

Al-Attas on Language and Thought: Its Relation to Worldview, Change and Translation*

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Abstract

Language, according to Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, reflects ontology. This article shall focus on three issues, namely worldview, change and translation, as espoused by al-Attas in *Islam and Secularism, Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam, The Concept of Education in Islam* and in his CASIS Saturday Night Lectures, (CSNL).

Keywords

Language, thought, ontology, worldview, change, translation, Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas.

Introduction

Language, according to al-Attas, reflects reality, not creating it. How the language is used reflects the worldview of a person or a nation. His position is in a way similar to that of

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Toshihiko Izutsu, who defines semantics as:

...an analytic study of the key-terms of a language with a view to arriving eventually at a conceptual grasp of the *weltanschauung* or world-view of the people who use that language as a tool not only of speaking and thinking, but, more important still, of conceptualizing and interpreting the world that surrounds them. Semantics, thus understood, is a kind of *weltanschauungslehre*, a study of the nature and structure of the world-view of a nation at this or that significant period of its history, conducted by means of a methodological analysis of the major cultural concepts the nation has produced for itself and crystallized into key-words of its language.¹

The “semantics of the Quran”, according to him, should be understood only in the sense of the Quranic *weltanschauung*, or worldview.

In the same vein, Hassan el-Nagar argues that language is the product of man’s perception of his environment and of his understanding of reality. From perception comes conceptualisation, in which man is able to make use of verbal symbols to record his thoughts and experiences.² The worldview of Islam has been shaped by Arabic, the language of the Quran. While it is true that language does not create reality and perception, it does however influence people’s worldviews and actions in certain sociocultural contexts.³

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1. Toshihiko Izutsu, *God and Man in the Koran: Semantics of the Koranic Weltanschauung*, (1964 first published in Tokyo, Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, New Edition 2002; Second reprint 2008), 3.
 2. Hassan Abdel Raziq el-Nagar, “Speaking with One Voice: The Politics of Language in the Modern Muslim World” in *Islam and the Challenge of Modernity: Proceedings of the Inaugural Symposium on Islām and the Challenge of Modernity: Historical and Contemporary Contexts, Kuala Lumpur, August 1–5, 1994*, ed. Sharifah Shifa Al-Attas (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 1996).
 3. *Ibid.*, 455.

El-Nagar observes the perceptible link between language and national identity; and its interrelationship with culture, values and worldviews. European languages, as part of the essential socio-cultural determinants of Western power, have achieved great triumph in the “third world.” In Africa, for instance, the impact of the Western languages has been deeper than it has been anywhere in formerly colonised Asia. Even the identity of the African countries is partly tied in with whether they speak some imperial language.⁴ The language question, which raises controversy among the writers and critics of African literature who wrote primarily in European languages, has serious ideological implications in the indigenous cultures, and has also given rise to the awakening of the relevance of language to issues and concepts such as reality, culture, values, literature and national integration. Such issues are relevant to especially newly-emerging societies struggling to redefine their cultural and political identities.⁵

According to al-Attas, “a ‘worldview’ is not merely the mind’s view of the physical world and of man’s historical, social, political and cultural involvement in it.” The worldview projected by Islam “encompasses both *al-dunyā* and *al-ākhirah*”⁶ and reality is not merely factual occurrence, but the actualisation of something true.⁷ It is characterised by authenticity and finality, as well as its fundamental elements are permanently established. The fundamental elements together with the key terms and concepts that they unfold, have profound bearing upon a Muslim’s life and thought.⁸ As a matter of fact, the conception and conceptualisation of knowledge and the sciences, as well as

4. Ibid., 444–445.

5. Ibid., 444–450.

6. Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islām: An Exposition to the Fundamental Elements of Worldview of Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1995), 1.

