

SEMANTICS OF THE QUR'AN: THE PAST AND OPPORTUNITY IN THE FUTURE

Dadang Darmawan
State Islamic University (UIN) Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung
dadang.darmawan@uinsgd.ac.id

Abstract

The semantics of the Qur'an is the promising method which obtaining more accurate Qur'an interpretation. It can be a complement to Fazlur Rahman's double movement theory. It can restore the concepts in the Qur'an to its original states. The mainstreaming of this method will provide a solid foundation for the objectification of Qur'anic concepts, namely the effort to derive the abstract concepts of the Qur'an into the concrete level.

Keywords: Semantics Qur'an, *Weltanschauung*, word relations, the change of meaning

Introduction

Semantics is the study of the meaning of linguistic expressions. In the 1950s Toshihiko Izutsu began to employ semantics as an approach and method in the study of Qur'anic world view (Partin, 1970). He published his work in 1959, entitled *The Structure of the Ethical Term in the Qur'ān*. The semantics of the Qur'ān then became popular when the book was subsequently republished in 1966 under the title *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'ān*. The book is the best study of the Qur'anic world view ever have been written in a western language (Izutsu, 2002, ix). Another Izutsu's book is *God and Mankind in the Qur'ān: Semantics of the Qur'ān Weltanschauung* published in 1981. These two books become references to the later studies in this field.

Toshihiko Izutsu was the first Japanese scholar who translated the Qur'ān directly from Arabic into Japanese. The translation is well-known with the accuracy that it became a reference for various scientific works (Rahim, 2014). Toshihiko Izutsu's activities in translating the Qur'ān, made him realize that not all words of the original language can be translated into another language without distortion. There will always be several words which almost untranslatable (Izutsu, 2002, 9). For example, the Arabic word *kufir*. According to Izutsu, when he translated *kufir* merely to disbelief, therefore the meaning of *kufir* has been distorted and lost. Because in Arabic, *kufir* refers not only as disbelief but also as ungrateful (Izutsu, 2002, 26).

So what are the causes of difficulties when translating words from one language to another? According to Izutsu, it happened because of each word represents a perspective or point of view. Someone who speaks "A" language sees the world differently than a person who has spoken "B" language. The task of semantics research is searching for this particular perspective or viewpoint hidden behind every word. The results were then formulated into a concept. In this case, the concept is nothing but the crystallization of such a subjective perspective or point of view hidden behind every word, which is called *Weltanschauung*.

Methods

This research concern on the development of semantic of the Qur'an. The method used is book survey. Several books related to the topic were reviewed to find out the semantics of the Qur'ān past and opportunity in the future. Another approach used

is intellectual history (Brown, 1996). This research will focus on the changes that have taken place in the development of the semantics of the Qur'ān. (Brown, 1996). Some example has also been added to enrich our understanding.

Literature Review

The Stephen Ullman's Book entitled *Semantics an Introduction to the Science of Meaning* (1972) has explained so well the development of the semantics from the underground to the modern period. Nevertheless, the information of semantic of the Qur'an was not exposed. It was Partin's Article which reported the existence of semantics of the Qur'ān in Izutsu's works (Partin, 1970). However, the latest development of semantic of the Quran was not included yet. Any other reports on this topic are less informative than Partin's Article. So, the objective of this article is to report the latest development of semantics of the Qur'ān in post modern era. It also proposes an important role that can be played by the semantics of the Qur'ān in the future.

Discussion and Result

Information about the semantics development before the 20th century was very rare. Perhaps because of that Ullman (1972, 5) also called the underground period. But from the sources found, it can still be reconstructed.

Karl. C. Reisig (1792-1829) was the one who includes the meaning study as part of linguistics. In 1825, his lectures at Halle university claimed that the linguistics consists of three things: (1) Etymology, the origin of words study, (2) Syntax, the sentences study, and (3) Semasiology, the study of meaning (Ullman, 1972: 5). Reisig's opinion that linguistics consists of etymology, syntax, and semasiology, basically shows three stages of research that are commonly done at the time to understand the meaning of a word. For example, when a new word found, the first step understanding is to find the origin of the word whether from Latin, Arabic, Sanskrit or others. And then finding out what the word meaning is in its original language. Those are etymology role. The next step is to find what is the current meaning of the word by looking its usage in sentences. That has known as syntax role. After the second phase is completed, then it is automatically also known that the meaning of the word already changed. This phase is when the semantics play its role.

