

# THE QUR'AN IN THE CONTEXT OF ORAL AND WRITTEN CULTURE\*

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## Makale Bilgisi

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## Abstract

It is a known fact that the first addressees of the Qur'anic revelation was Arab society so it's not surprising that the Qur'anic text reflects the elements, expressions and styles of the oral culture of that society. This article has an aim to clarify that there are great differences in understanding of the Qur'an before and after it was turned into a scripture. In this context, the Qur'an, revealed in Arabic, reflects the cultural and linguistic characteristics of its age. Regarding this fact, it is not surprising to witness several "oral" elements in the Qur'anic "Text".

**Keywords:** Oral, Written, Discourse, Text, Culture, Language.

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### Sözlü ve Yazılı Kültür Ayrımında Kur'an

#### Öz

Bilinen bir gerçektir ki Kur'an vahyinin ilk muhatapları Arap topluluğudur. Bu nedenle Kur'an metninin bu toplumun sözlü kültür unsurlarını, ifadelerini ve üsluplarını yansıtması şaşırtıcı değildir. Bu makale Kur'an'ın bir metin haline dönüşmesinden sonra anlaşılmasında önemli değişimlerin olduğunu ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Arapça vahyedilen Kur'an, çağının kültürel ve dil özelliklerini yansıtır. Buna göre Kur'an metninde çeşitli sözel unsurlar mevcuttur ve anlaşılmasında bu yapının dikkate alınması gereklidir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Sözlü, Yazılı, Söylem, Metin, Kültür, Dil.

#### Introduction

The Qur'an was revealed into the Arab Community having a certain language. The life-style of that community took its form around this language. What is underlined in the Qur'an is that it is Arabic and the revelation (wahy) took its shape on the basis of this language. In this context, it would not be wrong to say that although the revelation has a divine origin, its language is on a humane level, that is it is shaped by the linguistic forms and way of thinking of the community. In fact, there are clear references in the Qur'an expressing it was revealed in Arabic. This shows that the borders of the communication language is limited to that culture. This means that the Qur'an has the characteristics of all the specifics and features of the Arabic language. The linguistic discussions during the early period show that language was considered as a crucial factor to understand the Qur'an. It is a well-known fact that an oral culture widely dominated the society before the revelation period and it showed its effect in almost all areas of the life. It is a historical fact that Arabs -like their contemporaries- were living in an oral culture and their lifestyle was shaped on the basis of that culture. The oral factors such as poetry, rhetoric, myths and *akhbâr* support this idea as well. Besides, the Arabs were called as *ummî* (illiterate) society and this clearly shows that they were not good at writing. In addition, the word *ummî* means having a culture not directed by the texts. This is confirmed by the Qur'an itself as well as some historical datum. So, it can be said that understanding the Qur'an depends on understanding the culture it was revealed in.

### The Primary Features of the Oral Culture

In the oral cultures, it is quite difficult to compile and gather the datum as there are no -or inadequate- recording materials making the transmitting possible from one generation to the next.<sup>1</sup> So, memory is a crucial factor to keep the datum and to transmit it to the next generations in these cultures.<sup>2</sup> Thus, memory plays an important role to keep and transmit the datum in such cultures lacking writing materials. Memory is considered as a kind of save in. In this context, memory has such a significant function as to shape the culture. Indeed, all the cultural datum is kept in the memories. In other words, in oral cultures, memory replaces writing as a more reliable tool to keep the datum. The Arab community, however they are *ummi*, memorized and transmitted the datum related to various events such as significant days, wars in detail. This transmission was generally in the form of poetry or rhetoric. Moreover, they were memorizing their lineage, the poems of the past, the names of the cavalries in the battlefield, their tribes and fathers' names.<sup>3</sup>

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The revelation was kept in the memories of the people during the early period. Although an official compilation was made during the life of the Prophet, memorizing was considered more important. The reason of this is that writing was not common in the society and Arabs had a natural inclination to memorizing. In that period, memory was given great significance in keeping the revelations.<sup>4</sup> As is known, the revelations were in the memories of the people not in written materials in the early period. Also, writing

<sup>1</sup> About memory and recollection in oral cultures see also Jack Goody, *The Power of the Written Tradition*, Washington and London, Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000, p. 26-46.

<sup>2</sup> See also Bedruddin Muhammed b. Abdullah ez-Zerkeşi (d.794/1392), *el-Burhân fi ulûmi'l-Kur'an*, Beirut, Dâru'l-Fikr, 2001, v. I, pp. 295,304; Abdullah Dıraz, *Kur'an'a Giriş*, Ankara, ed. Salih Akdemir, Kitâbiyât, 2000, p. 31.; Celâluddin Abdurrahman Ebî Bekr es-Suyûtî, *el-Itkân fi Ulûmi'l Qur'an*, Beirut, Daru'l-Kütübî'l- İlmiyye, 1987, v. I, p. 157. Nihat M. Çetin, *Eski Arap Şiiri*, İstanbul, İ.Ü. Publications, Edebiyat Fakültesi Press, 1973, p. 50.

<sup>3</sup> Mahmûd Şükrü el-Alûsî, *Bulûğu'l-ereb fi ma'rifeti ahvâli'l-arab*, ed. Muhammed Behcet el-Eserî, Beirut, v. I, p. 38; İbn Atiyye al-Endulusî, *Mukaddimetân fi 'ulûmi'l Qur'an*, ed. Arthur Jeffery, Mektebetü'l-Hâncî, p. 32.

