AMBIGUITY AND VAGUENESS IN THE QUR'ĀN: A SEMANTIC INVESTIGATION INTO SIGNIFICANT EXAMPLES[*]

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ABSTRACT

Ambiguity is one of the essential characteristics of the semantic richness in Qur'ānic language. However, studies of Qur'ānic ambiguity is scarce and limited to the issues of translating the ambiguities of the Qur'ān, without a deep investigation into ambiguity techniques or how the Qur'ān exploits ambiguity to enrich its language. The few studies on Qur'ānic ambiguity also did not interest in the productive relations between ambiguity and other relevant concepts, such as vagueness, in spite of the importance of these relations in grasping the essence of ambiguity. The article aims to fill this gap in Qur'ānic studies through the following steps: (1) presenting a systematic classification of ambiguity in Qur'ānic language. (2) Explaining the relations between ambiguity and vagueness in the Qur'ān. (3) Discovering how Muslim exegetical tradition dealt with the multiple interpretations that stem from ambiguity and vagueness. The article relies on the semantic analysis as a method of examination into selected Qur'ānic instances. The analysis demonstrates that the Qur'ān exploits effectively most of the acknowledged ambiguity kinds to perform either semantic or rhetorical functions.

Keywords: *Ambiguity, vagueness, Qur'ān, semantics, multiple meanings, narrative, oaths.*

1. **INTRODUCTION**

Ambiguity, the status of having more than one possible meaning, is a great source of semantic richness in Qur'ānic language. However, Qur'ānic ambiguity has not been studied in a sufficient manner in Qur'ānic studies. Few exceptions can be found in studies that concerned with translating Qur'ānic ambiguities (see El-Zeiny, 2009; Sharifabad, Mahadi, & Kenevisi, 2012). The main concern of these studies was to analyze and compare the different translation approaches and evaluate which translation is adequate in reproducing ambiguity. In addition to the scarcity of this kind of studies, their treatment of ambiguity remains limited and not enough to grasp such an essential linguistic feature in the Qur'ānic text. In this article, there is an attempt to present a systematic account of ambiguity in the Qur'ān and discover the productive relations between ambiguity and vagueness as complementary concepts. Moreover, the article examines how the Qur'ān exploits ambiguity and vagueness to enhance its semantic richness; how Muslim exegetical tradition *Tafsīr* addressed the two concepts within different Qur'ānic forms e.g. narrative and oaths.

The basic meaning of the word "Ambiguity", according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is 'that can be understood in more than one way; having different meanings'. In his entry on ambiguity in The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Sennet (2016) regards ambiguity as an intrinsic and inevitable property in the normal use of language. But in the more formal language used in scientific or systematic activities, such as philosophy, law, and rhetoric, ambiguity may have a damaging impact on the precision and validity criteria of these activities. Philosophers, for example, believe that arguments that may look correct in virtue of their linguistic form, in fact, can be incorrect if the words or phrases involved are ambiguous. Thus, any multiplicity of sense is not allowed in a perfect language. Sennet also mentions that ambiguity in the laws can undermine their applicability. According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Law*, ambiguity is defined as "uncertainty in meaning" (Martin, 2002, pp.24-25). As for rhetoric, Olson (2006) explained that from classical times through the nineteenth century, rhetoricians view ambiguity as a stylistic fault or deceptive device. Clarity and precision were rhetorical ideals and ambiguity is the absence of these ideals. All of these convections about ambiguity made it a "pejorative term in Western cultural history until the twentieth century" (Tashiro, 1968, vol.1, p.48).

Another perception of ambiguity is presented also by Sennet (2016) in which ambiguity seemed as an appreciated term by authors, poets, literary scholars, and the like. They have found it to be an extremely powerful tool. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare benefits from ambiguity in 'Ask for me tomorrow and you shall find

me a grave man' in which he plays cleverly on the double meaning of 'grave'. Ambiguity in poetry is regarded as an "excellent device for concealing views" (Cook, 2008/2009, p.230). Fowler (2006) thinks that the appreciation of ambiguity became prevalent, in literary criticism, with the works of the twentieth-century critic, I. A. Richards (1893 – 1979). Richards argued that what is required of scientific language (e.g. lucidity) is not necessarily demanded in poetry. Later, William Empson (1906 – 1984) invested this argument in a piece of practical criticism focusing on ambiguity in poetry, namely his *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, which is regarded as a landmark in appreciating ambiguity as a literary and poetic device. According to Brogan (1993), the application of semantics to literary study is characteristic of Richards and Empson's works. This article presents a semantic analysis of certain ambiguous/vague Qur'ānic examples after displaying a systematic classification of ambiguity in the Qur'ān.

