

# Why Does the Verb Fail to Be *Xabar*? A Relevance- Theoretic Analysis

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Received: June 1, 2011 Accepted: June 17, 2011 doi:10.5296/ijl.v3i1.689

## Abstract

Adopting a psycholinguistic model of analysis such as Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson 1986a[1995]), helps, we argue, account for traditional Arab grammarians' long-standing belief that the verb, as a lexical category, fails to be *xabar* (a rheme). Concisely, this paper aims to explore the 'linkage' between linguistic structure and pragmatic interpretation. The proposal adopted here is that, following Al-Jarrah (2009), actions, being less concrete than participants, tend to stand out less in the "landscape"; and thus, are less likely to create maximal relevance. In relevance-theoretic terms, verbal constituents create, we argue, less contextual effects for larger processing cognitive effort. Nominal constituents, on the other hand, are more likely to be relevant because they are, we believe, the "discourse entities" which are mainly the potential carriers of information. The present study advances the uniform assumption that the "rhematic status" of a constituent - be it nominal, verbal, etc. - is exclusively determined by its overall relevance to the context in which it occurs, i.e. the one causing substantial modification to the cognitive environment of the interlocutors in the discourse. In order to empirically support the validity of this claim, the information structuring of the opening of some Qur'anic chapters (*Arabic: suras*) is investigated. Whereas some chapters (e.g. 'al-mutaffifeen, 'al-'la) follow the verbal pattern (V S), others (e.g. 'altakweer, 'al-inshigaag, 'al-infitaar) follow the nominal pattern (NP VP). As for the mechanism, sooner disambiguation (topicalisation), defocalisation (lower pitch), and reference assignment (pronoun usage) all work in tandem in a text consisting of a set of assumptions of different degrees of manifestness to narrow down the assumption that is relevant most to both the speaker and the audience in the discourse, and ultimately enhance the local cohesion of the text. (Note 1)

**Key words:** Xabar, Rheme, Arabic linguistics, Relevance theory, Discourse analysis studies, Qur'anic studies

## 1. Introduction

In this research paper, we aim to provide a relevance-theoretic analysis for traditional Arab grammarians' insight that once the verbal constituent changes its linguistic coding (e.g. V VP) it incurs a somewhat different pragmatic interpretation. Our objective is to provide a conceptual uniform analysis to show that in a given discourse information structuring (i.e. foregrounding and backgrounding) of all assumptions arises "as automatic effects of the speaker/hearer's tendency to maximize relevance" (Sperber and Wilson 1986a [1995]: 217)

By voicing Grice's long standing belief that communication is an intentional process (see Grice 1975; 1989), Wilson and Sperber (1986a [1995]) argue that communication is an ostensive behavior which helps focus the attention of the audience on the relevant information. To them, "ostension" is a major driving force that gives direction to the flow of thoughts. This is probably true for at least two reasons: (1) the 'communicative intent' of the speaker is not always manifest to all interactants; and (2) there is always more than one meaning created. Conversationalists have to figure out which meaning is really intended, is justifiable, and/or makes the most sense in an exchange by filling in for what is left unsaid/unstated based on evidence provided for this purpose. The thrust of our argument is to show how interactants get the 'communicative intents' right. (Note 2) Within this framework of analysis, the underlying theoretical claim is that utterances which contain novel assumptions cause substantial modification to the cognitive environment of the audience, and can thus bring about contextual effects that are worth hearers' attention.

To alter the addressees' cognitive environment, the addressor's task is twofold: (1) to communicate information to her audience (the informational function), and (2) to have them recognize her intentions in doing so (the communicative function). This second task can sometimes be achieved by extra focusing (e.g. tonic stress, repetition, loudness, special gestures and facial expression, etc.), whereby the speaker causes herself extra effort so as to minimize the effort on the part of the hearer and, in the meantime, maximize the relevance of the 'focalized' constituent (be it a noun, verb, preposition, etc.) to the larger discourse. (Note 3) If this is true, we could safely conclude that (when communicating) people always have the intention to make some assumptions (those which process new information) more accessible than others (those which are already part of the addressee's consciousness (for details see Prince 1981a, b; Kuno 1971; Chafe 1976, inter alia)).

### *1.1 Information structuring and sentence focusing: Topic/focus-based accounts*

The encoding of the information structure of nominal constituents, i.e., highlighting certain elements and backgrounding other elements (Wallace 1982), has been extensively studied in the literature (Halliday 1967a, b; 1968; Jackendoff 1972; Chafe 1976; Clark and Haviland 1977; Givon 1979; 1984; Green 1980; Prince 1981b, 1992; Reinhart 1981; Wallace 1982; Gundel et al 1992; Vallduvi 1996; Ping 2000; Wilson and Sperber 1993; Birner 1994; Ward & Birner 1996; 2005; Wilson and Wharton 2006; author 2009; Gochecho 2011; inter alia). It has turned out that at the surface structure, intonation and word order are the most important features (Chafe 1970: 233; Zubizarreta 1998) (Note 4). However, in order to understand the real impact of these factors at the discourse level, we need to consider other parts of speech (e.g. verbal constituents) whose information statuses seem to be less crystal clear (cf. Phillips 1983; Faber 1987; Look 2007, Gochecho 2011).