<sup>4</sup> Muhsin Demirci, *Vahiy Gerçeği*, İstanbul, M. Ü. İlahiyat Fakültesi Publications, 1996, p. 200-202.

was not in a kind what we understand it today. Only the consonant letters were written and you had to have some Qur'anic knowledge in order to differentiate the letters from each other. The ones having no experience on the Qur'an had some difficulties on reading it correctly. So, they had to make memorize. Here, it can be said that writing had a mnemonic factor for the memory.<sup>5</sup> It was difficult to recite the Qur'an for the people having lack of memorization.

Today it is an astonishing fact to witness such a lot of *aqhbâr* (past accounts) transmitted by heart, not by writing. Arabs were considered as the people memorizing everything they hear.<sup>6</sup> A Bedoun saying 'a letter in the heart is better than ten letters in the paper'<sup>7</sup> is an important sign to show the place of the memory in the society. Likewise, the proverb 'Knowledge is not the one in the verses but the one in the hearts' is another evidence pointing to the place of the memory in that culture. Abû 'Umar reports that Arabs tended to memorizing, came to the fore with this feature and the people generally did not like writing. A report by Shâbî tells that Arabs were good at memorizing and some people could memorize any poem in their first hearing. Ibn Qutayba reports the reality that in Arab society the scholarship was based on listening and reciting: The first step of the *'ilm* is to keep quiet, the second to listen, the third to memorize, the fourth to understand, and the fifth to transmit.<sup>8</sup> In this context it is reported that Ibn Abbas memorized the long ode (*qasîda*) of 'Umar ibn Abî Rabîa in his first hearing.<sup>9</sup> Qata-dah, likewise, reports that when he was reading a paper including the traditions (hadiths) of Câbir ibn 'Abdillah, he immediately memorized them.<sup>10</sup> During the *tabiûn* period and afterwards, writing became widespread but some famous hadith scholars still did

<sup>5</sup> For the Qur'an Manuscript and its development in the early period see also W. Montgomery Watt, *Kur'an'a Giriş*, ed. Süleyman Kalkan, Ankara, Ankara Okulu Publications, 1998, p.61-62.

<sup>6</sup> Ahmed Emîn, *Duhâ'l İslâm*, Beirut, Dâru'l-Kütübi'l-Arabiyye, v. 1, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Ebû Osman Amr b. Bahr el-Câhiz, *al-Bayân wa't-tabyîn*, ed. Abdusselam Muhammed Hârûn, Beirut, Dâru'l-Cil, v. 1, p. 258.

<sup>8</sup> Abû Muhammad Abdullâh b. Muslim b. Qutayba, *Uyûnu'l-akhbâr*, Cairo, Dâru'l-Kütübi'l-Misriyye, 1925, v. II, p. 122. See Ibn Qutayba, *al-Shi'r wa'l-Shu'ârâ*, Beirut, Dâru Ihyâi'l-'Ulûm, 1994, p. 22.

<sup>9</sup> Abû Omar Yûsuf İbn Abdilberr, *Jâmi'u beyân-i'l-'ilm wa fadlih*, ed. Abdulkarîm el-Hatîb, Cairo, 1982, p. 116-117.

<sup>10</sup> Ibn Abdilberr, *Jâmi'u beyân-i'l-'ilm wa fadlih*, p.116-117. Talat Koçyiğit, *Hadis Usûlü-İlmu mustalahi'l-hadis*, Ankara, A. Ü. İ. F. Publications, 1987, p. 21. See Hamidullah, *Kur'an-ı Kerim Tarihi*, p. 1. Koçyiğit, *Hadis Usûlü-İlmu mustalahi'l-hadis*, p. 21.

not rely the ones writing the hadiths but not memorizing them as much as the ones both memorized and recited the hadiths. This shows how memorizing was given significance at that time.

In oral cultures, the people have to apply to some forms mostly being imprinted on the minds in order to transmit the culture, information and custom from generation to generation. These are kept by way of memorization. Nevertheless, nothing can be memorized and transmitted verbatim (word by word)<sup>11</sup>. Here *verbatim* evokes the memorization and transmission of the hadiths in variants. The prophet Muhammad banned writing hadiths in his first years as he was afraid that they might be mixed with the Qur'anic verses. This led the oral transmission to become widespread. As a result, the hadiths were transmitted by taking the meaning into consideration, not the wording.<sup>12</sup> A report by Abû Saïd al Hudri explains this case: "We, almost ten people, sat and listened the hadiths from the prophet. Only two of us could repeat them *verbatim*; but when we all repeated them, it was approved that the meaning was the same."<sup>13</sup>

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In oral cultures, memorization mostly depends on rhythm. In Arab society with oral culture there is a deep connection between poetry and rhythm. There is a rhythmic structure in the legends belonging to the oral culture such as the cameleer's songs, lullabies, laments and hymns. According to the reports in hand, poems are read esoterically; that is monotonously but rhythmically.<sup>14</sup> Arabic has such kind of rhythmic qualities as well. In Arabic, we see this in wording patterns. Each of these patterns has its own musical rhythm. The wording patterns in Arabic consist of, on one side, structures, patterns and forms, on the other hand, musical rhythms. By way of these rhythms which sound nice a listener can comprehend some part of the meaning. Arabic, in this context has a musical characteristics. It consists of rhythms whether it is a prose or a

<sup>11</sup> Jack Goody, *The Interface Between the Written and Oral*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 86-91.