2. AMBIGUITY IN THE QUR'ĀN

Two main kinds of ambiguity are usually recognized: lexical ambiguity, which is due to words, and structural ambiguity, which is due to sentences. Lexical ambiguity can stem from either homonymy or polysemy. Homonymy sometimes is phonetic e.g. *peak* [pi:k] 'summit' and *peek* [pi:k] 'glance', which is called homophony, and other times it is orthographic e.g. *lead* 'to control' and *lead* 'a chemical element', which is called homography. Homonymy and homography may co-occur as in *bank* 'financial institution' and *bank* 'slop' (Rathert, 2004). Some Qur'ānic words can be homonymous such as *sāʿah* 'an hour' and *sāʿah* 'the judgment day' (Rippin, 1994). Homonymy means that multiple meanings are distributed over several words, whereas polysemy refers to a single word that has multiple meanings e.g. *point*: 'punctuation mark', 'sharp end', and 'detail, argument'. Also *green*: 'a certain color' and 'inexperienced'. The different meanings of a polysemous expression either have a base meaning in common or related by metaphor or metonymy (Rathert, 2004).

Some Qur'ānic words are polysemous e.g. *rabb*, which means 'owner' or 'God/Lord' as in the following example:

Yā-ʾayyatuhā n-nafsu l-muṭmaʾinna Irjiʿī ʾilā rabbiki rāḍiyatan marḍiyya

O soul at peace,Return to your rabb well pleased and well pleasing.[1] (Q 89:28).

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[1] I depended in translating verses on three sources: (1) Abdel Haleem, M.A.S. (2004) *The Qur'ān: A New Translation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (2) Arberry, Arthur J. (1955). *The Koran Interpreted*. London: Allen and Unwin. (3)

The verse is about the human soul that will return to its *rabb* on the resurrection day. The polysemous word *rabb* made the verse is ambiguous between two meanings: either 'Oh soul, return to your God/Lord to receive your reward', or 'Oh soul, return to your body where you were before the death to be ready for receiving the reward'. In the second meaning, the body could be regarded as an owner of the soul (Al-Ṭabarī, trans. 2001, vol.24, p.397).

Another polysemous word is *ʿatīq*, as in the following example:

Wa-l-yaṭṭawwafū bi-l-bayti l-ʿatīq

And circle around the ʿatīq House. (Q 22:29).

According to *al-Muʿjam al-Wasīṭ*, '*ʿatīq*', an adjective to the House [i.e. the *ka'bah*], has three meanings in Arabic: (1) ancient (2) liberated/ free/ emancipated (3) noble (p.582). The verse is about the pilgrimage acts where pilgrims can circle around the *ka'bah*. Polysemy here made the three meanings are applicable as a description of the House and the Qur'ān has another verse that seems to support the first meaning:

Inna ʾawwala baytin wuḍiʿa li-n-nāsi la-lladhī bi-bakkata

The first House [of worship] to be established for people was the one at Mecca. (Q 3:96).

Al-Shanqīṭī (1980) prefers this meaning because there is a Qur'ānic evidence to support it. However, he does not eliminate the other two meanings as long as the language signifies them.

The second kind of ambiguity is the structural (grammatical/syntactical) ambiguity. It is usually divided into three types. The first type is attachment ambiguity as in *the policeman observes the lady with the telescope* in which the prepositional phrase *with the telescope* modifies either *the lady* (thus, the lady is a lady with a telescope) or *observes* (thus, the policeman observes by means of a telescope) (Rathert, 2004). We can find the same kind in the Qur'ān as in the following example:

Fa-ʾulāʾika yadkhulūna l-jannata yurzaqūna fīhā bi-ghayri ḥisāb

Those will enter Paradise and be provided therein without reckoning (Q 40:40).

Nasr, Seyyed Hossein (Ed.). (2015). *The Study Quran*: *A New Translation and Commentary*. U.S.A: Harper Collins. Mostly, the translation does not illustrate the ambiguity as in the original language. Therefore, I prefer that some ambiguous words remain in Arabic and it will be followed by explanation.

