

# Hyperboles in the Qur'ān: What Affects the Meaning of these Morpho-Lexical Forms?

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## *1. Introduction*

### *Definition of Hyperbole*

The term hyperbole is derived from the Greek word for ‘exceed’. This rhetorical device emphasizes a point through exaggerated or overstated language, which is not meant to be taken literally but rather to convey emotional or social truths<sup>1</sup>. Classical rhetoricians concurred that employing such over-the-top exaggerations when describing a situation helps draw attention and reinforce the intended point. Hyperbole is also defined as a way of overstating the truth, by either making something seem bigger or smaller than it is<sup>2</sup>.

Utterances that include hyperboles are not regarded as untrue or as absolute falsehoods since they are rooted in reality. The appropriate response to a hyperbolic statement is to adjust or modify it to align it with the facts, and not completely dismiss it as false. For example, if someone says “I almost starved to death when I stayed at my aunt's house”, the interpretation would be something

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<sup>1</sup> AL-DARRAJI 2023, p. 277-278. Cf. CLARIDGE 2011, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> NIVEEN 2013, p. 182.

like “Your aunt severely restricted your food intake, leaving you quite hungry”. Hyperbolic statements are closely linked to the emotional state, feelings, and attitudes of the speaker. While the literal meaning of their words may be exaggerated, the speaker is still conveying an underlying emotional or social truth<sup>3</sup>.

Vagueness is another key feature of hyperbolic language. Imprecise quantifiers like “loads” or “millions” are employed to amplify an utterance without specifying an exact quantity. This intentional vagueness can be used by speakers to augment the rhetorical impact.

Hyperbole primarily serves two key purposes: emphasizing a point and expressing evaluations. Through extreme descriptions of entities and events, hyperbole can underscore and draw attention to a particular idea or concept<sup>4</sup>.

Al-Mawla (2018) identified three other functions of hyperbole: generating surprise, contrasting differences, and achieving aesthetic effects. The surprise effect stems from the contrast between expected norms and the exaggerated reality presented. Hyperbole can also intensify differences to an extreme degree, by rendering the contrasts more salient. Hyperbole can serve an aesthetic function by expressing the intended message in a more vivid, engaging, and memorable fashion<sup>5</sup>.

Hyperbolic expressions can manifest in diverse ways, such as similes (“He is as skinny as a toothpick”), claims of superiority (“Whiter than snow”), or statements of impossibility (“That joke is so old, the last time I heard it, I was riding a dinosaur”). Hyperbole can be conveyed through various lexical devices including nouns, adjectives and clauses. Nouns often express quantities, such as “ages,” “loads,” and “miles,” as in the example “He saw his childhood friend ages later.” Adjectives are often overused in hyperbolic expressions, such as “She checked her watch for the umpteenth time.” Adverbs can also intensify hyperbolic meaning, as in “The weather was so hot that literally everything was on fire.” Verbs are less common, but some hyperbolic verbs including “hate,” “kill,” and “love,” can be used in this way, such as in the example “Their boy was dying to get a new bag<sup>6</sup>.”

Clausal hyperbole refers to the combination of two or more clausal constituents, such as in “Nobody ever learns anything.” Numerical hyperbole is expressed by single-word classes, such as “thousands,” “millions,” and “hundreds,” and their singular forms, as in “I told him to clean his room a million times<sup>7</sup>!”

The choice of the appropriate hyperbolic expression is affected by semantic, pragmatic and argumentative considerations. Semantically, hyperboles are grounded in the linguistic structure of the words and phrases used, although the meanings and connotations of the words themselves create a scale or spectrum. For example, words like “cold”, “freezing”, “glacial” form a semantic continuum of temperature. Pragmatically, hyperboles are shaped by speakers' assumptions and expectations about the world. Argumentatively, hyperboles use different claims to support the same conclusion. The strength or intensity of the argument can also lie on a continuum. For example,

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<sup>3</sup> *Ead.*, p. 183-184. Cf. AL-DARRAJI 2023, p. 277-278.

<sup>4</sup> AL-DARRAJI 2023, p. 277-278.

<sup>5</sup> Al-Darraji refers to AL-MAWLA 2018, p. 11-13.

<sup>6</sup> AL-DARRAJI 2023, p. 278 refers to BESANÇON SPENCER 1998, p. 191-192.

