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Linguistic Differentiation in the Science–Religion Debate: A Comparative Study of Contemporary Shi'i Thought and Modern Philosophy of Language

Roohallah Rezaie [1]

Master of Qur'anic Sciences, University of Islamic Sciences, Qom, Iran

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ABSTRACT:

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One of the common responses to the conflict between science and religion is the strategy of *linguistic differentiation*. This strategy—which holds that the language of science and the language of religion differ in purpose, method, and worldview—is so broad that it encompasses theories ranging from the philosophical interpretation of Allameh Tabataba'i and Ayatollah Javadi Amoli, to the symbolic language theory of Shahid Motahhari, the metaphorical language theory of Mojtahed Shabestari, the interactive interpretation between science and religion proposed by Albert Einstein, and Ludwig Wittgenstein's complete separation of the domains of science and religion. This breadth has led some scholars in Islamic studies to assign a significant place to the linguistic differentiation strategy in discussions of the science-religion conflict. However, it must be noted that, although the broad semantic scope of linguistic differentiation includes these theories, they are so distinct that each may be interpreted as an independent strategy for resolving the science-religion conflict. This study briefly examines the meaning of linguistic differentiation in its philosophical origins and analyzes selected Islamic–Shi'i theories that align with this strategy, highlighting their differences from modern philosophy of language. Special emphasis is placed on theories rooted in the works of Tabataba'i, particularly his exegesis. The findings show that although many Islamic theories may be subsumed under the general concept of linguistic differentiation, enduring

1. Corresponding Author. Email Address: rrroohallah@gmail.com

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principles of Shi'i theology produce fundamental differences in their premises and interpretations compared with Western traditions.

KEYWORDS: The Qur'an and science, science-religion conflict, linguistic demarcation, religious language, symbolic language, scientific language.

1. Introduction

Among the proposed solutions to the science-religion conflict is the strategy of "linguistic differentiation." In general terms, this strategy posits that each linguistic domain serves distinct purposes, functions, and objectives, and therefore leads to different meanings and outcomes. According to this view, the truth or falsity of a statement cannot be determined independently of whether it fulfills the purposes and functions specific to its linguistic domain. Proponents of linguistic differentiation argue that due to the diversity of linguistic functions and uses, language cannot be interpreted monolithically. The truth value of a proposition depends on its intended purpose, usage, and linguistic role (Khosropanah & Ghomi 2021). For example, in didactic stories, the focus is not on the literal veracity of the narrative but rather on its motivational value and its capacity to reform human behavior; in contrast, scientific statements are assessed by their utility.

Linguistic differentiation within the philosophy of language led to the complete separation of different linguistic domains, including religious and scientific language. Over time, this notion entered the discourse surrounding the conflict between religious texts and science. Some religious scholars, fearing that science might undermine religion, adopted the linguistic differentiation approach and relinquished scientific references in religious texts. Ian Barbour states that theologians ought to be grateful to linguistic analysts. Religion has once again become a topic worthy of philosophical discussion (Barbour 1966). This religious response to the science-religion conflict also found its way into Muslim theological and philosophical discourse, particularly regarding the relationship between the Qur'an and science. Various perspectives on the differentiation of Qur'anic and scientific language have been proposed. For example, Motahhari (1997), Makino (1970), Kalantari (2008), Darzi (2022) and Faramarz Qaramaleki (1994) all consider linguistic differentiation to be a viable solution to the conflict between science and religion.

Muslim exegetes and theologians, especially Shi'i scholars, have historically engaged in extensive debates concerning divine speech, debates that are rooted in Islamic and Shi'i beliefs. Among these discussions, some

pertain directly to the Qur'an as divine speech, such as the Qur'an's being the word of God, the existence of inner layers (*baṭn*) within its verses, and the conventional (*ʿurfī*) nature of Qur'anic language. Other debates concern divine speech in relation to its Speaker, such as whether the speech of God is eternal (*qadīm*) or created (*ḥādith*).

