

Learning Languages in the Light of Quran and Sunnah: Its Legitimacy, Importance and Humanitarian Effects

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Abstract

The study of foreign languages is one of the most problematic issues in this age. With the need for Muslims to familiarise themselves with the latest developments in science and human knowledge and to keep abreast of developments, different views have emerged regarding the necessity of learning foreign languages. This research arises from the importance of this problem in the modern age and the lack of research addressing the Islamic ruling and the views of the Quran and Sunnah on this topic. Some researchers have erroneously believed that there are texts in Islam that prohibit learning languages. Moreover, some fatwas and opinions reject learning languages on the pretext that they distract from the study of Islam, and that dedicating one's efforts to the study of Islamic sciences is better than wasting time learning a language. This research aims to explain the concept of the languages of the world and the reasons as to why some have spread more than others. It explores the fatwas of scholars on the rule of learning foreign languages, then clarifies the vision of Islam on the topic and how the Quran and Sunnah deal with non-Arabic languages. The paper then highlights the humanitarian effects resulting from learning languages. To meet the objectives of the research, the inductive method was used. The researcher concludes the results that religious, social, political and linguistic conflicts have had an important impact on the spread of some languages and the disintegration of others. The fatwas have differed in the ruling on learning foreign languages. Some consider it obligatory at this age. Others regard it as a social obligation, while others view it permissible based on need. Al-Quran Al-Karim and the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) encourage to learn foreign languages and to master them because of the benefits they derive from nations in terms of security, society and religion.

Key Words: Education, Languages, Quran, Sunnah, Jurisprudence, Archaeology.

Introduction

Allah has created mankind and graced him with innumerable blessings. Among the most important blessing is that He taught mankind how to communicate with other human beings. There are many forms of communication. Some communication is verbal others are non-verbal. Perhaps the most notable form of communication is through language. People use language to express their needs and desires. Al-Quran Al-Karim mentions in the story of the creation of Adam (peace be upon him) how the Lord Almighty taught Adam the names of all things, God Almighty said: “And He taught Adam the names of all things” [al-Baqarah: 31]. This is the place where God mentioned the honour of Adam over the angels, including the knowledge of the names of all things.¹

The number of languages estimated around the world according to UNESCO today is 6,000 languages.² Given the importance of the role of languages in the lives of people, it is necessary to shed light on the Islamic perspective of the importance of learning languages in terms of the legitimacy of doing so, its view of languages other than Arabic, and how the Quran and Sunnah deal with other languages. The paper also examines the fatwas that have been issued on this topic and their humanitarian implications.

The significance of the Study

The importance of this research stems from its treatment of the following:

1. An overview of the languages of the world and the most important living

languages spoken and the reasons for their spread.

2. Stating the ruling for learning languages in Islam in terms of legitimacy and a look at the fatwas in this regard.
3. Stating how Islam views languages other than Arabic, how the Quran and Sunnah deal with other languages and its impact on human behaviour.
4. Lack of scientific studies on this topic.

Problem statement

Based on the role of language as the most important means of communication between the human race and its ramifications for human learning, the researcher felt that there must be a study highlighting the view of Islam on the importance of learning languages in terms of its legitimacy and humanitarian effects. It also details how the Quran and Sunnah address the issue of languages. Some researchers have erroneously believed that there are texts in Islam that prohibit learning languages. Moreover, some fatwas and opinions reject learning languages on the pretext that they distract from the study of Islam, and that dedicating one's efforts to the study of Islamic sciences is better than wasting time learning a language. This study explores the origins of such claims which leads us to an examination of the texts of the Quran and Sunnah to reach the correct Islamic opinion on the issue.

The need to learn languages in the present age has become an urgent need, not a scientific luxury, and the presence of such texts may make cause some young Muslims to be reluctant to learn a new language, thinking that it is the opinion of Islam.

Research Questions

1. What is the concept of languages, their importance and the reasons for the spread of some more than others?
2. What is the most prominent fatwa among Muslim scholars regarding learning foreign languages?
3. What is the Islamic view on the topic, and how do the Quran and Sunnah

¹ Ibn Katheer, Abu al-Fidaa Isma'il ibn 'Umar ibn Katheer al-Qurashi al-Basri and al-Dimashqi (deceased: 774 AH), Tafseer al-Qur'an al-Azeem. Ed. 1. 1419 AH. Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah. Vol. 1, 130.

² Article published on CNN, 23/03/09, entitled: UNESCO: The world speaks 6000 languages 2500 of which are extinct, <http://archive.arabic.cnn.com/2009/entertainment/2/21/unesco .report/>

address foreign languages? What are the human implications of learning languages?

4. How much the vacuum in the Arabic literature on this issue?

Research Objectives

The research aims to:

1. Explain the concept of languages and their importance and the reasons for the spread of some more than others.
2. Extrapolate the opinions of scholars on the ruling of learning foreign languages.
3. Clarify the vision of Islam and how the Quran and Sunnah address foreign languages along with the humanitarian implications of learning languages.
4. Fill the vacuum in the Arabic literature concerning this issue.

Structure of the Research

The research consists of an introduction, three sections and a conclusion. The introduction includes the importance of the research, research problem, research questions, research objectives, and structure of the research. The first topic addresses the concept of global languages, their importance and the reasons for their spread. The second topic addresses the ruling on learning languages in Islam and the most important fatwas on this issue. The third topic is dedicated to articulating the vision of the Quran and Sunnah concerning foreign languages and their human effects. The study concludes with a summary and offers recommendations for future research.

The Concept of Language, its Importance and the Reasons for its Spread:

The concept of language:

Ferdinand de Saussure defined language as “a social product of the tongue and a set of necessary traditions adopted by a society to help

its members practice this skill”.³ In addition to the importance of language in its being the most important form of communication among the human race, Ibn Jinni defines it as “the voices of every nation to express their will”.⁴ Languages all over the world have faced various challenges which have contributed to either its extinction or spread. This study examines the most important living languages that were able to withstand such challenges and spread broadly, unlike other languages that dwindled and became extinct or neared extinction. We also identify that most important reasons that lead to the spread of a language at the expense of another.