7. Ibid., 1–2.

8. Ibid., *Prolegomena*, 4–5. See also from the same author, *Islam and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1993), 46–47.

the adaptation of methods and theories, are in each civilisation formulated within the framework of its own metaphysical system forming its worldview. Each metaphysical system, and thus also the worldview it projects, is not the same for every other civilisation; and the difference is rooted in the different interpretation of what is taken to be ultimately true and real.⁹

Language, thought and reason, according to al-Attas, are interconnected and interdependent in “projecting to man his worldview or vision of reality.”¹⁰ When Greek thought began to be infused into the Muslim minds and corrupt their understanding of Islam, scholars of Islam responded to the corruption with refutations and explanations of the true meaning of the key terms projecting the worldview of Islam. Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazzālī (d. 1111 C.E.), for example, explains how the meanings of *fiqh*, *ilm*, *tawhīd*, *dhikr* and *ḥikmah* have been confused due to change and restriction in their original and authentic meanings.¹¹ Al-Ghazzālī had refuted some assumptions of the

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9. *Prolegomena*, ix in the preface. For example, the most serious intellectual error in human history, Aristotle’s concept of the eternity of the universe remained unchallenged until the coming of al-Ghazzālī, who discovered that the theory is scientifically wrong according to proper definition of knowledge. See Omar Jah, “Al-Balagh,” *Knowledge, Language, Thought and the Civilization of Islam: Essays in Honor of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas*, ed. Wan Mohd. Nor Wan Daud & Muhammad Zainiy Uthman (Kuala Lumpur: UTM, 2010), 89–90.
 10. Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 45; *The Concept of Education in Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM), 1980; third impression by ISTAC, 1999), 11. See also Ahmad Kazemi Moussavi, “Shifts of Language and Turns in Worldview,” in *Knowledge, Language, Thought and the Civilization of Islam: Essays in Honor of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas*, ed. Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud and Muhammad Zainiy Uthman (Kuala Lumpur: Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, 2010), 98–99. The idea of interconnectedness of language and thought can be found in most of al-Attas’s works especially in *Risalah Untuk Kaum Muslimin*, (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 2001), 98–110. For a technical elaboration on worldview and Islamic worldview, please refer Alparslan Acikgenc, *Islamic Science: Towards a Definition* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1996) and *Islamic Scientific Tradition in History* (Kuala Lumpur: IKIM, 2014).
 11. Al-Attas, *Concept of Education*, 11. Al-Attas has elaborated on the infusion of alien concepts into the Muslim world in many of his works and lectures. See for example his welcoming address at the International Conference on “Al-Ghazali’s Legacy: Its Contemporary Relevance,” October 2001, 6.

philosophers, and their belief in the primacy of the intellect as the sole guide to knowledge of the Ultimate Reality.¹² Language, therefore, is not simply a matter of syntax and semantic but more importantly the worldview that projects it.¹³ This is supported by the result of recent studies in social science which show that shifts of language symbolise turns in worldview in a society.¹⁴

Language and Worldview

What Islam is projecting as a worldview is not merely the mind's vision of reality based on philosophical speculation formulated mainly from observation of the data of sensible experience.¹⁵ Reality is not mere fact (*wāqīʿ*), or factual occurrence but *ḥaqīqah*, the actualisation of something true (*al-ḥaqq*).¹⁶

The worldview of Islam is the Islamic vision of truth and reality of the visible as well as invisible worlds. It liberates a person “first from magical, mythological, animistic, national-cultural tradition as opposed to Islam; and then from secular control over his reason and language.”¹⁷ Truth, according to al-Attas, must be subjected to the statements and general conclusions of revealed Truth; and that reality and truth, and values derived from them are not separate and that they do not articulate their meanings within the paradigms of relativity and plurality.¹⁸

The keywords projecting the worldview are interconnected like a network forming a big picture. Nine fundamental elements

12. Moussavi, “Shifts of Language”, 98.

13. Al-Attas, *Concept of Education*, 12.

14. Examples are Evelyn Fox Keller and Elizabeth A. Lloyd, eds., *Keywords in Evolutionary Biology* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992); Mazyar Lotfalian, “Keywords in Islamic Critiques of Technoscience: Iranian Postrevolutionary Interpretation,” in *Iran between Tradition and Modernity*, ed. Ramin Jahanbegloo (Lexington: Lexington Books, 2004), 16.