In the contemporary period, following the emergence of the great Shi'i philosopher and exegete, Allameh Tabataba'i, philosophical-theological discussions related to the Qur'an gained new vitality and were presented in new and diverse forms. Tabataba'i (2014, 2:325; 7:120) maintained that the divine speech in the Qur'an fundamentally differs from the speech of created beings and that one must conceive of a reality beyond sensory reality for it. The very distinction that Tabataba'i draws between the language of God and that of other creatures has led to his being regarded as among the first to articulate a position akin to those who advocate for linguistic differentiation between religion and other linguistic domains in the philosophy of religion. After him, his student, Shahid Motahhari, also expressed propositions concerning the differentiation between the languages of religion and science in his writings and lectures. The intellectual and philosophical divergences between the views of Tabataba'i and Motahhari indicate that Motahhari, too, presented a distinct theory regarding linguistic differentiation. His perspective was closer to contemporary discussions of linguistic differentiation, as he argued that the aim and purpose of speech play a determining role in what we are to derive from it (Motahhari 1997, 1: 515). If a discourse has been revealed for our guidance, what we must derive from it is precisely its guiding function. This approach of Motahhari can be regarded as an "Islamicized" form of linguistic differentiation, one that influenced many scholars after him to adopt this line of thought.

The aim of the present study is to precisely identify and analyze the similarities and differences between these two approaches. Employing a descriptive-analytical method and based on library sources, this research clarifies the concept of linguistic differentiation and undertakes a comparative examination of it in both Western and Islamic—particularly Shi'i—thought. For this purpose, the first part briefly reviews the views of some Western philosophers and theologians, such as Wittgenstein and Barbour, as the intellectual background of the concept of "linguistic differentiation." The second part then focuses on the theory of linguistic differentiation in Shi'i exegetical and theological thought, particularly in the works of Tabataba'i and subsequent scholars, and offers a comparative analysis of these perspectives with Western theories. Finally, a comparative study identifies and analyses the similarities and differences between Western and Shi'i approaches.

2. Literature Review

The concept of linguistic differentiation developed within the context of analytic philosophy and modern linguistics, influenced by fundamental critiques of logical positivism and of the univocal conception of language. The turning point of this development can be traced in the later works of Wittgenstein (1953), especially his *Philosophical Investigations*. By introducing the concept of "language games," Wittgenstein, as one of the founders of this shift, demonstrated that meaning in language depends on contextual use and internal linguistic rules. From this perspective, religious language is not an instrument for scientific reporting but rather a dimension of the believer's mode of existence. This perspective was quickly welcomed in Christian theology and led to the emergence of trends such as the functionalist theory of religious language, symbolic language, and the view of religion as a distinct language game.

Ian Barbour (1966), in his book *Issues in Science and Religion*, analyzed the history of the relationship between science and religion from the medieval period to the modern era. He examined different theoretical strategies for resolving the conflicts between the two domains and considered the linguistic differentiation approach one of the most effective in reducing this tension. Barbour commended linguistic analysts who, by emphasizing the linguistic and functional distinction between science and religion, revived the possibility of dialogue and coexistence between the two and restored the place of religion. Other theories influenced by linguistic differentiation include the "independence of domains" theory, advanced by Stephen J. Gould (2002), which seeks to prevent conflict between science and religion by distinguishing their explanatory realms. William P. Alston (2014), by extending the notion of linguistic differentiation to the domain of experience, argued that experience, too, in its various kinds—such as sensory experience and religious experience—possesses its own structures and criteria of evaluation and interpretation. Therefore, one cannot impose the standards of one type of experience universally on another. In the same context, John H. Hick (1995) carried this differentiation so far as to affirm the truth of all religious propositions, thereby presenting the theory of religious pluralism.

Even some scholars such as Albert Einstein (1954), although they did not produce systematic philosophical analyses, nevertheless emphasized in their epistemic reflections a kind of functional and linguistic distinction between science and religion. They considered the two not as conflicting, but rather as complementary and mutually necessary in providing a comprehensive account of existence. Thus, within the domain of Western thought, the

theory of linguistic differentiation—drawing upon the foundations of philosophical linguistics—came to be regarded as one of the serious solutions to the problem of conflict between science and religion, giving rise to a wide spectrum of theorizing in the fields of philosophical theology and religious epistemology.

Among Shi'i Muslim thinkers, Allameh Tabataba'i is one of the prominent figures who, in three instances within his exegetical and philosophical works, refers to certain linguistic distinctions which, at first glance, appear comparable to the theory of linguistic differentiation in the Western philosophical tradition. However, a closer analysis reveals that these distinctions not only do not follow from those theoretical foundations, but at times stand in direct opposition to them. First, in the introduction to *al-Mīzān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, he explicitly states that the language of the Qur'an differs from the language of the theologians, philosophers, or empiricists, and that the Qur'an was revealed in the ordinary language of the people. Yet his intention is not to negate philosophical or scientific language, but to emphasize the necessity of suspending preconceived notions when engaging with the revealed text and of fully receiving its content on the basis of the Qur'an's own self-expression. This, however, is not compatible with the presuppositions of the theory of linguistic differentiation, which essentially restricts understanding to linguistic structures. Second, in his exegesis of certain verses, such as Q. 2:261 or al-Q. 18:45, Tabataba'i emphasizes the figurative (*tamthīlī*) function of Qur'anic language, regarding *tamthīl* as a rhetorical device of Arabic employed to communicate elevated meanings to a general audience. This interpretation is grounded in classical rhetoric and in Islamic rationalism, rather than in linguistic theories that treat meaning merely as a product of intra-linguistic functions. Third, he posits an essential distinction between the speech of the Creator (*kalām al-khāliq*) and the speech of the creature (*kalām al-makhlūq*), which arises from the ontological difference between Creator and creature. On this account, the language of revelation transcends the capacity of human language and contains levels of meaning far beyond the limits of human linguistic function (Tabataba'i 2014, 5: 381).

