

## Translating Qur'anic Deictic terms: A Systemic Functional Perspective

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### Abstract:

*Many grammatical structures are a serious problem in the understanding and translation processes of certain Qur'anic verses, crucial to the everyday life of believers due to their jurisprudential value. An example is the punishment suggested for the crime of "Fāhisha" in verses 15 and 16 of the fourth surah (Al Nisa). The two verses are understood and translated in different ways due to the ambiguity of the relative clauses in both verses that is caused by ambiguity at the level of reference of the two relative pronouns "allāti" and "allathāni", known in Arabic as "asma' mousula". This article examines the translation of these two problematic relative pronouns from a systemic functional linguistics perspective.*

**Keywords:** Qur'an, relative pronouns, fāhisha, systemic functional linguistics, exegesis, translation.

## Introduction

Deictic terms form an important parcel of language in general and of religious discourse in particular. Language of the Qur'an is a case in point, where we notice an important number of deictic terms and deictic expressions that are of paramount importance in the understanding of the text. Although the major tendency in linguistics is to divide deixis into three major categories: personal, spatial and temporal ( Bühler 2011), there are other categories of language, which do not fall under the strict categorization of deictic terms, and yet play a deictic role. Such is the case of relative pronouns in Arabic known as “al asma' al mousula” which play a crucial role in specifying the meaning of the clauses they modify. The Qur'anic text includes cases of relative pronoun usages that are problematic both to exegetes and translators of the canonical text. Two pertinent examples are the relative pronouns “allāti” and “allathāni” in Q.4:15 and Q. 4:16 in relation to the punishment of the crime of “Fahisha”. The paper sheds light on these two relative pronouns from a systemic functional linguistic perspective

### 1. Research Problem

Although relative clauses, as part of deictic expressions in the Arabic language, are considered to “provide a means for restricting the number of possible referents that qualify as candidates for the listener’s identification as the referent intended by the speaker” (Perkins 1992, p.105), some relative clauses in the Qur’an remain vague as to the linguistic role attributed to them and consequently pose a problem both to exegetes and translators. The paper investigates the translators’ degree of awareness of this linguistic phenomenon and the ways of dealing with it in their translation process. Within this perspective, the paper attempts to answer the following questions:

- What linguistic role do the relative pronouns “allāti” and “allathāni” play in specifying the meaning of verses 15 and 16 of surah An Nisa?
- How are the terms understood by Arabic grammarians and Muslim exegetes?
- Is there consensus as to their meaning?
- How are they translated into English?

### 2. Research Methodology and Corpus Description

#### 2.1 Research Methodology

The research adopts the systemic functional grammar view of relative pronouns as deictic expressions. In doing so, it examines the selected relative pronouns in the light of this perspective. It also adopts the systemic functional linguistics view of translation, as belonging to the category of interpersonal function of language, to see how translators understood the deictic value of relative pronouns and the correspondent selected translations among the possible potential ones. The following table is used as a research tool in examining the selected data:

	Translation provided		Translator's Awareness of the Deictic Value of Pronouns and Related Problems in the Understanding and Translation of the Verses	Translator's Choices
Translation	<b>Verse 15</b>			
	<b>Verse 16</b>			

This paper uses Systemic Functional Linguistics, as a research approach, to understand and interpret English translations of the Qur'an. Explaining the merits of SFL as a research tool, Vinh To *et al* (2014, p.146) explain that "SFL can be seen as a paradigm shift in linguistic theory moving away from the traditional focus on syntax to the inclusion of the interface between language and pragmatics. The focus of SFL is language in use. It deals with texts in social contexts, which is the main focus in qualitative data analysis. Thus, SFL provides both research tools and theoretical insights for understanding and interpreting texts".

## 2.2 Corpus Description

The corpus includes the Qur'an as a source text (ST) and four different translations of it (TRS<sup>1</sup>, TRS<sup>2</sup> and TRS<sup>3</sup>). These are: The Holy Qur'an translated by Abdullah Yusuf Ali. Second, The Quran translated by Saheeh International. Third, The Message of the Qur'an translated by Mohamed Assad.