In the 1880s to the 1890s, there are two different tendencies in the study of meaning. The first one directs attention to the word relations with other words. In 1886 Arsene Darmesteter, a professor at Sorbonne University, published a book entitled *La Vie des Mots Etudies Dans Leurs Significations* which was later translated into English *The Life of words as a symbol of ideas*. It described how words are born with meaning, then connect and live together with other words. Some of them survive, evolve and change, but the others are gone (Darmesteter, 1886). The second draws attention to the change of word meaning. In 1897 Michel Breal published an article entitled *Essay de Semantique Science des Signification* which was later translated into English *Semantics: Studies in The Science of Meaning*. Semantics, as proposed by Breal, is a study to examine the "laws" behind the change and the development of words meaning (Breal, 1900: 99).

These two tendencies are interconnected and complemented. The next generation's research proves two things. First, the meaning is born because of the word relation with other words. Second, the change of word relationship is directly making the change of word meaning. If the relationship of a word with other words is changing, therefore the meaning will also change. The words relations and its implication to meaning were discussed further by Ferdinand de Saussure in the early 20th

century. In various expressions, he had repeatedly emphasized it. Saussure (1960: 114) said: “*Language is a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others.*”

In the 1930s semantics attention to the change of word meaning as proposed by Michel Breal increased. It became the object of many semantics researchers. Such studies are called historical approach or diachronic approach. An example of semantics research with this kind of approach is Gustav Stern's book titled *Meaning and Change of Meaning with Special Reference to the English Language* published 1931. It discusses empirically the change of English words meanings time by time.

This historical semantics research has brought semantics to other research objects. When the meaning of word changes, what is the indicator? This problem is solved by the research that conducted by Jost Trier. It found that the change of word meaning was marked by the changes of word relations or by the changes of its vocabulary structure. Jost Trier called it semantics field. In a monograph, Jost Trier gives the following illustration; in the 1200s in Germany, it has known the word *wisheit* which means wise. *Wisheit* is related to two other words namely *kunst* which means art in the broad sense of knowledge and *list* which means ingenious. In other words, a person can only be said as a wise person (*wisheit*) if he has extensive knowledge (*kunst*) and ingenuity to design tactics (*list*). In the 1300s there was a change in the meaning of *wisheit*. It was marked by the changes in the vocabulary structure. In the 1300s *wisheit* was no longer associated with knowledge (*kunst*) and ingenuity (*list*), but related solely to religious or mystical experience (Trier, 1931).

Why did this change happen? Through depth investigation, it was found that the change in the meaning of *wisheit* was related to the change of reality and mind realm that took place in Germany. Until the 1200s the relationship between the German emperor and the Catholic bishops was quite close. From Emperor Otto I (936-973), the German emperors were more interested in appointing Catholic bishops and abbots as government officials than Hertogs (the landlords in German), because they often committed treachery to seize the emperor's office. Of course, the bishops and the abbots who are appointed as government officials must have superior quality above the average. They should have *wisheit*, which is a broad knowledge (*kunst*) and the ingenuity (*lists*).

In the 1300s, the relationship was strained, because since Pope Innocentius III reigned, the popes eager becoming rulers over kings. All kings must obey the pope's decree. The throne is regarded as a gift from the pope. The pope no longer saw the Germany emperor as a partner, but as a rival and even a threat. The German emperor at that time (Frederik II) disliked obeying the pope's orders. In the 1300s the pope continued crippling the German emperors.

Finally, in 1338, the Hertogs decided that the emperor was legitimate although without the pope permission. (Berkhof, 1995). From that time the chosen emperor changed direction. Now he prefers Hertogs as the government officials. The bishops and abbots who had been entrenched in the government shifted from their positions. This circumstance ultimately forced them to pursue only the religion matter. The meaning of *wisheit* that has been attached to them also changed as " a man rich with religious and mystical experiences" (Ullman, 1972: 249).