The importance of languages:

There are thousands of spoken languages - unlike dialects - each of which has its audience of speakers who understand each other, and each of these languages is sovereign in its region.

There is a wide disparity between these languages, both in the number of speakers and in the spaces in which they predominate. Most of these languages are spoken by a few people ranging from a few hundred to less than a million, and language zones range from isolated villages to several hundred square miles.

The number of languages in the world that have a population of one million and over does not exceed 100. Even among the top 100, only 13 languages are spoken by more than 50 million people. Of the 13 languages, there is considerable variation in areas and distribution areas. Some of these languages represent the official language in vast areas of the world, while others are confined to a very small area. Some languages, such as English, French and German, have high coefficients in the level of production, trade, scientific and literary production, while others are used among a group of people who are relatively under-developed.

³ Ferdinand de Saussure, *General Linguistics*, Translation: Dr. Yoel Youssef Aziz, I: 3, Afaq Arabia, 27.

⁴ Ibn Jinni, *Abu al-Fath Othman Ibn Jinni Al-Musli* (deceased: 392 AH), Al-Khasais, Ed. 4. The Egyptian General Book Organization. Vol 1., 34.

Their levels of scientific or mental production are low along with trade. Such is the case for most Indian-American languages in the United States of America, and with aboriginal languages in Australia. Some of these languages are used by human beings with excellent political and military stature, such as English and Russian, some lack political and military status, such as Hawaiian and some New Zealand languages. Some second languages are used in areas with important political and strategic positions such as Vietnamese and Swahili in East Africa.⁵

There are six official languages of the United Nations: Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish. Immediate textual and verbal translations from one language to another are important to the work of the United Nations, as they offer clear and concise communication on issues of global concern.⁶

Human languages vary greatly in their diffusion. Some of them have favourable opportunities, spread across vast areas of the earth, and spoken by a large number of nations such as Latin and Arabic in ancient and medieval times, and English, Spanish, Portuguese, French, German and Turkish in modern times. Some of them remain restricted to a small geographic area and is spoken by a small group of people such as (Inuit and Lithuanian): Some languages are between two extremes such as Abyssinia and Persian.⁷

Reasons for the spread of languages

The following are the main reasons for the spread of some languages at the expense of others.

The Religious Factor:

⁵ See: Ahmad Mukhtar Omar, Foundations of Linguistics, Ed. 8, 1419 AH-1998, Alam al-Kutub, 65.

⁶ Source: United Nations website, <http://www.un.org/en/sections/about-un/official-languages/>

⁷ Wafi, Ali Abdul Wahed Wafi, Linguistics, Ed. 1, Nahdet Misr for Printing and Publishing, 170.

Religion is one of the most important reasons for the spread of a language. It played a major role preserving the Arabic language for more than twenty centuries. The Jews learned a certain amount of Hebrew because it is the language of the Old Testament. The convergence of the Arabs on classical Arabic and the failure of a single dialect to take prominence is due to several factors not least of which is the fact that classical Arabic is the language of the Quran. The religious factor has also led to the use of a large number of Arabic words related to religion and civilization by the languages of the Islamic world in Africa, Asia and Southern Europe. In Swahili and Serbian, we find Muslims using words pertaining to worship and daily behaviour borrowed from the Arabic language. The link between Arabic calligraphy and Islam made the Harari people embrace Islam and led them to write Abyssinian in the Arabic script. Many Arabic words entered into the Harari as if they wanted to prove their attachment to the Islamic world and distinguish themselves from the Christian Ethiopians around them.⁸

“The spread of a common language was based on reasons that were independent of political unity. German was first and foremost the language of writing and became successful due to religious reasons before being due to colonialism. The sixteenth century Lutheran reform led to a proliferation of German in lower Germany. By the end of the 16th century, only German was used as the language of literature and religion. It spread slowly in the provinces of Catholic South Germany and Protestant Switzerland”.⁹

Cultural Contribution:

The spread of the language - any language - depends on the extent of its contribution to the cultural reality. Although it has been proven that

⁸ Al-Hijazi, Mahmoud Fahmy, Arabic linguistics, Dar Ghraib for Printing, Publishing and Distribution, 29

⁹ Vendres, Joseph Vendryes (deceased: 1380 AH), Language, Tarab: Abdul Hamid Al-Dawaheli, Muhammad Al-Qasas, The Anglo-Egyptian Library, 1950, 333.

Arabic was once the language of civilization, we must prove today that it can define our cultural development and invent living expressions in all the arts.¹⁰

If the status of any major contemporary language is determined primarily by its cultural heritage and its modern cultural product, then scientists, intellectuals and the media have a great influence on the linguistic environment as well.¹¹

The political factor (colonial):

The political factor has a significant impact on the lives of languages. The various Roman languages including French, Spanish, Italian and Romanian emerged in one period due to political unity of these regions. This unity would later fall apart due to the emergence of national consciousness. The colonial influence in India led to the spread of English to become the most widely used language in India. The division of the African continent into areas of colonial influence defined the spread of colonial languages in those countries. African countries are divided into French-speaking and English-speaking countries, despite their independence. Many African countries continue to communicate in French and others in English. In Uzbekistan, formerly Turkestan, they learn Russian because Uzbekistan was part of the Soviet Union and so the political factor influenced its choice of language.¹²

The social factor:

The social factor is one of the most important factors in the life of languages. The movement of a certain human group from one place to another and the intermingling of the group with the indigenous people can create new linguistic relationships. The migration of the Arab tribes after the Islamic conquest and in the centuries following the Sham, Iraq, Egypt and Morocco was one of the most important factors in the spread of the Arabic

language. Arabic was no longer the language of the north Arabian Peninsula, but became, over time, the language of modern science and literature in the major Islamic countries. Furthermore, the upper class of a single multi-layered society has a decisive influence on the linguistic use of other classes.¹³

Linguistic conflict:

This means that the language is in conflict with another language or languages. The dominant language will then spread to the region of the defeated language thereby expanding its reach and assuming new speakers. Such was the case of Latin in ancient times. It overcame the original languages of Italy, Spain, Portugal and France, becoming the language of modernity and writing in a large area in the southwestern part of Europe, and was once confined to a narrow area in central Italy. Arabic overcame a number of Semitic languages such as Berber, Coptic, until it reached over 100 million speakers belonging to approximately 15 nations, despite once being spoken by a few thousand people in a remote area of south-west Arabia. Such was also the case for German which overwhelmed a large area of neighbouring areas in Central Europe, Germany, Switzerland, Czechoslovakia, Poland and Austria.¹⁴

Trade influence:

Commercial influence has an important impact on the spread of a language. As we can see today, many people are learning English as the language of business, and Japanese and Chinese are progressing steadily. Despite the difficulty of learning these two languages, people continue to learn these languages and discover the lifestyles and society of the countries which have excelled economically. For China, which is called the sleeping giant, no continent is absent its products. Chinese labour exists on every continent. The world is rushing to learn the Chinese languages. Its economic prowess is making Chinese a global language.¹⁵

Also, "Traders have played a strong role in the spread of Arabic. Some Arab traders had settled before Islam on the eastern coast of Ethiopia and worked in

¹⁰ Al-Saleh, Subhi Ibrahim (deceased: 1407 AH), Studies in philology, 1: 1379 AH - 1960. 351.

¹¹ Hijazi, Mahmoud Fahmi, Arabic Language, Dar Gharib for Printing, Publishing and Distribution, 28.

¹² Hijazi, Mahmoud Fahmi, Arabic Language, op.

¹³ Hijazi, Mahmoud Fahmy, Arabic Language, Ibid., 30.

¹⁴ Wafi, Ali Abdul Wahed, Linguistics, op. Cit., 170.

¹⁵ An article published on the website of Al-Aloka, writer Osama Tabash, Date of addition, 12/12/2016, Article link: http://www.alukah.net/literature_language/0/110310/

trade. After Islam, the number of Arab traders increased greatly and established trade centres along the coast. These transformed into important commercial centres. The Arab-Islamic influence was not limited to these coastal cities but spread to the interior. Hence, traders were the means and tools for the dissemination of Islam and the Arabic language. They would venture into the interior, live some time there, and then return to the coast. During their stay, they come into contact with people, interacted with, and spread Islam. This entails the dissemination of the Arabic language”.¹⁶

The Rule of Learning Languages in Islam and the Most Important Fatwas on this Issue

This section presents the most important fatwas issued by the scholars and the Islamic Shari'ah bodies regarding the provisions of learning foreign languages.

Fatwas Issued by Scholars:

First fatwa: Issued by Shaykh Ibn Taymiyah:¹⁷

Ruling on pronouncing foreign words in worship comprising prayer, reciting the Quran, remembrance, in sacrifice, contracts, dissolution, marriage, etc.

As for using foreign terms for the names of people and months - such as dates and so on - without understanding their meaning, then it is forbidden. Upon knowing the meaning, then Imam Ahmad is of the view that it is disliked, but it is not forbidden.

I believe he was once asked on supplicating in Persian, for which he said it was disliked.

In another place, he (Imam Ahmad) said: As for the habitual use of a language other than Arabic - which is the motto of Islam and the language of the Quran - to the extent that it becomes the norm of a nation or a household, or between friends, or in the market, or among princes, or

administrators, or jurists, there is no doubt that this is disliked because it is a form of striving to become like a foreigner (non-Muslim) which is disliked.

Second fatwa: Issued by Shaykh Ibn 'Uthaymeen:¹⁸

The Shaykh (may Allaah have mercy on him) was asked: What is your opinion of the student learning English, especially in order to use it in calling to Allah?

He said: “We have seen in learning English a means [of performing da'wah] to be sure, and a good way if it is for good purposes, and bad if it is for bad purposes, but what should be avoided is taking it as a substitute for the Arabic language. This is not permissible. We hear some teaching their children the greetings of non-Muslims like saying bye bye as farewell and so on. The replacement of the Arabic language, which is the language of the Quran is prohibited. As for using it as a means of advocacy, it is undoubtedly necessary sometimes. I have not learned it but had hoped that I would learn it. Sometimes I found that I have to as the translator cannot express what is in my heart. I remind you of a story that took place at the airport mosque in Jeddah with the men of Islamic awareness. We talked after Fajr prayer about the Tijani doctrine and that it is a false doctrine and disbelief in Islam. I made a speech about what I know about it. A man came to me and said: I want you to allow me to translate in Hausa. I said: I do not mind. If I knew such a language, I did not need such people who could misinterpret my words. In fact, knowing the language of the person who speaks is undoubtedly important in communicating the meaning of the language. Allah says, “We sent not a messenger except (to teach) in the language of his (own) people, in order to make (things) clear to them” [Ibrahim: 4].

¹⁶ Mahmoud, Hassan Ahmed, Islam and Arab Culture in Africa, 2008: Arab Thought House, 431.

¹⁷ Ibn Taymiyyah, Taqi al-Din Abu al-Abbas Ahmad ibn Taymiyyah al-Harani al-Hanbali al-Damashqi (deceased: 728 AH), Iqtida al-Sirat al-Mustaqeem li Mukhalafah Ashab al-Jaheem. Ed. 7, Beirut: Dar Alam al-Kutub. Vol 1., 520-526.

¹⁸ Al-Uthaymeen, Muhammad bin Saleh bin Mohammed (deceased: 1421 AH), The Complete Fatwas and Messages of Sheikh Muhammad bin Saleh Al- Uthaymeen, Ed. 1: 1413 AH, Dar al-Watan Thuraya, 26/327.

Third Fatwa: Issued by Sheikh Muhammad Al-Hasan Al-Dado Al-Shanqeeti:¹⁹

The importance of knowledge of foreign languages for advocates of Islam:

Question: I am a young man who intends to communicate Islamic thought in English, but I want to pursue higher education. Should I start learning jurisprudence and Hadith before that? What advice do you give me?