Motahhari likewise, in some of his Qur'anic writings, referring to the ethical and pedagogical aspects of Qur'anic narratives, argues that the Qur'an's purpose in narrating stories such as the creation of Adam is to convey moral and educational messages rather than to provide a scientific account of natural phenomena. At the same time, he stresses that these stories are grounded in objective reality, and that their figurative character does not negate the truth-claim of the Qur'an (Motahhari 1997, 16: 100). Therefore, although his reading may bear superficial resemblance to

figurative approaches in theories of religious language, it remains fundamentally distinct and is analyzed within a theological and doctrinal framework. By contrast, certain religious reformists such as Muhammad Mojtahed Shabestari, drawing upon hermeneutical methodologies and a particular interpretation of linguistic differentiation, have undertaken a rereading of religion and the Qur'an which, in the view of many critics, is incompatible with the doctrinal foundations of Shi'i theology. Shabestari, moving beyond the doctrine of the descent of revelation (*nuzūl al-waḥy*), reduces the concept of "God speaking" to the realm of human interpretations of religious experience, thereby ultimately weakening the intimate connection of the Qur'an with transcendent reality.

In recent years, some scholars have sought to retrieve and reinterpret concepts related to the theory of linguistic differentiation within the works of major Shi'i thinkers, especially Tabataba'i and Motahhari (Parsa et al. 2020). Nonetheless, it seems that the explicit evidence in their writings, particularly in *al-Mīzān* regarding the issue of "similitude," bears little relation to the functionalist and linguistic approaches of the West, and remains situated within the framework of Islamic rationalism and realist ontology. In a critical analysis of Shabestari's interpretive stance, Khosropanah & Ghomi (2021) have enumerated epistemological shortcomings and theoretical incompatibilities of linguistic differentiation when confronted with the revealed text, emphasizing its inconsistency with Islamic theological principles—especially within the Shi'i tradition.

In sum, although such studies have taken steps toward analyzing aspects of the relation between theories of linguistic differentiation and religious exegesis, no comprehensive research has yet been conducted with a comparative approach that simultaneously examines these theories in Western philosophy and theology and in Shi'i Islamic interpretations. The present article seeks to address this gap by offering an analytical and comparative framework.

3. The Modern View on Linguistic Differentiation

In contemporary debates on science and religion, some Christian theologians have played a significant role in promoting the strategy of linguistic differentiation. Within certain theological strands of Christianity that affirm verbal inspiration, however, linguistic differentiation has been difficult to accept. The belief that both the meaning and wording of the sacred scripture were directly revealed by Almighty God presented a serious challenge to the presuppositions of linguistic differentiation, including the influence of context on language, the presuppositional nature of language,

or the existence of distinct linguistic domains. On this issue, Ian Barbour, quoting a Christian theologian, writes that the scientific concepts which the author of Genesis may have held could be wrong, that is, they may have been derived in the usual way from the science of his time. But that was not what he meant, either explicitly or implicitly. The intention of the Bible is not to teach us cosmology (Barbour 1966).

Many Christian theologians believe that linguistic differentiation allowed them to preserve their religious convictions while also accepting scientific findings, thus preventing conflict between the two domains. In fact, the method of linguistic differentiation, instead of seeking a single, definitive truth as a response to questions common to all domains, aims to preserve the knowledge of each domain separately. This approach has been particularly evident in Christian theological engagement with issues such as creation and human evolution.

3.1. Wittgenstein and Language Games

Earlier, positivists and empiricists had also examined the nature of language, its various domains, and its limitations. They especially emphasized the empirical aspects of language and often regarded religious language as unverifiable by experience and lacking epistemic value. Although these views did not explicitly employ the term "linguistic differentiation," they nevertheless contained indications of the same notion—that different languages possess distinct functions and rules.

