




The importance of a semantic approach in understanding the texts of the Holy Quran and Sunnah

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Abstract

The relevance of the study is determined by contemporary ideas of modernisation and radicalisation of Islam, the formation of which is directly linked to the problem of interpreting the sacred texts of the Muslim world. Therefore, the aim of the research work is to determine the veracity of applying linguistic and semantic approaches to the interpretation of the Holy Quran in order to find new ways of regulating the socio-cultural space. The research was conducted on the basis of the semantic, cultural, semiotic and formal-logical approaches, using such methods of scientific knowledge as induction, deduction, linguistic analysis, systematisation, comparison, synthesis and generalisation. In the course of the research work, key narratives of contemporary Islam were analysed in terms of their specific understanding of the Holy Quran. The current state of research into the interpretation of the sacred texts of Islam is reviewed. The specifics of understanding the Holy Quran in the context of its metaphorical constructions are explored. The relationship between the linguistic structure of the Arabic language and the interpretations of the texts of the holy injunctions has been established, on the basis of which two ways of investigating the understanding of the Quran have been proposed. A comparative analysis of the research findings with other research findings in the category of modern interpretation of the Quran and Sunnah has been conducted. The trend towards digitalisation of the sacred texts of Islam, as well as the use of artificial intelligence technologies to interpret the ayahs, has been noted. The practical significance of the research work lies in proposing new methodologies for interpreting sacred texts, which can then be qualitatively applied in practice.

Keywords: Linguistic Method; Interpretation of Islam; Metaphor; Intertextuality; Ayah.

Introduction

The semantic field of the contemporary Muslim world is taking shape in the context of two trends. The first trend is related to the modernization of Islam as a world religion (Uddin et al., 2022). From the 19th century onwards, Western European values were actively introduced into Muslim society through colonialism and modernity. This has contributed to the term “liberal Islam” appearing in academic discourse today. The central tenet of this religious movement is a rethinking of Islam as such. It is a question of adapting Islam to Western European narratives and integrating it into Western European philosophical thought. For example, the traditional European notion of freedom is no longer at odds with Muslim values and has become the basis for national liberation thinking.

The second trend, alongside the modernization of Islam, is its radicalization (Jung, 2023; Dzhanarayeva et al., 2014). Radical Islam is oriented towards anti-Western narratives and is very often a source of conflict situations between members of the Muslim world. One way or another, regardless of the prevailing trends, the social, political, moral, ethical, economic, and other aspects of the Muslim world are based on a holy text – the Quran. All spheres of life in Islamic society are linked to the interpretation and understanding of the meanings embedded in the Quran. Accordingly,



it can be argued that certain contemporary socio-cultural trends in the Muslim world have arisen because of one interpretation or another of the holy texts of the Quran. In this regard, the problem of interpretations of the Holy Quran and Sunnah is relevant.

Modern scholars often refer to the topic of modern Islam and the understanding of sacred Muslim texts in the new socio-cultural space. For example, A.H. Bahri (2022) considered the modernization of Islam in Egypt and the need to borrow some scientific knowledge to popularise Islam and consequently seek a better understanding of the Quran. His colleague in the field of study, J.A. Abdullah (2021), argued for the importance of interpreting the Quran correctly. The scholar has studied the relationship between cultural and linguistic features of the Arabic language, as well as their influence on the interpretation of the Quran.

Of interest to the study are the writings of A.T. Rakhmat and A.F. Rasyid (2021). Through their scholarly work, scholars have proved the importance of interpreting the Quran in the field of education. He explained the term “valuation” using derivative words from 150 verses of the Quran. This has proved the relevance of theoretical Muslim narratives to their practical application. A more global approach to the problem of interpretation of the Quranic texts is inherent in the researcher H.T. Lafta (2022). The author argued that semantic differences between different Muslim societies or religious doctrines arise due to misinterpretation of the Quran. Thus, this is the reason for the emergence and development of various terrorist groups, which, in turn, carve out individual divine messages from the general context of the Holy Quran and use them for their purposes.

Based on the above, it can be concluded that the semantic approach in the study of the problem of understanding the Quran and Sunnah is indeed actively used by scholars in the course of their research. However, the specificity of these works is limited to a theoretical analysis of cultural and linguistic features in the interpretation of sacred texts, as well as a rather generalized view of the said semantic problem, which necessitates the search for new scientific leads. Thus, the research work aims to determine the linguistic and semiotic prerequisites for the interpretation of the texts of the Holy Quran and Sunnah based on the principles of the semantic approach.