<sup>12</sup> Hatîb al-Bagdâdî, *al-Qifâya fi 'ilmi'r-rivâya*, ed. Ahmed Ömer Hâkim, Beirut, Dâru'l-Kitâbi'l-Arabiyye, 1986, p. 239-246; Koçyiğit, *Hadis Usûlü*, p. 76-77; Salih Karacabey, *Hadis Tenkidi*, İstanbul, Sır Publications, 2001, p. 223.

<sup>13</sup> Hatîb al-Bagdâdî, *al-Qifâya fi 'ilmi'r-rivâya*, p. 240.

<sup>14</sup> Nihat M. Çetin, *Eski Arap Şiiri*, p. 58.

poem. So it is always possible to see the connection between the meaning and the rhythm.<sup>15</sup>

As is known, it is more difficult to memorize a prose than a poem. In pre-Islamic period, many poems were recited in Arab society owing to this rhythmic characteristics.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, the Qur'an has a rhythmic structure. The letters at musical frets come together at a certain composition and with the phonetic structure of them, the musical tone of the Qur'an appears.<sup>17</sup> As for the prose, you do not feel the relation between the words and the feelings as there are no such factors as breath, musical tone and rhythm.<sup>18</sup>

When viewed from this aspect, a distinct rhythmical structure stands out especially in the short Meccan suras. The ends of the verses comprise of homogeneous and rhythmical words.<sup>19</sup> Such a characteristics is both a literary device and a factor supporting memorizing.

Another significant feature of the oral cultures is the wide use of rhetoric. *Hitabah* deriving from the verb *hataba* lexically means sermonizing, eloquence. Terminologically the word is defined as an effective and strong oratory aiming to encourage a society to an action or to make them adopt an opinion.<sup>20</sup> Rhetorical structure is widely used both in pre-Islamic and Islamic periods. The effective usage of the words are provided in this way.<sup>21</sup> The rich examples of the rhetorical structure are witnessed in the wars between the tribes in the pre-Islamic period. In addition, some people with different tribes gave a speech before the Prophet. The content of the

<sup>15</sup> Muhammad al-Mabârek, *Fıkhul-luğa ve hasâisu'l-arabiyye*, Beirut, Dâr al-Fıkr, 1981, p. 280-282.

<sup>16</sup> Yusuf Sancak, Hz. Peygamber Devrinde Şiir, Erzurum, Şafak Publications, 1999, p. 32; Kenan Demirayak-Ahmet Savran, *Arap Edebiyatı Tarihi-Câhiliye Dönemi*, Erzurum, Atatürk Üniveristesi Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi Publications, 1993, p. 63.

<sup>17</sup> Necdet Çağıl, *Kur'an-ı Kerim ve Kitab-ı Mukaddes Mukayyesinde Özgün Bir Yaklaşım*, Ankara, Araştırma Publications, 2005, p. 38.

<sup>18</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and The Surples of Meaning*, Forth Worth: Texas Christian University Press 1976, p. 40. For a similar approach see also Jacques Bergue, "The Koranic Text: From Revelatin to Compilation" *The Book in the Islamic Word: The Written Word and Communication in The Middle East*, ed. George N. Atiyeh, New York, State University of New York Press, 1995, p. 20.

<sup>19</sup> See: Q 69: 1-52; 70:1-44; 89:1-30; 90: 1-20. On the other hand, this feature gradually disappears in the Medinan suras. Çağıl, *Kur'an-ı Kerim ve Kitab-ı Mukaddes Mukayyesinde Özgün Bir Yaklaşım*, p. 35.

<sup>20</sup> Mahmut Kaya, "Hitabet," İstanbul, *DİA*, 1998, v. XVIII, p.156.

<sup>21</sup> For the examples of rhetoric, see Jâhiz, *al-Bayân*, v. II, p. 31.

speeches were the tribal life, violent fights between the tribes.<sup>22</sup> These speechmakers had an important position in the Arab society. In one sense, they were the voice and pioneer of their tribe in a similar way of a poet. The tribes preferred the ones with the strongest voice as they wanted the addressees to be effected in any subject such as negotiations, peace settlements, starting the war.<sup>23</sup> The role of the speechmakers was to defend his tribe ideally against others through eloquence. So they were the pride of the tribe. Today, the use of rhetoric maintains its importance to a large extent. In rhetoric teaching, the aim is to defend his view and confute the others. For this reason, thoughts include polemical and challenging to some extent. What is important in rhetoric is to have strong meanings, words and proofs. Beauty, clarity, the commonness of repetitions and synonyms, bywords, tone of voice are the features awaited in rhetoric.<sup>24</sup> Every year fairs were organized in various parts of the Arabian Peninsula to encourage poems reflecting a polemical atmosphere. In these fairs, poems were read and for the best one was given a prize. Jahiz states the vocal feature of the language in such a striking example:

Voice is the tool of wording. The parts of the sentences consist of sounds. Without sound, the motions of the tongue can compose neither a wording, nor an artistic writing. To state something, using gestures and facial expressions provide a more effective statement; like the use of wiles to stir the lust of man.<sup>25</sup>

The other significant feature of the oral culture is to keep the ancestral culture strictly. According to the reports, the Arabs gathered between Mina Mosque and Mina Mountain after completing the Hajj and boasted of their ancestors to take credit for themselves. The topics they boasted of were bravery, generosity and visiting relatives.<sup>26</sup> They even gathered at graveyards and counted

<sup>22</sup> Kaya, "Hitabet," p. 158.