<sup>7</sup> AL-DARRAJI 2023, p. 277-278. Cf. CLARIDGE 2011, p. 46-68.

saying “it's freezing” is a more compelling argument for putting on warm clothes than simply saying “it's cold”<sup>8</sup>.

### *Hyperbole in Arabic*

The Arabic word for “hyperbole” is *mubālaḡa* and is derived from the verb *balāḡa* which means “to reach” in general. One illustrative example of the occurrence of the verb *balāḡa* “to reach” in the Qur'ān is *fa-`idā balāḡna `aḡalahunna* “when they have reached the end of their husbands' post-death waiting period (...)”. By extension, the root *blḡ*, takes on the meaning of “acquiring or performing an act to its extreme extent”.

In Arabic grammatical exegesis, hyperbolic forms are usually discussed in sections dealing with the active participle, or more precisely, under the heading of the grammatical influence of the hyperbolic form on sentence components (see below). Hyperbole is thus said to refer to the intensification of meaning which is typically achieved by exaggerating the meaning of the active participle. Hyperbole is formed from the verb, but is a derivative of the active participle (*ism al-fā`il*)<sup>9</sup>. al-Zarkašī noted that when a word with a particular morphological structure is recast in a different, more complex structure, it conveys more meaning than it did in its original form. This is because words are signifiers; i.e., they represent and convey meaning. When words are modified or enhanced, their underlying meanings are also expanded or amplified<sup>10</sup>.

The major hyperbolic forms in Arabic are *fa`āl*, *fa`ūl*, *fa`īl*, and *mif`āl*. These forms are used to express an exaggerated degree of action or quality. To understand their grammatical behavior, it is useful to first examine how they function in relation to other common grammatical structures in Arabic.

As shown above, hyperbolic forms share certain similarities with the active participle (*ism al-fā`il*), such as *kātib* (“writer”). Both the hyperbolic form and the active participle govern the noun that follows them; i.e., they determine the case of that noun. This is often indicated by saying they “perform the function of an active participle” (*ya`malu `amala ism al-fā`il*). Syntactically, in Arabic, hyperbolic forms can affect the position and case of the noun that follows. For example, in the sentence *`ammā l-`asla fa-`anā šarrābun* (“as for the honey, I drink it a lot”), the hyperbolic form *šarrāb* causes the noun *al-`asl* (“honey”) to take the accusative case, making it *al-`asla* instead of its nominative form *al-`aslu*. This shift in case highlights the grammatical impact of hyperbolic forms on the structure of a sentence<sup>11</sup>.

Note that Arabic has a flexible word order, which allows for elements like the hyperbolic form to be positioned in different locations in a sentence. Arabic nouns take different case endings depending on their syntactic role, with the accusative case typically marking the direct object of a verb. In the example above, *šarrāb* acts in a way similar to a verb, by requiring the noun *al-`asla*

<sup>8</sup> CLARIDGE 2011, p. 7-10.

<sup>9</sup> SĪBWAYHI 1999, vol. 1, p. 164-166. Cf. IBN `AQĪL 1992, p. 356-357; IBN YA`TŠ 2001, vol. 1, p. 86-89; AL-`AŠMŪNĪ 1955, vol. 1, p. 342.

<sup>10</sup> STEWART 2013, p. 33-36 refers to AL-ZARKAŠĪ *s.d.*, vol. 3, p. 34-6. He is mentioned in another article by Stewart on pages 37 and 47. See STEWART 2009, p. 1-56.

<sup>11</sup> SĪBWAYHI 1999, vol. 1, p. 164-166. Cf. IBN `AQĪL 1992, p. 356-357; AL-`AŠMŪNĪ 1955, vol. 1, p. 342; IBN YA`TŠ 2001, vol. 1, p. 86-89.

to be in the accusative form because it is the object of drinking. Thus, hyperbolic forms in Arabic not only convey an intensified meaning but also influence the sentence structure by dictating the case of the noun they modify. This interaction between hyperbolic forms and the nouns they govern is key to understanding their grammatical behavior in Arabic sentences.

Arabic rhetoricians had different views concerning hyperbole (*al-mubālaḡa*). Some maintained that hyperbolic forms reflect a failure to express a meaning otherwise. Others considered these forms to be innovations. Still others argued that hyperboles should simply be accepted as is, because they represent reality. Al-Sakkākī (d. 1229) argued that semantically accepted exaggerations are one of the most important rhetorical devices in Arabic. Al-Qazwīnī (d. 1283), a follower of al-Sakkākī, remarked that speakers and listeners can evaluate the extent of exaggeration based on the circumstances in which they are uttered<sup>12</sup>.

