



RELEVANCE THEORY IN FRIDAY KHUTBA

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Some eloquent speech has the influence of magic.
Sahih al-Bukhari

Abstract:

This study seeks to tackle the Muslim Friday khutba (speech) from a Relevance-Theoretic perspective (Sperber and Wilson 1995). Relevance Theory posits that the goal of communication is to maximize the relevance of the phenomena available to language users while minimize the amount of mental or cognitive processing effort. Three Friday khutbas are analyzed in order to explore how the khatibs (preachers) maximize the relevance of the topics in the khutbas to the audience utilizing the least processing effort.

Keywords: Friday Khutba; Islamic discourse; relevance theory

1. Introduction

The eloquent speech can be as influential as magic, as Prophet Muhammad's Hadith reiterates (narrated in Sahih al-Bukhari; paraphrased and cited in Jones 2013: 74). It has the power to affect, mobilize and persuade people. In order for the khutba to be appealing and persuasive and accomplish political and social functions, it has to address topics that are relevant to the audience. For this purpose, the khutba should be simpler and more relevant to the problems of the daily life. The Islamic Society of Greater Lafayette (ISGL), the home to the Muslim community at Purdue University, places a simplified questionnaire on its website (<https://isgh.org/survey/>). The ISGL asks for feedback on the form and content of the khutbas delivered on Friday congregational sermon (jum'a). One of the points raised in the questionnaire is whether

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the topics tackled during the khutbas are thought-provoking, engaging and *relevant* to the community (In fact, the part *The khutba was relevant* was later placed first in the questionnaire!). Likewise, the digging of the Egyptian New Suez Canal (i.e. expansion of the Suez Canal) was compared to Prophet Muhammad's digging of a trench to defend the Medina from attackers in the seventh century (*The Economist*; 8 August 2015: 25). The Egyptian President al-Sisi took power in July 2013. His critics described his move as a coup, whereas his proponents describe it as a correction movement. In order for al-Sisi to bolster support and legitimacy for his rulership against his political rivals, he initiated the New Suez Canal to provide his people with adequate services. The ministry of religious affairs instructed the mosque sermons, according to *The Economist*, to cite Prophet Muhammad's digging of a trench to defend Medina from attackers (dubbed in the history of Islam as Al-Khandaq Battle).

The objective of the study is to illustrate on how khatibs (preachers) seek to make Islam current and rational and relevant to community needs (see Ahmad 2012: 177-183). Brinton (2015: 11) maintains that, "*Many who came to be accepted as religious authorities did so by finding relevant knowledge in the Qur'an and hadith, which helped make their interpretations applicable. The ability to make the text relevant-something that was once an outcome-became the object and the description of learnedness.*" As such, the khatib introduces himself as a mediator and culture broker (Wiktorowicz 2001: 56; Antoun 1989: 3) whose mission is to mediate between Islamic teachings and everyday practices and events in order to come up with solutions for the problems of the society and, consequently, promote positive social change. In a society that places little appreciation for professional psychotherapy, the khatib seeks to play the role of the public therapist (Bayat 2007: 153), among other religious and socio-political roles in his community (Kamp 2008). The khatibs, as well as the mosques, are both the products and the creators of the religious discourse that materializes only with relation to the historical and social context (Tayob 1999: viii & 15). The study of preaching and religious discourse in light of socio- and psycho-linguistic approaches has acquired increasing popularity just recently (Garner 2009; Brown 2007; Pieterse 2010; Schmidt and Kiss 1986). What gives the study of religious discourse from a linguistic perspective its appeal is the growing visibility of Islamic symbols in public life, and hence the growing appreciation of these symbols within the social context (Geertz 1973: 90; Tayob 1999: 4; Kersten and Olsson 2013: 1). Like Friday khutbas, various Islamic practices and rituals are discursive in nature and are, therefore, intertwined with other religious and non-religious practices (Zainal Ariff 2012; Awad 2017). The Muslim Friday khutba could be considered one of the most salient signs of Islamic discourse. Richard Antoun's (1989; 1993) anthropological fieldwork on the Friday sermon in Jordan is a pioneering research done on preaching in the Muslim world. Antoun (1993: 607) highlights the socio-religious role of the khatib (preacher) as a culture broker; "*The Muslim preacher is taken here to be a culture broker who selects from and interprets an enormous corpus of religious ethics to a less sophisticated audience of coreligionists; but who, on the other hand, is exposed to, constrained by, and selectively incorporates the local custom accepted by the consensus of his audience.*"