At the discourse level, the problem is, to quote Sperber and Wilson's (1995: 203), "how an

actual focus is chosen from a range of potential foci.” Several studies have shown that once a certain constituent enters into the discourse for the first time, it is more likely to receive prominence by throwing it towards focus position (Firbas 1966a; 1966b; Bolinger 1972; Mathesius 1975; Prince 1981b; Prince 1992; Birner 1994; Birner and Gregory 1998; Ward & Birner 1996; Breheny 1996; 1998; Labistia 2006; inter alia) (Note 5) as it adds a new piece of information to the message communicated by the speaker/writer to the audience (see Bardovi-Harlig 1983: 23-4). This may, we believe, contribute to considering the text as consisting of “degrees of significant discourse information” (Jones and Jones 1979: 6). Firbas (1966a; 1966b) argues that each constituent in the discourse communicates a certain degree of ‘communicative dynamism’, securing the heterogeneity of the discourse: not all items in the discourse are new (because the message cannot be totally understood), and not all of them are old (because that won’t help the discourse to move forward). What is especially worth noting here is that topic/focus-based accounts (e.g. Erku and Gundel 1987; Sidner 1983a; 1983b; author 2009) mostly agree that the topic of the larger discourse is likely to be introduced as the focus in the VP of the main clause. Consider the following two examples from Erku and Gundel (1987), where the discourse is more than one sentence:

- A) We stopped for drinks at the New York Hilton before going on to the Thai restaurant. The waitress was from Bangkok.
- B) We stopped for drinks at the New York Hilton before going on to the zoo. The baby orangutan was really cute.

One reason why (A) is stylistically felicitous is that the topic of the second sentence (namely *The waitress*) can be bridged with the focus of the first sentence (namely *the New York Hilton*). In contrast, (B) is stylistically infelicitous because the topic of the second sentence (namely *the baby orangutan*) cannot be bridged with the focus of the first sentence (namely *the New York Hilton*). In Ping's (2000: 21) words, "Backward inferences relate rheme to theme, establishing a degree of appropriateness between them". However, problems of the topic/focus-based account emerge when the first sentence contains two or more local foci. Consider the following example:

- C) I didn't pass the math exam because I was sick on the day of the exam.

Disregarding the many implications and problems of our phrasing of the issue, two concepts are foregrounded in this one-sentence discourse, viz. *the math exam* and *being sick*. The interesting inquiry we raise is like this: How does the hearer expect the speaker to continue with this discourse? Should the speaker continue with this discourse discussing the math exam? Or should s/he go on discussing the state of being sick? It is not completely impossible to imagine two perfectly acceptable continuations, especially if we take heed of the undisputable observation that this sentence has two intonational nuclei. However, this requires a thorough investigation of *information distribution in discourse*, viz. the bond between sentence topic and discourse topic (for an illuminating discussion, see van Dijk 1977). By making use of Firbas' notion of communicative dynamism, author (2009) argues for settling the dispute by considering the interplay between topic and focus. This study presents an alternative solution, particularly, a relevance-based analysis.

### *1. 2 Information structuring and sentence focusing: A relevance-based analysis*

By situating the problem within the relevance-theoretic model of analysis, we argue that *the information distribution in discourse is geared towards the maximization of relevance, and so the rhematization of any lexical item (be it nominal or verbal) is largely determined by its overall relevance (i.e. cost-effect trade off) to the larger context*. For, relevance theory capitalizes on the claim that human cognition, and ultimately human communication, is

“relevance-oriented”, i.e. picking out assumptions that are relevant and processing them productively (Sperber and Wilson 1986a, 1986b, 2002; Wilson and Wharton 2006). What this basically means is that people pay the utmost of their attention to that which seems most relevant to them. Sperber and Wilson (1986a [1995]: 122) provide the following definition, where relevance is viewed as a “relation between an assumption and a context”:

An assumption is relevant in a context if and only if it has some contextual effect in the context

However, Sperber and Wilson (1986a [1995]) put forward another condition for the maximization of relevance, namely effort. By adopting an ‘extent-conditions format’, Sperber and Wilson (1986a [1995]: 125) redefine relevance along the following lines:

Relevance

*Extent condition 1:* an assumption is relevant in a context to the extent that its contextual effects in this context are large.

*Extent condition 2:* an assumption is relevant in a context to the extent that the effort required to process it in this context is small.

Accordingly, the ‘interplay between effect and effort’ is what determines the relative relevance of an assumption. In gross terms, when processed in context, an utterance provides some “analytic implications”, which, no doubt, are not processed all at once. For, people cannot attend to the whole text at a time. In Ping's (2000: 13) words, this is achieved through forward and backward inferences, "establishing the appropriateness of the theme-rheme relationship." To Halliday (1970: 161) and others (cf. Ping 2000), because the theme is "the peg on which the message is hung", the sole task is to see how the development of the message proceeds not only at the level of the clause (intra-sentential) but between adjacent sentences (inter-sentential). *The overall relevance of the utterance increases by the implication that reduces the cognitive effort needed to process it, and by that which increases its contextual effects.* In Sperber and Wilson's (1986a [1995]: 152) terms “it is the phenomena which are least likely to be relevant which get filtered out, and those most likely to be relevant which pre-empt attention.” The task is then to single out the assumption(s) which will have greater contextual effects and, in the meantime, require less processing cognitive effort (Wilson and Sperber 1981; 1986; Wilson 2000; Sperber and Wilson 1986a[1995], 1990a). At the level of detail we are considering here, this requires exploring “the linkage between linguistic structure and pragmatic interpretation” (Sperber and Wilson 1986a [1995]: 217).

## 2. Problem of the study: lexical versus phrasal verbal constituents

### 2.1 Traditional Arab grammarians' viewpoint

The debate on the information structuring of sentences like (1) and (2) below has sparked off Arab grammarians' interests for ages:

- (1) māt-a ? r-rajul-u (Arabic: مات الرجل)  
die (V. sing. past) the man (N. sing. nom.)  
(literally: died the man)  
*The man died*
- (2) ? r-rajul-u māt-a (Arabic: الرجل مات)  
the man (NP. sing. nominal) die (VP. sing. past)  
(literally: The man died)  
*The man died*

Proponents of the traditional approach have always argued in favor of maintaining a fine line of demarcation between a nominal sentence and its verbal counterpart. Almost all traditional Arab grammarians would agree that sentence (1) above is verbal (*Arabic*: جملة فعلية), and sentence (2) is nominal (*Arabic*: جملة اسمية). For them, a sentence is verbal (interpreted as consisting of a subject and a verb) if the word order is V S; if the word order is S V, the sentence is nominal (interpreted as consisting of an NP and a VP) (Note 6) To a traditional Arab grammarian, the verbal constituent (e.g. *māt*) occupies a rhematic position iff (if and only if) it is a phrasal category (VP). They would therefore agree that whereas *māt-a* is rhematic (*Arabic*: خبر) in (2) above, it is not in (1). To them, (1) consists of a verb (*māt-a*) and an agent (? *r-rajul-u*), but (2) is made up of a theme (? *r-rajul-u*) and a rheme (*māt-a*).