In his seminal book *The Complete [guide to] Language and Literature*, Al-Mubarrad defined four categories of similes: hyperbolic similes, exact similes, approximate similes and far similes. He gives the example of characterizing a generous person as “a sea” in reference to the sea’s limitless waves, the vast number of creatures in it, etc<sup>13</sup>. Hyperbolic simile works in the same way when a brave man is likened to a lion. Al-‘Askarī (d. 1005) suggested that semantically, hyperbolic forms depict the maximal rather than the minimal manifestation of an act<sup>14</sup>.

### ***Problems, Aim and Methodology***

*al-mubālaḡa* “Hyperbole” has a long history in rhetoric and grammar. Definitions usually refer to the forms (*ṣiyaḡ al-mubālaḡa*) and the notions of excess and exaggeration. Studies on hyperbole in Arabic, both generally and specifically in the Qur’ān, deal mainly with the forms and their translation, yet much regarding the use of hyperbolic forms in the Qur’ān remains unexplored. Three key issues are outlined below.

1. The semantic indication of hyperbolic forms: While both traditional grammarians and modern scholars have noted that hyperbole usually indicates exaggeration (*mubālaḡa*) or multiplicity (*takṭīr*), it is not clear what exactly is meant by these indications. If we consider a simple example such as *ṣadiḡuka qawwālu l-kaḡaba*, should it be translated as “Your friend speaks words of falsehood”, “Your friend lies frequently” or “Your friend is a complete liar”, or even “Your friend is an awful liar”? Another example is the Qur’ānic verse *yā-‘ayyuhā llaḡīna ‘āmanū kūnū qawwāmīna li-llāhi* (Q 5:8). Abdel Haleem translated the verse as “You who believe, be steadfast in your devotion to God”<sup>15</sup>. However, it is also possible to render *qawwāmīna* as “(be) totally/absolutely steadfast (in your devotion to God)”, “always (be) steadfast (in your devotion to God)”, or “(be) the most loyal/perfect (in your devotion to God)”. The actual meaning of the hyperbolic form remains unclear especially in the absence of context or textual clues such as in the expressions mentioned by Cano (2009), who examined expressions that indicate exaggeration and suggested dividing hyperboles into evaluative and quantitative forms.

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<sup>12</sup> NAJJAR, KADHIM and AL-HEEH 2021, p. 152-153.

<sup>13</sup> AL-MUBARRAD 1997, vol. 2, p. 101.

<sup>14</sup> AL-‘ASKARĪ 2008, p. 287.

<sup>15</sup> ABDEL HALEEM 2005, p. 68.

The evaluative dimension includes (a) Positive evaluations that express approval or admiration by using words related to life, perfection, and beauty, such as vital, paradise, ideal, excellent, great, wonderful, lovely, gorgeous, precious, brilliant, (b) Negative evaluations that convey disapproval or criticism by using words and expressions such as chaos, violence, sorrow, and loss of control, including mess, mess up, worst, wicked, relentless, obnoxious, horrible, terribly, terrible, and awful (lot of), disaster, a recipe for disaster, disgrace, devastated, ruin, blasting away, thrown on the scrap heap, pathetic, sickening, starve, starving, freezing, can't breathe, gets on your nerves and get out of my head, (c) Impact/singularity, that expresses noteworthiness or astonishment, which can have either positive or negative connotations. Examples include amazed, astonished, shocked, shocked, thrilled, unbelievable, couldn't believe, extraordinary, another world, impressive.

The quantitative dimension includes two semantic subfields: (a) words such as completely, absolute, absolutely, total, totally, entirely, full, fully, whole, sheer, pure, (b) expressions of magnitude such as numerical expressions and standardized units of measurement covering time, length, and other numerical concepts, such as ten times, a second, a minute, ten minutes, an hour, ages, ages and ages and ages. a load, loads of, a pile of, compost heap and lots<sup>16</sup>.

