Semantic Disparity between Amr (Command) and Nahy (Negative Command) in the Noble Quran: An Interpretive/Contextual Study

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Abstract

The present study explores the semantic disparity between the use of Amr (command) verb and Nahy (negative command), based on contexts of each in the Noble Quran. Among the key results of the study is that Amr mainly serves the obligation of carrying out the action promptly, or keeping it incessantly, which may or may not have started before the command. Amr often comes to refer to a desirable, commendable action. On the other hand, a Nahy, which consists of a present verb with Lā, typically necessitates halting a despicable action which is common or committed by some. It is found that the two structures may not be exchanged in the same contexts in the Noble Quran due to their different purposes.

Keywords: command, negative, the Noble Quran, semantic differences.

1. Introduction

Words may convey different meanings in relation to situational and collocational effects, which are gradually generated to establish distinct creations. Such indications are better restricted, so they would not result in ambiguity of various subjective semantic interpretations. Contextual or situational exchangeability connected with diverse words or structures requires deep investigation of semantic differences. Here, each of the two structures expresses certain behaviours.

1.1 Theoretical Framework

Amr and Nahy are major constructions which have been thoroughly discussed by Arabic grammarians and rhetoricians.

❖ **Amr**

Here, the research is limited to Amr in the form of Ifˤal bare command, which is basically opposite to Nahy (Ibn F āris, 1979).

Technically, Amr is to request an action in a certain form (Ibn Yaʿīsh, 2001). This form is Ifˤal, ignoring the present prefix and only directed to an addressee. The other less common form is for a third person using the prefix Li with the present verb (Al-Sāmarrāī, 2000).

1. Amr also calls for an action or is made by another superior party (Al-'alawī, 2002). A further use is the expectation of the command to be carried out promptly without delay, as in 'Read and understand' (Al-Sarrāj, 1983). However, it could have other metaphorical meanings, mainly:

2. Permission: Almighty Allah says: "Once you are permitted to [go on your way], then **go hunting**" (5:2).

3. Invocation: Almighty Allah says: "My Lord, **forgive** me and my parents" (71:28).

4. Threatening: Almighty Allah says: "**Do** whatever you (all) may wish: He is Observant of anything you do" (41:40).

5. Guidance: Almighty Allah says: "**Seek help** through patience and prayer" (2:45). Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) says: "**Be mindful** of Allah and He will protect you."

6. Honouring: Almighty Allah says: "**Enter** them safely, at peace" (15:46), addressing dwellers of Paradise.

7. Insulting: Almighty Allah says: "**Taste** it; you were such a powerful noble!" (44:49), addressing dwellers of Hell.

8. Showing contempt: Almighty Allah says: "**Decide** anything you may decide; you are no judge" (20:72).

9. Giving choice: Almighty Allah says: "**Act** patiently or impatiently" (52:16).

10. Astonishment: Almighty Allah says: "**Watch** what sort of stories they make up about you" (17:48).

11. Denial: Almighty Allah says: "Say: '**Bring** the Torah and recite it if you have been truthful'" (3:93).

12. Showing powerlessness of the opponent: Almighty Allah says: "**Bring** a chapter like it" (2:23). Here, it is not a real request but aims at proving the disbelievers' helplessness to produce anything like the Noble Quran. Almighty Allah also says: "**Tell** me the names of these if you are so truthful" (2:31).

13. Humiliation: Almighty Allah says: "**Become** apes, rejected" (2:65), where the addresses are not expected to act at all.

14. Showing the Creator's ability: Almighty Allah says: "Say '**Become** stones or iron'" (17:50), which means that if they were in these forms, Almighty Allah could bring them back. So, He answers: "They will say 'Who will bring us back [to life]?' Say: "The One Who originated you in the first place" (17:51). According to Ibn Al-Shajarī (1991, 1/270), the Amr in the above verse indicates Almighty Allah's absolute ability.

Ḥassan (no date found, 4/366) elaborates on the construction as follows. First, in terms of the status of the sender, it is called Amr only when it comes from a superior party, Du'ā from an inferior and Iltimās from an equal. Second, in terms of form, there are the typical explicit Amr and the one with the request Li added to a present verb. Thirdly, in terms of tense, it is largely about the future to require introducing what has not taken place, or could be about continuing what is already happening. An example of the former is the example **Travel** in summer to the beach. As for the latter, Almighty Allah says: "0 Prophet, **heed** God," for the Prophet never abandons piety.