## 3. Literature Review

### 3.1 Translation from a Functional Perspective

Translation, from a systemic functional approach, falls within the interpersonal meta-function of language. The translator, as a rewriter of the source text, operates within the realm of meaning potential that is expressed through a selection from possible alternatives within a system. Explaining the utility of analysing translations from a functional approach, Munday (2009, p.16) argues that:

The usefulness of functional analysis in translation has to do with the significance allotted to choice. Hence, the reader (and translator) approaches the ST in the belief that the ST writer's choice is meaningful, asking questions such as: Why this wording rather than another? What choices did the writer have at each point? What is the function of the writer's choice? And what form of communication is produced by this choice? The translator needs to uncover the ST writer choice and to re-encode that choice as appropriate in the target language. Thus, the translator's choices are also meaningful and represent

conscious or unconscious decisions at the lexical level that, together, represent the translator's interpretation of the ST.

### **3.2 Relative pronouns as Deictic Expressions from a Systemic Grammar Perspective**

Apart from being recognised to perform the duties of pronouns and conjunctions (Lise Fontaine 2013, p.29), relative pronouns are rarely attributed any deictic function in traditional grammar in contrast to functional grammar. Explaining the functional aspect of language, L. Fontaine (2013, p.5) purports that:

All speakers of a language do something with it ; they use language. They may play with it, shape it, but ultimately they use it for particular purposes. It serves a function. The ways in which people use language is always driven by the context within which people are using language and the speaker's individual goals or objectives (conscious or subconscious). In this sense, we could say that language is primarily functional; in other words, for any language context (casual conversation, letter to the editor, political speech etc.), language is being used to do a job for the speaker; it is being used by the speaker (p.3)

Within this functional approach to grammar, RD Perkins (1992, p.105) explains the grammatical functional role of relative clauses and deduces that "The entire restrictive relative clause fills the function similar to deictics".

### **3.3 Relative Pronouns in Arabic Language**

Comparing pronouns in Arabic and English grammatical systems, Aboud (2015, p.1079) explains that:

A pronoun is termed in Arabic a "noun of the connected". Being nouns, relative pronouns have the characteristics of nouns, specifically gender, number, and grammatical category. [...]. Relative pronouns in English have some characteristics that aren't gift in Arabic as we have a tendency to area unit near to see. In English, "that" is used for both humans and nonhumans. There is a similar word in Arabic, but it will have to change to modify different numbers and genders

In explaining the Arabic equivalents of the English general pronouns, he provides the following table (p.1079)

General Relative Pronouns Who / Who / Which / That		
Singular	Masculine	'al-lathee
	Feminine	'al-latee
D U A L	Masculine (subject)	'al-lathan(i)
	Masculine (object)	'al-lathayn(i)
	Feminine (subject)	'al-lataan(i)
	Feminine (object)	'al-latayn(i)
P L U R A L	Masculine	'al-latheen(a)
		'al-'ulaa (Archaic word)
	Feminine	'al-laatee
		'al-laa'ee
		'al-lawaaatee

Table 1: Arabic Equivalents of English General Pronouns

### 3.4 The Two Verses in the Light of Classical Exegesis

The Shiite scholar Mohamed Housine Fadl Allah explains on his official website that exegetes differed as to the meaning of the two verses in question. In reviewing the exegetes' explanations, he provides the following major differences in their understanding: Zina in both verses, lesbianism in the first verse and homosexuality in the second verse, zina in the first verse and homosexuality in the second verse. It is worth noting here that the relative pronouns "allāti" and "allathāni" are ambiguous (أسماء موصولة مبهمّة) and consequently need further clarification in the clause, the key word that exegetes relied upon to understand the meaning of the two verses is "Fahisha". However, the issue is further complicated as there has been no consensus as to the meaning of the term "Fahisha". The possible understandings of the relative pronouns "allāti" and "allathāni" and the term "Fahisha" are summarised in the diagrams below.