<sup>23</sup> Jawâd Ali, *al-Mufasssal fî târihi'l-arab kable'l-islâm*, 1993, v. VIII, pp. 771-772.

<sup>24</sup> J. Walter Ong, *Sözlü ve Yazılı Kültür-Söziün Teknolojileşmesi*, ed. Sema Postacıoğlu Banon, İstanbul, Metis Publishing, 1995, p. 132.

<sup>25</sup> Jâhiz, *al-Bayân*, v. I, p. 79.

<sup>26</sup> Abû Ja'far Muhammad b. Jarîr at-Taberî, *Jâmiu'l-bayân an te'vîli âyi'l-qur'an*, Beirut, Dâru'l Kütübî'l-İlmiyye, 1992, v. II, p. 308; Abû Zakariyyâ Yahyâ b. Ziyâd al-Farrâ, *Maâni'l-qur'ân*, ed. Muhammed Ali en-Neccâr; Ahmed Yûsuf Necâtî, Dâr as-Surûr, v. I, p. 122.

the number of the graves belonging their lineage.<sup>27</sup> The Qur'an refers to such events.<sup>28</sup> Considering the sociocultural conditions, it can be seen that the dependence between the tribes result from the harsh conditions of the desert. As a result of this, the tribalism aroused. In order to survive in these conditions, they had to stick to their tribe.<sup>29</sup> During any attack by someone to the other, it's a relief for the attacked to remember that he had a tribe.<sup>30</sup> In the pre-Islamic Arab society, the tribes were referred with their distinctive features. Riding, hearing, seeing, speaking, honor, leadership were some of these features, which are pride of the tribe. The tribes were interested more what their ancestors did than what they themselves were doing because this was a privilege for a tribe against the others.<sup>31</sup> The effect of the ancestral culture are felt in the nomadic societies more than the urban ones considering the development of the latter ones in trade, culture, and writing. As Ibn Khaldun stated, there is a parallelism between the development of the city life and its writing and culture.<sup>32</sup> There are verses in the Qur'an related to this fact. When they did something wrong, "They said, "We found our fathers worshippers of them." In another verse: "Rather, they say, "Indeed, we found our fathers upon a religion, and we are in their footsteps [rightly] guided." One more verse: "And when it is said to them, "Follow what Allah has revealed," they say, "Rather, we will follow that upon which we found our fathers." Even if Satan was inviting them to the punishment of the Blaze?"<sup>33</sup>

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### Oral Culture and Types of Expression

Colloquial language or spoken language is the one used by the people in their daily routines. So it can be considered as one of the

<sup>27</sup> Cevâd Ali, *el-Mufasssal*, v. IV, p. 589.

<sup>28</sup> Q 102: 1-2. See also Abdullah b. Ahmed b. Mahmûd en-Nesefî, *Tefsîru'n-Nesefî*, Kahraman Publications, İstanbul 1984, v. IV, p. 374.

<sup>29</sup> See Cevad Ali, *al-Mufasssal*, v. 1, p. 466; Sabri Hizmetli, *İslam Tarihi*, Ankara, A. Ü. İ. F. Publications, 1991, p. 71.

<sup>30</sup> Muhammad Âbid al-Jâbirî, *Arap Aklının Oluşumu, Tekvînu'l-akli'l-arabî*, ed. İbrahim Akbaba, İstanbul, İz Publications, 1997, p. 127.

<sup>31</sup> Muhammad b. Mansûr at-Taymî as-Sem'ânî, *al-Ansâb*, ed. Abdurrahmân b. Yahyâ al-Muallimî, v. I, p. 62-63. About how to investigate the lineage see the same work, v. I, p. 62-88.

<sup>32</sup> Abdurrahman b. Muhammad Ibn Khaldûn, *Muqaddima*, ed. Ali Abdolvâhid Vâfi, Cairo, p. 417. See also Muhammad Ahmad Halefullah, *Kur'an'da Anlatım Sanatı*, ed. Şaban Karataş, Ankara, Ankara Okulu Publications, 2002, p. 114.

<sup>33</sup> See Q 21: 53; 43: 22-23; 31: 21.

tools helping to make daily life easier. This language serves to make a direct contact in practical conditions. For this reason, to state certain datum about any specific condition is considered enough for the communication. Let's give an example. Think two men trying to hang a painting to the wall. One of them on the ladder and the other waiting an instruction from him. The one on the ladder says: 'Hammer, please!' 'A bigger nail!' and asks: 'Is it OK?' The other one waiting says: 'A little below', 'a little bit right/left'<sup>34</sup>. It's almost impossible to understand this dialogue unless you are acquainted with the situation. The conversation already does not aim it. In daily language, the objective content of the expressions are not in the foreground. What is important is the expressions used in daily life.<sup>35</sup>

In oral language, as the addressees and context are known, expressions such as 'look at that', 'give me this', 'throw that' are understandable.<sup>36</sup> It's no use telling the names in such conditions. So what is important is to state only the needed information during a daily spoken language. In such kind of language, gestures and facial expressions are the tools supporting the communication. Using these, you even do not need to tell a word to express yourself. This feature of spoken language is replaced with punctuation marks in written language; but they can compensate for the gestures and facial expressions only to some extent.