This word re-ordering, they reckon, should alter the pragmatic interpretation of the sentence (Note 7). We strongly believe that for languages with relatively less rigid word order (e.g. Arabic), word order is necessary to disentangle structural ambiguities (*Arabic*: الالتباس), such as that between theme and rheme (*Arabic*: المبتدأ والخبر), theme and subject (*Arabic*: الفاعل والمبتدأ), and rheme and subject (*Arabic*: والفاعل الخبر) (Note 8).

However, a number of neo-Arab grammarians have questioned the essence of the divisions which, for many of them, are only sanctioned on formal considerations. Al-husari (1985), Al-jawari (2006), Al-makhzumi (1986) Al-samirra'i (1980) (Note 9), to name only a few, argue that the classical distinguishing line between nominal and verbal clauses is not pragmatically motivated. They all point out that although Al-jurjani (1978; 1995) in his theory of *anna m* (*Arabic*: النظم), for example, calls for linking grammar with meaning, most of the applications of his theory remained structural (Note 10).

Neo-Arab grammarians' call is like this: linguistic structure should be linked with pragmatic interpretation. To this end, we let ourselves into relevance theory, aiming to show how this word re-ordering (namely changing V S into NP VP) affects the relative relevance of the assumption to the larger discourse.

## 2.2 Information structuring of verbal constituents: A relevance-theoretic analysis

Because the Hallidayan conception of the thematic and rhematic portions of the clause is very much influenced by languages (e.g. English) whose word order is relatively fixed, a theme is viewed as the clause-initial element and the rheme the reminder: Halliday (1994: 37) makes this point clear, "one element in the clause is enunciated as the theme, this then combines with the reminder so that the two parts together constitute a message". However, as the canonical word order of Arabic allows for variation, a sentence may be verbal (V S) or nominal (NP VP) for reasons, we believe, related to speaker's intention to *highlight* certain constituents and *background* others. Accentuation, which is a byproduct of this information packaging, is not solely for, though it does imply, emphasis or contrast. Such being the case, any constituent can be the focus of the discourse, i.e. the potential carrier of new information; therefore, "[n]ewness is definable not only by strict appearance in a text or discourse" (Bardovi-Harlig 1983: 21-2).

By adopting a relevance-theoretic model of analysis, we argue that it is not an inherent property of nominal constituents, as has sometimes been implied, that they are given priority in the discourse. Given data from a language which has relatively less restricted word order (*cf.* Arabic), we hope to provide evidence that casts doubt on the Hallidayan's view of the theme as a "position-bound, clause-initial element" (for details see Ping 2000). Concisely, we

hope to provide an alternative look at how the thematic and rhematic portions of the clause help us see how the discourse proceeds from one sentence to another. The bulk of the argument is like this: the theme guides the direction of the message to the maximization of relevance; for the information status of constituents (theme-rheme distinction) occurring in the same discourse is determined by their relative relevance to the subsequent discourse. This basically suggests that all constituents (and thus all assumptions) compete for maximal relevance. The constituent, be it verbal or nominal, that contributes more to the overall meaning of the text by pushing it forward most is more likely to receive prominence (foregrounding) on its first occurrence, defocalization and pronominalization (backgrounding) on subsequent occurrences. Constituents then keep changing their information statuses as the discourse develops; the greater the ‘saliency’ of that constituent as the discourse develops (i.e., in terms of frequency), the less likely it is to be prominent (in terms of stress), and thus the least likely, in relevance-theoretic terms, to be adapted by the speaker to the way the hearer is going to process it. That same constituent—be it nominal or verbal—which was part of the rheme (i.e., comment) on its first occurrence changes now to become part of the theme (i.e., topic) on subsequent occurrence(s). As noted earlier, participants (represented by NPs), being more concrete, tend to stand out more than actions in the "landscape", and thus require less processing cognitive effort and in the meantime create more contextual effects. This can be clarified by the following extract from the holy Qur'an (where focalized Ns are in bold, and defocalized Ns in italics):

- (3) Allah is the **light** of the heavens and *the earth*. The parable of his *light* is (as there were) a **niche**, and within *it* is a **lamp**: the *lamp* is in a **glass**, the *glass* as it were a brilliant **star**, light(*it*) from the blessed **tree**, an *olive*, neither of the east nor of the west
- الله نور السموات والأرض || مثل نوره كمشكاة ||  
 فيها مصباح || المصباح في زجاجه || الزجاجه كأنها  
 كوكب دري || يوقد من شجرة مباركة || زيتونة لا  
 شرقية ولا غربية ||