Answer: One of the most famous preachers of this age was asked by a group of youths about the conditions a preacher today should possess? He said: English language proficiency. This is the first condition for da'wah because language is the medium through which people understand each other. We often find ourselves unable to communicate effectively due to poor language proficiency. On one occasion, when the convoy of Mauritanian pilgrims departs for the Hajj, we usually remind them of the Hajj rituals and preaching and prepare them for this great journey, which is a journey to the Hereafter. It is the most sacred journey from which they might not return. The buses that transport the pilgrims usually have a loudspeaker. I boarded a bus, and all of the occupants could not speak a word of Arabic, and I could not speak a word of Bulgarian. I hesitated a little and then raised my hands in prayer, and they all responded to me and began to believe in my da'wah. They departed the bus praising Allah Almighty. I did not find a means to enter their hearts except through supplication. If we could master the English language in addition to understanding the religion, we would combine between two virtues. Otherwise, a person should learn English first before ageing as matters of religion can be learnt once one has grown whereas language requires youth in order to master it. If a person exceeds a certain age, then it becomes difficult for them to speak in a language other than the mother tongue.

Fourth Fatwa: Issued by Sheikh Saleh Bin Fawzan:²⁰

¹⁹ Site of Islam: Link Article: <http://iswy.co/e3obm>

²⁰ The Sheikh's Official Website, <http://www.alfawzan.af.org.sa/en/node/9659>

The question: Some of the Arab brothers speak English without a pressing need, is this disgraceful or permissible, and does it contravene the dignity of Islam?

Answer: Speaking non-Arabic to Arabs is akin to seeking to emulate non-Muslims. Nevertheless, it is permissible when necessary. However, if it is not necessary, it is not permissible, because it is similar to emulation which is impermissible when the need is absent.

Fifth Fatwa: Sheikh Abd al-Hay al-Katani:²¹

Ibn Rushd inquired about the opinions of Malik and Umar concerning the folly of learning foreign languages. His views in the book al-Bayan wa al-Tahsil that Malik's position on learning a foreign language is that it is disliked unless it is for a beneficial purpose. If it is beneficial such as to learn translation as was the case of Zayd based on the command of the Prophet (PBUH), or because a judge requires it to adjudicate disputes and establish due rights, or to ensure commercial transactions are properly regulated, or to free a captive, etc., then it is not disliked.

Ibn Yunus said when he commented on Malik's Mudawwanah and Umar's prohibition on speaking in foreign tongues: The meaning of this prohibition is that they speak it in the mosques. The meaning of the prohibition is that if they speak it with a presence of those who do not understand it. He hated such behaviour.

Islamic Shari'ah bodies:

First Fatwa: Issued by the Standing Committee for Scientific Research and Issuing Fatwas:²²

²¹ Al-Kettani, Muhammad Abd al-Hayy ibn Abd al-Kabir Ibn Muhammad al-Hasani al-Idrisi, known as' Abd al-Hay al-Kettani (deceased: 1382 AH). The Administrative Structure, The Occupations, The Industries, The Shops And The Scientific Situation At The Time Of Establishing The Islamic Civilization In Medina. Ed. 2., Beirut: Dar al-Arqam, 187.

²² Fatwas of the Standing Committee for Scientific Research and Issuing Fatwas, Publisher: The Presidency of the Department of Scientific Research

Question about the hadeeth: “Whoever learns the language of a people is secure from their deceit” is it a hadeeth or anecdote?

The answer: We did not find it in any of the Hadith books. It could be a view of some of the salaf. Nevertheless, its meaning is correct. The one who learns the language of a people, lives with them, learns their ways. The Prophet (PBUH) commanded Zayd ibn Thabit to learn the tongue of the Jews so that he would have a safe and reliable means of communication with them in conveying his words to them and their words to him. Hence, learning a foreign language is permissible should the need arise²³.

Second Fatwa: issued by the Fatwa Committee on the Islamic Network:²⁴

In the name of God the Merciful, it is known that the Prophet (PBUH) encouraged learning languages. Was the Prophet proficient in other languages besides Arabic (such as French and English) or does it meant that he mastered the dialects of Arabia?

Fatwa:

Praise be to God and prayers and peace be upon the Messenger of Allah and his family and companions:

That the Prophet (PBUH) used to encourage the study of languages is uncertain. Nevertheless, it is correct that when the Prophet (PBUH) needed someone to translate the books the Jews would give him, he requested that Zayd ibn Thabit learn Syriac.

Al-Tirmidhi narrated from the hadeeth of Zayd ibn Thabit. He said: The Messenger of Allaah

and Ifta, Ed. 1, Al-Riyadh: Dar Al-Muayyad, Fatwa No. 585, Page No 344.

²³ Al-Tirmidhi, Abu Isa Muhammad bin Isa Al-Tirmidhi, (deceased: 279 AH), Al-Jam' Al-Kabir, Dr. Bashir Awwad Ma'ruf. Ed. 1, 1996, Beirut: Dar Al-Gharb Al-Islami, Hadeeth No 2715, 4/439.

²⁴ Fatwas of the Islamic Network, Fatwa Committee on the Islamic Network, Fatwa Number: 33219, http://fatwa.islamweb.net/fatwa/index.php?page=showfatwa&Option=FatwaId&Id=33219&RecID=0&src_hwords=%E5%E1%20DF%C7%E4%20C7%E1%D1%D3%E6%E1%20ED%CA%DE%E4%20C8%C7%DE%ED%20C7%E1%E1%DB%C7%CA%20&R1=1&R2=0

(PBUH) told me to learn words from the book of the Jews²⁵.

Based on his learning Syriac, Muslims need to learn languages for their dealings and relationships with others. As for the question of whether the Prophet (PBUH) taught languages? The answer is no. Perhaps the person asking the question is unaware of the fact that the Prophet (PBUH) was illiterate and could not read or write. This is clear in the Quran and Sunnah.

The Almighty says: “And thou wast not (able) to recite a Book before this (Book came), nor art thou (able) to transcribe it with thy right hand: In that case, indeed, would the talkers of vanities have doubted” [al-Ankaboot: 48]²⁶.