2. Relevance Theory

Relevance Theory assumes that the goal of communication is to maximize the relevance of the phenomena available to language users while minimize the amount of mental or cognitive processing effort. It aims at optimal relevance, i.e. to understand without expending undue energy. According to Sperber & Wilson (1995, 270):

Presumption of optimal relevance (revised)

- a) The ostensive stimulus is relevant enough for it to be worth the addressee's effort to process it.
- b) The ostensive stimulus is the most relevant one compatible with the communicator's abilities and preferences.

In the same vein, Wilson and Sperber (1998: 8-9; Wilson and Sperber 2012: 176) contend that *"Relevance is defined in terms of cognitive effects and processing effort. Cognitive effects are achieved when newly-presented information interacts with a context of existing assumptions by strengthening an existing assumption, by contradicting and eliminating an existing assumption, or by combining with an existing assumption to yield a contextual implication...The greater the cognitive effects, the greater the relevance will be...Cognitive effects, however, do not come free; they cost some mental effort to derive, and the greater the effort needed to derive them, the lower the relevance will be."*

3. Data

A. Khutba 1 (27 July 2015)

The topic of this khutba was about causes of distress and the solutions Islam offers to overcome its consequences. The khatib narrated a Hadith that illustrates on the strength of distress as the strongest of all God's creatures. Then the khatib singled out that particular theme of distress in society and offered causes and solutions to that problem. He started with this Hadith

The Prophet said:

"When Allah created the earth, it started shaking. So He created the mountains, and said to them: 'Upon it' so it began to settle. The angels were amazed at the strength of the mountains, so they said: 'O Lord! Is there among your creatures one who is more severe than the mountains?' He said: 'Yes. Iron.' They said: 'O Lord! Then is there anything among your creatures that is more severe than that iron?' He said: 'Yes. Fire.' So they said: 'O Lord! Is there anything among your creatures that is more severe than fire?' He said: 'Yes. Water.' They said: 'O Lord! Is there anything among your creatures that is more severe than water?' He said: 'Yes. Wind.' They said: 'O Lord! Is there anything among your creatures more severe than wind?' He said: 'Yes. The son of Adam. He gives charity with his right hands, while hiding it from his left' (www.sunnah.com).

This was how the khatib began his khutba. However, he proceeded with another part which he claimed to be part of the same Hadith. According to the Hadith

resources, the second part is Ali Bin Abi Talib's narration/interpretation of this Hadith (al-Tabarani 1995: 276-277). It goes as follows

*"The son of Adam (Man) is stronger than wind since he can avoid wind with his clothes; drunkenness is stronger than Man; sleep is stronger than drunkenness; distress is stronger than sleep; so **the strongest of all creatures is distress.**"*

Based on the last phrase (in bold), the khatib expatiated on the importance and relevance of this topic to the audience. The outline of the khutba consisted basically of addressing a problem (distress) and offering solutions drawn from religion. By doing so, the khatib sought to introduce himself as both a public therapist (Bayat 2007: 153) and culture broker (Wiktorowicz 2001: 56; Antoun 1989: 3) whose mission was to mediate religious script (Quran, Hadith, etc.) and optimize their relevance to the life of the ordinary people. In order for the khatib to intensify and add to the gravity of distress, he urged the audience to *"ask the physicians (psychiatrists) to tell you about the psychological diseases."* The solution he offered was based on abiding by the teachings of God because *"the closer you stand to God and his teachings, the more you distance yourself from distress, and vice versa."* The cure for distress and other physical and psychological illnesses, according to the khatib, is to be drawn from Islamic rituals such as praying four *rak'at of duha* and supplication.

B. Khutba 2: (1 May 2015; Labor Day)

This khutba was delivered on Friday 1st May 2015. It coincided with the International Workers' Day (May 1st), or the Labor Day. The significance of work and its relation to faith in Islam was the main theme during the khutba.