In each intonation phrase, nominal constituents acquire an information status on their second occurrences (in italics) different from that they have acquired upon entrance into the discourse for the first time (in bold). This shift in position, we argue, enhances the assumption's overall relevance to both the speaker and audience, and is thus a crucial factor in determining the thematic and rhematic portions in the discourse. It is not because *niche*, for example, is an indefinite noun (for definiteness is, we believe, a byproduct not a cause) that makes it more prominent than its competitors in the same intonation group; but rather, because it occupies a position that makes it the most legitimate candidate to be analytically implied by the immediately succeeding member (i.e. the salient feature) of the following discourse, and thus contributing in one way or another to the development of the discourse (i.e. maximizing its contextual effects). This happens when a new element (thrown toward a rhematic position) takes turn to be part of the subsequent discourse. '*Niche*' is, therefore, the rheme because the narrator wants to adapt it to the way the hearer is going to process it by maximizing its contextual effects and minimizing the effort on the part of the hearer by means of increasing its prominence, and thus constraining the number of possible interpretations. As for the machinery, this is brought about by (*de*)focalization, sooner disambiguation and earlier reference assignment, which together contribute to enhancing the local cohesion of the discourse. By structuring smaller intonation phrases to highlight particular words, nominal constituents change positions resulting in foregrounding some assumptions and backgrounding others (see Wallace 1982). It is interesting to note, however, that movement rules that influence the information status of lexical constituents are done relative to the verb (cf. preposing and postposing) (Note 11). What this basically means is

that movement rules which “serve an information packaging function” (Birner 1994: 233) are not as influential in the case of verbs as they are for nouns, something that negatively affects their optimal relevance relative with the other competitors in the discourse (Note 12).

As for reference assignment, verbs sometimes fail to occupy initial position (talking about typical declarative sentences) as that position is reserved for nominal constituents which can be pronominalized (in order to avoid mere repetition, of course) on subsequent occurrences (cf. **niche** and **star** above), and thus reducing the effort needed to process them. All in all, reasons relating to disambiguation and reference assignment may explain why nominal constituents are, relatively speaking, more likely to be the main DISCOURSE ENTITIES, the potential carriers of new information (or *xabar* in a traditional Arab grammarian's words).

However, this assumption is never inviolable. Optimal relevance analysis provides evidence that non-nominal constituents can sometimes be maximally relevant (Note 13). For example, Bardovi-Harlig (1983) argues that pronouns, which are contextually evoked - to use Prince's (1981b) terminology, can be stressed for their “semantic roles.” This amounts to saying that every lexical item, including prepositions and form words which are marked for “their high word frequency and their low sentence stress” (Philips 1983: 487), can sometimes be the smallest focally stressed constituents in a certain context. This replicates Bolinger's (1985: 85) argument that “the focusing of a preposition is like the focusing of any other word.” The speaker may choose to make a “declared contribution” (Gussenhoven 1983: 383) to the context by means of emphatically stressing any constituent, for “whenever emphatic stress occurs in a sentence, it overrules normal stress” (Hogg and McCully 1987: 4). Sperber and Wilson (1986a [1995]: 49) call this 'ostensive behavior', i.e. the “behavior which makes manifest an intention to make something manifest.” For, in relevance theory, a fine line of demarcation is drawn between the speaker's *informative intention* (her intention to inform the audience of something) and the speaker's *communicative intention* (her intention to inform the audience of one's informative intention). By extra focusing, the speaker causes herself extra effort so as to (1) minimize the effort on the part of the hearer and (2) maximize the relevance of the focalized constituent (be it a noun, verb, preposition, etc.) to the larger discourse. Let us show how this can be brought about on pronouns and verbs.

Bardovi-Harlig (1983) provides the following example to show that “[p]ronouns are also potential carriers of new information,” and that “[n]ewness...is definable not only by strict appearance in a text or discourse”

(4) John hit Sam and then *he* was hit by Ira (Note 14),

In this example, *he* (i.e., the topic of the second clause) is not interpreted as referring to *John* (i.e., the topic of the first clause), but to *Sam* (i.e., the comment of the first clause). In relevance-theoretic terms, this semantic role shift has contributed to the overall relevance of the pronoun to both the speaker and her audience. The speaker has to adapt it (the communicative intention) in a way or another as to how the hearer is supposed to process it. In more operational terms, the speaker has caused herself the extra effort to alter the saliency of the more accessible interpretation (namely that *he* refers to *John*). It is true that reference assignment in this way is to some extent costlier than the more accessible interpretation (*he* refers to *John*), but this is sanctioned as it maximizes relevance by reducing the effort the hearer needs to infer (the less salient but the more intended) interpretation, and by creating more contextual effects in the hearer (See Sperber and Wilson 1986a [1995]; Wilson and Wharton 2006).

The same rationale applies to verbs. Consider the following examples taken from Bardovi-

Harlig (1983: 17), where in (5) the pronoun *it* is in focus, but in (6) the verb *broke* gets that privilege:

(5) I saw the glass that Floyd broke, but I couldn't tell what *it* broke.

(6) She saw the window break, but she didn't know what *broke* it.

In (6), the speaker has caused herself the extra effort to alter the saliency of the more accessible interpretation, namely (5). For communication to be maximally relevant, the hearer has to recognize the speaker's communicative purpose.

This may fit well with the suggestion that Bardovi-Harlig (1983: 23) put forward to account for the accentuation of pronouns apart from that of emphasis or contrast: "a scale on which all information bearing sentence elements are entered," to compete for maximal relevance. The verb in Sidner's Expected Focus Algorithm comes last in the preference schema (a path that speakers have to follow) which sets out like this:

Order the set of phrases in the sentence using the following preference schema:

- theme, unless the theme is a verb complement in which case theme from the complement is used
- all other thematic positions with the agent last
- the verb phrase

Optimal relevance provides grounds for the claim that it is never unusual for any competing assumption to reach the top of the scale (Note 15). However, accentuation per se is not sufficient condition for an implication to be most relevant to both the speaker and hearer. For an implication to reach the top of the scale, the speaker has to adapt it to the way the hearer is going to process it. This requires, in addition to accentuation upon entrance into the discourse, topicalization and pronominalization on subsequent occurrences.