If the Prophet (PBUH) knew languages, he would not have asked Zaid to learn Syriac so that he could read the books in this language. Allah knows best.

Third Fatwa: issued by the Fatwa Committee of the Islamic Network:²⁷

One does not mind learning foreign languages, such as English or the like, if he needs it. However, it may be that learning it is a social obligation (as opposed to individual obligation) if it is advantageous to the society. Learning English should not be an end in itself, nor should it distract from learning the language of the Quran.

Fourth Fatwa: Issued by the Egyptian Fatwa House:²⁸

²⁵ Al-Tirmidhi, Abu Isa Muhammad bin Isa Al-Tirmidhi, (deceased: 279 AH), Al-Jam' Al-Kabir, Dr. Bashir Awwad Ma'ruf. Ed. 1, 1996, Beirut: Dar Al-Gharb Al-Islami, Hadeeth No 2715, 4/439.

²⁶ Al-Quran Al-Karim Translation by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, Sūra 29: Ankabūt, (The Spider) verse 48.

²⁷ Fatwas of the Islamic Network, Fatwa Committee on the Islamic Network, No. Fatwa: 51311, http://fatwa.islamweb.net/fatwa/index.php?page=showfatwa&Option=FatwaId&Id=51311&RecID=0&src_hwords=%DD%E1%C7%20E3%C7%E4%DA%20%E1%E1%E3%D1%C1%20E3%E4%20CA%DA%E1%E3%20C7%E1%E1%DB%C7%CA%20C7%E1%C3%CC%E4%C8%ED%C9%20&R1=1&R2=0

²⁸ Fatwas of the Egyptian Fatwa House, Mufti: Atiya Saqr, The History of Fatwa: May 1997, Comprehensive Library, 10/428.

As for the ruling on learning foreign languages, it is permissible. It could even become obligatory in certain circumstances. It falls under the general command to pursue science and acquire knowledge. The texts on this are plentiful and do not specify which knowledge or science. This is evidenced in Sura Faatir verse 28, “Those truly fear Allah, among His Servants, who have knowledge”²⁹. This was stated after mentioning the descent of water from the heavens, the growth of plants, the difference of the earth’s layers, the components of the mountains and the difference of living creatures from man and animal, which calls for faith in God and good use of the treasures of the earth in appreciation of God and realising man’s vicegerency.

Without a doubt, learning foreign languages is good. Whoever learns the language of a people are secure from their deceit as they are able to read their written works and benefit from its good and avoid its evils. The Jews used to insult the Prophet (PBUH) with a phrase that outwardly appeared to be good. They used to call him Ra’ina which in their language meant brainless. The Muslims would imitate them without knowing its intended meaning, and thinking that it means leader as is the case in Arabic. Allah says, “O ye of Faith! Say not (to the Messenger) words of ambiguous import, but words of respect; and hearken (to him): To those without Faith is a grievous punishment” [al-Baqarah: 104].

Ibn Abbas, may Allah be pleased with them, used to translate for the Prophet when delegations arrived speaking different dialects.

The Prophet (PBUH) ordered Zayd ibn Thabit to learn the language of the Jews because the books that came from them needed to be translated. Al-Bukhari, al-Baghawi and Abu Ya’la narrated that Zayd ibn Thabit said: I was brought to the Prophet (PBUH). They said this is a boy from Bani al-Najjar who has read seventeen surahs. I read them to him and impressed him, and he

(PBUH) said: “Learn the language of the Jews because I do not trust them to scribe my words”. So I learnt it and half a month did not pass until I mastered it. I used to write for him to them, and if they write to him, I would read it for him. Learning foreign languages is therefore legally valid. Every nation should have someone who has mastered languages so that the society does not live isolated from the world.

Researcher Comments:

After presenting the most important fatwas issued by the Islamic bodies and Muslim scholars, it is noted that the fatwas have varied in the rule of learning foreign languages. Some regard it as disliked, some regard it as a social obligation, while others see it as an obligation. Some have gone so far as to prohibit it in certain circumstances. The researcher is of the view that the most prominent view is the obligation to learn foreign languages as required in order to communicate with other civilizations and exchange knowledge. Doing so achieves the words of Allah, “O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise (each other))” [al-Hujaraat: 13]. The researcher disregards those views and fatwas that alienate learning languages on the pretext that it distracts from learning religion and the fundamentals of Islam. Most fatwas are in keeping with the spirit of the era. We are in an era when sciences are within reach, so I see that it is one of the basics of this era for a Muslim to learn more than one language to practicing Dawah to non-Arabic speakers, to refute the negative allegation toward Islam and to Show the tolerance and beauty of Islam to the world. We are commanded to communicate this religion and explain its intentions to all people. This is not possible unless Muslims learn languages other than Arabic, Islam and its purposes. Such is the spirit of Islam and aligns with its purposes. Hence, learning foreign languages is a social and religious necessity.

²⁹ Al-Quran Al-Karim Translation by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, Sūra 35: Fātir, (The Originator of Creation) verse 28.

The Vision of the Quran and the Sunnah in Dealing with Foreign Languages, and its Humanitarian Effects

The need to teach and learn languages has existed since the early days of Islam, albeit on a small scale. As a result of the contact between Muslims and other countries and the spread of Islam outside the borders of the Arabian Peninsula, the need to learn foreign languages arose. This section refers to texts from the Quran and Sunnah indicating the importance of learning foreign languages.

Al-Quran Al-Karim:

Al-Quran Al-Karim encourages seeking knowledge. It did specify which science but left the door open to any science that would advance humanity and expand their perceptions. This is indicated in the first verses to be revealed to the Prophet (PBUH), "Proclaim! (or read!) in the name of thy Lord and Cherisher, Who created, Created man, out of a (mere) clot of congealed blood:- Proclaim! And thy Lord is Most Bountiful,- He Who taught (the use of) the pen,- Taught man that which he knew not" [Al-Alaq: 1-5].

The Quran also urged increasing one's knowledge. Allah says, "say, "O my Lord! advance me in knowledge" [Taa-Haa: 114].