From the very beginning, the khatib made it clear that Islam does not endorse the celebration of these memorial days such as Workers' Day and Mothers' Day; *"regardless of how or why the International Workers' Day began,"* was the khatib's introductory phrase that was meant to make his point clear. Then he moved to the main theme of the khutba which was the significance of work in Islam. To illustrate on that point and to maximize the relevance of the theme of work to the audience, he maintained that there are 359 expressions in the Quran that use the verb root *work/do* in Arabic. From that point on, he singled out the theme of work in Islam and expatiated on its significance up till the end of the khutba. For example, he drew a relation between work and knowledge as these two themes share the same three-letter verb root in Arabic ('-m-l/-l-m). In addition, he cited the Mutaffifin Sura (83) that deals with the disbelievers who mock and laugh at the believers. The Sura is concluded by a verse that shows the fate of the disbelievers; *'Will not the disbelievers have been paid back for what they **did?**'* (Q83: 36; Pickthall 1997; emphasis added). By citing this Sura, the khatib was alluding to some societal activities that were set to mock and ban some of the Islamic rituals such as the head scarf (hijab). In the week preceding the khutba, Egyptian demonstrators took to the streets and called for the banning and the taking-off of the hijab (Ezzidin 2015). Following this Sura, the khatib cited two other stories in the Quran where the theme of

good-doing/good-conduct was set against the bad-doing/bad-conduct, most notably in the story of Noah and his son ('he is of evil **conduct**'; Q11: 46) and the story of the Companion Abu Lubaba with the Jews of Bani Quraida ('They mixed a righteous **action** with another that was bad'; Q9:102; emphasis added).

C. Khutba 3 (12 February 2016; Valentine's Day)

This khutba was delivered on February 12, 2016, two days before the Valentine's Day memorial. The khatib offered his thoughts on the significance of love in Islam and how the love of God and the Prophet represent the Muslims' driving force towards abiding by the rules of Islam. The khatib recounted a history of the memorial. He explained how the Roman governor in the third century A.D (referring to the Emperor Claudius II) banned marriages in his kingdom as a result of his wife's death. Although the documented resources refer to a different reason (e.g. that the Emperor was having a difficult time getting young Roman men to join the army; see Winterton 2015: February 14 section; Polon and Cantwell 1983: 116), the khatib went on and embarked on the role of Valentine in arranging secret marriages till the disclosure of his conduct that ultimately led to his execution.

Contrary to the conventional khatibs that were apt to exaggerate the negative image of these memorials, this khatib sought to emphasize the value of love and marriage and how Valentine cohered with human nature. At this particular point, the khatib drew the connection between the Valentine's Day and the theme of love in Islam. He cited a number of Quranic verses and Hadiths (the Prophet's sayings) that dealt with love such as, "Say, (O Muhammad, to mankind): If ye **love** Allah, follow me; Allah will **love** you and forgive you your sins. Allah is Forgiving, Merciful" (Q3: 31; Pickthall 1977; emphasis added). The khatib then expatiated on the significance of love in the family, especially between husbands and wives. He particularly cited a Hadith that underpins the special relationship between the Prophet and his wife, Aisha. The Hadith goes as follows, "Amr Ibn al-'As related that he asked the Prophet (pbuh), 'Who do you love most, O messenger of Allah?' He replied, 'Aisha'. 'Who is from among men?' Amr asked. He said 'Her father.' (Reported by al-Bukhari and Muslim; <https://theislampost.wordpress.com>)." The khatib meant to further emphasize that special relationship by referring to the fact that the Prophet died with his head in Aisha's lap, "*whether some people liked that or not*", as the khatib put it. The khatib was alluding to the negative attitude of the Shi'ites towards prominent Muslim figures (Companions) like Aisha, Abu Bakr and Omar.