2. There are many cases of counterpart forms in the Qur'ān; for example, active participles and hyperbolic forms derived from the same root or two hyperbolic forms derived from the same root. Even in these cases, it is very difficult to explain the differences between forms and determine the exact meaning. For example, *'inna rabbanā la-ġafūrun šakūrun* (Q 35:34) "Our Lord is truly most forgiving, most appreciative" vs. *wa-kāna llāhu šākiran 'alīman* "God always rewards gratitude and He knows everything" (Q 4:147)<sup>17</sup>. Although there is a difference in the translation, the distinction between the two forms is still unclear. According to al-Ṭabarī in both cases, God thanks the believers for their obedience (*šakūrun lahum 'alā ṭā'atihim 'iyyāhu* vs. *šākiran...lakum wa-li-'ibādihī 'alā ṭā'atihim 'iyyāhu*)<sup>18</sup>.

3. The use of hyperbole is also related to rhyming, as Stewart (2013) pointed out when discussing *al-asmā' al-ḥusnā* ('the very beautiful names') which is constructed primarily as *mubālaġa* forms. The epithets applied to God in the Qur'ān have long played important liturgical and theological functions. It is clear that *al-asmā' al-ḥusnā* are not actually names, but rather adjectives applied to God, except for al-Raḥmān ('the Beneficent'), which appears in the Qur'ān as a proper name for the divinity. The divine epithets found in the Qur'ān frequently appear in contexts of prayer, usually in pairs of rhyming positions at the end of verses. Western scholars of the Qur'ān consider these divine epithets to be a distinct feature of the text. Bell referred to them as a type of "rhyme-phrase", and Robinson called them "refrains which mention the divine names". Mukhtār's study focuses for example not only on the semantics and theological aspects of these epithets but also on their linguistic and stylistic usage in the Qur'ān, including the roles they play with regard to rhyme and rhythm<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> CANO MORA 2009, p. 29-30.

<sup>17</sup> The translations of the Qur'ānic verses are taken from ABDEL HALEEM 2005.

<sup>18</sup> AL-ṬABARĪ 1995, vol. 4, p. 457 and vol. 12, p. 167.

<sup>19</sup> STEWART 2013, p. 33-36. Stewart refers to RICHARD 1953, p. 69-70; ROBINSON 1996, p. 198-201; MUKHTĀR 1997, p. 132.

An analysis shows that the morphological patterns *fa'ūl* and *fa'ūl* statistically dominate the divine epithets in the Qur'ān. This may be due to metric considerations, as evidenced by the relative rarity of forms like *qādir*, which appears only once in a rhyming position, while the more common *qadīr* appears frequently. A similar pattern is seen with *šākir* and *šakūr*<sup>20</sup>.

Thus, the use of hyperbolic forms is related to rhyming constraints and not necessarily to their meaning. There are various cases in the Qur'ān where the difference between forms is not clear, for example *'inna hādā la-šay'un aġībun* “Are you astonished at what God ordains?” (Q 11:72) vs. *'inna hādā la-šay'un uġābun* “What an astonishing thing [to claim]!” (Q 38:5). The difference between *aġībun* and *uġābun* is hard to grasp and the most plausible explanation is that the form was chosen because it rhymed.

## Aim

The primary aim of this study was to investigate the meanings of hyperbolic forms in the Qur'ān and identify the linguistic and contextual factors that influence their interpretation.

## Methods

The following methodology was implemented

**Step 1 Data Collection:** All hyperbolic forms in the Qur'ān were collected using works such as Rašid Šālih's Ph.D. thesis (2005). We analyzed 65 forms.

**Step 2 Classification:** The collected forms were then categorized into three groups:

(1) forms without counterparts, e.g., *faḥūr* (Q 31:18) and *hallāf* (Q 68:11). No forms in active participle were found.

(2) forms with counterparts but different meanings; e.g., *sammā'ūna li-l-kaḏibi 'akkālūna li-s-suḥti* “(They are) listeners to (any) lie, and devour the unlawful” (Q 5:42) vs. *la-'ākilūna min šaġarin min zaqqūmin* “You indeed shall eat of the tree of Zaqqum” (Q 56:52). The hyperbolic form *'akkālūna* is considered to have a metaphorical meaning when it describes people who eagerly engage in or benefit from unlawful or unethical activities, particularly those involving financial gain, as opposed to the present participle form *la-'ākilūna* which has the literal meaning of eating. Q 56:52 describes the tree that grows in Hell (Jahannam) and is meant to evoke a sense of the torment that awaits wrongdoers in the hereafter according to Islamic belief.