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953), the Austrian philosopher, is one of the most influential figures in the systematic study of language use and linguistic diversity, particularly through his later work on language games. He maintained that language is a multifaceted instrument; just as different games are governed by different rules, so too in diverse domains language functions according to distinct rules and uses. This view laid the foundation for the theory of linguistic differentiation. He conceives of language as a diverse set of practices situated in different contexts, distancing himself from the traditional view that regards language as a fixed and uniform instrument for describing reality. In other words, the meaning of words and expressions is determined by their use in these contexts, not by a fixed, pre-determined definition. He argues that one of the key principles of the theory of language games is the emphasis on the diversity and relativity of language. Each language game possesses its own unique rules and structures, which depend on the form of life, culture, and social settings in which it is used. Consequently, the meaning of a word in one language game may differ from its meaning in another. Wittgenstein also underscores that

language cannot express everything; certain concepts and experiences—such as personal emotions—lie beyond the capacities of language. Moreover, he emphasizes the role of life context in shaping language: beliefs, values, and social institutions are fundamental in forming language games, and language reflects the form of life of a community.

According to Wittgenstein, the meaningfulness of asking about a name depends on one's understanding of its role within a shared language game; without the relevant know-how, questions about meaning may not be sensible. This implies that meaning arises within a shared context between speaker and hearer, and without such a shared context, communication is impossible. He addresses one of the fundamental issues in the philosophy of language—namely, the relation between word and meaning—thereby underscoring the central premise of linguistic differentiation: that words carry different meanings in different uses. Therefore, the key ideas of linguistic differentiation consist of the limitation of language in conveying meanings, the influence of life-context on the transmission of meanings, and the plurality of meanings inherent in language.

3.2. Ian Barbour and the Selective Character of Science and Religion

Ian Barbour (1966), a Christian theologian, in his well-known book *Issues in Science and Religion*, examined the complex relationship between science and religion. One of the key concepts Barbour employs in addressing this issue is the notion of *linguistic differentiation*. Although he may not always use this exact term, he draws upon this concept in various sections of his work. Barbour argues that science and religion employ different languages and cognitive methods. In other words, each of these domains poses its own distinctive questions and seeks answers within the framework of its own assumptions and epistemic methods. This difference in language and method can help resolve the apparent conflicts between science and religion. In the conclusion of his discussion on the methods of science and religion, Barbour emphasizes the selective character of both. Even among the sciences, theories may be autonomous and separate, since each field has selective interests, although the sciences as a whole reveal similar interests. Between science and religion, however, there are fundamentally different and divergent kinds of interests, which arise from dissimilar realms of experience, each reflecting another aspect of the truth of reality.

In short, by emphasizing linguistic differentiation and the selective nature of science and religion, Barbour offers a strategy for reducing the

conflict between the two domains. He maintains that by recognizing the essential differences between science and religion, one can refrain from seeking a single, definitive answer to all questions, and instead aim for a deeper understanding of each field independently. It is clear from Barbour's writings that he also endorsed a form of the linguistic differentiation approach in resolving the problem of the conflict between science and religion, though not exactly in Wittgenstein's sense.

3.3. Einstein and the Complementarity of Science and Religion

Albert Einstein (1954), a contemporary of Wittgenstein, in addition to his outstanding achievements in physics, also engaged deeply with philosophy and, in particular, with the relationship between science and religion. He consistently emphasized the complementarity of these two domains. Einstein held that although science and religion pose different questions and speak in different languages, they can coexist and even assist one another. In a 1940 interview, Einstein famously remarked that Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind. This statement aptly illustrates his view of the relationship between science and religion. For Einstein, science equips humanity with tools to understand and master the natural world, while religion provides values, ethics, and meaning to life. He believed that both aspects are indispensable for a complete and flourishing human existence.

From the fact that Einstein regarded science and religion as belonging to distinct domains, it may be said that he too recognized a kind of linguistic differentiation. Yet his approach was considerably more balanced than that of Wittgenstein. While Wittgenstein considered the languages of science and religion to be entirely separate, without the possibility of translation or dialogue between them, Einstein maintained that these two languages could complement one another and jointly assist humanity in attaining a deeper understanding of the world.

In general, many theologians relied on Wittgenstein's theory of linguistic differentiation and spoke as though every believer ought to be indebted to Wittgenstein for restoring meaning to religious propositions. This approach emerged as a natural response to the dominant trend of logical positivism at the time, which dismissed as meaningless anything beyond sensory experience and logical analysis. By differentiating the language of religion from the language of science, believers were able once again to ascribe meaning and validity to religious propositions and to regard religious

language as an independent discourse with its own rules and logic. Among Muslim theologians, particularly within Shi'a, however, this theory developed in an altogether different manner.

