on (Lakoff & Johnson 2008). Conversely, a real gun has an intrinsic characteristic (its ability to function) and several interactional characteristics that we also utilize with a toy gun: we treat it like a real gun, we threaten with it, and we use it in play. In reality, the category of "gun"—and, by extension, all our concepts—depends on our purpose in using that category. Therefore, a toy gun should also be considered a gun and a new reality.

4. Analyzing Human Relationships in the Qur'an

It is noteworthy that in the Qur'an, God establishes new concepts of human relationships based on interactional characteristics. In the Qur'an, the concept of *mother* is not limited exclusively to the biological mother who

gives birth. There exists another form of *motherhood*, defined not only by conceptual similarity but also by interactional roles and functions. This means that even human relationships in the Qur'an are conceptualized through metaphor and grounded in interaction: God defines these relationships in terms of their roles, functions, and purposes, and establishes them as binding injunctions. By understanding concepts as interactional, we can better grasp the meaning of these injunctions. Concepts such as mother, brother, child, spouse, and garment in the Qur'an are not confined to particular individuals or objects; rather, they are concepts defined through interactional characteristics. As mentioned in the theoretical framework, the concepts by which we live are rooted in our experiences and recognized according to their roles, purposes, functions, and components. Accordingly, the type of conceptual system we possess results from our interaction with cultural and physical environments. Metaphors such as HAPPINESS IS UP, ARGUMENT IS WAR, and EVENTS ARE OBJECTS exemplify such interactional conceptualization (Lakoff & Johnson 2008).

4.1. The Prophet's Wives Are Mothers of the Believers

In the verse Q. 33:6 a significant ruling is issued for Muslims:

النَّبِي أَوْلَى بِالْمُؤْمِنِينَ مِنْ أَنْفُسِهِمْ وَ أَزْوَاجُهُ أُمَّهَاتُهُمْ (الاحزاب/6)

The Prophet is closer to the faithful than their own souls, and his wives are their mothers (Q. 33:6).

The designation of the Prophet's wives as mothers of the believers is a divine legal ruling unique to the Prophet. Its meaning is that just as respecting one's biological mother is obligatory and marriage to her is forbidden, respecting the Prophet's wives is likewise obligatory for all Muslims, and marriage to them is strictly prohibited. Subsequent verses explicitly confirm this prohibition:

وَ ما كانَ لَكُمْ أَنْ تُؤْذُوا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ وَ لا أَنْ تَنْكِحُوا أَزْواجَهُ مِنْ بَعْدِهِ أَبَداً إِنَّ ذلِكُمْ كانَ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ عَظِيماً (الاحزاب/53)

You may not torment the Apostle of Allah, nor may you ever marry his wives after him. Indeed that would be a grave [matter] with Allah (Q. 33:53).

The comparison of the Prophet's wives to mothers applies to some, but not all, aspects of motherhood. For instance, a biological mother, in addition to being owed respect and being prohibited in marriage, has other legal implications: such as mutual inheritance with her children, the permissibility of seeing her unveiled, and kinship ties with her other children (e.g.,

half-siblings through her). By contrast, the wives of the Messenger of God (peace be upon him and his family)—apart from the rulings of respect and prohibition of marriage—do not share these other rulings or characteristics of biological motherhood (Tabataba'i 1996, 16: 414).

From the perspective of conceptual metaphor and interactional characteristics, we understand that the motherhood of the Prophet's wives should not be regarded as a mere simile. Instead, it should be considered a new, real concept of "motherhood" that is defined by specific interactional features. Based on the interactional nature of concepts, this ruling preserves two key characteristics of biological motherhood—respect and the prohibition of marriage—while setting aside others, such as inheritance and childbirth. Just as, in the earlier example, a toy gun cannot be dismissed as "not a gun," here we cannot dismiss the motherhood of the Prophet's wives as merely metaphorical or symbolic. Rather, we are dealing with an expanded and redefined concept of *mother*, which is best understood through its function.