### 3. Methodology

In order to empirically support the validity of our claim, the information structuring of the opening of some Qur'anic chapters (*Arabic: suras*) is investigated. Whereas some chapters (e.g. المطففين، الأعلى), follow the verbal pattern (V S), others (e.g. التكوير، الانفطار، الانشقاق) follow the nominal pattern (NP VP). This shift between linguistic coding provides, we believe, clues about the communicator's intentions which consist of all *the explicatures (linguistically inferred) and implicatures* (contextually inferred) conveyed by the utterance. In other words, the coding is a stimulus, so to speak, from which the audience can make linguistic and contextual inferences about what the speaker is trying to communicate. This basically why the role of the audience is always thought to be inferential, i.e. recovering the thoughts they assume the communicator is trying to convey. The choice between V S or NP VP coding is then relevance-oriented, i.e. making judgments about which assumption (from the set of competing assumptions available in the discourse) makes larger contextual effects for smaller cognitive processing effort in the discourse. As criteria of judgment, the present analysis suggests that *sooner disambiguation* (topicalisation), *defocalisation* (lower pitch), and *reference assignment* (namely pronoun usage) all work in tandem to narrow down the implication that is relevant most to both the speaker and the audience in the discourse, and ultimately enhance the local cohesion of the Qur'anic text.



## 4. Discussion

### 4.1 *S V information structuring*

An optimal relevance-based analysis suggests that any constituents are then potential competitors for maximal relevance, provided that enough evidence (salient or inferable) is available in the larger context to help unravel the communicative intent of the speaker. For, in a long text consisting of a set of assumptions of different degrees of manifestness, the goal is always to help focus the attention on the assumption that is more relevant to both the speaker and her/his audience. This is probably why the speaker adapts part of the discourse (by means of prominence, pronominalization and disambiguation) as to how the hearer is supposed to process it. Consider the opening of chapter 87 of the Qur'an (Arabic: الأعلیٰ):

سَبِّحْ اسْمَ رَبِّكَ الْأَعْلَىٰ [87:1]

[87:1] glorify the name of thy Lord, the Most High,

الَّذِي خَلَقَ فَسَوَّىٰ [87:2] [87:2] Who creates and perfects,

وَالَّذِي قَدَّرَ فَهَدَىٰ [87:3] [87:3] And Who designs and guides,

وَالَّذِي أَخْرَجَ الْمَرْعَىٰ [87:4] [87:4] And Who brings forth the pasturage,

فَجَعَلَهُ غُثَاءً أَحْوَىٰ [87:5]

[87:5] Then turns it black, rotten rubbish.

As the opening of this chapter follows the verbal pattern (i.e., V S word order), most traditional Arab grammarians would agree that the verbal part of Verse 1 glorify (Arabic: سبح) is lexical, and is thus background information. In the meantime, the nominal constituent in direct object position the name of thy Lord (Arabic: اسم ربك) is in focus position, preparing the audience to hear something about this part of the discourse. In relevance-theoretic terms, what this basically means is that *glorify* (Arabic: سبح) does not pre-empt attention, and thus does not require sooner disambiguation, pronominalization, and/or prominence, a privilege enjoyed by the nominal constituent which is now in focus position. This is quite manifest when we consider Verses 2, 3 and 4 which have all disambiguated "the name of thy Lord". The relative pronoun "who" (Arabic: الذي) in Verses 2, 3 and 4 helps focus the attention of the audience on the relevant piece of information of that discourse (namely "the name of thy Lord"). It is true that repeating that same pronoun three times has caused the speaker extra effort, but this is sanctioned as it minimizes the effort the hearer needs to exert to get the speaker's intentions right. Prominence also helps construe meaning. To illustrate, although "the name of thy Lord" is most prominent on its first occurrence, pitch on subsequent references starts to fade out until a new focus comes forward in Verse 4 (namely "the pasturage"), which sets the search for relevance anew.

What is especially worth noting is that although the verbal constituents in Verses 2 and 3 (namely, *creates and perfects, designs and guides*) are phrasal categories in focus position, they do not pre-empt attention, and thus do not cause further disambiguation.

Consider, however, how, in verses 4 and 5, relevance shifts to "the pasture" (Arabic: المرعى), the NP part of the discourse "the pasture"- the one that now creates more contextual effort for less processing cognitive effort, and the one that prepares the reader "for what will follow" – to use Ping's (2000: 6) words-

وَالَّذِي أَخْرَجَ الْمَرْعَىٰ [87:4]

[87:4] And Who brings forth the pasturage.

فَجَعَلَهُ غُثَاءً أَحْوَىٰ [87:5]

[87:5] Then turns it black, rotten rubbish.

Again, sooner disambiguation, pronominalization and prominence help focus the attention of the reader on the communicative intent of the speaker. This is evidenced by the fact that the underlined anaphoric expression *it* can only be interpreted as referring to the nominal constituent which is in focus position in the preceding verse, and which carries sentence tonic stress. However, the relevance of this new assumption (namely *the pasturage*) does not last for long. For, pasture is no longer relevant in Verse 6; a new assumption (namely "thou shalt forget not") is thrown to focus position.

The interesting point here is that *تَنسَى* (the Arabic term for *thou shalt forget not*) is a verbal phrasal constituent, which receives prominence on its first occurrence and causes sooner disambiguation in the next verse. In simple terms, whereas *تَنسَى* is rethematized in verse 6, it is 'themetized' in verse 7. In Ping's words, what this basically means is that "Backward inferences relate rheme to theme, establishing a degree of appropriateness between them". Let's consider the continuation of the discourse

سَنُفَرِّقُكَ فَمَا تَنسَى ۚ [87:6][87:6] We shall teach thee the Qur'an, and thou shalt forget not,  
إِلَّا مَا شَاءَ اللَّهُ إِنَّهُ يَعْلَمُ الْجَهْرَ وَمَا يَخْفَى [87:7] [87:7] Except as Allah wills. Surely, He knows what is open and what is hidden.