### 3.4.1 Possible Meanings of the Relative Pronoun “allāti”

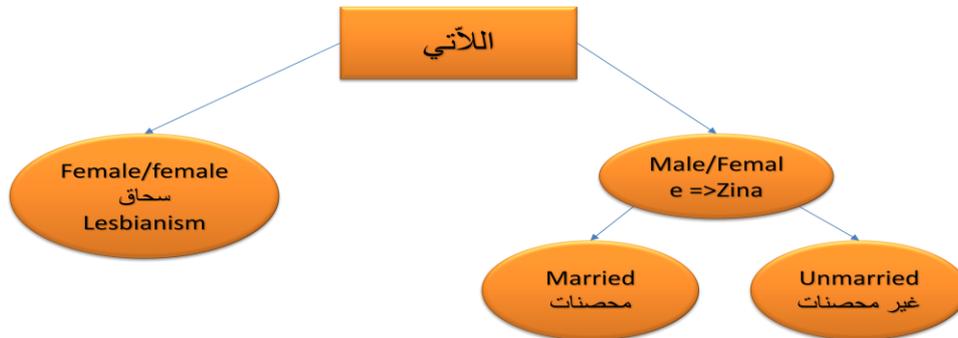


Diagram 1: Possible meanings of the relative pronoun “allāti”

The diagram reveals that the deictic term “allāti” may refer either to two females committing a sexual act among themselves and thus refers to lesbianism as the equivalent of “Fahisha” being talked about in Q.4.15 or may refer to females being involved in illicit sexual relation with men and consequently refers to the act of fornication. In the latter case, both parties involved can be either married “محصن” or unmarried “غير محصن” and the punishment varies according to the marital status. It is, however, worth noting that in case the deictic term is understood to refer to women committing fornication, the punishment stated in the verse is believed to be abrogated by Q.24:2.

### 3.4.2 Possible meanings of the relative pronoun “allathānii”

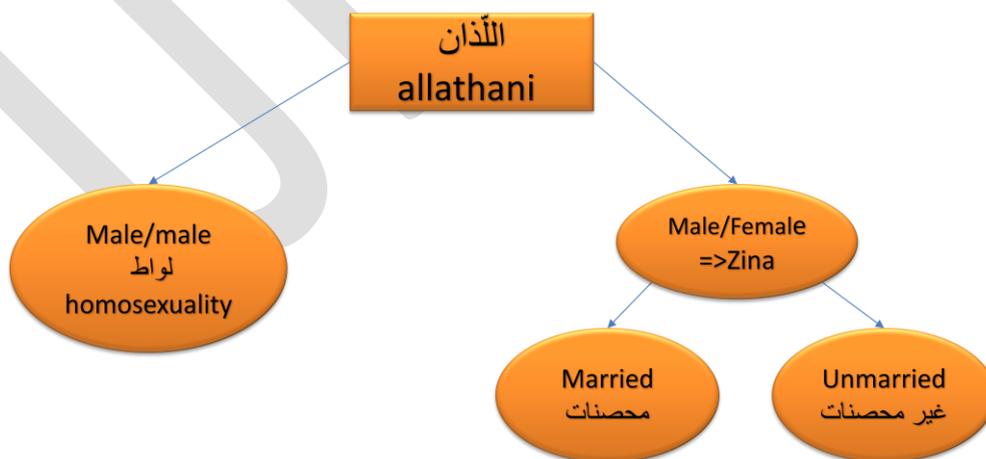


Diagram 2: Possible meanings of the relative pronoun “allathānii”

The diagram shows that the deictic relative pronoun “allathāni” in Q.4.16 may undergo two different interpretations: According to the first one, it refers to the crime of fornication. Exegetes who adopt this interpretation usually refer to the story of Lot in another part of the Qur’anic text and consequently understand the reference of the deictic relative pronoun through recurrence to intertextuality besides the clause in which it occurs. According to the second interpretation, it refers to the act of fornication that can occur either between married or unmarried people.