The phrase *bi-ghayri ḥisāb*, without reckoning, modifies either *provided*, thus the meaning will be 'those will enter Paradise. In Paradise, they will be provided without reckoning [without limits]', or *enter*, thus the meaning will be 'those will enter Paradise without reckoning [calculating the good and bad deeds], and therein, they will be provided'.

The second type is scope ambiguity, which refers to the possibility of assuming different logical forms of a sentence. In *every man loves a woman* there are two probable meanings: either 'for each man, there is [his] woman, and he loves her' or 'there is a specific woman who is loved by all men'. In the first meaning, the sentence is primarily about 'every man' but in the second meaning, the sentence is primary about 'a woman' (Rathert, 2004). A similar ambiguity can be found in the Qur'ān:

Wa-huwa rabbu l-ʿarshi l-ʿaẓīm (Q. *9*:129).

Translating the verse directly into English will not show how it is an example of the scope ambiguity. In other words, if I translated it, I should choose one of its two possible meanings. Nevertheless, I can provide the meanings of the words as a temporary aid: *wa-huwa* [He is = God] *rabbu* [the Lord] *l-ʿarshi* [the Throne] *l-ʿaẓīm* [the Mighty]. In Arabic, the adjective occurs after the noun. Therefore, when we see the adjective, we should go back to see the noun that is qualified by the adjective. In this phrase, the adjective *ʿaẓīm* is ambiguous between qualifying '*Throne*' or '*Lord*'. Thus, the verse could be read in two ways: (1) the Lord of the Mighty Throne, the choice of Arberry and Abdel Haleem, (2) the Mighty Lord of the Throne. In the first reading, the sentence is primarily about the Lord Himself and the adjective *ʿaẓīm* qualifies Him. In the second reading, the sentence is primarily about the Throne and the adjective *ʿaẓīm* qualifies it.

The third type is the pronoun ambiguity. It arises when a reference of a pronoun is not precisely known as in *everyone loves his mother*, the pronoun 'his' can make the sentence interpreted as 'everyone loves his own mother' or as 'everyone loves that guy's mother' (Sennet, 2016). In the Qur'ān, we can meet this type of ambiguity as in the following example:

Allāhu lladhī rafaʿa s-samāwāti bi-ghayri ʿamadin tarawnahā

God is who raised the heavens without pillars you can see (Q 13:2).

It is not clear if the suffix *-hā*, 'them' refers to the heavens or the pillars. The verse could be read in two ways and gives two different meanings: (1) God raised the heavens with no visible pillars (2) God raised the heavens without pillars, as you see the heavens.

After displaying the kinds of ambiguity in the Qurʾān, the following analysis will focus on a polysemous word in the context of Qurʾānic narrative, namely the word 'rabb' in Q.12, *Sūrat yūsuf*.

I propose that one of the key factors in understanding the story of Joseph/*Yūsuf* in Sūra no.12 is the multiple meanings of the word *rabb* whether as 'God/Lord', 'owner', or 'master'. Through the story, which is narrated entirely in one *sūrah*, the word *rabb* occurs 19 times in various forms, and the reader can easily distinguish its intended meaning among these three or four meanings. In two instances, the word bears two distinct meanings without decisive evidence of what is precisely intended.

The first instance is in what Joseph said *when the woman in whose house he was living tried to seduce him*:

Qāla maʿādha llāhi ʾinnahū rabbī ʾaḥsana mathwāya ʾinnahū lā yufliḥu ẓ-ẓālimūn

He [Joseph] said, God be my refuge, my rabb has been good to me; wrongdoers never prosper. (Q 12:23).

Rabb in 'my *rabb* has been good to me' is ambiguous between two meanings: (1) Joseph refused the woman's seduction because God honored him, saved him from his brothers' plot and took him to this palace to live in safety and luxury. (2) Joseph refused the woman's seduction because his master (the woman's husband) was treating him well and taking him as a son. Both meanings are efficacious at once, and an ethical value may be intended by this ambivalence; that there is no difference between people's rights and God's rights.

The second instance is when Joseph asked one of his cellmates, the wine carrier, to mention him to the King of Egypt. However, the king has not been informed of the case of Joseph because of forgetting; forgetting of who?

Wa-qāla li-lladhī ẓanna ʾannahū nājin minhumā dhkurnī ʿinda rabbika Fa-ʾansāhu sh   shayṭānu dhikra rabbihī Fa-labitha fī s-sijni biḍʿa sinīn

Joseph said to the one he knew would be saved, 'Mention me to your master,' But Satan made him forget dhikra rabbihī So Joseph remained in prison for a number of years. (Q 12:42).