The point that is worth bringing out here has to do with the contextual effects the two verbal constituents (namely *تَنسَى* and *سَبِّح*) create in the same discourse. Notice that whereas glorify (Arabic: *سَبِّح*) in verse one does not cause further continuation in the succeeding discourse, shalt forget not (Arabic: *فَمَا تَنسَى*) in verse 6 is further disambiguated in the next verse. Disregarding for a moment some further intricacies, the point which is interesting for our discussion is this: pragmatic interpretation could be anchored with the linguistic structure of the verbal constituents. To illustrate, when the verbal constituent is *lexical* carried in a V S structure (e.g. glorify: *سَبِّح*), it never pre-empts attention and has thus petered out instantaneously. But when the verbal constituent is phrasal carried in NP VP structure (e.g. shalt forget not: *فَمَا تَنسَى*), it may cause further disambiguation in the subsequent discourse provided that no neighbouring NP rival bests it on the preference schema – a sufficient reason to keep the traditional distinguishing line between lexical and phrasal categorization of verbal constituents. This relevance-theoretic analysis helps explain traditional Arab grammarians' long-standing belief that the verb, as a lexical category, fails to be *xabar* (a rheme). However, as a phrasal category, a verbal constituent may pre-empt the attention of the interlocutors and thus functions as *xabar* (a rheme). On the whole, the current analysis then provides sufficient proof for anchoring linguistic coding with pragmatic interpretation.

However, a note worthy of mention here is that the "manifestness" of an assumption should not be viewed on binary grounds, i.e., the presence or lack thereof. Instead, we need to take heed of what Sperber and Wilson (1986[1995]: 39) call "degrees of manifestness". For example, whereas *the name of thy Lord* is made relevant in four verses, *pasture* and *shalt forget not* are made relevant only in two verses each. In a multiple-topical theme chapter such as this one, we assume that the former assumption (namely *the name of thy Lord*) causes hearers less effort to be retrieved (*cf.* Wilson 1998). This assumption has become more relevant in the cognitive environment of the audience because the environment has provided "sufficient evidence for its adoption" (Sperber and Wilson (1986 [1995]: 39). In simpler terms, the higher the degree of relevance, the less the effort the hearer needs to exert to retrieve the information.

This theme-rheme interplay (the fading out of some assumptions and the coming out of others) is manifest throughout the Holy Qur'an. But the important point is that the relative relevance

of any assumption is not conditioned by its strict appearance in the text. For, in a language with a relatively less restricted word order, an assumption in nonfinal position can still be most relevant. Let us consider the opening of another chapter of the Holy Qur'an called 'alghaṣeya, *the falling of overwhelming calamity* (Arabic: الغاشية). The opening of this chapter follows the S V word order, too.

In verse one, the idea of *the falling of overwhelming calamity* is introduced to be detailed in subsequent verses:

هَلْ أَتَكَ حَدِيثُ الْغَاشِيَةِ [88:1][88:1] Has there come to thee the news of the falling of overwhelming calamity?

The interesting point is that in verse 2, *some faces* (Arabic: وجوه), the assumption that is in nonfinal position, turns out to be the actual focus; the physical environment now provides sufficient proof to increase the "degree of manifestness" of this assumption. For, verses 3-6 all set out to disambiguate this assumption: 'some faces' is the assumption that is more manifest at this moment. Its manifestness fades out only when a new assumption (namely *food* in verse 6) sets the search for relevance anew: وَجُوهٌ يَوْمَئِذٍ خَاشِعَةٌ [88:2][88:2] Some faces on that day will be downcast;

عَامِلَةٌ نَّاصِيَةٌ [88:3] [88:3] (They will be) Toiling, weary.

تَصَلَّى نَارًا حَامِيَةً [88:4] [88:4] They shall enter a burning Fire;

وَتُسْقَى مِنْ عَيْنٍ آتِيَةٍ [88:5] [88:5] And they will be made to drink from a boiling spring;

لَيْسَ لَهُمْ طَعَامٌ إِلَّا مِنْ ضَرِيحٍ [88:6] [88:6] They will have no food save that of dry, bitter and thorny herbage,

لَا يُسْمِنُ وَلَا يُغْنِي مِنْ جُوعٍ [88:7] [88:7] Which will neither fatten, nor satisfy hunger.

The interesting point for our discussion here is that although other assumptions (e.g. *a burning Fire, a boiling spring, thorny herbage*) appear in focus position (introduced in the verb phrase of the main clause), none of them the physical environment provides sufficient evidence to increase their manifestness.

A similar scenario can be detected in verses 11-16 when relevance shifts to *lofty Garden*:

فِي جَنَّةٍ عَالِيَةٍ [88:11][88:11] In a lofty Garden,

لَا تَسْمَعُ فِيهَا لَافِيَةً [88:12] [88:12] Wherein thou wilt hear no idle talk;

فِيهَا عَيْنٌ جَارِيَةٌ [88:13] [88:13] Therein is a running spring,

فِيهَا سُرُرٌ مَرْفُوعَةٌ [88:14] [88:14] Therein are raised couches,

وَأَكْوَابٌ مَوْضُوعَةٌ [88:15] [88:15] And goblets properly placed,

وَتَمَارِقٌ مَصْفُوفَةٌ [88:16] [88:16] And cushions beautifully ranged,

وَزَرَابِيُّ مَبْثُوثَةٌ [88:17] [88:17] And carpets tastefully spread.

It is worth noting that neither the assumptions in sentence-final position (namely *idle talk, running spring, raised couches*), nor the assumptions in nonfinal position (namely *goblets, cushions, carpets*) get enough support in the physical environment to be 'more manifest'. It is true that they receive prominence upon entrance into the discourse, but that turns out to be not enough for them to alter the cognitive environment of the audience (or to be *xabar* in traditional Arab grammarians' terms). For, according to Sperber and Wilson (1986 [1995]: 39), manifestness is not only a function of the "cognitive abilities" of the hearer but also "his physical environment". It is always part of the communicative intention of the speaker to adapt his assumptions to the way the hearer is going to process them.