### 3.4.3 Possible meanings of the term “Fahisha” and the referent “هاها”

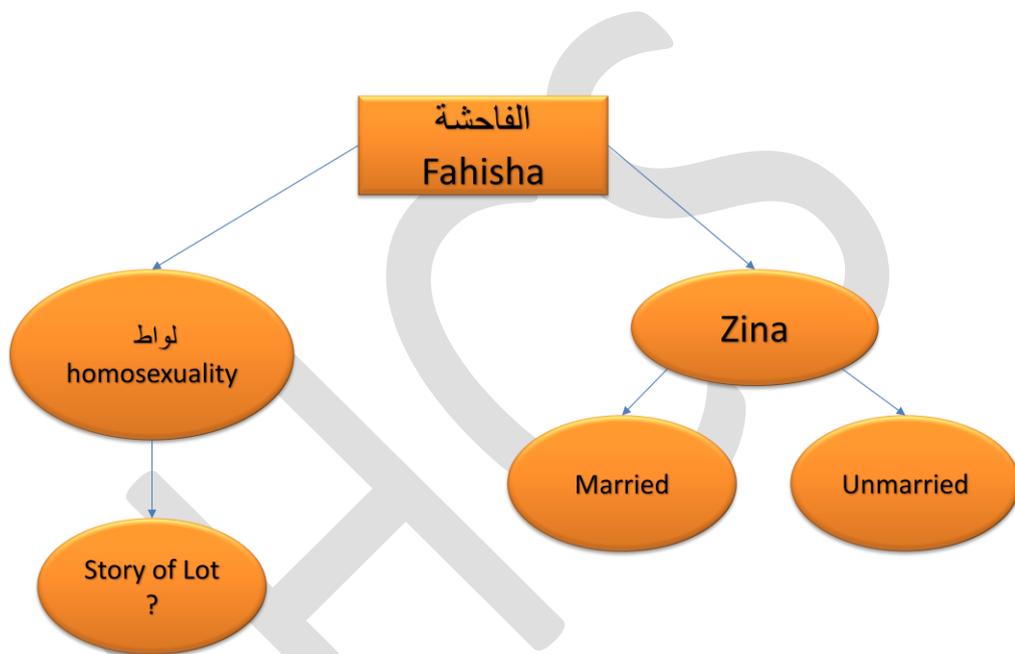


Diagram 3: Possible meanings of the term “Fahisha” and the referent “هاها”

Based upon the three previous diagrams, it has been shown that the deictic relative pronouns “alāati” and “allathāni” are understood through the meaning attributed to the cataphoric word “Fahisha”. The ambiguity of this term, however, renders the task of deciphering the reference of the two relative pronouns more complex. The term “Fahisha” indeed is being understood in three different ways, as shown in this diagram: It may refer to lesbianism, homosexuality or fornication.

4. Findings

	Translation Provided		Recognition of the linguistic issue of Relative Pronouns	Position towards the Issue of Relative Pronouns
TRS <sup>1</sup>	<b>Verse 15</b>	<b>any of your women/lewdness</b>	Yes	Footnote 523: Most commentators understand this to refer to adultery or fornication: in that case they consider that the punishment was altered to 100 stripes by the later verse, 24:2. But I think it refers to unnatural crime between women, analogous to unnatural crimes between men in 4:16 below; because (1) no punishment is specified for the man, as would be the case where a man was involved in the crime; (2) the word, al lāī, the purely feminine plural of al lāī, is used for the parties of the crime; (3) the punishment is indefinite; see the next note but one.
	<b>Verse 16</b>	two men among you/lewdness		
TRS <sup>2</sup>	<b>Verse 15</b>	Those who/immorality	Yes	Footnote148 Scholars differ over whether “the two” refers to two of the same sex
	<b>Verse 16</b>	And the two who/immorality		
TRS <sup>3</sup>	<b>Verse 15</b>	AND AS FOR those of your women who/immoral conduct	No	
	<b>Verse 16</b>	The two who/it		
TRS <sup>4</sup>	<b>Verse 15</b>	The women who/lewdness	Yes	004:015 The relative pronoun in this verse is allati, which refers to a group of women. It indicates an organized prostitution, which might pose a grave health problem for the society.
	<b>Verse 16</b>			004:016 The relative pronoun is not marked; the male dual form allazani (both) includes the female partner. In this case, it appears that the illegal or extramarital sexual affair is

				monogamous.
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Table 2: Findings