4. Shi'i Perspective on Linguistic Differentiation

The theory of linguistic differentiation encountered more serious challenges among Shi'i thinkers. The Qur'an is not merely a sacred book but the very speech of God (*kalām Allāh*), containing definitive and real concepts. This position stands in essential contrast with the Christian perspective, in which the Bible is more often regarded as an inspired text and guide. Consequently, the separation of the language of religion from the language of science faced substantial limitations in Shi'i thought and theology. The distinction between the language of God and the language of creatures, whose intellectual roots can be traced back to the medieval Islamic period, is grounded in an ontological difference between the language of revelation and human language. This distinction is primarily attributed to the specific features of the language of revelation, such as its pre-eternal character, its esoteric dimensions, and its conventional aspects.

Some Shi'i scholars, such as Tabataba'i (2014, 2: 385; 13: 318), have made remarks in their works that can be interpreted within a framework resembling linguistic differentiation. These exegetes, by emphasizing the essential difference between the language of God and that of creatures, in fact recognize a certain type of separation between the language of religion and other languages. Tabataba'i maintained that the meaning of Qur'anic language possesses a reality beyond the meaning of human language (beyond empirical reality).

Strategies similar to linguistic differentiation also appeared after Tabataba'i. Motahhari, while adhering to the real meaningfulness of Qur'anic texts in accordance with fundamental principles of Shi'i theology, emphasized—albeit in limited cases—the significance of purpose and intention as factors in conferring meaning upon Qur'anic language (Motahhari 1997, 1: 515). He held that in deriving meaning from the words and sentences of the Qur'an, the divine purpose in employing them must be considered. Furthermore, a group of intellectuals among Shi'i thinkers such as Muhammad Mojtahed Shabestari advanced a theory that effectively severed the words of the Qur'an from the Creator encompassing reality, and consequently from reality itself. This theory, more than the two earlier ones, bears resemblance to the Christian theory of linguistic differentiation, insofar as it largely denies the connection between the text of revelation and reality.

Nevertheless, it can readily be emphasized that linguistic differentiation in Shi'i thought differs essentially from its Christian counterpart. In Islamic-Shi'i thought, this distinction is founded upon the ontological difference between Creator and creature, whereas in Christian thought, the differentiation pertains more to the distinct domains of language and their effects. The exclusive aim of this article is to analyze the similarities and differences of the three aforementioned theories and to compare them with the theory of linguistic differentiation in Western thought. This focus is justified because all prominent Shi'i views on linguistic differentiation ultimately return in some way to these three theories. Thus, their examination and comparison carry particular significance. By exploring the complexities of each of these theories, this study correlates their principles and foundations with those of analogous theories of linguistic differentiation in Western scholarship.

4.1. Tabataba'i and the Language of Revelation

The thought of Tabataba'i in his *al-Mīzān* commentary presents a transcendent epistemological system regarding the Qur'anic text (*lisān al-waḥy*) that may be examined from philosophical, theological, and exegetical perspectives. Among his key ideas are notions that overlap, at least in part, with discussions of linguistic differentiation in contemporary philosophy. These can be analyzed under three main axes:

4.1.1. Use of Allegory in the Qur'an

In *al-Mīzān*, Tabataba'i regards *tamthīl* (allegory/similitude) as a means for conveying concepts to the audience more fully and effectively. He discusses the function of allegory in connection with verses such as those about the Throne (*al-ʿarsh*)—"then He established Himself upon the Throne" (Q. 7:54), the description of the polytheists at the time of death and God's sovereignty (Q. 34:5), the story of two disputants seeking judgment from David and its allegorical representation (Q. 41:21–25), God's command to heaven and earth (Q. 41:11), the story of Jonah (Q. 37: 139-148), or the narrative of the creation of Adam and Eve, the angels' prostration, and Iblīs's rebellion (Q. 2:30-39) (Parsa et al. 2020). He (2014, 13: 318) also sets out a general discussion of allegory in connection with verses such as Q. 18:45. Tabataba'i (2014, 3: 79) states that the purpose of these allegories is to facilitate comprehension, just as in literary allegory. He (2014, 2: 385–386) applies the principles of literary allegory to Qur'anic allegories. He insists that adequate contextual evidence is necessary to establish the presence of allegory in the Qur'an (2014, 2: 386; Parsa et al.