15. Al-Attas, *Prolegomena* 2.

16. *Ibid.*, 1–2.

17. Açıkgöç, *Islamic Science*, 7–8

18. Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, ix.

of the worldview of Islam are God (*rabb* and *ilāh*), Revelation (*wahy*), His creation (*khalq* and *makhlūq*), man and the psychology of human soul (*insān* and *rūh*), knowledge (*ʿilm* and *maʿrifah*), religion (*dīn*), freedom (*ikhṭiyār*), values and virtues (*fadīlah*), and happiness (*saʿādah*).¹⁹

The experience of modernity forces man to reorient themselves, which may give rise to the development of new ideas and values, or may also lead to reawakening or revitalisation of old ideas and values.²⁰ Modernisation has brought about a “rational way” of transformations in the self-identification and identity of man.²¹ Such a rationalisation also influences Muslim thinking about Islam and its religious and cultural institutions. The Muslim response²² has been the idea that Islam is a religion consonant with reason and not contradictory to it. The Western intellectual presuppositions of modernity and post-modernity have confronted the Islamic intellectual tradition with alien perspectives whose assimilation or Islamisation is questionable.²³ Few contemporary Muslim thinkers have moved beyond exhorting people to take action, evoking symbols, or analysing what was wrong and proposing certain strategies. Al-Attas has been one of them.²⁴ One of his fundamental ideas is accuracy and precision in language, semantics and conceptualisation as clarified in his writings.²⁵ The fundamental elements of the worldview of Islam are important conceptions which are neither changeable nor to be tampered with.

19. Ibid., 5.

20. Ibid., 318.

21. Ibid., 323–324.

22. For example, Muhammad Abduh, Jamaluddin al-Afghani, Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Abul Aʿla Mawdudi, Ṭabaṭabaʿī, Ali Shariʿati and Khomeini, to mention a few.

23. Marcia K. Hermansen, “Modernity and Religious Worldviews—The Challenge of Classical Islamic Religious Thought for Contemporary Muslim Intellectuals” in *Islam and the Challenge of Modernity*, 509.

24. Wan Mohd Nor, *The Beacon on the Crest of a Hill* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1991), 6.

25. Marcia K. Hermansen, “Modernity”, 530.

Language and Change

Al-Attas does not deny the fact that change is inevitable in language and life but he discords with the idea that change is a necessity, accepted as a value and essential to measure human life, and a reality one has to abide to philosophically. In relation to semantic change, al-Attas agrees that it is happening at every core of the human language. But in the case of Arabic, semantic change is not a threat; for it is “the only divinely inspired living language”²⁶ which assures permanence, perfection and consistency in preserving meaning and understanding of Islam. It is not subject to “change and development, nor governed by the vicissitudes of social change” as in the case of all other languages which derive from culture and tradition.²⁷

It does not mean that language cannot be allowed to develop, but the basic vocabulary in the Islamic languages can only develop from its roots, and not severed from them; nor can they develop from roots stunted in restriction.²⁸ In the languages of the Muslims, including Arabic, basic vocabulary consisting of key terms govern the interpretation of the Islamic vision of reality and truth; by no means do such key terms, according to him, are to be tampered with nor changed.

Notwithstanding, many major key terms in the Islamic basic vocabulary of the languages of Muslims²⁹ have now been displaced and made “to serve absurdly” in alien fields of meaning and such kind of regression towards non-Islamic worldviews is a phenomenon which al-Attas calls the *deislamisation*

26. Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 46.

27. *Ibid.*

28. Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 32.

29. Al-Attas, “Saturday Night Lectures, (SNL),” (lecture, CASIS-UTM, Kuala Lumpur, April 6, 2013).

of language,³⁰ or the secularisation of the Arabic language.³¹ Al-Attas argues that special words which deal with key aspects of truth and reality, of man and the universe, religion and ethics, which may comprise hundreds or thousands of them, are the basic vocabulary of Islam. They must be understood precisely and used properly, and not to be changed, played with, moved about, added to or subtracted from.