Thus, it means commanding him to persist in it. There is a rare form of Amr to convey the past. For instance, if a soldier says that he killed many of the enemy troops and one says: "**Kill** and you are not to blame; **crush** them and God is with you", that means they already killed and crushed. The point is all about context in this case and others (Ibid).

Accordingly, Amr is a command to be implemented by the addressee in relation to commendable and desirable actions. Purposes may differ depending on the context, generating several implications which need to be studied and differentiated from other forms.

❖ **Nahy**

In general, Nahy is the opposite of Amr in halting an action, especially a bad one (Ibn Manzūr, 1993). It also refers to prohibition. In Arabic, Nahy is close to the word Nuhya (mind), since it prevents one from wrongdoing (Al-Shawkānī, 1992). In addition, the use of Nahy sometimes shifts from the command to halt an action to scolding. For instance, Almighty Allah says in the Noble Quran: "Have you seen someone who forbids…a worshipper as he prays?" (96:9-10). Here, yanhā 'forbids' refers to a somehow violent manner of asking the addressee stop doing something (Al-Iṣfahānī, 1992).

Technically, Nahy is an utterance which conveys prohibiting an action from a superior party as in Lā tafʿal (Do not do) (Al-Alawī, 2002; Al-Jirjānī, 1983). It usually takes place when the act is hated by the addressor and expected to be left (Al-Baṣrī, 1983). Thus, the structure is not a mere utterance, but it indicates the sender's will for the receiver to end the act (Abdul-Karīm, 2005).

Real Nahy, which requests halting an action from a superior, is argued to have one form: a jussive present verb preceded by Lā (Al-Jārim & Amīn, 1999).

Such association basically conveys forbidding a despicable or undesirable action, or it could be asking for abandoning an action in the future.

Mainstream Arabic grammarians argue that Nahy with Lā has a number of implications, mainly (Al-Āmidī, 2003):

1. Religious prohibition: Almighty Allah says: "**Do not kill** any soul whom God has forbidden you to, except through [due process of] law" (17:33).

2. Showing contempt: Almighty Allah says: "**Do not strain** your eyes towards what We let some types of them enjoy" (20:131).

3. Statement of destiny: Almighty Allah says: "**Do not reckon** those who are killed for God's sake are dead" (3:169). He also says: "Do not reckon God is oblivious of what wrongdoers are doing" (14:42).

4. Invocation: Almighty Allah says: "Our Lord, **do not let** our hearts falter" (3:8).

5. Ending hope: Almighty Allah says: "**Do not make** excuses! You have disbelieved following your profession of faith" (9:66).

6. Advice of what is better avoided: Almighty Allah says: "**Do not ask** about such things as would worry you if they were shown to you" (5:101).

❖ **Interactive Factor:**

Interaction requires, at least, two parties: sender vs. receiver, speaker vs. hearer or writer vs. reader, provided that it is centred on the originator's intentions within different contexts (Yazīd, 2010). Therefore, such a determinant may uncover the purposes the utterance, the specificity of the context and the interaction of the parties. On the other hand, Context refers to the total syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations between the language units which compose the text (Ḥūrī, 2018). Here, the impact of context is invested to consider the Amr and Nahy meanings and purposes.

❖ **Semantic Differences between Amr and Nahy**

The semantic purpose of any word or structure may not be considered without context. For instance, in some contexts above, the Amr typically necessitates implementing the action without delay. However, a jussive verb with Lā of Nahy requires persistence in response but not promptly, as is the case in the present form in general. For example, Idhhab (Go) conveys the necessity of carrying out the action immediately, and the request may be only momentary. The other form of Amr using the present verb preceded by Li, like Litadhhab (Let go) may have abundance of time and an element of urgency to keep doing the action. This seems to be attributed to the fact that the present verb in Arabic generally suggests continuity and renewal. The same applies to the jussive present verb with Lā, which requests a continuous forbidding of an undesirable act.

It is found that Amr and Nahy are the same in having a superior party. However, the former has a required move while the latter has a forbidden, disfavoured act (Al-'alawī, 2002). Real Nahy like Lā taf'al (Do not do) involves prohibition, in contrast with Amr. It definitely indicates the obligation of halting a forbidden act promptly. In other words, as the act is expected to lead to damage or evil, it is supposed to stop immediately.