2020). He further explains that even if an allegory were imaginative, no objection could be raised against the Qur'anic verses (2014, 2: 387). Accordingly, the claim that Tabataba'i regarded narratives such as the story of Adam or other historical accounts as merely allegorical lacks foundation. The philosophical notion of the "symbolic/allegorical language of religion" in linguistic differentiation debates is essentially distinct. Such a language neither seeks to explain nor to describe reality, and more precisely, it remains silent regarding external reality. By contrast, the allegory of which Tabataba'i speaks is a tool for expressing real concepts in simpler, more comprehensible terms for the audience.

Thus, there exists a fundamental distinction between allegory in Tabataba'i's perspective and the philosophical concept of "symbolic language." The allegory employed in the Qur'an, as understood by him, cannot provide a basis for claiming that Qur'anic language is "symbolic" in the philosophical sense. Symbolic language is not concerned with material reality and is not intended to convey it. By contrast, the allegory referenced by Tabataba'i serves an entirely different purpose: it is a device chosen by God to render real truths simpler and more intelligible. This kind of allegory, common in Arabic literary practice, is far removed from the symbolic language concept within linguistic differentiation. Therefore, the inference that Tabataba'i denied the external reality of Qur'anic stories and reduced the Qur'anic language to symbolic language (in its philosophical sense) is entirely unfounded.

4.1.2. The Necessity of Avoiding Subjective Presuppositions in Qur'anic Exegesis

In the introduction to *al-Mīzān*, Tabataba'i (2014, 1: 6–9) critiques exegetical methods that employ philosophical, theological, or scientific concepts in interpreting the Qur'an. He argues that such approaches often impose the interpreter's subjective presuppositions upon the Qur'anic verses. In his view, the Qur'anic text is independent and should not be interpreted within the restricted frameworks of the sciences, theology, or philosophy. Although Tabataba'i's words at this stage suggest a certain distinction between the language of religion and the language of science, this differentiation does not imply the separation of the two, as proposed in the linguistic differentiation approach. In fact, Tabataba'i emphasizes that interpreters must approach the Qur'an with a mind free of such presuppositions and accept what the Qur'an states, regardless of the epistemological domain to which it belongs.

Therefore, contrary to the intent of the linguistic differentiation strategy, the conclusion drawn from Tabataba'i's perspective is that, although the

languages of religion and science are different, the realities presented by other sciences must ultimately be measured against the realities expressed in the Qur'an.

4.1.3. The Essential Difference between the Language of the Creator and the Creature

One of the key principles in Tabataba'i's (2014, 2: 325) thought is the essential difference between the language of the Creator and that of the creature. While he regards the essence of speech (*kalām*)—the transmission of meaning—as common to both divine and human discourse, he nevertheless posits a profound difference between them. This distinction does not lie in the use of words, the arrangement of sentences, or the employment of literary techniques and rhetorical devices. Rather, the difference pertains to the referent and denotation of the general concepts conveyed by speech (Tabataba'i 2014, 3: 79). Human beings are deficient creatures with limited cognition, whereas God is Wise and His knowledge is complete. Consequently, the use of language by these two beings is fundamentally different, and their discourse diverges drastically (Tabataba'i 2014, 5: 381–383).

In applying speech to God, Tabataba'i (2014, 14: 247–250) envisions two possibilities: either the Qur'an consists of letters and sounds, uttered in sequence indicating certain meanings, or it refers to meanings and cognitions of which these letters and sounds are merely conveyors, with their origin in the divine knowledge of God. In this second conception, Tabataba'i makes it clear that the Qur'an not only possesses an independent meaning and reality but also that this meaning and reality are grounded in God's attribute of knowledge and derive from it. Thus, the language of revelation, unlike human language, is not merely an instrument of conveying concepts but is a manifestation of Absolute Truth that has appeared in the form of human words. The acts and speech of God, the Exalted, do not merely conform to truth; they are truth itself (Tabataba'i 2014, 7: 118–121). At this juncture, Tabataba'i establishes a real and essential difference between divine language and human language, particularly in the transmission of meaning and the clarification of its referents—something closely akin to what the linguistic differentiation approach asserts. However, by examining Tabataba'i's exegetical practice, one may readily argue that despite affirming this difference, he does not accept the view that the physical, material, and empirical meanings derived from the so-called "scientific verses" of the Qur'an are meaningless or merely symbolic.

4.1.4. An Example of Exegesis: The Creation of Humanity

In discussing human creation, Tabataba'i maintains that the near-explicit meaning of the Qur'anic verses indicates that contemporary humanity traces its lineage, through reproduction, to a specific man and woman, the man being identified in the Qur'an as Adam. These first human beings were not born of any parents (Tabataba'i 2014, 16: 169–170).