In other words, the Prophet's wives relate to the believers in a way that parallels the relationship of a toy gun to a real gun: the concept retains certain essential functions while discarding others. In the Qur'an, the concept of *mother* is thus not a fixed, intrinsic concept; it is redefined through interactional characteristics (respect and prohibition of marriage) and is not limited to the biological relationship. The concept of *mother* contains both intrinsic characteristics (such as giving birth) and interactional characteristics (such as being a source of respect and a figure one may not marry). If what metaphors recommend are the most important aspects of our experiences, then metaphor can stand in for truth (Lakoff & Johnson 2008). Since respect and the prohibition of marriage are our most salient experiences of motherhood, the Prophet's wives, by embodying these functions, are considered the true mothers of the believers.

4.2. Believers Are Brothers to One Another

Another verse in which God establishes an injunction for believers is verse 10 of *Sūrah al-Ḥujurāt*:

إِنَّمَا الْمُؤْمِنُونَ إِخْوَةٌ فَأَصْلِحُوا بَيْنَ أَخَوَيْكُمْ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُرْحَمُونَ (الحجرات/10)

The faithful are indeed brothers. Therefore make peace between your brothers and be wary of Allah, so that you may receive [His] mercy (Q. 49:10).

Al-Ālūsī considers the application of *brotherhood* to believers as metaphorical, either as a simile or as a *tashbīh balīgh* (eloquent simile). He

states that the shared possession of faith by two individuals is analogous to their shared origin through birth, because just as birth is the cause of continued existence in this world, faith is the cause of continued existence in Paradise (al-Ālūsī 1994, 13: 303). Similarly, Tabataba'i (1996, 18: 472) explains that the brotherhood intended in this verse refers to religious and conventional brotherhood, which has only social and ethical implications and does not affect rulings concerning marriage or inheritance.

Once again, the Qur'an does not treat the concept of *brother* as a fixed, intrinsic concept. Instead, it redefines brotherhood by presenting believers as brothers to one another. This ruling preserves some key characteristics of brotherhood, such as a shared origin—here, faith—and the ethical and social responsibilities expected among brothers, while setting aside others, such as legal rulings on inheritance and marriage. Therefore, this concept does not represent a mere metaphor or simile; rather, it embodies an interactional reality. Believers, in relation to one another, preserve the essential characteristics of brotherhood while discarding others. In this context, the brotherhood of believers is to the biological brotherhood as a toy gun is to a real gun: a redefined concept that retains essential functions. Within the Qur'anic framework, and on the basis of the interactional nature of concepts, believers are therefore regarded as true brothers to one another.

4.3. A Sinful Child Is Not a Child.

Another example of a Qur'anic decree concerning relationships is found in the statement regarding Prophet Noah's son:

قالَ يا نُوحُ إِنَّهُ لَيْسَ مِنْ أَهْلِكَ إِنَّهُ عَمَلٌ غَيْرُ صالِحٍ فَلا تَسْئَلْنِ ما لَيْسَ لَكَ بِهِ عِلْمٌ إِنِّي أَعِظُكَ أَنْ تَكُونَ مِنَ الْجاهِلِين (هود/46)

Said He,"O Noah! Indeed He is not of your family. Indeed he is [personification of] unrighteous conduct. So do not ask Me [something] of which you have no knowledge. I advise you lest you should be among the ignorant" (Q. 11:46).

Here, God declares that Noah's son is not of his family because the criterion for true kinship is faith. Although Noah is bound to him biologically, this kinship is nullified by disbelief, as there is no genuine bond between a believer and an unbeliever. Religious kinship is presented here as stronger and more real than genealogical kinship (al-Ālūsī 1994, 12: 69). This is also reflected in the famous saying of al-Ḥamdānī (1944, 353): Salmān's affection caused kinship to the Prophet, and there was no kinship between Noah and his son. It means that Salmān al-Fārisī's loyalty and acceptance of guardianship established a spiritual kinship with the Prophet,

whereas the disbelief of Noah's son severed the natural kinship bond.

From an interactional perspective, this verse shows that religious kinship holds a more fundamental reality than biological descent. Just as Salman was included in the Prophet's family by virtue of his faith and allegiance, God here makes piety the key criterion for familial relationships. In the absence of piety, those relationships lose their validity. Just as believers are considered brothers due to their shared origin in faith, Noah's son, because of his unbelief and ungodly conduct, is denied the status of "child" by God. This explains the divine command: *"So do not ask of Me that of which you have no knowledge."*

Thus, in this verse as well, the concept of "child" is shown not to be a fixed, intrinsic concept. Rather, it is a relational concept defined, in God's decree, by a person's actions and righteousness rather than by biology.