Materials and Methods

The methodological rationale of the research work provides a reasoned explanation of the scientific methods and approaches used in the course of the research. The study of the problem of understanding the texts of the Holy Quran and Sunnah is based on the semantic approach. The application of this scientific approach facilitated the study of interpretations of the Quran through individual semantic units, which were further supplemented by a holistic value-semantic field of the Muslim space.

The effectiveness of the semantic approach in the study was confirmed by the use of several general scientific theoretical methods of cognition, including analysis, synthesis, comparison, induction, deduction, structural method, systematization, and generalization. The method of analysis was used to substantiate the relevance of the problem of understanding the sacred texts of the Quran and to identify socio-cultural trends in the contemporary Muslim world, as well as during the study of the literature sources that formed the theoretical basis of the study. It is also the linguistic analysis that is of particular importance in scientific development since this scientific method of knowledge has made it possible to analyze specific examples of the ayahs of the Quran and to further confirm the primary figurative meaning in the understanding of the ayahs in question.

The method of synthesis has helped to explore the understanding of the Holy Quran inseparably from the context of the modern Muslim world. The comparative method of learning enabled the results of the study to be compared with the findings of other scientists, which in turn helped to identify promising topics for further research. The methods of induction and deduction were used when searching for variants of studying the semantic field of the Quran. For example, the method of induction involved the study of the Quran through its individual semantic units, i.e. starting from the



individual meanings of the elements to the general understanding of the holy text. The method of deduction involved analyzing the interpretations of individual words or ayahs through a general understanding of the Quran. That is, in this case, only from the general interpretation of the Quran is it possible to understand its individual passages.

In addition to the above-mentioned methods of scientific knowledge, a structural method was also applied in the course of the study. With the help of this method, the scheme of semantic interpretation of the ayah was considered: transparency, direction, expression, and emergence of the text. The second trend, the method of systematization is used more than once in the research paper. This method has been used to analyze the structure and classification of the ayahs of the Quran and to study the specificity of the semiotic approach, which is rooted in the perception of the Quran as a sign system.

The research was also made possible through the application of culturological, semiotic, and formal-logical approaches. The cultural approach helped to identify the socio-cultural preconditions for a particular understanding of the Holy Quran. The semiotic approach was used to reinterpret sacred texts in the context of the sign-symbol, signified-signifier relations. In turn, the formal-logical method underpinned the presentation of thought in scholarly work. Thus, the described combination of scientific approaches and methods of scientific cognition made it possible to obtain qualitatively new results in the topic of understanding the texts of the Holy Quran and Sunnah.

Results

First of all, it is worth beginning with the fact that the text of the Quran is an example of a work written in an artistic style, so its understanding is directly proportional to the semantic features of the Arabic language. Understanding the Quran as such is only possible through the interpretation of each word of the holy text. However, here researchers face a certain difficulty (Raudatussolihah et al., 2021). This is because understanding the Quran through the direct meaning of each word leads to a misinterpretation of the divine meanings embedded. For the study of the Quran, it is especially important to pay attention to the figurative meaning, as most of the Holy Book is written using metaphorical constructions.

Thus, based on the dependence of the understanding of the Quran on the specificity of the Arabic language, it is possible to identify two ways of contextual-semantic analysis (Very Eko Atmojo et al., 2022 Romash et al., 2022). The essence of the first method is to investigate the lexical and semantic meaning of each element, or unit, of a sacred text. This is because each term in the Quran has a different meaning that affects the overall message of the religious work. The second way of analysis has some similarities with the deductive scientific method. The essence of it is to study each ayah from a certain general semantic context since the ayahs of the Quran become understandable only in their totality. This specificity of the writing of the Holy Quran encourages further research to focus on the linguistic and semiotic preconditions for interpreting the Holy Book of Islam.

In contemporary scholarship, the translation of the Quran is a rather problematic field of endeavor. This is due to the structure of the Arabic language, as discussed above. In studies, A. Gaibani et al. (2021) explained the unreliability of English translations of the Quran to the linguistic features of the Arabic language, which were missed in the translation process. This is especially true when it comes to understanding the ayahs, which, in fact, make up the Quran. The individual ayahs in the Holy Quran are classified and structured based on their content certainty, which is crucial for understanding the Quran's semantic field (Figure 1).