In oral culture, one of the common expression types is the jointed phrase. This is also used to express successive statements.<sup>37</sup> To state linguistic terms, it is arranging the sub clauses as main clauses. In oral cultures, the turning of the sub clauses into main clauses via conjunctions stems from their functional usage instead of their meaning.

Any information or thought in written languages and cultures are mostly expressed via sub clauses. In oral expressions, what

<sup>34</sup> Walter Porzig, *Dil Denen Mucize*, ed. Vural Ülkü, Ankara, Türk Dil Kurumu Publications, 1995, p. 183-184.

<sup>35</sup> Porzig, *Dil Denen Mucize*, p. 183.

<sup>36</sup> John Wilson, *Dil, Anlam ve Doğruluk*, ed. İbrahim Emiroğlu, Abdülhatif Tüzer, Ankara, Ankara Okulu Publications, 2002, p. 25.

<sup>37</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Genel Dilbilim Dersleri*, ed. Berke Vardar, İstanbul, Multilingual Publications, 1998, p. 39. To see more detail about the jointed phrases, Berke Vardar, *Dilbilimin Temel İlke ve Kavramları*, İstanbul, Multilingual Publications, 1998, p. 93.

takes attention is that the expressions are consecutive rather than obeying a strict language. This helps syntax. By way of this, language is shaped by colloquial speech. As for written language, it takes its form by detailed and fixed grammar because in written language, getting meaning depends on language. Written language lacks lively atmosphere which helps to transfer meaning. Jointed expressions are common in the Qur'an as in the Bible.<sup>38</sup> The passages below describe such a kind. Let's look at surah at-Takwir:

1. When the sun (with its spacious light) is folded up;
2. When the stars fall, losing their lustre;
3. When the mountains vanish (like a mirage);
4. When the she-camels, ten months with young, are left untended;
5. When the wild beasts are herded together (in the human habitations);
6. When the oceans boil over with a swell;
7. When the souls are sorted out, (being joined, like with like);<sup>39</sup>

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As can be clearly seen, the main clauses are stated in the form of sub clauses via conjunctions. It is seen that although the verses begins with 'and' in the original form, in some parts of the translation we witness 'when', 'so' instead of 'and'. So, in the translated form, we see that the passage is translated with the sense of written culture. So this shows that written language is more sensitive to grammar.<sup>40</sup>

Another type of expression in oral cultures is categorization. It is about use of patterns to strengthen the memory. The thoughts and expression elements based on discourse do not say much thing alone. When synonyms and antonyms, idioms and clauses are categorized, they get the feature of a definitive phrase. We observe the features of oral expressions in the Qur'an which is an oral discourse in its origin:

<sup>38</sup> Ong, *Sözlü ve Yazılı Kültür-Sözün Teknolojileşmesi*, p. 54.

<sup>39</sup> Q 81: 1-9; 32: 22-34.

<sup>40</sup> Elmalılı M. Hamdi Yazır, *Kur'an-ı Kerim ve Meâli*, ed. Düccane Cündioğlu, İstanbul, İslamoğlu Publications, 1993.

Not equal are the blind and the seeing, nor are the darkneses and the light, nor are the shade and the heat, and not equal are the living and the dead.<sup>41</sup> Evil words are for evil men, and evil men are [subjected] to evil words. And good words are for good men, and good men are [an object] of good words.<sup>42</sup> Have you not considered how Allah presents an example, [making] a good word like a good tree, whose root is firmly fixed and its branches [high] in the sky? It produces its fruit all the time, by permission of its Lord. And Allah presents examples for the people that perhaps they will be reminded. And the example of a bad word is like a bad tree, uprooted from the surface of the earth, not having any stability.<sup>43</sup> A [large] company of the former peoples, and a few of the later peoples.<sup>44</sup> Say, [O Muhammad], "Indeed, the former and the later peoples, are to be gathered together for the appointment of a known Day."<sup>45</sup> And the forerunners, the forerunners<sup>46</sup> Is the reward for good [anything] but good?<sup>47</sup> Then the companions of the right - what are the companions of the right? And the companions of the left - what are the companions of the left?<sup>48</sup> He is the First and the Last, the Ascendant and the Intimate, and He is, of all things, Knowing.<sup>49</sup>

It's possible to see categorizing expressions in synonymous-antonymous phrases like "a good word- a strong tree, a bad word- a weak tree, seeing-unseeing, lightness-darkness, knowing-unknowing, alive-dead, hotness-shade, first-last, apparent-obscure, formers-latters, earth-sky". The use of categorization is to help memorizing and provide permanence in the mind.

We have already stated that keeping information and transmitting it to the next generations occurs mostly via memory. So it is understandable to witness facilitative repetitions in oral cultures. In this context, it is worth considering that the prophet was continuously repeating to memorize the first revelations.<sup>50</sup> It's possible to

<sup>41</sup> Q 35: 19-22.

