Some religiously-charged linguistic labels: Their regulatory functions and effects in Islamic contexts

Muhammad-Reza Fakhr-Rohani (University of Qom, Qom)

And the food of those who have been vouchsafed revelation aforetime is lawful to you, and your food is lawful to them.   The Holy Koran 5: 5

There are certain Islamic religiously-charged permission/prohibition terms which signal a spectrum of permission to prohibition for doing or abandoning some practices. Some of them are as follows: halal (permitted, lawful), haram (prohibited, unlawful) (already recorded in Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, 6th ed. [2007]), *wājib* (obligatory, binding, mandatory), *makrūḥ* (reprehensible, detested, hateful, undesirable), and *mustaḥab* (recommended). These religious labels make sense only for those who have conviction in them; otherwise, they may indicate nothing whatsoever in the real world. Once a mujtahid (expert in Twelver Shiite Islamic law) declares an act, e.g., eating a meal prepared by a Christian as "halal", it is permitted for his *muqallids* (Twelver Shiite adherents in religious matters) to practice it; otherwise, if the mujtahid regards it as "haram", they are not permitted to do that act, and their undertaking is tantamount to committing a sin. While the labels "halal" and "haram" are Koranic words, the rest seem to be those inferred from the Islamic legal literature.

Some basic questions that are introduced in this contribution are as follows: What is the prime role of such permission/prohibition terms in Islamic law? What could their linguistic-cum-religious effects be on Muslim believers? What would happen in the believers' real life if these injunctions are overlooked, whether inadvertently or on purpose? Is a believer's religious fate determined solely by observing the meanings of these labels? Charged with strictly religious overtones, these labels seem to have some "regulatory function" in the religious community where they are observed because they "shape" or give a "new direction" to a form of behavior. On analogy with the Searlean notion of "regulative rule", provisionally devised here is the term "regulatory function" which means that these labels seek to "regulate" the religious behavior and/or practices of the believers according to the strict religious injunctions, whether explicitly mentioned as such in the Koran as well as in the "authentic and practicable" hadiths, or they might simply be the "conjectures" of some mujtahid. Incorporation of such concepts as "reward ", or "punishment" for obeying or ignoring the effects of these labels make these "linguistic labels" sound more "symbolic", rather than "real". Linguistically, it seems that Islam makes a "linguistic game" with these "concepts", whether to coax or to intimidate its believers, not only for preventing them from going astray but also for helping them to choose the "Straight Path" (The Holy Koran 1: 6). Viewed from a speech-act perspective, these terms seem to simultaneously fulfill the roles of assertives (for expression of a belief), directives (the desire of the law-giver), and declaratives (making changes in the world). At the same time, on a par with speech-act verbs, these Islamic religiously-charged linguistic labels could also be regarded as "religiously regulatory terms".

Bibliography

Austin, J. L. 1975. *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd ed. Ed. J. O. Urmson and Maria Sbisa. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Briggs, Richard S. 2001. *Words in Action: Speech Act Theory and Biblical Interpretation*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark.

Davis, Stephen. 1991. (ed.) *Pragmatics: A Reader*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Davis, Stephen. 2004. (ed.) *Semantics: A Reader*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Esposito, John L. 2003 (ed.) *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Fawcett, Thomas. 1970. *The Symbolic Language of Religion: An Introductory Study*. London: SCM Press.

Mey, Jacob L. 2001. *Pragmatics: An Introduction*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Blackwell.

Nair, Rukmini Bhaya. 2002. *Narrative Gravity: Conversation, Cognition, Culture*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Petrey, Sandy. 1990. *Speech Acts and Literary Theory*. New York: Routledge.

Ruthven, Malise. 2001. *Islam: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Searle, John. 1969. *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Searle, John. 1998. *Mind, Language, and Society: Philosophy in the Real World*. New York: Basic Books.

Schacht, Joseph. 1964. *An Introduction to Islamic Law*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Vanderveken, D. – S. Kubo. 2002. (eds.) *Essays in Speech Act Theory*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Verschueren, J. 1980. *On Speech Act Verbs*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Verschueren, J. 1999. *Understanding Pragmatics*. London: Arnold; New York: Oxford University Press.