While the active participle form *'ākilūna* is used to describe actual eating, the hyperbolic form *'akkālūna* is used more figuratively or metaphorically, most likely to emphasize or intensify the action beyond its literal meaning. The choice of grammatical form can significantly impact the interpretation of the form.

(3) forms with counterparts whose meanings are analyzed in order to understand the meaning and use of hyperbolic forms, for example, the case of *šakūr* vs. *šākiran*, mentioned above.

**Step 3 Analysis:** Distinguishing hyperbolic forms from their parallel forms (i.e., active participles), in terms of features such as plurality, focus on roles vs. actions, and syntactic functions.

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<sup>20</sup> STEWART 2013, p. 38-39.

## 2. Why and When are Hyperbolic Forms used in the Qur'ān? An Analysis

### Singular vs. Plural

The following examples show that the hyperbolic forms usually appear in the singular, whereas the plural form characterizes the active participle forms. Out of the 65 hyperbolic forms in the corpus, only 6 nouns were in the plural<sup>21</sup> and one in the dual<sup>22</sup>.

(1a) *'inna llāha lā yuḥibbu kulla ḥawwānin kafūrin* (Q 22:38)

“God does not love the unfaithful or the ungrateful”

(1b) *'inna llāha lā yuḥibbu l-ḥā'inīna* (Q 8:58)

“God does not love the treacherous”

(2a) *'inna fī dālika la-'āyātin li-kulli ṣabbārin ṣakūrin* (Q 14:5)

“There truly are signs in this for every steadfast, thankful person”

(2b) *wa-ṣbirū 'inna llāha ma'a ṣ-ṣābirīna* (Q 8:46)

“Be steadfast: God is with the steadfast”

(3a) *rabbu s-samāwāti wa-l-'arḍi wa-mā baynahumā l-'azīzu l-ḡaffāru* (Q 38:66)

“Lord of the heavens and earth and everything between, the Almighty, the Most Forgiving”.

(3b) *fa-ḡfir lanā wa-rḥamnā wa-'anta ḥayru l-ḡāfirīna* (Q 7:155)

“So forgive us and have mercy on us. You are the best of those who forgive”.

The most dominant feature of these forms in the singular and the plural is that they can be regarded as generic nouns, except in cases where the hyperbolic form (in the singular) refers to God. Genericity in language refers to how the speaker expresses general truths or tendencies without referring to specific instances. For example, the statement “Bears eat honey” does not describe a particular event or bear, but rather the general behavior of bears. This sentence suggests that bear honey-eating situations tend to happen repeatedly, without pointing to any specific occurrence. In contrast, non-generic sentences describe particular events. For instance, “This morning, a bear ate some honey” refers to a specific incident involving a particular bear at a defined time. This utterance refers to an individual episode rather than general patterns. Genericity has another aspect beyond simply generalizing situations. When saying “Bears eat honey,” the speaker is not only generalizing about honey-eating events but also about bears themselves. The bears in this case are treated as a collective group or class, without referring to specific individual bears. Typically, generic statements like “Bears eat honey” describe a characteristic feature applicable to bears in general, even if not literally every single bear exhibits this trait<sup>23</sup>.

For an object *x* to be generic, it must relate to specific individual *y* through an “instance of” or “exemplar of” relationship. This reference should be unbounded, encompassing both existing and potential instances. For instance, one could point to a nearby animal and say, “This is an

<sup>21</sup> *qawwāmīna* (Q 5:8); *sammā'ūna* (Q 5:41); *sammā'ūna li-l-kaḍibi 'akkālūna* (Q 5:42); *tawwāfūna* (Q 24:58); *an-naḥḥātātī* (Q 113:4);

<sup>22</sup> *naḍḍāḥatāni* (Q 55:66)

<sup>23</sup> CARLSON 2019, p. 232-233.

exemplar/instance of a bear.” An additional intuitive condition is that if  $y$  exemplifies the generic object  $x$ , the phrase used to refer to  $x$  must also be truthfully applied to  $y$ . For example, if  $A$  (e.g., a student) is an exemplar of a smart person, then  $A$  must indeed be smart, not just someone who enjoys surfing but may or may not be intelligent<sup>24</sup>.

The relationship between the collective and the individual may perhaps explain the meaning of the hyperbolic in the singular form; namely, the hyperbolic form in the singular refers to the individual, while the plural form refers to a group despite the fact that there may be people within the group that the attribute does not represent either fully or partially. But before clarifying this argument by referring to an example, the term ‘individual’ should be defined.