The Quran then differentiated between the status of the one who knows and the ignorant: "Are those equal, those who know and those who do not know? It is those who are endued with understanding that receive admonition" [As-Zumar: 9].

Among the important sciences of the present age is language, which is a bridge to modern knowledge and diverse cultures. The following verses highlight the importance of learning languages:

1. Allah says: "And He taught Adam the names of all things" [al-Baqarah: 31]. This is the place where Allah mentioned the honour of Adam over the angels, including the knowledge of the names of all things, which highlighted Adam's virtue over them due to his knowledge.

Al-Sadi narrates that Ibn Abbas said: "And He taught Adam the names of all things" [al-Baqarah: 31] Adam was taught all the names of his children and creatures. It was said: this is a donkey, this a camel, this a horse³⁰.

Al-Dahhaq said on the authority of Ibn Abbas: These are the names commonly used by people such as man, animal, sky, land, plain, sea, camel, donkey, etc.

Ibn Abi Hatim and Ibn Jarir narrated from the hadeeth of Asim bin Kaleb from Sa'eed ibn Maabad from Ibn Abbas that he said: He even taught him the names of dishes and the types of breeze.

Mujahid said: He taught him the name of every animal, every bird, and everything.³¹

Some scholars have derived from the verse: "And He taught Adam the names of all things; then He placed them before the angels, and said: "Tell me the names of these if ye are right" [al-Baqarah: 31]. That learning languages is better than full-time worship. Because after Allah taught Adam the names of all things, He ordered the angels to prostrate to Adam for this privilege.³²

2. Allah says: "And among His Signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the variations in your languages and your colours: verily in that are Signs for those who know" [Ar-Room: 22].

The verse indicates the differences in creation from the heavens and the earth and the difference of people in their languages and colours as signs of Allah. The differences in tongues refers to differences in languages. There are those who speak Arabic, Tatar, Latin, Kurdish, Berber, Amharic, Hindi, English...and many more the number of which Allah alone

³⁰ At-Tabari, Jami' al-Bayan an Tawil al-Quran (Tafsir al-Tabari), Al-Baqarah: 31.

³¹ Ibn Katheer, Tafseer al-Qur'an al-Azeem. op. Cit., 1/130.

³² Ibn Salam, Abu Ubaid al-Qasim ibn Salam bin Abdullah al-Harawi al-Baghdadi (deceased: 224: AH), Al-Ghareeb al-Musannaf. 1414 AH, Journal of the Islamic University in Medina, 1/245.

knows. These are the languages of the children of Adam.³³

The differences in language means that people speak differently, have different pronunciation, intonation, vowelization...etc. to the effect that no two languages are alike.³⁴

3. Allah says: “O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise (each other))” [al-Hujaraat: 13].

It is well known that this acquaintance is likely to have many stages that are not completed in full form except through communication through language. It is through language that the proportionality and understanding of cultures and science is acknowledged.

4. Allah says: “Let there arise out of you a band of people inviting to all that is good, enjoining what is right, and forbidding what is wrong: They are the ones to attain felicity” [al-Imran: 104].

It was narrated in Sahih al-Bukhari that the Prophet (PBUH) ordered some companions to learn Hebrew in order that he may better appreciate the Jews of Madinah. Knowledge of their native language meant that he could understand them better. A nation that calls to Islam cannot dispense with learning languages.³⁵

5. Some scholars said: The Quran came down in every language. This was the view of Ibn al-Naqeeb. Al-Suyuti says in his al-Itqan: Abu Bakr al-Wasiti said in al-Irshad: The Quran contains fifty languages including the language of Quraysh and Hathil, Kanaanah, Khatham, Khazraj, Muhajj, Khuza'a, Ghatfan, , Anamar, Ghassan, Saba, Aman, Bani Hanifa, Tagalb,

³³ Ibn Katheer, op. Cit., 6/279

³⁴ Al-Baydawi, Nasir al-Din Abu Sa'id Abdullah bin Omar bin Muhammad al-Shirazi (deceased: 685 AH), Anwar al-Tanzil wa Asrar al-Ta'weel. Ed. 1, 1418 AH, Beirut: Dar Ihya al-Turath al-Arabi, 4/204.

³⁵ Muhammad Rashid bin Ali Reza bin Muhammad Shams al-Din bin Muhammad Bahaa al-Din bin Manla Ali Khalifa Al-Kalamouni al-Husseini (deceased: 1354 AH), Interpretation of Al-Quran Al-Karim (Tafseer al-Manar), 1990. The Egyptian General Book Organization, 4/35.

Tayt, Amer ibn Sa`asah, Aus, Jatham, Urwah, Nimr, and Yamamah.

Non-Arabic: it includes the language of the Persians, Romans, Copts, Abyssinians, Berbers, Syrians, Hebrews, and Copts.

In a treatise written by al-Suyuti titled al-Muhadhdhab fi ma waqa'a fi al-Quran min al-Muarr'ab, he comments: the scholars have derived from the verse, “We have not sent thee but as a universal (Messenger) to men, giving them glad tidings, and warning them (against sin)” [Saba: 28] and, “We sent not a messenger except (to teach) in the language of his (own) people, in order to make (things) clear to them” [Ibrahim: 4] that the Prophet (PBUH) knew all languages. See also the explanation of al-Balqini of the Council of Sheikh Shoni, may God have mercy on them, and in explaining the al-Shifa to the Khafaji that he (PBUH) knew all languages and the Prophet (PBUH) was sent to all nations.³⁶

The Prophetic Sunnah:

The enlightened reader of the Prophet's biography of observes how he (PBUH) encouraged his dear companions to learn foreign languages in order to advance the Islamic da'wah and secure peace agreements. The following is a review of extracts from the Prophet's biography and his teachings on the issue:

1. Narrated Zayd ibn Thabit: The Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) ordered me (to learn the writing of the Jews), so I learnt for him the writing of the Jews. He said: I swear by Allah, I do not trust Jews in respect of writing for me. So I learnt it, and only a fortnight passed before I mastered it. I would write for him when he wrote (to them), and read to him when something was written to him. Narrated by al-Tirmidhi as Hasan and also narrated by others³⁷.