4. Discussion

Van Dijk (2009: 5) reiterates aspects of discourse pertaining to the production and comprehension of utterances. He puts forth a perceptive definition of context in terms of relevance; "*...a context is what is defined to be **relevant** in the social situation by the participants themselves*" (emphasis added). As such, this definition takes into consideration the Gricean maxim of relation ("Be Relevant"; as well as the other three

maxims of cooperation; see Grice 1975: 47) and its later, rather more refined, version as spelled out by Sperber and Wilson (1995). The basic tenet of Relevance Theory relies on the assumption that an utterance raises certain specific and predictable expectations of relevance which, in turn, guide the hearer towards the speaker's meaning. This is how Wilson and Sperber (1994: 85) put it, "... *every utterance creates an expectation of relevance in the hearer, with the preferred interpretation being the one that best satisfies the expectation of relevance.*"

In terms of discourse analysis, the Friday khutba could be seen as a type of communicative event whereby a message is initiated by a sender-encoder (khatib) and directed to specific audience or receiver-decoder (audience in the mosque), and it relies for its success on the activation of various types of mutual or shared knowledge. The *shared knowledge* in the case of the khutba could refer to the khatib's knowledge of Islam and the world as well as the audience's knowledge of Islam and the world, at varying proportions. That is, the khatib is presumably the most knowledgeable person of religion in his community, coupled with reasonable knowledge of his community's daily life. Conversely, his audience is more knowledgeable of the details of the community's daily life, coupled with reasonable knowledge of religion. Understanding the role of the khatib in his society is very central for the realization of the khutba as a communicative event. The general goal of the khatib is spreading the word of Islam (*da'wa* or call for Islam). From among systemic patterns of meaningful choices, the khatib chooses the topic or type of language that is most optimal and most relevant to the audience (borrowing from Halliday & Matthiessen's 2004: 23 as well as Sperber and Wilson's 1995). The khatib's systemic patterns of choice produce the type of relations he seeks to establish with his audience according to the role he creates for himself and his audience.

By applying the above theoretical framework on the three khutbas, it becomes clear how the khatibs capitalized on the hearers' background/shared knowledge or, in Relevance-Theoretic terms, the hearers' expectations of relevance and the way these expectations are satisfied. In khutba 1, a connection was made between distress in theology (the Hadith) and distress as a problem in people's daily life. In khutba 2, the significance of work in Islam was related to the current event (Labour Day). In khutba 3, the current event (Valentine's Day) was utilized to shed light on the notion of love in Islam and how sentiments and feelings find their way in Muslims' relations with others. More details will be given below.

In khutba 1, a theological resource (the Prophet's Hadith) was invoked to illustrate on the power of distress at the cosmic (or rather the metaphysical) level *and* at the level of people's everyday life. A connection was drawn between distress as the strongest of all creatures, according to the Hadith, and the implications and cures of distress as alluded from religious resources as well. In other words, the Hadith narrated by the khatib provides a list of creatures in the universe in terms of their relative strength. The Hadith is concluded by the stance that distress is stronger than all other creatures in the universe. Using Sperber and Wilson's theorization (2012: 176) for the current data, the khatib sought to yield a contextual implication and achieve cognitive

effects by interacting new information with existing assumptions of the hearers. Based on the dramatic course of the khutba, the 'relatively' new information to the hearers was the fact that distress is the strongest creature. The khatib's next step was to move 'outwardly' (from theology to real life) by urging the hearers to 'ask the psychiatrists' about the psychological diseases. After depicting the various forms of distress that humans suffer from, he offered solutions drawn from religion; as such, he moved 'inwardly' (from real life to theology). In other words, the backbone of the khutba consisted of highlighting the following three elements:

Strength of distress – distress in real life – solutions of distress

Achieving positive and optimal cognitive effect with little processing effort could have not taken place without aligning and positioning the above three elements against each other.