Individualism has to do with the idea that people are distinct entities with unique characteristics that set them apart from their social groups. Such individuals typically identify themselves primarily as individuals (using ‘I’) rather than as group members, thus reflecting an independent self-view. They prioritize internal factors like personal goals, values, needs, preferences, rights, and identity. These internal factors guide their behavior and thoughts, and often take precedence over group conformity. Individualists tend to act based on their personal attitudes rather than group norms. They typically maintain an internal locus of control, taking responsibility for their actions and well-being. To achieve their goals, individualists often reject rigid standards and resist social pressure to conform. In contrast, collectivism is a social pattern where individuals are closely integrated into a group. The collective determines the individual's values, behaviors, needs, norms, and identity. Collectivists are more likely to identify themselves as group members and use collective pronouns<sup>25</sup>.

In the Qur’ān, the use of singular hyperbolic forms appears to emphasize individual responsibility and personal traits, by portraying each person (or the divine entity, like Allāh) as an exemplar of a characteristic. This focus on the individual aligns with the concept of individualism, where a person’s distinct actions or thoughts are highlighted. Conversely, the plural forms emphasize collective behavior, which is often shaped by shared values or norms. In collectivist contexts, the group dynamics are more prominent, and individual actions are interpreted in light of the collective identity.

In example 1a, the singular form *ḥawwān* emphasizes the treacherous behavior of a given individual by stressing this person’s unique betrayal and disobedience of God. The use of the singular form underscores the fact that each instance of treachery is a personal, deliberate act. The individual is seen as independently choosing to defy God's commands, thus highlighting personal accountability. In contrast, example 1b uses the plural form *ḥā’inīn*, referring to treacherous people as a group. This shifts the focus to collective behavior, and suggests that within the group, treachery is a shared characteristic, even though some individuals may exhibit this trait more strongly than others. The plural form generalizes the group's tendency to betray, which may arise from shared social norms rather than isolated individual decisions.

In addition, the difference between the singular and the plural indicates that individuals are responsible for their own behavior. That is, the singular form points to individual behavior that is motivated by a specific situation as well as the cognitive state of the person. The examples above

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 249.

<sup>25</sup> CHENG, RIZKALLAH and NARIZHNAYA 2020, p. 287-288.

(1a-1b) refer to the fact that people know they should believe in God and recognize His power; nevertheless, individuals ultimately act on their own and decide not to believe in God. The group, however, has shared values; sometimes, the group acts according to the general social code and not according to individual opinion. Moreover, people in a group do not always behave the same way, but there is still a generalization within the group.

The same is true for examples 2a and 2b which refer to those who are patient. The prophet Muḥammad stated that *al-ṣabru niṣfu l-’īmāni* “Patience is half of faith” and as written in Q 16:96 whoever is patient, endures, and realizes that this world is temporary and the hereafter is the eternal abode, will attain the reward; namely, entering Paradise without reckoning.<sup>26</sup> Patience is one of the characteristics of true believers and one of the most important Islamic virtues. Patience is one of the fundamental qualities that people must possess in order to complete their path in life. Patience is like the head of the body for those who are patient<sup>27</sup>.

Patience is divided into three types, as the prophet Muḥammad said: (1) *ṣabr ’inda al-muṣība* “patience in times of calamity”. This means that a person must be patient when faced with problems or the loss of a loved one, and in times of adversity and hardship; (2) *ṣabr ’inda t-tā’a* “patience in obedience”. This means that the believer must be patient when performing religious obligations such as fasting, prayer, pilgrimage, giving alms, and others. Fasting involves patience in enduring hunger and thirst and avoiding what Allah forbids. In prayer, worshippers must be patient in maintaining focus on their heart during bowing and prostration to prevent distraction; (3) *ṣabr ’ani l-ma ’siya* “patience against disobedience”. People must not commit forbidden acts. Believers must be patient when Satan whispers to them, and should remain patient until the temptation passes and the urge to sin disappears<sup>28</sup>.

The concept of *ṣabr* is very important in the Islamic faith. When referring to the individual, namely the one who has patience, the focus of the singular form is on the individual (*kulli ṣabbārīn*) and that person’s personal traits, experiences, and actions. It refers to the person’s own steadfastness in coping with difficulties or hardships, own persistence in doing good deeds and following Allah’s commands and control of the emotions, particularly anger or despair, and above all faith that God’s plan will unfold in due time.