For Maṭlūb (1982), Amr and Nahy agree in the following:

− They are made by a superior party.

− They are made by another party than the addressee.

− Their impact is expected by the addressor.

− On the other hand, they disagree in the following:

− In terms of form, the former is constructed as If'al (Do), while the latter is made as Lā Taf'al (Do not do).

− In terms of expectation, the former involves a required action, while the latter indicates a hated, prohibited act.

2. Significance of the Study

It is needless to say that each word or structure has its peculiar associations. In this study, it is assumed that the effect of Amr is remote from that of Nahy. It is surveying and analysis which can lead to the semantic differences, aimed at eliminating the misconception held by many native speakers, especially university students, that both forms generally carry the meaning of command. For example, in the verse "**Remain** in your homes and **do not dress up** fancily the way they used to dress during [the time of] primitive Ignorance," they would not differentiate between Remain (Amr) and do not dress up (Nahy). They would consider the latter as one of Amr command,

ignoring its structure and tense. This may be attributed to the series of Amr verbs in the two verses as will be seen below – Qarn, Aqimn, Ātīn and Aṭeʿn – without noticing the abrupt shift to Nahy – Lā Tabarrajn. In other words, their response comes in a general and consistent judgment of all the verbs in the context.

Therefore, it is necessary to look into the uses of Amr and Nahy with Lā and the semantic differences between them.

3. Methodology of the Study

The study attempts to answer two questions: ould Amr and Nahy be exchanged and convey the same meaning in the same context? Or will this lead to other indications imposed by the situation? It adopts a descriptive, analytical method based on arguments by scholars of Arabic language and rhetoric on the Amr and Nahy forms.

Random representative examples are taken from old and modern exegesis books, especially those which focus on the language aspect and address the phenomenon in a direct manner. The interactive factor is also employed as a fundamental tool to explore useful rhetorical tips, and the translations are cited from Thomas Irving. Finally, conclusions are made on such differences.

4. Data Analysis

It is necessary to remember that the Noble Quran is a unique text. It is the holy book for Muslim, in which form and content are intertwined in a highly special relationship (Zebiri, 2003).

Upon taking a glance at relevant examples in the Noble Quran, it is found that Amr and Nahy can be joined in the same verse, but with the context showing their different effects. The Amr and Nahy constructions investigated are as follows.

❖ **Amr and Nahy Combination**

When Nahy is preceded by Amr, it mainly conveys religious prohibition, as Nahy addresses evil and Amr addresses good.

For example, Almighty Allah says: "wa-ilā madyana akhāhum shuʿayban qāla yāqawmi **uʿbudū** l-laha mā lakum min ilāhin ghayruhu **walā tanquṣū** l-mik'yāla wal-mīzāna innī arākum bikhayrin wa-innī akhāfu ʿalaykum ʿadhāba yawmin muḥīṭi. wayāqawmi **awfū** l-mik'yāla wal-mīzāna bil-qis'ṭi **walā tabkhasū** l-nāsa ashyāahum walā taʿthaw fī l-arḍi muf'sidīn" It is translated into: "To Midian [God sent] their brother Shuayb. He said: "My people, **worship** God [Alone]! You have no other deity except Him. **Do not give a short measure and weight**. I see you enjoy well-being while I fear the torment of an overpowering day for you. My people, **give full measure and weight** with all fairness, and **do not cheat men of their belongings** nor cause havoc on earth as mischief makers do" (11:84-85).

Here, an interesting question is raised: if the prohibition of giving a short measure (Nahy) is identical of a command of giving full measure and weight (Amr), why are they combined? It is argued that the addressees are first told to halt the very evil act, as its explicit mention shames them. After that, they are overtly told to carry out the good action for further encouragement. This required deed is also reinforced with 'fairness', indicating that it is an obligation to give with no more or less, though giving more shows virtue and kindness. In addition, giving good measure shows the noble intention of seeking fairness (Al-Zamakhsharī, 1997).