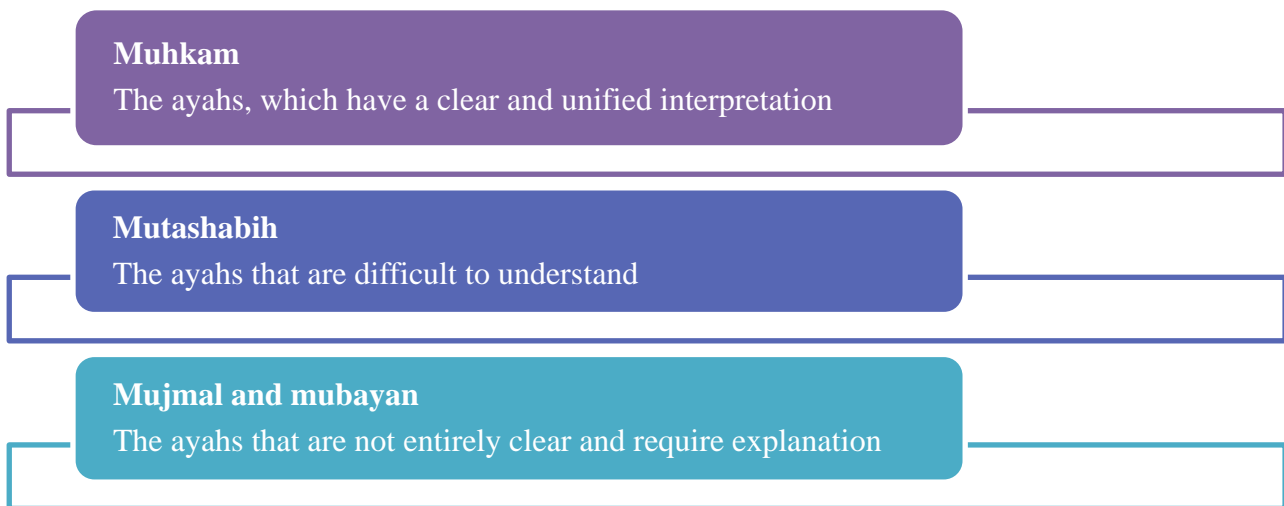


Figure 1. Classification of the Ayah by content

Source: compiled by the author on the basis of D.A. Abdullah and N.J.M. Al-Khafaji (2021).

Figure 1 shows the classical classification of the ayahs of the Holy Quran according to which the ayahs are divided into muhkam, mutashabih, mujmal, and mubayan (Abdullah et al., 2021). Each of these types has its own meaning. For example, flies are provided with a clear single statement that requires no further explanation. These ayahs do not need to be interpreted. However, there are other examples among the ayahs, such as mutashabih. It is these ayahs that are known to Allah alone. They are quite difficult to understand and explain. Apart from classification, the ayahs have a structure of their own. In particular, they are divided into parts “according to the definition of what is meant by the word in the verse in question” (Barni, 2022):

- text transparency;
- text direction;
- text expression;
- text production.

To reliably explain the structure and parts of the ayah, a linguistic analysis of the individual ayah must be done. For example, there is an ayah that goes like this: “If you are afraid that you will not be fair to the orphans, then marry other women that you like: two, three, four. But if you fear that you will not be equally fair to them, be content with the one or the slaves your hands have mastered. This is closer to avoiding injustice (or poverty)” (Quran. Surah 4. Ayah 3, n.d.). In this case, the ayah consists of three parts. The first part of the ayah states the permission to marry. The second part defines the fact that a man may take one to four women as his wife. The third part, however, states that if a man fears that he will not be fair to all wives equally, he may marry only one woman. Such a move would come close to being fair. It should also be added that the second and third theses of this ayah are key in terms of the meaning of the text.

The next example is Surah 4, Ayah 2, the essence of which is, “Give to the orphans their possessions and do not exchange the wicked for the good. Do not devour their possessions along with your own. Verily, it is a great sin. At first glance, after reading the ayah, it would seem that everything is quite obvious and no further explanation is needed. However, this belief is false. This type of ayah is intended to make the interpreter think. The first part of the verse says to “give property to orphans” (Quran. Surah 4. Ayah 2, n.d.). This means that the inheritance goes to the orphans, first, when the parents die, second, when they come of age, and third, if they are legally capable. This ayah is analogous to the modern legal unit that governs heritage rights. The second part of the ayah explains that orphans’ heritage cannot be substituted for their property. The second trend, it is not permissible to appropriate property for oneself. The last ayah in the context of the linguistic parsing of this study



reads: “And those who disobey Allah and His Messenger and transgress His limitations, He will cast into the Fire, in which they will abide forever. They are destined for humiliating torment” (Quran. Surah 4. Ayah 14, n. d.). This ayah refers to the punishment for transgressions of the injunctions. Although the ayah is not specified, after reading it, it is clear that it refers to the restrictions that were previously established by Allah. Accordingly, the word “fire” means hell.