The plural form (*aṣ-ṣābirīna*) focuses on the group and the collective dynamics, shared characteristics, and interactions. It indicates that the choice or the behaviors is a collaborative decision, and that the group acts in this way to achieve a shared goal. Thus, while *kulli ṣabbārīn* may indicate that the actions are driven by personal motivations, the plural form *aṣ-ṣābirīna* indicates that the behaviors are influenced by social norms and group dynamics.

Examples 3a and 3b strengthen the argument that the singular form emphasizes the individual. There are multiple divine figures as well as people who can forgive (i.e., *al-ḡāfirīn*), but only one individual entity can really forgive people for their actions and that is God, who is referred to by the hyperbolic form *al-ḡaffār* “the Most Forgiving”.

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<sup>26</sup> DĪBĀN 2023, p. 356.

<sup>27</sup> AL-ĠĪLĀNĪ 2013, p. 195-196; DĪBĀN ‘ABBĀS 2023, p. 348-349, 357-361; AL-ZŪMĪ 2018, p. 1770; AL-DŪRĪ 2010, p. 6.

<sup>28</sup> DĪBĀN 2023, p. 357-358. Cf. AL-ZŪMĪ 2018, p. 1770; AL-DŪRĪ 2010, p. 6.

Thus individualism helps explain the use of such hyperboles in the following cases:

- a) Personal responsibility: The use of strong terms like *ḥawwān* “treacherous” or “betrayers” emphasizes individual accountability. By using hyperbolic forms, the Qur’ān underscores that each person is responsible for their own actions and will be judged accordingly.
- b) Situational and Cognitive Factors: The singular form points to individual behavior motivated by specific situations and the cognitive state of the person. This focus on individual decision-making processes aligns with individualistic perspectives.
- c) Identity formation: Hyperboles help to create a clear distinction between believers and non-believers, thus fostering a sense of individual identity within the larger community of faith.
- d) Personal relationship with God: The use of intense language can foster a sense of a direct, personal relationship between the individual and God, by emphasizing the importance of individual faith and actions.
- e) Divine Attributes: In examples referring to divine attributes (such as *al-ḡaffār* “the Most Forgiving”), the use of singular hyperbolic forms emphasizes the unique, individual nature of God's qualities, thus further reinforcing the idea of individual distinctiveness.

### ***Activity vs. Practice***

Hyperbolic forms do not necessarily indicate a multiplicity of actions or that an action is done frequently or intensely. For example, it would be wrong to suggest that the word *fallāḥ* “farmer” “peasant” is in the hyperbolic form because farmers engage intensively in agriculture. Although a *mu’allim* “teacher” works hard, the word does not appear in the hyperbolic form. This section compares the hyperbolic form with its counterpart to better understand when hyperbolic forms are used in the Qur’ān to indicate a profession, identity, a role/divine role including all the characteristics of this profession/role, whereas the counterpart forms (i.e., active participles) indicate the actions they perform.

(4a) *’inna rabbaka huwa l-ḥallāqu l-’alīmu* (Q 15:86)

“Your Lord is the All-Knowing Creator”.

God states in Q 15:85 that He did not create the heavens and the earth and what is between them except with truth. He also declares that the Hour (of resurrection) is surely coming. Q 15: 86 states that He is the Creator, the All-Knowing. In Surah 85, one specific action that occurred in the past is mentioned, which is the creation of the heavens and the earth (*wa-mā ḥalaqnā s-samāwāti wa-l-’arḍa*). If so, why does the following sentence (verse 86) again mention that Allah is the Creator? Before discussing this point, a comment on the translation of *ḥallāq* is in order. This word is usually translated as “creator”, whereas Abdel-Haleem adds the prefix all- to capture the omnipotence of the divine name. In so doing, he loses the repetitive quality. A better translation would be the “All Creating”. The same problem recurs in the case of translating divine attributes. The suffix -or only denotes agency, while super-ability, repetition and abundance are lost<sup>29</sup>. Thus below, we translated *ḥallāq* as “creator” because this form has nothing to do with repetition or abundance, but rather with the divine role of God. Although it may appear unusual to refer to God's attributes as roles,

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<sup>29</sup> EL-ZAWAWY 2014, p. 211-239.

the term *ḥallāq* serves more as a descriptor of a comprehensive divine function rather than a profession or frequent activity.