## 5. Analysis

Trs<sup>1</sup> is aware of the deictic problem in Q4.15 and opts for a footnote to clarify its position as to this issue. In doing so, it does not adopt the widespread understanding of the verse referring to adultery and being abrogated by Q.24:2. Instead, the translation provides an uncommon understanding purporting that it “refers to unnatural crime between women, analogous to unnatural crimes between men in 4:16” on the basis that “the word, al lātī, the purely feminine plural of al lātī, is used for the parties of the crime”. Trs<sup>2</sup> contents itself with a footnote in which it declares that “Scholars differ over whether “the two” refers to two of the same sex”. By translating the terms “allāti’ and allāthani’ as “those who” and “the two who” and the term “fahisha” as “immorality”, it remains as ambiguous as the source text. As to Trs<sup>3</sup>, the issue of the deictic reference of the relative pronouns “allāti” and “allathāni” is not raised at all. The rendition of these two terms as “those of your women who” and “The two who” remains as problematic to the reader as the source text. Trs<sup>4</sup> is aware of the ambiguity of the relative pronouns “allāti’ and “allathāni” in both verses and opts for footnotes to clarify their meaning. Although the footnote relative to verse 15 declares that the relative pronoun “allāti” refers to “a group of women [and] indicates an organized prostitution, which might pose a grave health problem for the society”, it does not discuss the type of punishment declared in the second half of the verse and does not specify whether this punishment is abrogated or not. In proclaiming, in the footnote relative to verse 16, that “The relative pronoun is not marked; the male dual form allazani (both) includes the female partner”, the translation falls in the trap of not explaining the reasons behind the repetition of the same content of verse 15.

## Conclusion and suggestions

Relative pronouns form an important part of language, as they are meant to clarify ambiguity at the level of the clauses in which they occur. Their importance increases for the translator whose job is to understand what they refer to in the source text and to find an equivalent for them in the target language. The role of relative pronouns gets more complex in case of translating religious texts, where understanding their deictic reference becomes crucial in understanding the source message and rendering it adequately in the target language.

Although relative pronouns in English and their corresponding equivalents of “asma mousula’ in Arabic are not being assigned any deictic value in the traditional grammar of both languages, systemic functional grammar in modern English linguistics is an exception as it recognises the functional deictic role of relative pronouns.

The article has examined the rendition of the relative pronouns “allāti” and “allathāni” in Q.15 and Q.16 in the light of functional grammar in three different translations. In doing so, the following conclusions have been drawn: instead of clarifying the meaning of the verses in which they occur through allusion to the deictic entities they are supposed to refer to, as purported by functional grammar in determining the deictic value of relative pronouns, the pronouns “allāti” and “allathāni” in Q.15 and Q.16 have been a source of ambiguity for both exegetes and translators. Exegesis relative to the meaning of these two terms has been so wide to include at least six interpretations. While some translators have been aware of the delicacy of this problem and have consequently adopted their translation techniques accordingly, others seem to have overlooked this issue. However, the problem which remains unsolved is that relative pronouns, meant to have a deictic reference according to systemic functional grammar and to clarify the meaning of the clauses in which they occur, become a source of ambiguity in the Qur’anic text. Referring to the specific use of language by the Qur’an, Mohamed Hedi Tahri (2016, p.127) purports that “It is [THE QUR’AN] a religious discourse i.e. it uses language in a religious way that is different in essence from the literary use. It is ultimately normal that the distance between the religious and literary discourses should be wide as each one of them has its own characteristics, a particular dominant textual structure to which it belongs and a particular discourse type under which it falls”<sup>1</sup>. Consequently, it remains important to read the Qur’an, while translating it, as a religious text and not a literary, scientific or legal one. Such a suggestion has been advanced by Hedi Tahri (2016, p.302) who thinks that “The problem then does not lie in the fact that the Qur’an is a disagreed upon text but rather lies in finding a tool to manage the old/new disagreement about the Qur’an. This tool, according to our findings, in reorganising the results reached by both classical and modern approaches in a way that allows us to read the Qur’an in the light of its being a religious text and not a literary, legal or divine [...] as done by most of the ancient scholars”<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Translation by the author

<sup>2</sup> Translation by the author

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