Thus, the linguistic analysis of the above three ayahs leads to the conclusion that the Quran as a Holy Book of Islam is really difficult to understand and perceive by individuals who are not part of the Muslim socio-cultural space (Songgirin, 2021; Kostruba, 2023; Sliusarenko, 2023). However, there are researchers in the contemporary scholarly field who question the rationality of using linguistic analysis in the study of understanding the Quran. K. Sardaraz (2017) in his scholarly dissertation considered the dichotomy of language and thought. This phrase suggests a division or contrast between the processes of language and thought, implying that they are separate and distinct aspects of human cognition. The dichotomy between language and thought raises several philosophical and cognitive questions: does language shape thought, or does a thought exist independently of language? This question relates to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which suggests that language influences and constrains thought. Some psychologists argue that inner speech (the internal use of language for thinking) plays a crucial role in human cognition. It blurs the line between language and thought, as language can be seen as a tool for organizing and processing thoughts.

Some theories suggest that language plays a central role in concept formation, while others propose that thought processes are more fundamental. In particular, this problem was analyzed in the context of interpreting the metaphorical units of the Holy Quran in the themes of rewards and punishments. The author concluded that the linguistic approach, which focuses on the interpretation of language, and the conceptual approach, which proceeds from the analysis of thinking, have several shortcomings when interpreting the texts of the Quran. This is because followers of the linguistic method, in particular researchers concerned with language constructions (literary scholars, rhetoricians), analyze metaphor as a linguistic unit or tool. The followers of the conceptual or cognitive approach, on the other hand, extol metaphor as a cognitive phenomenon. Because of this different approach to the study of metaphorical turns in the Holy Quran, false semantic constructions can also arise. Here it is especially important to understand that the Quran is an intertextual object, as it has always been an integral part of the overall socio-cultural Muslim context. Therefore, applying only the linguistic approach is inappropriate because it denies the empirical basis of metaphors, and applying only the conceptual approach because it ignores the pragmatic aspects of metaphorical explanation.

Such an exploratory analysis suggests that a qualitatively better tool in the study of understanding the texts of the Holy Quran is the integrated application of linguistic and conceptual approaches (Ali & Sardaraz, 2021). This approach will preserve the rhetorical beauty of the Quran in its integrity with pragmatic interpretation. In addition to the linguistic analysis of the metaphorical basis of the Quran, the work aimed to apply a semiotic approach. The peculiarity of this method of research is that each word of the Quran is perceived as a sign, so the text itself is a kind of sign system in need of deciphering. In contemporary academic discourse, the use of the semiotic approach in interpreting sacred religious texts is quite popular. For example, the authors S.T. Syahputra and A. Murtaza (2022) analyzed the meaning of the word “Qalam” in the Quran, applying the method of semiotics. First of all, the scholar concluded that the word “Qalam” is used only four times in the Quran. However, in each version, the word is understood differently. That is, it can be argued that in the case of writing the Quran, the word used is a sign that indicates something or denotes a certain context. It is also worth adding that the word “Qalam” in everyday life means “a pen or an instrument used in writing”.

As evidence of the effectiveness of the method of interpretation of the Quran described above, it is worthwhile to cite the example of the scientific work of I.A. El-Hussari (2022). The author argued that the very process of understanding the Quran is a semiotic exercise. Given that the Quran is written in allegorical language, it is exceedingly difficult to choose a single authentic version of



understanding among the many variants of interpretation. Therefore, semiotics as the science of signs and ways of translating information can provide a universal tool of understanding without any false or subjective beliefs. The second trend, despite the positive outcome of the study of the Quran's metaphorical constructions using semiotics, the question arises: "How true can the interpretation of the Quran, written in Arabic, be considered using the semiotic method previously applied to the languages of the Western European region?" Is the socio-cultural context of the Muslim world not lost in the moment of its adaptation to the Western European scholarly traditions? Apart from the fact that the solution to this problem is still being developed by scholars today, the use of a semiotic approach remains one of the more effective in understanding the Holy Quran (Aras & Sardaraz, 2022; Kálmán & Poyda-Nosyk, 2023).