Ambiguity emerges in the phrase '*Satan made him forget dhikra rabbihī*' in which three ambiguity generators work together: (1) the indeterminate reference of the pronoun –*hu*, 'him' that could refer to the wine carrier or to Joseph. (2) The ambivalent meaning of the word *rabb* that means 'master' or 'God'. (3) The ambivalent meaning of the word *dhikr*, which means 'mention' and 'remembrance'. Hence, the first probable meaning is 'Satan made the wine carrier

forget to *mention* Joseph to his master i.e. the King of Egypt'. The second possibility is 'Satan made Joseph forget to *remember* his God and ask the help from him'. In the traditional *tafsīr*, the reference of 'him' still a matter for debate; Al-Rāzī (trans.1981) defends intensively that the pronoun refers to Joseph, unlike Ṭanṭawī (1998) who see that the pronoun refers to the wine carrier. Al-Zamakhsharī (trans.2009) and Ibn ʿĀshūr (1984) mention the two possibilities without a decisive preference, yet Ibn ʿāshūr states that the two meanings are deliberately intended to demonstrate the richness of the text. This richness, which stemmed from an ambiguous word, encourage us to consider another kind of words can also produce richness, namely vague words.

3. VAGUENESS IN THE QUR'ĀN

Most of the literature on ambiguity involves a section that discusses vagueness. Some try to define the subtle difference between them e.g. Rather (2004) and Sennet (2016) whereas others assert that each of them is complementary to the other e.g. Bussmann (2006). The relation between the two concepts stems from that the ambiguous word has multiple meanings or interpretations; the vague word has a non-specific meaning. In *Mary owns a red skirt*, a dark pink or a dark orange skirt would be borderline cases for this sentence, due to the intrinsic vagueness of red (Rathert, 2004). The same in adjectives such as 'tall', if Bill is not quite tall enough to be clearly tall and not quite short enough to be clearly not tall then he is a borderline case (Barker, 2002). 'Person' is not specified with reference to the features [male] vs [female], [old] vs [young] (Bussmann, 2006). Vagueness, therefore, is a kind of uncertain and unspecified applicability of a predicate. The non-specific meaning, mostly, produces multiple interpretations because of the reader's desire for clarity. Vagueness can be found in the Qur'ān as in the following example:

Fa-ʿasā llāhu ʾan yaʾtiya bi-l-fatḥi ʾaw ʾamrin min ʿindihī Fa-yuṣbiḥū ʿalā mā ʾasarrū fī ʾanfusihim nādimīn

But God may well bring Fatḥ or ʾamr of His own making, Then they will rue the secrets they harboured in their hearts. (Q. 5: 52).

Two vague words are contained here: '*fatḥ*' and '*ʾamr*'. The verse is precede by another verse in which God prevents believers from taking Jews and Christians as allies. Most of the Muslim commentators relate this verse to *ghazwat ʿUḥud* the battle of ʿUḥud (it was between the early Muslims and their Qurayshī Meccan enemies in 3AH/625 CE). The current verse refers to, *al-munāfiqūn*, the hypocrites, who show loyalty for the Prophet while actually being loyal to Jews

and Christians and need they desire to know who will win by the end. The two vague words in the verse play a rhetorical role in threatening the hypocrites. God promises that He will finish the struggle by either *fatḥ* or *ʾamr*. Mentioning two ways of how God will finish the struggle evoke an initial confusion in the listeners' minds. In addition, the two possible ways of the divine action are not specified. Every way/word has multiple interpretations. The basic meaning of *fatḥ* is 'opening'. It is used to express occupation the enemy's land, or the victory over the enemy. In addition to the meaning of the divine judgment, which is not precisely known. *ʾamr* means 'order', 'matter', 'topic', 'incident ', and 'event'. There is no indication to any of these meanings but something will be used in finishing the struggle. The vagueness here is an effective rhetorical tool to threaten the hypocrites who wait to see the winner, and then be loyal to him.

Another example of vagueness:

Wa-hadaynāhu n-najdayn

And [We] pointed out to him the two ways (Q. 90:10).