In khutba 2, the course was quite simpler than khutba 1. The khatib made a connection between the Labor Day (the International Workers Day) and work in Islam. There was a collection of shared and background knowledge which the khatib utilized. The first is the notion that Muslims should always take action and be active. Second, Islam is often described as a religion that focuses on orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy. This means that Islam gives more focus on society than theology (Antoun 1989: 10). For example, among the five pillars of Islam, which are the Proclamation of Faith, praying, giving of alms (*zaka*), pilgrimage, and fasting, only the first one is associated with theology or belief; the other four pillars involve actions. The Islamic discourse is based on assumptions pertaining to the interrelationship between religion and life. As Hashem (2010: 49) puts it, the discourse of the khutba is 'a religiously-driven civic discourse rather than a pure religious sermon.' For the sake of maximizing relevance for his audience, the khatib selectively assigned particular attributes or parts of the Labor Day and invoked certain attributes or parts from the theological resources (Quran and Hadith) and established connections that aimed at shedding light on current events. Following the same argument above, the Valentine's Day in khutba 3 simply acted as a spur to more relevant issues via foregrounding particular attributes of the Valentine's Day and the subsequent topics at the expense of other attributes which were *intentionally* downplayed. The figure below shows the outline of khutba 3:

Valentine's Day → Love → Love in Islam → Marital Love (in Islam) → Prophet's Love of his Wife, Aisha → Sunni-Shi'ite Conflict

The khatib traded on the people's trepidation, fear and knowledge of Valentin's Day and chose to approach it in an unconventional way. Instead of avoiding or criticizing the event, the khatib chose to optimize the value of love and virtue in the life of Saint Valentine and compare it to the value of love in Islam. In doing so, the khatib tended to make the khutba relevant! The khutba was relevant to the social context (i.e. Valentine's Day: 14th February) and at the same time relevant to the place and time of

the Friday khutba (which was presumably a religious context). For this purpose, the khatib cited a relevant Quranic verse (Q3: 31; If you love Allah, etc.) that refers to love in Islam in general, from which he singled out marital love (love between husbands and wives) in Islam. By referring to marital love from among various types of love in Islam, the khatib tended to be selective. Selectivity on the part of the khatib was conversationally motivated. In more technical terms, the khatib selected one *attribute*, among other attributes, of *the object* (drawing from Object-Oriented programming; see Britton & Doake 2005: 80-100). In this particular case, 'love in Islam' was *the object*, and 'marital love' was *the attribute*. After developing the notion *marital love-the attribute* from *love in Islam-the object*, the khatib went on and drew on Prophet Muhammad's love of his wife, Aisha, as an example of marital love in Islam. By invoking the Prophet's relationship with his wife, Aisha, the khatib was in fact addressing a profoundly and a supremely political issue, i.e. the Sunni-Shi'ite conflict. Aisha, Abu Bakr and Omar are three main figures of the early days of Islam who are often depicted negatively by the Shi'ite scholars.

The relatedness and the un-relatedness among topics and issues in this khutba 3 need to be tackled with more elaboration. The first topic (Valentine's Day) and the last topic (Sunni-shi'ite conflict) seemed unrelated. The mission of the khatib was to make it related, or rather, look related! The intermediate topics facilitated and mediated their relatedness. Each and every topic entailed and presupposed a myriad of themes (or attributes) from which the khatib proceeded and expatiated. The khatib proceeded with a theme, an attribute, an interpretation, or part of the story which he assumed to be relevant enough to be worth the addressees' effort to process it, and it was the most relevant one compatible with the addressees' abilities and preferences. Therefore, it was the mission of the khatib as a culture broker (cf. Antoun 1989: 3) to realize the topics that would attract the attention of his audience, based on the type of the shared knowledge or *mutual knowledge* (see this notion in light of Relevance Theory in Tendam 2009: 14) between the khatib and his audience. That was exactly how the khatib extracted a sub-topic from a topic (or an attribute from an object).

5. Conclusion

Khatibs (preachers) are spoilt for choice concerning the most attractive and most relevant topic that needs to be introduced to their audiences every Friday. A good number of ideal options are available at the khatibs' disposal to choose from, owing to the abundance of the media outlets. Similarly, the potential audiences have an abundance of suitable options concerning 'picking a good khutba' from among a variety of mosques available in their neighborhood. Here comes the role of the eloquent and experienced khatib in 'picking a good topic' by providing his audience with the maximum amount of cognitive effect without expending undue processing effort. By every weekend, most of the people have full awareness of the current political and social events during the week. They are actually waiting for their khatib to 'religiously dramatize' the events for them. It is a religious dramatization or, in relevance-theoretic

terms (Wilson and Sperber 1994: 85), a preferred interpretation that must presumably best satisfy their expectation of relevance.

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