Thus, a practical analysis of the application of linguistic and semiotic methods in the context of the semantic approach to the study of the Quran has shown a new level of possibility of obtaining reliable interpretations of metaphors (Dulayeva et al., 2023). Through a linguistic approach to interpreting the ayahs, it has also been determined that a non-Arabic speaker will encounter several problems during the reading of the Koran related to linguistic features and the figurative meaning of the words used. An analysis of semiotics as a way to interpret the holy Quranic texts showed that the methodology of marking words as signs is promising for future research because it holistically substantiates the figurative meaning of metaphorical constructions and explains the gap between the meanings of words in the holy Quran and everyday life.

Discussion

The problem of applying a semantic approach to understanding the texts of the Holy Quran and Sunnah is the object of much contemporary research. Today, religious scholars, literary scholars, and educators use various methods to find new interpretations of sacred texts. Among the research methods used are both classical general-scientific and modern, in particular empirical methods. For example, researchers S. Ghazipour et al. (2021) are convinced that all the existing interpretations of the Quran are incorrect. He suggests applying a comprehensive method to the interpretation of sacred texts, the essence of which consists in gathering all the existing interpretations and analyzing them together. In this way, we arrive at a mutual understanding. The second trend, the person who will be brought into the process of in-depth analysis must be fluent in Arabic and knowledgeable in Arabic literature, as well as be free from all beliefs and knowledge of other religions. It is worth saying that such a view of the category of understanding the Quran can be considered quite utopian. The problem is that any person who is formed in the context of a particular society, particularly a Muslim one, will already have some sort of beliefs planted by a subjective or collective mind. Man cannot function outside social space. The second trend, a general analysis of the already existing interpretations of the Quran does not suggest that the outcome is true since there is no reliable evidence that all previous versions are correct. Based on the results obtained during the study, it can be stated that true variants of understanding of the Quran can only be obtained from the analysis of the source, rather than its interpretations, using linguistic or semiotic methods.

Scientists K. Karman et al. (2021) suggested looking for alternative methods and approaches to the understanding of the Holy Quran. In particular, the introduction of such innovative methods should be at the level of education and familiarity of representatives of the Muslim socio-cultural space with the sacred texts of Islam. The researchers considered the integrated emancipatory teaching of the interpretation of the Quran and the Sunna. That is about a liberated understanding of the Holy Quran. There are similarities with the views of the author A.H. Bahri (2022), who considered it important to integrate Western European educational methodologies to popularise the thoughts of Islam. It is worth noting that the scientific development also raised questions about the relationship between the Western European and Muslim contexts in the question of applying a semiotic approach to the interpretation of the Quran. However, in such a discourse there is always the risk of losing a certain national identity since the Quran is not just a religious text, but also a source of norms and rules of social behavior. Returning to the views of K. Karman et al. (2021), the authors propose to implement



an emancipatory interpretation of the Quran based on the objectives, process definition, and selection of scholarly materials.

It is interesting to compare the results of the study with the findings of N.Z.N. Zainol et al. (2018). In work, the scholars refer to the application of the method of hermeneutics for the interpretation of the holy texts of the Quran. Hermeneutics is understood as a scientific branch that aims to define and explain literary texts, such as artistic, historical, philosophical, religious, and so on (Beskemer et al., 2021). Thus, using the method of hermeneutics in the analysis of the Quran involves literary criticism, historical analysis, and semiotic study of the sacred text. This study has a close connection to the findings of the scholarly design, as hermeneutics is interlinked with semiotics. However, the researchers come to specific conclusions. The scholars believe that the application of the method of hermeneutics in the search for variants of understanding the Quran is a humiliation of the sacred text. This is because the Holy Quran is equated with other works of fiction, which are investigated using a hermeneutic approach. Based on the logic of the author's thinking, it can be argued that the application of the semiotic approach in the interpretations of the Quran is also inappropriate. Moreover, to understand the semantic content of the Holy Quran, many different methods are used in academic circles, which, accordingly, can potentially be used to work with other texts of different natures. The question then arises: "Isn't the use of other scientific methods also a disparagement of the Quran's value narrative?"