Al-najdayn is the dual form, *muthannā*, of *al-najd*, which means 'way' or 'path'. The word in the singular form is vague. If we say 'way', It could be 'the work way', 'the school way', 'the happiness way' and so forth. When using the word in the dual form 'two ways', vagueness is enhanced because of thinking of two parts for each possibility. The verse comes in a context of mentioning God blessings on the man: '*Did We not give him eyes, a tongue, lips, and point out to him the two ways*'. Most commentators prefer to say that two ways are 'good and evil'. It is a plausible meaning. However, al-Ṭabarī (trans.2001) narrates that the early commentator al-Rabīʿ Ibn Khuthaym (d. 65 AH /684 CE) thinks that the two ways are 'the two breasts of the woman' in the sense of that breasts are the two sources of the basic food for the baby and the baby knows innately how to reach it. At first glance, this meaning seems strange but we cannot reject it; not only because the verse did not specify the 'two ways', but also because the verse is preceded by another that indicates to this meaning in a way or another '*did We not give him a tongue and lips*'. Tongue and lips are the tools of sucking. Therefore, the verse could be interpreted as follows: 'We pointed out to him the source of his food, taught him how to eat, and equipped him with the tools'.

Qur'ānic vagueness is not limited to some single words, but it can extend to cover a group of verses as in the introductory section of Q. 79, *Sūrat al-Nāziʿāt*, The Wresters. The sūra begins with five oaths; each of them presents a typical example of vagueness in the Qur'ān:

wa-n-nāziʿāti gharqa, wa-n-nāshiṭāti nashṭa, wa-s-sābiḥāti sabḥa, fa-s-sābiqāti

sabqa, fa-l-mudabbirāti ʾamra

By those that wrest violently, By those that draw out quickly, By those that glide serenely, By those that race to the fore, Outstripping, By those that govern affairs (Q. 79:1-5).

The word '*al-nāziʿāt*' is a plural form of '*al-nāziʿah*'. '*al-nāziʿah*' is a nominal adjective derived from the verb '*nazaʿa*', which can be transitive in the meaning of 'wrest [get or pull violently]', and intransitive in the meaning of 'move powerfully'. The nominal adjective signifies that the word '*al-nāziʿāt*' gains its significance from the meaning of the verb. The noun does not refer to a defined object as 'the sky' that refers to 'the space above the earth' but the noun here is a description of who does the action. Thus, the mind should concentrate on the verb to understand that noun/nominal adjective. '*nazaʿa*' is a vague verb; in its transitive form 'wrest' we should ask who wrest, from who, what is wrested. In its intransitive form 'move' we need to know who moves, from where, to where. The word, echoing the vagueness theorists, has *fuzzy boundaries* (see Graff, 2000).

Al-Ṭabarī (trans.2001) narrates five interpretations for *al-Nāziʿāt*:

(1) The angels that wrest '*tanzaʿu*' people souls in death moment

(2) The death that wrests '*yanzaʿu*' people souls

(3) The stars that move '*tanzaʿu*' from horizon to another

(4) The arrows that move from bows in battles

(5) The soul when moves from the body in the death moment (vol. 24, pp. 57-59).

After displaying the meanings, al-Ṭabarī (trans.2001) said "The right interpretation in my opinion that God swore by *al-Nāziʿāti gharqā* and He did not deduct a specific '*naziʿatun*' wrester. Therefore, every '*naziʿah*' falls under this oath" (vol. 24, p. 59).

In the second oath '*wa-n-nāshiṭāti nashṭa*', we find that '*al-nashiṭāt*' refers also to the movement and it can be transitive in the sense of 'to cause movement', 'take', 'unscrew' and intransitive in the sense of 'move'. The verb *nashiṭa* differs from the verb '*nazaʿa*' in terms of the movement type. While '*nazaʿa*' connotes violence and power, '*nashiṭa*' connotes quickness and gracefulness. Four interpretations also are narrated by al-Ṭabarī for *al-nashiṭāt* '*nashṭā*', almost in the same meanings of *al-nāziʿāt*.

(1) The angels that unscrew the soul from the body in death moment

(2) The death that takes people's souls

(3) The stars that move from horizon to another

(4) The ropes that unscrewed from camels *(*vol. 24, pp. 59-62).

Al-Ṭabarī (trans.2001) proposed a fifth meaning inspired from a poetic partition: '*amsat humūmī tonshiṭu al-manashiṭā*', which means 'my anxieties moved my heart'. Hence, '*al-nashiṭāt*' could be, metaphorically, the anxieties of the heart *(* vol. 24, p. 62).