Furthermore, in the second verse above, there are both the Amr 'Give full' and the Nahy 'Do not cheat'. On the one hand, giving full measure and weight refers to maintaining the buyers' rights, as the one who weighs is the seller, who is tempted to get more by selling an incomplete amount for a full price paid by the buyer. On the other hand, forbidding the cheating of people of their belongings is associated with maintaining the seller's rights, for the buyer may undervalue the commodity by convincing the seller to accept a little price. Both cases were common in Midian. They are two different and unacceptable tricks aimed at gaining money, and neither is a confirmation of the other (Ibn 'āshūr, 2000). In other words, the Amr 'Give full measure and weight' comes first to set the rule of granting full rights, where the command requires doing a desirable, commendable action. In contrast, the Nahy 'Do not cheat men of their belongings' prohibits doing a despicable, undesirable act of undervaluing people's rights.

❖ Amr and Nahy Shift

Some contexts contain shifting between Nahy and Amr forms.

For instance, Almighty Allah says: "wal-samāa rafaʿahā wawaḍaʿa l-mīzān. **allā taṭghaw** fī l-mīzān. **wa-aqīmū** l-wazna bil-qis'ṭi **walā tukh'sirū** l-mīzān." This is translated into English as: "While He has raised the sky up and placed scales [there]. So **do not skimp** in weight. Always **measure** accurately with [all] fairness and **do not give** short weight" (55:7-9).

Here, the Nahy comes twice 'Do not skimp in weight' and 'Do not give short weight' with Amr in between 'Measure'. The word Mīzan (weight) is repeated to emphasize its valid use (Al-Zamakhsharī, 1997), whereas the word Wazn (measure) comes with the Amr. At the beginning of Verse 8, 'Do not skimp in weight' constitutes an explicit prohibition of increasing while selling or buying. At the end of Verse 9, 'Do not give short weight' forbids decreasing when selling or buying. Both behaviours lead to infringing people's rights and cause disputes in the society. Giving short measure, in particular, involves seeking the execution of justice in measure and abandoning unfairness (Al-Iṣfahānī, 1992). In contrast, the Amr 'Measure accurately' stresses achieving complete fairness in such transactions, while warning against the preceding and following misbehaviours (Ibid). Any of the three structures may not be exchanged with another. For instance, an Amr expression like 'Be committed to weight' may not replace 'Do not skimp in weight', since it does not convey warning against an existing or common act at the time. In fact, it is the Nahy in the latter which tells that some people do this act. Then, it was followed by the Amr of establishing fairness without increase in 'Measure accurately with [all] fairness', as fairness was missing in those wrongdoers' practise. Likewise, a Nahy expression like 'Do not oppress in weight' may not replace the above Amr, since it forbids a common undesirable act.

The next example of shifting also shows semantic disparity between the Amr and Nahy forms within context.

Almighty Allah says: "**awfū** l-kayla **walā takūnū** mina l-mukh'sirīn. **wazinū** bil-qis'ṭāsi l-mus'taqīm. **walā tabkhasū** l-nāsa ashyāahum **walā taʿthaw** fī l-arḍi muf'sidīn." It is translated into English as: "Give full measure and do not be among those who cause [people] losses. * Weigh with honest scales; * Do not undersell people to cheat them of their things, and do not storm around the earth in order to spoil matters" (26:181-183).

Prophet Shu 'ayb told his folks to give full measure and not to cause any loss. Generally, weighing is of different types: equal, short and extra. Firstly, he commanded doing the obligation 'Give full measure' and warned against forbidden 'Do not cause any losses. However, he ignored

the extra because giving it is a virtue, while abstaining from it is not an offence. When he told them to give full, he explained how it should be done: 'Weigh with honest scales. Secondly, 'Do not undersell people to cheat them of their things' is a principle stating that nobody shall be deprived of their rights, and that any property may not be seized or even used without the owner's permission. Thirdly, storming around the earth in order to spoil matters conveys robbery and destruction of crops, which those people used to commit, so they were told to halt it (Al-Rāzī, no date found, 24/528).

On the other hand, 'Do not be among those who cause [people] losses' is more eloquent than saying 'Do not cause [people] losses', as it indicates commanding disavowing those who commit it (Ibn ʿāshūr, 2000). Thus, while this Nahy prohibits and warns the addressee against committing such an undesirable act, the Amr 'give full measure' requests implementing a desirable action.

The Amr and Nahy shifts in Quranic contexts serve particular purposes.