4.4. Some Wives and Children Are Enemies

Another verse in which God issues a decree concerning relationships is verse 14 of *Sūrah al-Taghābun*:

يا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِنَّ مِنْ أَزْواجِكُمْ وَ أَوْلادِكُمْ عَدُوًّا لَكُمْ فَاحْذَرُوهُمْ وَ إِنْ تَعْفُوا وَ تَصْفَحُوا وَ تَغْفِرُوا فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَحِيم (التغابن/14)

O you who have faith! Indeed among your spouses and children you have enemies; so beware of them. And if you excuse, forbear and forgive, then Allah is indeed all-forgiving, all-merciful (Q. 64:14).

According to exegetes, there are four primary reasons why God describes some wives and children as enemies:

- Disagreement with the faith of the believing spouse.
- Pressuring the spouse to abandon faith and refrain from righteous deeds.
- Inducing the spouse to commit wrongful acts, such as theft and the usurpation of others' property.
- Placing love for one's spouse or children above the love of God and the religion of Islam.

Consequently, believers are cautioned against such spouses and children and are urged to exercise vigilance to avoid harm (Tabataba'i 1996, 19: 515).

In this verse, based on the interactional nature of truth, it becomes clear

that those wives and children whom God designates as enemies are so described because they functionally fulfill the role of an enemy—through opposition, coercion towards sin, or preventing righteousness. In reality, they have set aside most of the characteristics of being a supportive spouse, friend, or family member. Therefore, what we are dealing with here is not merely a metaphorical expression, but an interactional reality.

Consequently, it can be argued that, throughout the Qur'an, concepts such as mother, brother, and child are defined by the interactional nature of truth. When individuals fail to fulfill the primary roles, functions, and purposes associated with these concepts, the roles and their very definitions are nullified. Thus, concepts are determined not only by their inherent characteristics but also by their functional and relational aspects. The metaphors mentioned in the Qur'an, therefore, are not mere figures of speech but represent new realities. The Qur'an is replete with these complex, interconnected conceptual metaphors. As Lakoff and Johnson (2008) observe: Truth is a function of our conceptual system, which is grounded in our experiences and the experiences of other members of our culture and is constantly tested by all of us in our everyday interactions with other people and with physical and cultural environments.

Most conceptual metaphors are interactional in nature, such as ARGUMENT IS WAR, LIFE IS A JOURNEY, LOVE IS A JOURNEY, and so on. Other examples of interactional conceptualization found in the Qur'an include: THIS WORLDLY LIFE IS MERE DIVERSION AND AMUSEMENT (Q. 29:64); LIFE IS COMMERCE (Q. 35:29); LIFE IS A RACE (Q. 56:10); PIETY IS CLOTHING (Q. 7:26).

5. Conclusion

According to Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the world consists of entities that do not possess inherent, fixed characteristics; instead, their meaning arises from interactional characteristics that become significant only in relation to human actions. This framework enables a deeper understanding of some of the injunctions mandated by God in the Qur'an. These injunctions express concepts that God has ordained based on their interactional nature, thereby giving them new dimensions of meaning. Such concepts are understood through the roles, functions, and purposes they fulfill. Thus, based on Conceptual Metaphor Theory and the discussion of interactional concepts, even human concepts and relationships in the Qur'an are not defined by inherent and rigid attributes. They are, instead, conceptual metaphors that shape how believers live. The Qur'an redefines human relationships, introducing new realities that transcend conventional

biological and social definitions. For example, God states that: The Prophet's wives are the mothers of the believers, and marriage to them is forbidden; Believers are brothers to one another; Regarding his disbelieving son, God tells Prophet Noah: Indeed he is not of your family; Some wives and children are enemies; And spouses are described as "garments" for one another. Therefore, many of the metaphors and concepts by which we live are interactional, and even the concepts of mother, brother, child, and spouse in the Qur'an possess inherent characteristics only to a limited degree. Their full meaning emerges from their interactional nature. According to Conceptual Metaphor Theory, these are not simply figurative expressions but divinely ordained realities that must be understood through their roles and functions.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my esteemed professor, Dr. Hojjat Rasouli, for his valuable guidance and cooperation on this article. I would also like to clarify that there are no conflicts of interest related to this work, and I have not received any financial support from any organization or institution.

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