In the third oath, *wa-s-sābiḥāti sabḥa'*, '*al-sabiḥāt*', is the plural of '*sābiḥ*'. It means 'the swimmer' and it can be used metaphorically to signify the very fast runner. Ancient Arabs used it to describe the fast horse. Its probable meanings are as follows:

(1) The death that swims in the man's soul

(2) The angels that come down on the land quickly as if they swim

(3) The stars that swim in the horizons

(4) The ships that swim in the sea (Al-Ṭabarī, trans.200, vol. 24, pp. 62-63)

As for the fourth oath, *fa-s-sābiqāti sabqa*, '*al-sabiqāt*' means 'those who outstrips' or 'precede'. Its probable meanings as follows:

(1) The angels that outstrip each other during coming down on the land

(2) The horses that outstrip each other in running

(3) The stars that outstrip each other in their movement in the sky (Al-Ṭabarī, trans.200, vol. 24, pp. 63-65)

The multiplicity in the fifth oath, *fa-l-mudabbirāti 'amra,* is almost nonexistent; '*al-mudabbirāt*', which means 'those who manage or control', is the angels, but it is not clear which '*amr* they manage or control.

It is noted that there is repetition in the interpretations. This repetition made al-Rāzī (trans.1981) propose two ways to deal with this kind of verse: either to regard the five verses as a description of the same thing or to regard every verse as a description of a different thing. What al-Rāzī said in the second possibility do not differ from what al-Ṭabarī narrated in his commentary. The first possibility should also be presented in which al-Rāzī proposes that the five verse have five possibilities:

(1) All verses are about angels

(2) All verses are about stars

(3) All verses are about people souls

(4) All verses are about horses in battel

(5) All verses are about warriors in battel (vol.31, pp. 28-33).

As for angels, they wrest, *tanza'u*, the disbelievers' souls during their death hour whereas take, '*tanshitu*', believers' souls softly. Other angels come down from the sky on the land in an extremely high speed as if they horses '*sābihāt*'. Angels preceded people in existence as well, thus they are '*sabiqat*'. Other group of angels are responsible for managing and controlling people's affairs '*mudabirāt*'.

Stars is a probable meaning because they shift from horizon to another. Their shifts are daily, monthly, and quarterly. The daily shifting is fast and powerful thus, it is called '*naz'un*', but the monthly or quarterly shifting is calm and soft, it is called '*nashṭun*'. Through this shifting, stars run smoothly as if they swim '*tasbaḥu*' and they are not at the same level in speed thus, some stars exceed '*tasbiqu*' others. Stars also can manage and control affairs '*tudabbiru*' because they relate to the night and the day i.e. the temporal space in which affairs are controlled in the life.

Souls is a probable meaning too. Souls go away from the body, violently '*naz'un*' for disbelievers, and softly '*nashṭun*' for believers. The believer's souls move smoothly through their bodies like swimming '*sabḥun*'. The believers souls desire to reach the heavens quickly thus, some souls outstrip '*tasbiqu*' others. Souls [of dead] can also manage and control '*tudabbiru*' affairs by visiting alive people in dreams and propose solutions of their problems. To demonstrate this, Al-Rāzī narrated that Galen [the Greek doctor] said that he was ill and unable to treat himself until someone visited him in dream and guided him to the treatment.

In the fourth possibility, battle horses run violently '*tanza'u*' and move gracefully '*tanshaṭu*' from place to another during the battle. Theses horse are extremely fast, their movement seems as swimming '*sabḥun*' and they exceed '*tasbiqu*' each other in the speed of running. They control '*tudabbiru*' the affairs of victory. As for the fifth possibility, the warriors wrest '*yanza'ūn*' the arrows form the bows. Arrows move '*tanshaṭu*' gracefully to the target. Warriors ride fast horses '*sābiḥāt*'. All these factors precede '*tasbiq*' the victory and control '*tudabbir*' it.

There is a sixth possibility that could be regarded as a mystical interpretation. These five verses can be viewed as five stages illustrate the heart's Ascension to God. The first stage is that heart wrest *yanza'u* itself from loving anything but God. The second, heart moves '*yanshaṭu*' seriously and gracefully towards God.