The findings of Jost Trier above clearly showed the effect of the changing reality and mind on language. When the reality and the human mind changed, therefore it would have implications for the change in their language meaning. This idea was widely accepted then. But semantics scholars find another, more "crazy" idea. Now they begin thinking that is not only the mind can change the language, but language can also change and shape the mind. This idea was first promoted by

Edward Sapir and then perfected by his student named Benjamin Lee Whorf. Hence this idea was known as Sapir-Whorf theory.

According to this theory, language is shaped by humans. But humans then pass on the language to the next generation. Through the language, the older generation shaped the younger generation minds. As a result, the younger generation sees, understands and responds to the reality through the language taught by his ancestors. It is through the language heritage that the young generation saw, understood and responded the reality. Whorf said: "*The linguistic system is not merely a reproducing instrument, but it is also the shapes of ideas.... We dissect the nature of the lines along with our native language.... We cut nature up organize it into the concept... because we are party to an agreement to organize it in this way.*" (Whorf, 1956: 212-214).

An illustration taken from the movie *God Must Be Crazy* may clarify it well. In the film, it illustrated how excited and bewildered the Bushman's alien tribe is when it falls over Coca-Cola bottles from the airplane. The furor and confusion were caused by such a case as never before. Finally, they try to understand the bottle is in line with ideas that have been taught and inherited by their ancestors through language. According to their belief only gods who live in the heaven, so if this object came from the sky, then it must belong to gods.

But why would gods throw such things into their midst? The fact that the Coca-Cola bottle caused their clash, then led them to the conclusion that gods dumped it for bringing bad luck. This opinion is understandable, but it cannot be accepted. Why do gods not solve their problems instead of sending those pesky things into their midst? Finally, they decided that they must send the bottle back to heaven where the gods were living. Many times they tried throwing it to the sky but always fell back to the ground. Eventually, they decided to send it to the end of the world because the gods also lived there. Then their chief went to the edge of a deep abyss while uttering a message that the gods should take care of their problem and never send it back again.

The illustration above shows that the language inherited, shaped the thought realm and reality faced. Lord Bacon said, "*For men imagine that their reason governs words, while, in fact, word react upon understanding.*" In fact, we use the language inherited to choose the realm of reality and rearrange it into an understandable concept. The language reflected not only the people minds but also crystallized and perpetuated them. It then passes on to future generations a ready-made experience analysis. Through this heritage, the next generation will see the world (Ullman, 1972: 251).

Michel Foucault through his writings has succeeded proven how language in its form as discourse can govern the mind and change reality. Discourse is a serious talk about anything widely. In addition to scientific discussions, the discourse also includes daily conversations. At first, it is very fluid; because of anyone can say anything. Over the time appearing an institution that is considered authoritative. The discourse also began to thicken and harden. Now only the institution has the right to speak. It produced a lot of talks to control the way of how public see the reality. It determined what right and wrong are, what may and may not. This provision is called *episteme*, which is so powerful, but subtle yet because it has been accepted publicly as a hegemony. (Foucault, 1971)

Foucault exemplified the discourse on madness. At first, it is quite fluid. The madness once was regarded as possession, the inspiration from the unseen, the criminal, it was also once presumed as an infectious disease. Then came medical institution that is considered authoritative. It produces various discourses about madness that has unconsciously controlled the way of how public viewed, interpreted and treated

madness phenomenon (Foucault, 1988)

The what so-called discourse by Foucault; it is identical with *da'wah* in Islamic terms. Is *da'wah* not a serious talk meant to explain either what good or bad is; which halal or haram is; what right or wrong is? In this way, Rasulullah PBUH succeeded in transforming the Arabian mindset from *Jahiliyah* to Islam, and then along with the change of their minds, he also changed the reality of Arabian society at that time, from merely nomadic tribes to a highly civilized *ummah*. They were able then to rule the world for centuries. Prophet Muhammad PBUH achieved all those things through language and more precisely with discourse. If the discourses could be restored, recovered, and rewritten again, then, of course, more or less the same changes will occur. That was what Fazlur Rahman believed.

According to “the double movement theory” of Fazlur Rahman, what manifested in the time of the Prophet Muhammad was, it can be realized again now. There are two ways to make it happen. First, going back to the time of the Prophet and restoring the core concepts that had been preached by the Prophet. Second, going back to the present time and trying as much as possible by applying those concepts to the present conditions. And for this purpose, Rahman chose hermeneutics as his methodological approach. (Rahman, 1984, 5-7)

This idea, I believe, will be successfully implemented if Rahman relies on semantics, not on hermeneutics as his approach or method. Semantics with its “semantics field” will be more capable restoring the core concepts of Islam to its original state. If these concepts can be restored and re-preached optimally, the glory of Islam as it experienced, will be realized again.