<sup>42</sup> Q 24: 26.

<sup>43</sup> Q 14: 24-26.

<sup>44</sup> Q 56: 13-14, 39-40.

<sup>45</sup> Q 56: 50.

<sup>46</sup> Q 56: 10.

<sup>47</sup> Q 55: 60.

<sup>48</sup> Q 56: 8-9.

<sup>49</sup> Q 57: 3.

<sup>50</sup> Q 75: 16-17. For more comments see Tabarî, *Jâmiu'l-bayân*, v. 12, p. 338-341; Abû'l-Kâsim Mahmûd b. Omar az-Zamakhsharî, *al-Kashshaâf an hakâiqi gavâmizi't-tenzil ve*

turn back to the writing if any; but what if not? It's possible to check the writing from beginning to the end. However this is not possible in oral discourses. In oral cultures, "the more you memorize, the more you know". When addressing to a community, the speaker is more inclined to repetitions due to the physical conditions. He sometimes makes repetitions two or three times to help the addressees understand the speech better.<sup>51</sup> It's indispensable to witness the standardized, cliché and repeated phrases. In Iliad and Odysseus; council meeting, mobilizing the army, challenging, plundering the enemy, the shield of the hero are some of the phrases repeated frequently.

In the societies the basis of which is based on traditions and orality, language mostly depends on dialogue and struggle to each other so in these societies confuting the others' opinions or uttering more eloquent words than others are very significant. That is, in oral societies, more contentious styles are witnessed. As for writing, it brings abstraction which pulls the people from their contentious environment. It separates the one having knowledge from the known. As for oral tradition, that abstraction never occurs. Any kind of oral communication, whether about attraction or hostility, is direct and in human affairs.<sup>52</sup> Proverbs and riddles are not only information storage but also a feature challenging people to the oral intelligence competitions. When bandied about a proverb or a riddle, people around are expected to utter more effective ones.<sup>53</sup>

It is known that there were some competitions in which poets were challenging to one another in ancient Arabic society formed in the oral culture. These happened in special days and as part of some rules. In these tribes, poets were used as a trump card to the others. According to the style of competition of the poet, one tribe might get an edge over another one. The wound made by a poet of a tribe could only be compensated for the same or more biting wound made by a poet of the other tribe.<sup>54</sup> Due to this presupposition, thoughts are challenging and defensive. In this context, it is

<sup>51</sup> 'uyûni'l-eqâvîli fî vucûhi't-te'vîl, Beirut, Dâr al- Qutu al-'Ilmiyya, 2003, v. IV, p. 648-649.

<sup>52</sup> Ong, *Sözlü ve Yazılı Kültür-Sözün Teknolojileşmesi*, p. 56.

<sup>53</sup> Ong, *Sözlü ve Yazılı Kültür-Sözün Teknolojileşmesi*, p. 60-61.

<sup>54</sup> Ong, *Sözlü ve Yazılı Kültür-Sözün Teknolojileşmesi*, p. 60.

<sup>55</sup> Çetin, *Eski Arap Şiiri*, p. 11, 15.

significant to remember the fairs organized in various parts of the Arabian Peninsula to encourage poem reflecting a challenging atmosphere. Poems were read and the best one got the prize.<sup>55</sup>

Lack of writing makes difficult to single a part of discourse out and analyze it specifically and analytically as in any written statement.<sup>56</sup> In fact, in our daily routine, abstract thinking has very little importance. It is full of behaviors dictated by the culture.<sup>57</sup> In such forms, the concreteness of the information reveals itself inevitably. In ancient Arabic poetry, statements about the visible world are miscellaneous as the mind isn't tend to categorical and abstract thinking.<sup>58</sup> In these poems, the words like camel, cloud, wine, some animals, and some natural events are expressed in more than one word. Using synonyms stem from lack of categorical and abstract thinking. In such cultures, for example, instead of an abstract word 'tree', they use 'the thing bearing fruit', 'the thing shading'. In the Qur'an, according to its types and features many names are used to express the camel such as 'bahîrah', 'sâibah', 'vâsilah' and 'hâm'. The reason of this usage is that in daily routine such expressions had significant value.

### Some Features of Written Culture

Writing is to dictate a language within the frame of certain rules. Writing and language are two different things. Writing is important from the aspects that it reflects language and provides a system everybody is in agreement on it.<sup>59</sup> Also, we can define the written language, apart from its distinctive features, as the written form of oral language. Putting it on the paper means that oral language is standardized. So, written language is the one having tradition and distinctive features. In oral language, words can have regional differences but in written language you should obey some certain rules.<sup>60</sup> Ibn Khaldun, emphasizing writing is an art peculiar to human being, defines it as pictures and figures revealing oral words and pointing the meanings in the human mind. With regard

<sup>55</sup> Çetin, *Eski Arap Şiiri*, p. 27.

<sup>56</sup> Goody, *The Power of The Written Tradition*, p. 24.

<sup>57</sup> Şerif Mardin, *İdeoloji*, İstanbul, İletişim Publications, 1995, p. 118.

<sup>58</sup> Çetin, *Eski Arap Şiiri*, p. 45-46.

<sup>59</sup> Vardar, *Dilbilimin Temel İlke ve Kavramları*, p. 84.