Another example is the verses: "yānisāa l-nabiyi lastunna ka-aḥadin mina l-nisāi ini ittaqaytunna **falā takhḍaʿna** bil-qawli fayaṭmaʿa alladhī fī qalbihi maraḍun waqul'na qawlan maʿrūfa. **waqarna** fī buyūtikunna **walā tabarrajna** tabarruja l-jāhiliyati l-ūlā **wa-aqim'na** l-ṣalata **waātīna** l-zakata **wa-aṭiʿna** l-laha warasūlahu." This is translated into English as: "0 wives of the Prophet, you are not like any other women! If you do your duty, then **do not act too deferential** while talking [to others] lest someone whose heart contains malice may thereby be encouraged. **Employ** suitable speech. * **Remain** in your homes and **do not dress up fancily** the way they used to dress during [the time of] primitive Ignorance. **Keep up** prayer and **pay** the welfare tax, and **obey** God and His messenger" (33:32-33).

The two above verses contain five Amr instances: Quln (say), Qarn (stay), Aqimn (keep up), Ātīn (pay) and Aṭeʿn (obey) as well as two Nahy instances: Lā takhḍaʿn (Do not act too deferential) and Lā tabarrajn (Do not dress up fancily).

In Verse 32, the Nahy 'Do not act too deferential' warns the Prophet's wives against this manner when talking to men, so those with weak faith would not have feeling towards them (Al-Wāḥidī, 2009). This Nahy in the present verb preceded by Lā is so eloquent in achieving the purpose of halting such a misbehaviour, not only once but to persist in the future. In addition, it comes to forbid a probably common habit by women at that time. On the other hand, it may not be replaced by any Amr verb like 'roughen' or 'coarsen' which neither conveys the same purpose nor requests carrying out an action missing at that time or promptly required.

Likewise, the Nahy 'Do not dress up fancily' forbids a despicable act which was common in the pre-Islamic era and at the beginning of the Islamic age. It is related to women's display of their charms which spark men's desire, about their waddling walk (Al-Zajjāj, 1988). This behaviour is prohibited especially for the Prophet's wives due to their great status. The Nahy may not be replaced by an Amr like 'Conceal your adornment', which does not necessarily convey that it was common at the time, but may even indicate that it has already been carried out by the addressee.

As for the consecutive Amr forms 'employ', 'remain', 'keep up', 'pay' and 'obey', they indicate the instruction to the Prophet's wives to do the above. The Amr in If'al structure requires the addressees to keep these actions ceaselessly and without laxity or slackness.

❖ Negative Antonymy

Ṭibāq Al-Salb (negative antonymy) in Arabic combines Amr and Nahy forms of the same verb, like in the verse: "**Do not dread** mankind, and **dread** Me" (5:44).

It is interesting to have the Nahy present verb 'Do not dread' followed by a direct Amr 'Dread'. It is argued that dreading cannot be required and forbidden in one but in two directions, for the former is connected to people and the latter to Almighty Allah. (Al-Dasūqī, 2007, 4/14).

According to Al-Andalusī, (1992), the above verse forbids judges from fearing other than Almighty Allah by ruling with other than justice due to dread from the harm of a dictator, opponent or even a friend.

The prohibited fear could be that which makes them forget the commands of Almighty Allah. It is He Who can bring benefit and harm to them, but they cannot. The Nahy tells those who commit cajolery, sins and oppression to halt such acts (Ibn Al-Khaṭīb, 1964).

In other words, the Amr 'Dread me' indicates that fearing only Almighty Allah is a desirable behaviour, whereas the Nahy 'Do not dread them' is about something despicable and inferior to fearing Almighty Allah.

5. Conclusion

Finally, the research has found answers to the questions posed above as follows:

1. A direct Amr command by If ̔al in the Noble Quran often necessitates carrying out an action in a prompt or slow manner, depending on the context.

2. Some cases of Amr in the investigated verses require persistence in actions or sayings which the addressee already practises. Here, the purpose is to emphasize not to stop doing them.

3. It is found that the Amr instances request performing commendable, desirable actions, while the Nahy with Lā instances indicate halting or abstaining from despicable, undesirable acts.

4. Any exchange between Amr and Nahy forms never works. Each context holds different purposes for the two constructions.

5. There are contexts which contain Amr and Nahy shifting, which aims at a semantic purpose which neither can accomplish by itself.

6. Appendices

– Appendix-1

Conflicts of interest statements

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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