Today many of the Islamic core concepts have changed and distorted in such a way that the results are less satisfactory. For example the concept of *taqwa*. Today the word *taqwa* is identical with obedience. In the Friday prayer sermon, the preacher loudly said: "O Muslims, you should be *taqwa*. *Taqwa* is carrying out God's commands and avoiding his prohibitions ". But the reality happens that the call for *taqwa* continues to echo, but the listeners still prefer to do evil things and very difficult to obey it. So what is wrong? This question is very hard to answer. But when appealing to the *taqwa* concept as discoursed on the Prophet time, it will appear that there is one element missing from the current “semantics field” of *taqwa*.

On the prophet time, *taqwa* closely related to *khasyiyah*, i.e., fear of God. *Taqwa* in the sense of God was preached to the people continuously. From this fear comes the obedience to God, and because of this fear the people away from vice. Now it is almost gone from semantics field of *taqwa*. People are required to be obedient, but they are not educated to fear to God.

Conclusion

There are many Islamic concepts, especially those contained in the Qur'ān that has been distorted so that the concept may be completely different from its original meaning. If this continues to happen, it is possible that one time in the future the Qur'ān written, the reading sounded, but its concepts are no longer recognizable. Of course, we hope the Qur'ān does not experience it. Therefore semantics research on the Qur'ān becomes very important to restore many key concepts of the Qur'ān. Because when this is not done as soon as possible, the Qur'ān will only be a pile of words written in *mushaf*, but people no longer know its original concepts.

References

Bacon, Lord. *Novum Organum*. New York: P.F. Collier and Son, MCMI.

- Berkhof, H. and I.H. Enklaar. 1995. *Sejarah Gereja*. Jakarta, BPK Gunung Mulia
- Bréal, Michel. 1900. *Semantics Studies in the Science of Meaning*, Translated by Nina Cust. New York, Henry Holt & Co.
- Brown, D. W. (1996). *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Coseriu, Eugenio & Horst Beckeler. 1981. *Trends in Structural Semantics in General Linguistic*. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag
- Darmesteter, Arsene. 1886. *The Live of the Words as the Symbols of Ideas*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Co, I, Paternoster Square.
- De Saussure, Ferdinand. 1974. *Course in General Linguistics*, Translator: Wade Baskin, Fontana, Collin
- Foucault, Michel. 1971. *Archeology of knowledge and The Discourse on Language*. New York, Pantheon Books
- Foucault, Michel. 1988. *Madness and Civilization, a History of Insanity in Age of Reason*. New York, Vintage Book Edition.
- Izutsu, Toshihiko. 2002. *Ethics-Religious Concepts in the Qur`an*. Montreal-London, McGill-Queen's University Press
- Partin, H. B. (1970). Semantics of the Qur`an: A Consideration of Izutsu's Studies. *History of Religions*, 9(4), 358–362.
- Rahim, Ahmad Sahidah. 2014. *Tuhan, Manusia dan Alam dalam al-Qur`an; Pandangan Toshihiko Izutsu*, Pulau Pinang, University Sains Malaysia Press
- Rahman, Fazlur. 1984. *Islam and Modernity, Transformation of an intellectual Tradition*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press
- Stern, Gustav. 1931. *Meaning and Change of Meaning with Special Reference to the English Language*, Gothenburg, Goteborg Hogskolas Arsskrift XXXVIII
- Trier, J. 1931. *Der Deutsche Wortschatz im Sinnbezirk des Verstandes. Die Geschichte ews Sprachlichen Feldes. I: Von den Anfängen bis zum Beginn des 13. Jh.* Heidelberg
- Ullman, Stephen. 1972. *Semantics an Introduction to the Science of Meaning*. Oxford: Basil Backwell
- Whorf, Benjamin L. 1956. *Language, Thought and Reality: Selected Writing of Benjamin Lee Whorf*. Edited by. J.B. Carroll. Cambridge, M.I.T. Press