<sup>60</sup> Doğan Aksan, *Her Yönüyle Dil, Ana Çizgileriyle Dilbilim*, Ankara, Türk Tarih Kurumu Press, 1990, v. I, p. 86.

to its pointing to meaning, writing comes after verbal expressions so writing is a secondary tool of language.<sup>61</sup> It is fact that writing has a basis shared by everyone. Aristotle points out that written language is less defective than oral one.<sup>62</sup>

Discourse, after having a written character, is a repeated and static message from then on. As for the spoken language, that is impossible. When you request someone go over his explanations, he will do that, but with different words and structures. By transferring an oral message into a written one, it passes from temporal area to the spacial. So, an unrepeatable discourse becomes repeatable millions of times. The process of turning discourse into writing is a process opening to the universality. After this process, dialogue becomes impossible any longer and discourse is not itself anymore and turns into another context.<sup>63</sup> In this sense, writing regains its power only by being re-recorded. Writing a discourse has some advantages such as keeping its meaning and recording it, it causes the language to lose its liveliness as well.<sup>64</sup>

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The ways of communication in oral and written message differ. So it is understandable that there happens some changes in the modes of communication while transferring an oral message into a written one. The most important one is the link between the message and the speaker. Instead of a face to face interaction in oral message, a written message turns out a reading-writing relation. So writing takes a direct interaction away. With Ricoeur's words, the dialogical situation has exploded. Writing-reading relation is quite different from speaking-listening one.<sup>65</sup> Written language, so to say, draws the pictures of the sounds and it's linear in the space. As for oral language, it's phonetical and linear in the time.<sup>66</sup>

Another change during the transformation of a discourse into a written text is that the reference field of the language undergoes a change. That is, in oral discourse, the relation of meaning-reference

<sup>61</sup> Ibn Khaldûn, *Muqaddima*, p. 417.

<sup>62</sup> Aristoteles, *Retorik*, ed. Mehmet H. Doğan, İstanbul, Yapı Kredi Publications, 1995, p. 193.

<sup>63</sup> Jacques Ellul, *Sözün Düşüşü*, ed. Husamettin Arslan, İstanbul, Paradigma Publications, 1998, p. 64.

<sup>64</sup> Osman Bilen, *Yorumbilimin Felsefi Temelleri*, Ankara, Kitâbiyât, 2002, p. 25.

<sup>65</sup> Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, p. 29.

<sup>66</sup> Ellul, *Sözün Düşüşü*, p. 63.

is the one referring to itself. In discourse relation there is a shared area by the speaker and the addressee. This includes dialogue. After writing, this dialogical relation ends. The text breaks its time-frame and spreads an unknown one.<sup>67</sup>

Another change occurs between the message and the tools transmitting it. As is known, during the pre-Islamic and Islamic revelation process, the revelations were recorded to such elements as stones, leathers, palm logs, papyrus and papers. So the oral discourse were made permanent. In fact, this is a great cultural success. But anyway, here, gestures and facial expressions, tuning, ways of expressions, the mood of the speaker or the addressee disappear. In this sense, a written message can only give us a picture of the events.<sup>68</sup> Because what is made permanent in writing is not the events but the words. In this context, what Jahiz said is important:

“Discourse is limited to the time it is uttered. As for writing, it includes both the time of speaking and the things other than this. Writing preserves past and includes present. Writing is read without the dimension of time and place. As for discourse, it does not exceeds its addressees.”<sup>69</sup>

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In Arabs the weakening of story-telling literature which is a feature of oral culture is related to this. During the Umayyads and Abbasids this type of literature was its peak. After the books became widespread and the people could find opportunity to read, they did not have to go to the council of the storytellers thus this literature weakened.<sup>70</sup> As the rates of reading increased this kind of literature weakened.

To take attention between oral and written language, comparing a preacher in a mosque and an author at his desk would be sound. These two are very different actions. The preacher can apply to gestures and facial expressions, different tunings and repetitions in order to increase the interest of the addressees. He can change the topic and give different examples to support his idea. He can

<sup>67</sup> Ricouer, *Interpretation Theory*, pp. 34-35.

<sup>68</sup> Ricouer, *Interpretation Theory*, pp. 26-27.

<sup>69</sup> Jâhiz, *al-Bayân*, v. I, p. 80.

<sup>70</sup> Tâhâ Hüseyin, *Câhiliye Şiiri Üzerine*, ed. Şaban Karataş, Ankara, Ankara Okulu Publications, 2003, p. 98.

adapt his voice to the subject. As a result, he will do his best by using the advantages of the oral discourse. As for the author, he can do none of them.<sup>71</sup> For this reason, As Ricoeur said, publishing preaches as a book is a bit boring since all the effects stressed above will disappear then.<sup>72</sup>

In oral discourse, the references are clear but in written language the references of the language are mostly vague. The reason of this, as Jahiz said, is that “a text is read in everywhere and can be taught every time; as for discourse, it does not exceed its addressees and reach others”.<sup>73</sup>

So, considering the discussions till here, we can make a summary about the difference between the written and oral language: Oral discourse is based on listening and it is impermanent, fluent, dynamic, rhythmic, subjective, defective<sup>74</sup>, repetitive, tonic, concrete and echoing, happening in the present time, collective and belonging to a community. As for a written language it is based on seeing and it is permanent, fixed, ordered, objective, perfect, abstract, graphical, in space, time-out, noncommon, having individual features.<sup>75</sup> Of course these are not indispensable characteristics but de facto differences.