³⁶ Al-Kettani, The Administrative Structure, The Occupations, The Industries, The Shops And The Scientific Situation At The Time Of Establishing The Islamic Civilization In Medina, op. Cit., 189.

³⁷ Al-Tirmizi, Abu Isa Muhammad bin Isa Al-Tirmizi, (deceased: 279 AH), Al-Jam' Al-Kabir, Dr.

When the Prophet (PBUH) entered Madinah as an immigrant, Jews lived there along with the Aus and Khazraj tribes (may Allah be pleased with them). The Prophet (PBUH) wrote a covenant with the Jews in Hebrew. Although they spoke Arabic, they wrote in Hebrew. The Prophet (PBUH) ordered Zaid ibn Thabit (may Allah be pleased with him) to learn Hebrew so he could write to them and read what they had written to him. He did not trust a Jew to perform this task. Zaid learned Hebrew and mastered it within half a month. He then undertook the duty to scribe and read the Prophet's (PBUH) correspondence to him.³⁸

2. The need to teach and learn languages has existed since the early days of Islam, albeit on a small scale. As a result of the contact between Muslims and other countries and the spread of Islam outside the borders of the Arabian Peninsula, the need to learn foreign languages arose.³⁹

Ibn Saad says in *al-Tabaqat al-Kubra* that when the Prophet (PBUH) returned from the al-Hudaybiyah expedition in the year 6 AH, he sent messengers to the kings to invite them to Islam and wrote them letters. It was said: O Messenger of God, kings do not read letters unless they are sealed. Then the Messenger of Allah took a silver ring from him, and he divided it with three lines stating 'Muhammad the Messenger of Allah'. He then sealed the letters. Six of them went out in one day, and in Muharram in the year 7 AH, every messenger he sent was proficient in the language of the nation to which they were sent.⁴⁰

Bashar Awwad Ma'ruf. Ed. 1, 1996, Beirut: Dar Al-Gharb Al-Islami, Hadeeth No 2715, 4/439.

³⁸ Al-Sanhaji, Abdul Hamid Mohammed bin Badis (deceased: 1359 AH), *Councils of Reminders of al-Bashir al-Nazir*, Ed. 1: 1403, 1983, The Ministry of Religious Affairs. 69.

³⁹ Mursi, Muhammad Mounir, *Islamic Education: Origins and Evolution in Arab Countries*, Revised edition 1425 AH / 2005, Alam al-Kutub, 267.

⁴⁰ Ibn Saad, Abu Abdullah Mohammed bin Saad bin Manea Al-Hashemi (deceased: 230 AH), *Al-Tabaqat al-Kubra*. Ed. 1. 1990, Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, 1/198.

3. The Prophet (PBUH) encouraged learning foreign languages fifteen centuries ago so that Muslims would always be able to communicate with various nations and races and call them to God. This is evidenced in the hadith which was narrated by Zayd ibn Thabit (may Allah be pleased with him) that the Prophet (PBUH) said to him: "O Zayd, learn the language of the Jews. By Allah, I do not trust the Jews to be my scribes". So I learned it and half a month did not pass until I mastered it. I used to write on behalf of the Prophet and read to him his correspondence. In another narration: The Messenger of Allah (PBUH) said to me: "Do you excel in Syriac? Because I receive correspondence [in it]. I said: No. He said: then learn it. So I learnt it."⁴¹

Ibn al-Zubayr (may Allah be pleased with him) was proficient in a number of languages without allowing these languages to occupy him from his religion. He had a hundred servants who spoke different languages. Ibn al-Zubayr spoke to each of them in his language. If we looked at his position in this world, then we could say that he has not blinked a moment. And if we looked at his position in the next world, we would say he has not blinked a moment.⁴²

Contemporary Muslims are in greater need to learn languages than previous generations. It is necessary to live his age and learn the positive and negative aspects of his culture and nation, its heritage and its religion. Language is necessary to avoid evils and secure benefit.⁴³

4. Scribes need to know foreign languages. Sobh al-A'shi, quoting Muhammad ibn Umar al-Madaini, said that the Prophet (PBUH) used to understand all languages, although he was an Arab because Allah sent him to all people and would not have sent him to all people unless he could communicate with them. He spoke with Salman in Farsi. Ikrama narrates: Ibn Abbas was

⁴¹ Narrated by al-Tirmidhi: a hasan-saheeh hadeeth.

⁴² Narrated by al-Hakim in *al-Mustadraq* 3/549, and Abu Naim in *al-Haliyah* 1/334.

⁴³ Al-Hashemi, Muhammad Ali, *The personality of the Muslim as formulated by Islam in the Quran and Sunnah*, Ed. 10, 1423 - 2002, Dar al-Bashaer al-Islaamiyyah, 50.

asked: Did the Messenger of Allah (PBUH) speak Farsi? He said: Salman entered and the Prophet (PBUH) greeted him in Farsi according to Muhammad ibn Emil. Based on this, the Prophet (PBUH) commanded Zayd to learn Syriac or Hebrew because he was unable to read and write.

Al-Hafiz Ibn Abd al-Salam al-Nasiri in the translation of his sheikh Imam Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Najari al-Nabulsi said: That he rejected the claim by the author of the al-Qamus that the Prophet (PBUH) did not speak Farsi. He said the correct view is that he (PBUH) did speak Farsi.⁴⁴

The Humanitarian Implications of Learning Languages

Learning languages is important and enjoyable at the same time. Its benefits extend from the individual to reach the entire society. The most important effects of learning languages are:

1. The enrichment of human knowledge. The more open an individual and society are to other cultures and languages, the more enriched their knowledge and culture.
2. Breaking down cultural barriers and reducing ethnic and cultural conflicts. The recognition of other civilizations and convergence with them through learning their languages contributes directly to the alleviation of conflicts and deepening the understanding of civilizations. This creates friendship and brotherhood among peoples.
3. Learning multiple languages has implications for a person and his way of thinking. Language learning helps strengthen memory and the ability to perform several tasks at the same time. It gives the person a variety of ways to think, and helps increase his attention. A new language opens a new world; because if you are able to converse in another language, is like getting a second spirit.
4. One of the most important purposes of human creation according to the Quran is acquaintance and integration. The Quran emphasised this by

saying: “O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise (each other))” [al-Hujaraat: 13]. The diversity of human beings and their differences is one of the purposes of God's creation. This diversity enriches humanity with different knowledge, skills and ways of thinking. The Quran affirmed this by saying, “that ye may know each other” and not quarrel.