A related topic to this study can be found in the works of N.H. Mohammad (2021). The author insists on explaining the texts of the Holy Quran with the help of the Sunnah texts. This approach is very appropriate because, as mentioned in the previous section, there are ayahs in the classification of the ayahs that need additional interpretation. In addition, the Sunnah is a model of the life of the Prophet Muhammad, who, in turn, drew on the precepts of Allah. In other words, the actions and words of the Prophet can reveal the true meanings of the Holy Quran. A new perspective on the semantic approach to understanding the texts of the Holy Quran and Sunnah is inherent in S. Muhyidin (2022) and D.I.A. Putra (2021).

First of all, it is worth beginning with the developments of S. Muhyidin (2022). The scholar's work is based on empirical research, particularly using the phenomenological method. After interviewing a certain number of scholars, the researcher concluded that in the modern XXI century, the Holy Quran should be interpreted with the help of innovative technologies. That is, the modern interpretation of the sacred text is based on the use of virtual data. However, some difficulties arose in the course of implementing this idea. Firstly, understanding Arabic as a foreign language. The point is that the narratives of Muslim socio-cultural space can be properly understood by someone who thinks in the same categories and speaks the same language, which contributes to a certain type of thinking. It is very difficult to introduce such an understanding into virtual space. Secondly, there is the problem of creating a technological program that would be capable of interpreting the religious text. In addition, the author suggests moving from printing the Quran in paper form to its digitalization. This will make it available to more people and meet the standards of the modern world.

Similar thinking to the previous one is to be found in the scientific developments of D.I.A. Putra (2021). The author proposes to explain the Holy Quran with the help of artificial intelligence. In this way, scientists will be able to avoid subjectivity, and bias during the interpretation of the sacred meanings. This research is very promising, but it is difficult to foresee how the direct speakers of the Muslim religion would react to such an interpretation of the Quran. From an analysis of previous related scholarly work, there is a possibility that the use of artificial intelligence does not fit within the principles of Islam. The second trend, raises the problem of different thinking, understanding the specificity of Arabic language, pronunciation, and spelling of semantic narratives (Ryskulova et al., 2022; Bazaluk & Nezhyva, 2016). All these aspects need further research and explanation.

Thus, the discussion identified both related and distinct research methods and themes with the scientific development undertaken. In particular, general scientific foundations were found in the use of methods of semiotics, hermeneutics, linguistic analysis as well and integrated scientific review. In



addition, prospective vectors of the described research, their problematic fields, and issues that need further elaboration were analyzed. The comparative analysis of the results helped to identify common trends in scientific research into the understanding of the texts of the Holy Quran and Sunnah, as well as the formation of subsequent topics for scientific activity in the direction of religious and cultural studies.

Conclusions

Thus, a comprehensive study of the interpretations of the Holy Quran and Sunnah in the context of linguistic and semiotic approaches examined the socio-cultural context of the contemporary Muslim world. The key trends in the study of the relationship between Islam and Western European influence were identified.

The article delves into the application of the semantic approach in contemporary interpretations of the Holy Quran, shedding light on the unique characteristics of this sacred text. It particularly focuses on analyzing the interplay between direct and figurative meanings of words within the Quranic context. Furthermore, it introduces two distinct methods for context-semantic analysis of the Holy Quran and Sunnah. The study also delves into the linguistic features of the Arabic language and their profound influence on how sacred religious texts are comprehended. By scrutinizing the structure of the Holy Quran through the analysis of its ayahs (verses), the article offers insights into the linguistic approach employed in parsing these verses, illustrating this with specific examples.

One of the intriguing aspects explored in the article is the application of the semiotic approach to interpreting the texts of the Holy Quran. This approach involves understanding the word as a symbol and the sacred text as a semiotic system. Additionally, the article conducts a comparative analysis of previous studies, highlighting predominant methods for interpreting the Holy Quran and Sunnah. These methods include the complex method, hermeneutics, phenomenology, the method of integrated emancipatory understanding, and innovative techniques employing artificial intelligence. Furthermore, the article underscores the importance of digitizing religious works to adapt them to the modern context of information perception, aligning them with contemporary modes of communication and understanding.

Thus, it has been determined that the problem of understanding the texts of the Holy Quran and Sunnah has an extremely promising field of research. This is due to the emergence of new categories of study in the process of analytical work, as well as the presence of some disagreement between the immediate value narratives of Muslim society and the methods of scientific research. Therefore, the main task for future developments in the chosen topic of research is to form a methodological instruction of practical recommendations for interpreting the texts of the Holy Quran and the Sunnah, taking into account the socio-cultural characteristics of the Arab world and, in particular, the language, the uniqueness of the categorical thinking of representatives of Islam, as well as the field of values inherent in Islam as a world religion.

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