### **Evaluating the Qur’anic Discourse in the Context of Oral-Written Culture**

The textual structure of the Qur’an has oral characteristics. It has a lot of exclamations, narrations and myths about the history, rhythmical harmony in the ends of the Meccan verses. These are the features of oral discourse. By the way, there is a certain difference between the Meccan and the Medinan verses in terms of style. Meccan suras are shorter and more rhythmic while Medinan ones are longer and less rhythmic. The rhythmic style disappears in later

<sup>71</sup> See Abûl A’lâ al-Mawdûdî, *Tafhîm al-Qur’an*, ed. Muhammad Han Kayanî et al., İstanbul 1996, p. 9-10;

<sup>72</sup> Zeki Özcan, *Teolojik Hermenötik*, İstanbul, Alfa Publications, 1998, p. 86.

<sup>73</sup> Jâhiz, *al-Bayân*, v. I, p. 80. Jâhiz, *Kitâb al-Hayevân*, ed. Abdusselam Muhammed Hârûn, Dâr al-Jîl, Beirut, v. I, p. 41.

<sup>74</sup> Jâhiz, *al-Bayân*, v. I, p. 80.

<sup>75</sup> These features are systematized by way of Daniel Chandler’s paper “Biases of the Ear and Eye,” <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/litoral/litoral1.html>, (p.6). About the comparison between oral and written language see more in Günay, *Metin Bilgisi*, p. 27-32.

periods. In the first stages we witness a more functional language including the topics such as the entity and oneness of Allah.

It's quite understandable that the Qur'an has many oral elements as it was revealed to a society in which an oral culture is dominant. Someone reading the Qur'an attentively will immediately notice that demonstrative pronouns are used more than nouns and pronouns. In addition, adverbs of time and place are not mentioned clearly. Instead, you witness such statements as 'that day', 'today', 'two towns'.<sup>76</sup>

As is known, this subject is named as 'mubhemât' in the works of 'Ulûmu'l Qur'ân. Such kind of statements require that the addressees have information about the matter. These are vague statements especially for the ones subjected to the Qur'anic Text. Another style of addressing is oaths in the Qur'an. In the oral societies oaths are frequently applied to convince the addressee. As a historical element, oaths are applied to provide peace and trust in the societies having no written law.

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Another narration style in the Qur'an is repetition. In oral cultures, information is transmitted by heart as there is lack of literacy and recording materials. Repetition is an important factor facilitating to keep the information or the message in the mind. Regarding the Qur'an as a written text and the repetitions as dull and defect means not to understand the text in its culture and disregard its formation process.

*Hazf* (omitting) is another oral feature applied when the addressees know each other. During the discourse some elements out of the discourse such as nodding and pointing to something makes the message understandable without needing to utter any words on it. Likewise, the speaker do not tell every detail as he knows that the addressees are already informed on it. In the Qur'anic Text, some verses supposed as not completed are in fact clear and completed ones in the first addressees of the Qur'an. So, *hazf* is an important oral element applied when the speaker is sure that the addressees have some knowledge on the subject he will mention.

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<sup>76</sup> In the Qur'an, see many 'mubhemât' (ambiguity) examples: Q 2: 197; 6: 52; 20: 2; 107: 2-4; 9: 7, 108; 8: 41 et al.

It is understandable for the addressees confronting the Qur'an as a completed text (Mushaf) in later periods to find some ambiguities in it. That is, in oral communications, it is less possible to witness problems in understanding the message. For this reason, the Prophet did not have not much explanation on the revealed verses and did very little *tafsir* during his lifetime. His companions after his death confined themselves to these explanations. After the 'Qur'an' became 'Mushaf' and the natural context were skipped in time, the interpretations and *tafsir* process gained speed. As it is seen, there is a great gap between the relation of the Qur'an with its first addressees and the later ones. For the first addressees, the Qur'an is a discourse in which they find the answers of their questions. So there is a live relation between the Qur'an and the first addressees. As for the written text, it does not reflect the whole picture to us. So there exists many verses needing more explanations. In the works of 'Ulûmu'l Qur'an, we see that these meaning gaps are tried to be filled, in fact. In such works, repetitions, oaths, exclamations and such kind of oral characteristics are tried to be explained to the reader. Especially the disciplines of the occasions of revelations (Asbâb an- Nüzûl) can be considered as the one to establish the meaning.

### Conclusion

The atmosphere of the revelation can be considered as the period in which the oral culture was mostly dominant and the oral literature was in demand. Historical datum and the expression of the Qur'an supports this fact. It is a clear indicator that poetry and rhetoric were determining factors in Arab Society at that time. As the Qur'an was revealed to that society, it is understandable to see cultural traces in its statements and style. Today, the Qur'an is a written text. But in its origin, it is an oral discourse. So we do not mention a problem of understanding for the first addressees. For later ones, there is a completed text (Mushaf). In order to understand this text, we need a non-textual context. It is a necessity to reveal the atmosphere of the revelations and contextualize them. The occasions of revelations (Asbâb an-Nuzûl) grew out of this concern.

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