The concluding remark for this part is something like this: in the Qur'anic chapters whose opening follows the V S pattern, the verbal part is lexical, and is always less manifest than its

nominal rival. The physical environment provides sufficient evidence for the nominal constituent to be more manifest, i.e. the nominal constituent (irrespective of its position) creates more contextual effect, and thus requires less processing effort from the audience to be processed. In Sperber and Wilson's (1986 [1995]: 39) terms, both the physical environment and the cognitive abilities of the audience contribute to the '*more-manifestness*' of the nominal constituent at a given moment.

#### 4.2 NP VP information Structuring

In the remaining part of this paper, we move on to consider some Qur'anic chapters whose opening follows the NP VP pattern. The openings of Chapters 81 & 82 (at-takweer and al-infiTaar, respectively) follow this pattern. Concisely, we need to consider the "manifestness" of the verbal constituent when it is phrasal. We claim that the physical environment may provide sufficient evidence for some constituent to be "more manifest", and thus altering the cognitive environment of the audience (or being *xabar* in traditional Arab grammarians' terms).

In Chapter 81 (Arabic: التكوير), the idea of resurrection is manifest throughout. This is what Chafe (2005) calls a supertopic. However, in each verse a basic level topic is introduced. Once a basic-level topic is introduced, participants may choose to abandon the topic that they are currently engaged in.

إِذَا الشَّمْسُ كُوِّرَتْ [81:1] [81:1] When the sun is wrapped up.  
 وَإِذَا النُّجُومُ انْكَدَرَتْ [81:2] [81:2] And when the stars are obscured.  
 وَإِذَا الْجِبَالُ سُيِّرَتْ [81:3] [81:3] And when the mountains are made to move.  
 وَإِذَا الْعِشَارُ عُطِّلَتْ [81:4] [81:4] And when the she-camels, ten-month pregnant, are abandoned.  
 وَإِذَا الْوُحُوشُ حُشِرَتْ [81:5] [81:5] And when the beasts are gathered together.  
 وَإِذَا الْبِحَارُ سُجِّرَتْ [81:6] [81:6] And when the seas are made to flow forth one into the other.  
 وَإِذَا النُّفُوسُ زُوِّجَتْ [81:7] [81:7] And when people are brought together.  
 وَإِذَا الْمَوْءِدَةُ سُئِلَتْ [81:8] [81:8] And when the girl-child buried alive is questioned about.  
 بِأَيِّ ذَنْبٍ قُتِلَتْ [81:9] [81:9] 'For what crime was she killed?'  
 وَإِذَا الصُّحُفُ نُشِرَتْ [81:10] [81:10] And when books are spread abroad.  
 وَإِذَا السَّمَاءُ كُشِطَتْ [81:11] [81:11] And when the heaven is laid bare.  
 وَإِذَا الْجَحِيمُ سُعِّرَتْ [81:12] [81:12] And when the Fire is caused to blaze up.  
 وَإِذَا الْجَنَّةُ أُنزِلَتْ [81:13] [81:13] And when the Garden is brought nigh.

The interesting point for our discussion here is that with the exception of the *girl-child* (Arabic: الموءدة) in verse 8, none of these basic level topics (neither the NP nor the VP parts of the discourse) cause further disambiguation outside the boundaries of the verse in which they appear. In other words, they were let to peter out locally. They are long stretches of discourse where no specific basic level topic is introduced to be "more manifest". As an additional test validating our claim, we asked a number of the reciters of this Qur'anic chapter what this chapter is all about. The interesting point is that although they could not narrow down the supertopic of this chapter, almost all of them commented on the *girl-child* (Arabic: الموءدة) as a basic level topic.

As a further evidence to our claim, let us consider the opening of another Qur'anic chapter, namely 82 (Arabic: الإنفطار) which also follows the NP VP pattern:

إِذَا السَّمَاءُ انْفَطَرَتْ [82:1] [82:1] When the heaven is cleft asunder,  
 وَإِذَا الْكَوَاكِبُ انْتَثَرَتْ [82:2] [82:2] And when the stars are scattered,  
 وَإِذَا الْبِحَارُ فُجِّرَتْ [82:3] [82:3] And when the rivers are made to flow forth into canals,

وَإِذَا الْقُبُورُ بُعِثِرَتْ [82:4] [82:4] And when the graves are laid open,  
عَلِمَتْ نَفْسٌ مَّا قَدَّمَتْ وَأَخَّرَتْ [82:6]

It is worth noting that neither the NP nor the VP part of the discourse qualifies for further disambiguation.

## 5. Conclusion

An optimal relevance-based analysis suggests that the pragmatic constraints on language use tell us that the hearer is only interested in (1) information he has not yet had, and (2) information relevant to the actual context. What this basically means is that in addition to the informational intention of the message itself, the hearer has to attend to the speaker's communicative intention, technically called ostention: "behaviour which makes manifest an intention to make something manifest" (Wilson and Sperber 1986 [1995]: 49). For, the goal is always to help focus the attention on the assumption that is more relevant to both the speaker and audience. The speaker chooses one assumption in the local context and adapts it to the way the hearer should process it. This can only be brought about when sufficient evidence (e.g. defocalization, reference assignment, sooner disambiguation, etc.) is provided in the local environment. This sends us into what van Dijk (1977) calls "the domain of information distribution in discourse and information processing in communication." To Chafe, (2005), topicality is one of the driving forces that "give direction to the flow of thoughts."