Failure to apply language correctly and to convey correct meaning implies unawareness of proper perspective of the true and real situation, which involves understanding not only the language, but also the worldview projected by it.³² In this particular respect, al-Attas again stresses the bad impact of secularisation of language, that:

....If even a few of such focus words were restricted in their meanings, or were made to convey meanings which are not authentic and authoritative—by which I mean whose intentions no longer reflect those understood by authorities among the early Muslims—then this would inevitably create confusion and error in the minds of Muslims and disrupt intellectual and spiritual unity among them. Moreover, it would render sciences once considered praiseworthy to become blameworthy....³³

Al-Attas disagrees with the opinion that restriction or alteration of meaning of key terms in the basic vocabulary of Islam is due to social change; for, Islam does not accept “society” as authoritative in matters of knowledge, or invest it with authority to bring about changes that will lead Muslims

30. Secularisation, deislamisation, westernisation, islamisation and dewesternisation are key terms which are based on his master idea of “secularism and Islam.” This master idea has been explicated thoroughly, comprehensively and consistently in his works, especially *Islam and Secularisme*, *Prolegomena*, *Risalah* and *Concept of Education in Islam*.

31. Al-Attas, “Saturday Night Lectures, (SNL),” (lecture, CASIS-UTM, Kuala Lumpur, April 6, 2013)

32. Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 32 and *Islam and Secularism*, 45–47.

33. Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 32.

astray. The learned and the wise among Muslims must oppose erroneous usage in language which impinges upon semantic change in major key concepts in order to prevent the occurrence of general confusion and error in the understanding of Islam and of its vision of reality and truth.

The Role of Translation

Translating involves introducing foreign key concepts and is a meticulous task in itself. Izutsu concurs with al-Attas on the difficulty of translating cultural terms. For him, translated words and sentences are partial equivalents at the very most. Texts tend to be read in the original by readers who unconsciously read into it their own concepts and transmute many of its key terms into equivalent terms obtainable in one's native language. Such kind of unconscious "transmutation," according to Izutsu is felt in contemporary ethical literature, particularly comparative studies of different systems of moral ideas.³⁴ Izutsu draws our attention to the case of translating the Greek word *arête* into the English word "virtue," the effort of some Western scholars who form their views on the ideas of righteousness and justice in Japanese Shintoism and Chinese Confucianism based on English translations; and the Arabic word *ṣāliḥ* which is generally translated as "righteous." These are examples of "the grave danger of being led unconsciously into erroneous theories about the nature of morality by manipulating translated concepts and not trying to analyse scientifically and rigorously the original concepts themselves."³⁵

Other examples of such words are *hamāsah*, *murūwah* and *jahl* in Old Arabic, which are all typical of the life and manners of

34. Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Quran* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2004), 3–5.

35. *Ibid.*, 5. Izutsu based his structure of work on the theory of meaning, a combination of Leo Weisgerber's *sprachliche Weltanschauungslehre*, developed and elaborated in West Germany; and Edward Sapir's Ethnolinguistics, a theory of interrelations between linguistic patterns and cultural patterns originated and developed in the United States.

pagan nomadic Arabia in contrast to the Islamic ethical culture. *Hamāsah* denotes a peculiar combination of bravery in battle, patience in misfortune, persistence in seeking blood revenge, protection of the weak, and defiance of the strong. Yet, all these traits can neither be properly nor adequately conveyed by “courage” or “bravery,” which are usually given as its equivalent. *Murūwah* represents the highest idea of morality among the Bedouins, and is made to correspond with “manliness.” The translation may suffice in contexts where no semantic precision need arises, but the content of “manliness” itself must of necessity vary according to the set of features of man. Similarly, *jahl*, the exact opposite of *ilm* (knowledge), is the basic meaning of ignorance: the state of *Jāhiliyyah*, however, is conceived not as a period of time that had now passed away, but rather as something dynamic, a certain psychological state driven away by Islam but surviving internally in the mind of believers.³⁶