5. As far as man has languages, he is useful to mankind and capable of accommodating others and coexisting with different types of thinking and temperament. This is what Shaykh Safi al-Din al-Hali, who memorized several languages, pointed out.

A man is useful based on the extent of the languages he speaks... they serve as useful assistants

He took the time to memorize languages... and every tongue is really a human being.

Conclusion

The researcher concludes with the following results:

1. Religious, social, political and linguistic conflicts have had an important impact on the spread of some languages and the disintegration of others.
2. The fatwas have differed in the ruling on learning foreign languages. Some consider it obligatory at this age. Others regard it as a social obligation, while others view it permissible based on need. The researcher believes that the preferred view is the need to learn foreign languages because of the need to communicate and acquire knowledge. This position is true to the verse: “and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other”. The researcher ignores the fatwas that deny or alienate learning languages under the pretext of preoccupying one from understanding religion and knowledge of the fundamentals of Islam.
3. **Al-Quran Al-Karim** encourages learning. This research has presented texts that encourage learning languages. These are as follows:

⁴⁴ Al-Kettani, The Administrative Structure, The Occupations, The Industries, The Shops And The Scientific Situation At The Time Of Establishing The Islamic Civilization In Medina, op. Cit., 190.

a. “And He taught Adam the names of all things; then He placed them before the angels, and said: “Tell me the names of these if ye are right” [al-Baqarah: 31]. The scholars have derived from this verse that Allah places the virtue of Adam over the angels due to his knowledge of the names of all things. Some scholars have said that learning languages is better than full-time worship, as Allah Almighty preferred Adam over the angels due to his knowledge of the names of all things.

b. “And among His Signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the variations in your languages and your colours: verily in that are Signs for those who know” [Ar-Room: 22]. In this verse, the Quran indicates that the difference between languages is a sign of God. When the Almighty says: (and the difference of your tongues), it refers to different languages.

c. “O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise (each other))” [al-Hujaraat: 13]. This verse indicates that one of the purposes of God's creation is that people should be familiar with each other. This has been interpreted to mean making acquaintances and marriage. This is not achieved except through communication through language and understanding different cultures.

d. “Let there arise out of you a band of people inviting to all that is good, enjoining what is right, and forbidding what is wrong: They are the ones to attain felicity” [al-Imran: 104]. The call to Allah is not made except by knowledge of the languages of the nations that you intend to call so that the message is delivered correctly.

e. We have not sent thee but as a universal (Messenger) to men, giving them glad tidings, and warning them (against sin)” [Saba: 28]

f. “We sent not a messenger except (to teach) in the language of his (own) people, in order to make (things) clear to them” [Ibrahim: 4]. The scholars derived from this verse that the Prophet (PBUH) used to know

all the languages because each messenger was sent to his own people. The Prophet (PBUH) was sent to all people meaning that he could communicate in all language. The verse is also used to deduce that the Quran contains non-Arabic words.

The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) urged his companions to learn foreign languages and to master them because of the benefits they derive from nations in terms of security, society and religion. The researcher cited several texts that directly indicate the Prophet's request to learn languages.

1. Zayd ibn Thabit (may Allah be pleased with him) narrated that the Prophet (PBUH) said to him: “O Zayd, learn the language of the Jews. By Allah I do not trust the Jews to be my scribes”. So I learned it and half a month did not pass until I mastered it. I used to write on behalf of the Prophet and read to him his correspondence.

2. When the Prophet (PBUH) returned from the al-Hudaybiyah expedition in the year 6 AH, he sent messengers to the kings to invite them to Islam and wrote them letters. It was said: O Messenger of God, kings do not read letters unless they are sealed. Then the Messenger of Allah took a silver ring from him, and he divided it with three lines stating ‘Muhammad the Messenger of Allah’. He then sealed the letters. Six of them went out in one day, and in Muharram in the year 7 AH, every messenger he sent was proficient in the language of the nation to which they were sent.

3. Zayd ibn Thabit (may Allaah be pleased with him) reported that the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said to him: “Do you excel in Syriac? Because I receive correspondence [in it]. I said: No. He said: then learn it. So I learnt it.

4. Ibn Abbas was asked: Did the Messenger of Allah (PBUH) speak Farsi? He said: Salman entered and the Prophet (PBUH) greeted him in Farsi according to Muhammad ibn Emil.

Recommendations

Based on the texts of the Quran and Sunnah, the researcher recommends the following:

1. The need to learn foreign languages, especially those that control the keys to science and knowledge at this time, and to learn these languages in order to transfer that knowledge to Islamic societies and to benefit from and develop them. The language learning mechanism must be based on scientific methods and divided into multiple levels (beginners, intermediate, advanced) in order to achieve rapid proficiency. It is best to start with specialized centres with long scientific and practical experience in teaching languages.

2. To work on the return of the Arabic language to its status as a language of science and knowledge and to benefit from the mistakes which led to the decline of the role of the Arabic language among the other languages. The researcher proposes establishing research centres specialised in conducting studies that monitor the levels of Arabic language and the path of development or to monitor the level of the Arabic language in schools, especially for small age groups. Also, to monitor the level of the Arabic language in media, and then issue periodic reports and studies that identify how to improve.

3. Convening scientific conferences to contribute to the convergence of languages and benefit from each other's experiences in order to reduce the gap between the Arabic language and other international languages. The researcher suggests that there should be an annual conference hosted by a different country every year for the world's linguists to discuss and debate n languages and research. The proposed date for this conference is the World Language Day.

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