Third, heart will swim '*yasbaḥu*' in heavens without obstacles. Fourth, hearts are not at the same degree of speed thus some hearts will outstrip '*tasbiqu*' others. After these stages, hearts may gain a partial ability to control '*tudabbiru*' some affairs on the earth ,just like angels. Finally, al-Rāzī (trans. 1981) comments:

Know that all of these possibilities are not transmitted form the Prophet, but commentators mentioned them because the words are capable of bearing all of these meanings. Therefore, we cannot say 'this is what God means', yet we should say 'this is what God probably means'. Here, there is no room for certainty. (vol.31, p.31).

4. AMBIGUITY AND VAGUENESS CO-OCCURRENCE

The last example to be presented, in the Joseph story once again, concerns the productive cooperation between the two phenomena to produce a unique type of narrative/interpretive uncertainty:

Wa-la-qad hammat bihī wa-hamma bihā, Law-lā ʾan raʾā burhāna rabbihī

For she desired him; and he would have taken her,But that he saw the proof of his Lord. (Q.12:24).

Burhān, which is translated as 'proof', and 'evidence', is vague in its reference in the story of Joseph. What exactly is it that Joseph has seen in order to resist the woman's seduction? Muslim commentators dispute over what exactly the '*burhān*' was:

Al-Ṭabarī (trans. 2001) attributes to the leading early commentator Ibn ʿabbas (d.68 AH/687 CE) two interpretations of the *burhān*: (1) a voice said: 'oh Joseph, will you do adultery? If you did, you will be as a bird lost its feathers and cannot fly anymore (2) an image illustrates that Jacob [Joseph's father] is angry. Another interpretation olso transmitted by Al-Ṭabarī (trans. 2001), attributed o the early commentator Muḥammad Ibn kaʿb (d. 108 AH/726 EC), that the *burhān* was a Qurʾānic verse appeared suddenly on the wall in front of Joseph. The verse is "*wa-lā taqrabū z-zinā ʾinnahū kāna fāḥishatan wa-sāʾa sabīla*" (And do not go anywhere near adultery: it is an outrage and an evil path) (Q.17:32). Al-Māwardī (trans.1993) narrates another interpretation, attributed to al-Ḍaḥḥak Ibn Muzāḥim (d.*10*5 AH/ 723 CE), in which before or during the seduction moment, the woman, who was worshipping idols, covered an idol in her room. Joseph asked her 'why did you do that?' she replied 'I feel shame to sin **in** front of the idol' Joseph said to himself 'if she feels shame to sin front of an idol that does not see or hear, I should feel shame to sin while God is seeing and hearing

me'. Ibn Baḥr (d.322 AH/934 CE) thinks that the *burhān* is a purity in Joseph's heart prevents him from doing sins (Al-Māwardī, trans.1993).

 The vagueness of the *brhān* has given the event when Joseph resisted the seduction, a high degree of abstraction. This abstraction made the most of early commentators tend to suppose concrete meanings of that *burhān* to be able to imagine it. The vagueness also has given other commentators the chance to interpret the word in a spiritual and mental manner. However, it should be noted that the vague word here did not work individually, the word *raʾā* supported vagueness by its ambiguous/ambivalent meaning. *Raʾā* [he saw] may be used literally in the sense of 'he saw with his eyes', which is called in Arabic semantics '*raʾā al-ḥissiyyah'* (physical *raʾā*). On the other hand, it may be used metaphorically in the sense of 'he knew, he realized' which is called in Arabic semantics '*raʾā al-ʿaqliyyah*' (mental *raʾā*).

5. CONCLUSION

The analysis demonstrates that the Qur'ān exploits effectively most of the acknowledged ambiguity kinds to perform either semantic or rhetorical functions. Ambiguity and vagueness are not limited to only one Qur'ānic form or genre, yet they play a decisive role in conveying the meaning in many Qur'ānic forms/genres such as narrative, oaths, and argumentation. The semantic multiplicity in some words is not only due to their lexical status as a polysemous or homonymous word but also because of the special use of the word that gives it further levels, whereas the same word could be univocal in another verse (as in '*rabb*'). In some cases, vagueness and ambiguity are overlapping and work effectively together. Vague words in the Qur'ān argue us to rethink the accepted meanings of certain Qur'ānic verses and try to appreciate other possible meanings whether these meanings were transmitted traditions or subjective and mystical reflections, as long as the text accepts. Finally, the Islamic exegetical works constitute an important depository of the probable meanings. They also show how commentators legitimize and justify their interpretations.

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