Tabataba'i further argues that although the theory of evolution may attain credibility within the empirical sciences, the creation of humankind is an exception, described in the Qur'an as an extraordinary, miraculous phenomenon (Tabataba'i 2014, 8: 23; 16: 169). This exegesis demonstrates clearly that Tabataba'i considers the Qur'anic verses to have meanings that correspond to reality, and he does not regard them as silent or meaningless in relation to various sciences—even empirical sciences such as biology. Rather, he uses them as arguments. Several of Tabataba'i's students such as Javadi Amoli (2024) and Sobhani (1985) have also adopted this interpretation of the verses concerning human creation.

4.1.5. Comparative Examination with the View of Linguistic Differentiation

Tabataba'i's perspective and Wittgenstein's philosophy both emphasize that the languages of religion and science each possess their own rules and logic, making a comprehensive comparison between them impossible. Nonetheless, significant differences exist between these two views, rooted in their distinct philosophical and theological foundations. Whereas Wittgenstein stresses the limitations of language in expressing the truths of the world, Tabataba'i affirms the existence of a reality beyond sense perception, accessible only through religious knowledge. In other words, Tabataba'i holds that the realities expounded in divine discourse transcend the boundaries of human sensory experience, which cannot apprehend them empirically. Wittgenstein, by focusing on language games and the conventional nature of language, seeks to analyze its limitations. Tabataba'i, in contrast, endeavors to uncover Absolute Truth through the language of revelation. Indeed, the distinction between divine and human language in Tabataba'i's thought stems from his belief in the existence of a reality beyond matter, which God, the Exalted, has expressed for us in the words and language of the Qur'an. Wittgenstein, on the other hand, regarded religious language as incapable of expressing the truth and reality for which science is responsible.

4.2. Motahhari and the Symbolic Language of the Qur'an

A group of Shi'i scholars and thinkers, in order to resolve the conflict between science and religion, resorted to something akin to linguistic differentiation. They held (though only in very limited cases) that the content and wording of the Qur'an should be regarded as *tamthīl* (allegory), that is, as a representation intended to convey a meaning other than what is conventionally understood from speech. In justifying this view, they argued that since every discourse has its own independent aim and each aim requires a separate method, therefore with the language used in the domain of theology we cannot reach results outside that domain. Likewise, when we are in the domain of other sciences, such as biology, we cannot derive theological conclusions from it. Without doubt, Motahhari was among the first to raise this theory. Others, such as Makino (1970), Faramarz Qaramaleki (1994) and Kalantari (2008) can also be considered proponents of this approach.

Motahhari (1997, 16: 100) regards the foundation and basic principle of the language of the Qur'an as reality and truth. He considers it impossible for the divine discourse to be divorced from reality or to contain falsehood or carelessness. He goes so far as to assert that even when God relates a story for the sake of moral instruction or edification, that story nonetheless corresponds to an actual event in the external world. However, Motahhari concedes a single exception—namely, the story of the creation of Adam—where he maintains that although God's words possess an obvious, ordinary meaning, that ordinary meaning is likely only a metaphorical vehicle used to convey an ethical significance consistent with God's purpose in relating the account. In explicating this position, Motahhari (1997, 4: 164) first explains God's purpose in presenting the story of Adam, arguing that the narrative of Adam does appear in the Qur'an, but it is not offered as an *āyah* of theology or divine unity; rather, it functions as a moral lesson. It is intended to show, for example, what pride can do—as illustrated by Satan's pride—or what covetousness can do—as illustrated by Adam's greed—serving as an instructive ethical example rather than a doctrinal lesson of monotheism.

Motahhari (1997, 1: 514) further asserts that when the speaker's purpose is to impart matters that are not doctrinal or theological but ethical and moral, one should not derive meanings other than those intended by the speaker. By this logic, passages of the Qur'an that, in light of their context and accompanying indications, speak of human creation should be contemplated with the understanding that, in this view, such propositions are to be regarded as symbolic statements.

4.2.1. Comparative Examination with the View of Linguistic Differentiation

Although Motahhari advances this interpretation with great caution and only in a single case, it has nonetheless provoked the criticism of many exegetes and theologians. They contend that while it is correct that the Qur'an is not a book of empirical sciences and was not revealed for that purpose, nonetheless, in the course of its discourse—aimed at the moral cultivation of humankind—it occasionally makes references to empirical matters. Since the speaker of the Qur'an is God, the All-Wise and All-Knowing of all realities, these references must necessarily be in accordance with reality (Sobhani 1985, 11: 20; Marefat 2007, 6: 13–14).