According to el-Nagar there is an “intricate relationship between language and culture” where language is a carrier of values. He agrees with al-Attas that secularisation is the basic problem of contemporary Muslim societies, and it arose due to a split between the study of the Quran and the study of the Arabic language.³⁷

In *Kitāb al-Hayawān*, al-Jāhiz (d. 255 A.H.) is quoted as saying: only the Arabs and people who speak Arabic have a correct understanding of poetry. Poems do not lend themselves to translation and ought not to be translated because when they are translated, their poetic structure is compromised; the metre is no longer correct; poetic beauty disappears and nothing worthy of admiration remains in the poems. It is different with prose. Accordingly, original prose is more beautiful and

36. Ibid., 28. Wan Mohd. Nor, *Educational Philosophy and Practice of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas*, 76–83.

37. Sharifah Shifa Al-Attas, ed., *Proceedings of the Inaugural Symposium on Islam and the Challenge of Modernity: Historical and Contemporary Contents, Kuala Lumpur, 1-5 August 1994*. (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation, 1996), 16.

appropriate than prose renderings of metric poetry.³⁸ Al-Attas uses the argument of al-Jāḥiẓ who had discussed in his *Kiṭāb al-Bukhālā'* about the right meaning of the concept of greed or avarice (*bukhl*) within a correctly applied context of its semantic field. A *bukhlī* is generally applied to man: a male, mature, sane and wealthy. It is not applicable to a woman, a poor or a boy. It follows that, certain words with fixed conception are not supposed to be unduly used, but rather correctly applied to avoid misinterpretation.³⁹

According to al-Attas there is no equivalent in Islam to the concept *secular* because Islam does not concede to the dichotomy of the sacred and the profane. The nearest equivalent would be “*al-hayāt al-dunyā*,” “the worldly life.”⁴⁰ The 20th century Christian Arabic usage and accepted translation of the term “secular” as *‘almāniy* merely reflects its meaning as formulated by the Latinised Western Christianity of the 13th century.⁴¹ Instead of translating it, it is better to have the term transliterated into Arabic so that its foreign origin is apparent.⁴² He strongly believes that the arabisation and introduction of the ambivalent concept of *‘almāniyyah* into mainstream contemporary Arabic is largely responsible for insinuating into the Muslim mind the dichotomous separation of the sacred and the profane, creating therein the socio-political notion of an unbridgeable gap separating what it considers to be “theocratic state” from a “secular state,” causing social and political upheavals and disunity.

38. Franz Rosenthal. *The Classical Heritage in Islam: Arabic Thought and Culture*, trans. Emile and Jenny Marmorstein. (New York: Taylor and Francis Routledge, 1992), 18.

39. Al-Attas, *Concept of Education*, 7.

40. Idem, *Prolegomena*, 21; *Islam and Secularism*, 41–42.

41. Idem, *Concept of Education*, 22–27. For a detailed description of secular-secularization, see also *Islam and Secularism* chapters I and II, 1–50.

42. Idem, *Prolegomena*, 28.

Conclusion

It is imperative that the worldview of Islam be projected correctly by the proper use of language. Yet, we observe that very little attention has been given to explicate the method of semantic analysis. The method needs to be re-introduced and put in practice in contemporary Islamic discourse instead of adopting sociological and hermeneutical methods of interpretation.

One of the crucial steps towards that is to re-observe and re-scrutinise the works of important scholars such as al-Attas in order to open up the horizons of the study of language in human sciences especially in religious studies. Three of such areas in need of serious excavation and discoveries under the light of al-Attas's metaphysical and linguistic frameworks are the formulation of the conception of Quranic Arabic and its limitations; the boundaries within which change is acceptable in the Arabic language; and al-Attas's Quranic conceptual system, i.e. the listing of basic Islamic vocabularies in their respective semantic fields together with the confused and corrupted terms and their correct definitions.

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