However, at the level of detail we are considering here the problem lies in "how an actual focus is chosen from a range of potential foci," to quote Sperber and Wilson's (1995: 203). In addition to pitch, loudness, etc., a longer-than-normal pause is one of the phonetic cues for introducing a new topic, and abandoning a previously established one. As for the Qur'anic context, the verse is thought to be the boundary of the local topic, or basic sentence-level topic. However, a more serious problem rises when more than one assumption is introduced in the same discourse (sometimes in the same verse). The participants will definitely pick out only one of the assumptions to be made available to their consciousness and therefore to be navigated through for sometime. They cannot attend to more than one assumption at any given time. This stems from human beings' drive to develop one topic at a time. For this, some topics are purposefully adopted; others are just allowed to peter out. What this basically means is that competing assumptions constantly change foci of consciousness, and hence their relevance to the flow of thought at the discourse level.

The whole argument of this research paper is centered on the competition between nominal and verbal constituents. For, all parts of the discourse compete for maximal relevance. We hope to have provided a conceptual argument why nominal constituents are more likely to change the participants' focus of consciousness, and therefore cause substantial modification to the cognitive environment of the interlocutors in the discourse. As for verbal arguments, by carefully examining the information flow in different Qur'anic chapters (V S vs. NP VP coding pattern) it turned out that a fine distinguishing line must be made between *lexical* verbal categories and *phrasal* verbal categories. As a lexical category (e.g. سَبَّحَ), the verb fails to attain maximal relevance, and therefore is never disambiguated in the immediate context; it never constitutes a basic-level topic. However, as a phrasal category (e.g. سَنَقِرْكَ فِلا تَنْسَى) it may contribute a higher degree of relevance provided that no nominal constituents best it on the preference schema. In NP VP chapters (where the VP part is in focus position), we have found tangible evidence for long stretches of discourse where no specific basic sentence level topic is developed. Finally, as topics vary greatly in length, we have found evidence that when further disambiguated in the immediate context, NP assumptions last longer. These claims provide sufficient reason to maintain the traditional Arab grammarians' long standing

view that the verb, as a lexical category, is less likely to be a rheme (or *xabar*) as it is less likely to alter the cognitive environment of the audience. The study then provides argument for the psychological bond between linguistic coding (cf. V vs. VP) and pragmatic interpretation (degrees of relevance).

### Acknowledgement

I am really grateful to Paulina Gocheco and Hisham Obiedat for their invaluable comments on an earlier version of this paper. Special thanks go to the anonymous reviewers of IJL whose comments helped improve the quality of the paper.

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## Notes

Note 1. "The text of the Qur'an consists of 114 chapters of varying lengths, each known as a sura" (source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qur'an> )

Note 2. Communication breakdowns take place when there isn't enough evidence (salient or inferable) available in the larger context to help unravel the communicative intent of the addressor.

Note 3. Relevance theorists have always shown that discourse assumptions that are more relevant cause hearers less effort to be retrieved (cf. Wilson 1998)

Note 4. Besides, in some languages such as Japanese and Quechua some particles are used.

Note 5. The insight here is like this: in order to facilitate comprehension, old assumptions precede new ones. However, for counter examples see (Green 1980).

Note 6. For details see Al-jurjani (2007), and for a counter argument, see Al-za'balawi (1984)

Note 7. Traditional Arab grammarians argue that in both cases the verb is *musn* d and the noun is *musn* d ili h,

Note 8. For details, see Hassan (2000), Hamasah (1996).

Note 9. Al-husari's (1985: 17) criticism of the traditional approach is unequivocal in the following quotation:

"كلماتها بقيّة إلى تلتفت أن دون، بها تبتدئ  
... أن قواعد اللغة العربية لا تلتزم هذه التعريفات والمفاهيم المنطقية، بل تخالفها كلية، فإنها تعتبر الجملة فعلية عندما تبتدئ بفعل، واسمية عندما تبتدئ باسم. ومعنى ذلك أنها لا تصنف الجمل حسب أنواع الكلمات التي تتألف منها، بل تصنفها حسب نوع الكلمة التي تبتدئ بها، دون أن تلتفت إلى بقيّة كلماتها."

Also consider what Al-makhzumi (1986: 218) says in this regard:

وتخريج تأويل  
ولو كان تحديدهم الاسمية والفعلية قائماً على أساس من ملاحظة واعية للفرق بين طبيعتي الجملتين، لكان عملهم أجيدي، ولكفوا أنفسهم والدارسين والنصوص المدروسة، عناء ما تكلفوه من تأويل وتخريج

Note 10. For illuminating discussions, see Al-sakaki (1987), Badawi (1970).

Note 11. Although verbs are not categorized in Prince's (1981) taxonomy, one can safely conclude that they are treated as links.

Note 12. In SVO languages, one may propose that verbs are less likely to change their positions; they are less likely to occupy a rhematic position on their first occurrence, and a thematic one on their second occurrence. Nouns, on the contrary, are less subject to the restriction; they have a relatively higher degree of maneuverability. Consider the following examples which involve It-Clefting:

- a. it was John that bought a car
- b. it was a car that John bought
- \*c. it was bought that John a car

The grammar of the language prevents such movement for the finite verb as in (c) above, thereby making its position with respect to the other constituents in the sentence highly predictable, and thus reducing its overall relevance to the discourse, unless the speaker adapts it (by means of focusing) to the way the hearer is going to process it. Hence, people turn their attention to that which seems most relevant to them. In languages that have less restricted word order (e.g. Arabic), this ostensive behavior is effected by the canonical word order.

Note 13. For discussion on how an appositive relative clause, for example, maximizes the relevance of the antecedent, see Look (1997).

Note 14. To see how the same problem is settled on discursal grounds, see author (2009).

Note 15. Bardovi-Harlig (1983: 23) proposes a scale on which all lexical items are listed according to their semantic content: "An item is entered on the top of the scale on its first occurrence." However, she assumes that pronouns, due to the fact that they can never be totally new, they cannot, compared to the other lexical items, reach the top of that scale.