Moreover, if one accepts that outside of the literary law of allegory there can be cases in which the apparent meaning serves only as an allegory to communicate a deeper spiritual meaning, then this theory may be said to resemble, in some respects, the notion of linguistic differentiation. However, as noted earlier, Motahhari refers to this possibility only in one case (the story of Adam), and even then, he regards the Qur'an's language as allegorical not throughout the entire story, but only in specific elements such as the miraculous dimension of human creation. Thus, unlike the comprehensive rule required by linguistic differentiation, proponents of this view do not treat it as a general principle.

4.3. Mojtahed Shabestari and the Qur'an as the Prophet's Monotheistic Reading of the World

As previously mentioned, the full application of Wittgenstein's theory of linguistic differentiation to Islamic-Shi'i beliefs has always faced serious challenges, the primary obstacle being the conviction that both the text and the meaning of the Qur'an are divine. This belief, as a core principle of Shi'i doctrine, renders any interpretation grounded in the assumptions of linguistic differentiation—which are based on the limitations of the text or its author—extremely difficult. A number of reformist thinkers within the Shi'i tradition have challenged this fundamental belief. In order to curtail religious intervention in various domains, they have regarded the Qur'an as a non-divine text. On this basis, they made possible the separation between religious language and other discourses.

Muhammad Mojtahed Shabestari was the first to introduce this perspective into Shi'i thought. Contrary to the near consensus of Shi'i theologians, Shabestari (2007) regards the Qur'an in both wording and meaning not as the speech of God but as the prophetic discourse and as the

Prophet Muhammad's monotheistic interpretation of the world in the light of revelation. He claims that various indications show that the Prophet never asserted that either the wording or the meanings of the Qur'an originated from God. In other words, the Qur'an is not the word of God; rather, it is the word of the Prophet. Shabestari (2000) further argues that no text can be understood without presuppositions, and the mind of the interpreter is never devoid of them. For him, identifying these presuppositions and analyzing the aim and intention of the speaker is essential for a sound understanding of the text. On this basis, he maintains that none of the Qur'an's declarative statements report objective realities of the world; rather, they reflect the Prophet's particular perspective on existence and humanity, constituting his prophetic interpretation and experience of the world as conveyed in the Qur'an.

4.3.1. Comparative Examination with the View of Linguistic Differentiation

Apart from the critique that can be leveled against Shabestari's view from the perspective of Shi'i theology and *fiqh* (jurisprudence)—namely, that this theory is not only contradictory to the certain principles of Shi'a but also opposed to the fundamental beliefs of Islam and ultimately leads to the denial of the divine origin of the Qur'an and, in the end, to disbelief—it can be argued that Shabestari's theory is, in fact, a modern and reconstructed version of Western linguistic differentiation. Yet it must be remembered that this theory falters at its very foundation. In other words, although he adheres to hermeneutics and certain principles of Western linguistic differentiation, he does not remain faithful to Islamic-Shi'i doctrines and ideas. Therefore, this theory cannot be regarded as a Shi'i, or even an Islamic, theory that overlaps with Wittgenstein's theory of linguistic differentiation.

5. Conclusion

The theory of linguistic differentiation emerged as a salvific response to the dominant trend of logical positivism, which considered meaningless anything that transcended sensory experience and logical analysis. It provided, to some extent, answers to the conflicts between science and religion within Christian theology. This theory had various readings, three of which were examined in this study.

In contrast, examining this theory in the field of Shi'i thought demonstrates that there are fundamental differences between the two perspectives, which stem from different approaches to religious texts. In

Shi'i thought, it is believed that the difference between the language of the Creator and that of the creature is essential and results from the divine nature of religious texts such as the Qur'an. Consequently, there exists a serious challenge to applying the notion of linguistic differentiation in its Western sense—where the limitations are attributed to the speaker of the text or to the text itself—within Shi'i theology.

Thinkers such as Motahhari, who in only one instance accepted a theory similar to linguistic differentiation, emphasized that this does not mean that religious texts are meaningless in discussions beyond religious domains. Rather, they insisted on the meaningfulness of religious texts in their conventional sense. However, reformist thinkers who have pursued linguistic differentiation by denying the divine origin of the Qur'anic verses have, in fact, distanced themselves from Shi'i beliefs. Therefore, it can be concluded that, up to the present, no comprehensive and complete theory has been offered to justify the notion of linguistic differentiation in its Western reading within Shi'i theology.

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