Though the Qur'ān stresses the idea that God is the only *ḥallāq* and it is impossible to speak of a “self-disciplined group of creators”, the word *ḥallāq* like any other role entails expertise, special knowledge, skills, ethical obligations, etc. This is what gives *ḥallāq* its intensified meaning. God as a creator has the ability and skills to create, He knows what He should create and how to create, He considers the benefits of creating things and whether they contribute or harm people. The commentators on the Qur'ān explain this by saying that the hyperbolic form *ḥallāq* suggests the abundance of what He created, or the Creator of Whom He wants to be miserable or happy in life. It also suggests that He created You (when addressing the prophet) and is the creator of all other creatures<sup>30</sup>.

The active participle *ḥāliq*, however focuses on the action, and can be translated as “God who creates” or “God is creating”<sup>31</sup>, as shown in the following example:

(4b) *quli llāhu ḥāliqu kulli šay'in wa-huwa l-wāḥidu l-qahhāru* (Q 13:16)

“Say: God is the Creator of all things: He is the One, the All Compelling”.

Q 13:16 is part of a group of verses beginning with Q 13:1 that describe God's power. Verse 16 is formulated as questions directed at the Prophet Muḥammad, with God providing him the answers so Muḥammad will be able to respond to the polytheists. God says “Who is the Lord of the heavens and the earth? Say: Allah. (Then) say: Why is it that you have taken guardians other than Him who own no profit and loss for themselves? Say: Are the blind and the eyed equal? Or are the darknesses and light identical? Or have they set up partners for Allah who have created (something) like His creation, so that creation is all alike to them? Say: Allah is who creates everything, and He is the One, the All-Dominant.”

al-Ṭabarī interprets *al-ḥāliq* as “Allah creates (i.e., the polytheists) and he creates your idols and he creates everything, therefore He cannot grasp the reason for their associating with idols which do not create and do not harm<sup>32</sup>. Hence, the active participle is used to refer to specific actions rather than describing God as the creator. Active participles are regarded a nominalized form and unlike verbs can refer to various tenses concurrently in that they can refer to the past as epithets or states, the future as a progression or continuity, etc<sup>33</sup>.

The active participle in Arabic is described as a noun or derived noun that expresses an action and identifies the agent of this action. It is also characterized as a noun stemming from the verbal noun of the active verb, indicating the person carrying out the action and suggesting both renewal and occurrence. The active participle often serves a similar function to the English present active participle ending -ing, acting as a verbal adjective that conveys ongoing or continuous action<sup>34</sup>.

<sup>30</sup> See 'ABŪ ḤAYYĀN 1999, vol. 14, p. 78.

<sup>31</sup> Note that Abdel Haleem for example translates *ḥāliq* as “creator”: “Say: God is the Creator of all things: He is the One, the All Compelling”.

<sup>32</sup> AL-ṬABARĪ 1995, vol. 8, p. 175.

<sup>33</sup> DROR and BADER EDDIN 2022, p. 652-674.

<sup>34</sup> NAJJAR, KAIS and AL-HEEH 2021, p. 153-154. Najjar, Kais and Al-Heeh rely on the following sources: HASSAN 1980, p. 238; AL-HĀSĪMĪ 2000, p. 310; THACKSTON 1984, p. 41-42.

Thus, the active participle is used to focus on the action where it conveys a sense of ongoing or habitual action. This might explain other cases in which the active participle is used and not the hyperbolic form *ġaffār* as in example 3a, such as:

(5) *ġāfirī d-danbi wa-qābili t-tawbi šadīdi l-‘iqābi dī t-tawli* (Q 40:3)

“[God the Almighty, the All Knowing] Forgiver of sins and Acceptor of repentance, severe in punishment, infinite in bounty”.

In example 3a *al-ġaffār* is translated as “the Most Forgiving”, where the hyperbolic form can be explained as referring to God’s divine role; namely, it implies that God knows which sin the people have committed and has the power and willingness to pardon or absolve humans of their wrongdoings or transgressions against divine law. It also emphasizes God’s merciful nature, suggesting that despite human failings, God offers the possibility of redemption. The active participle form, however, conveys the action, namely that God’s forgiveness is universal, and extends to all people. The act of forgiveness is ongoing and repetitive and forgiveness occurs in real-time, coinciding with the moment a sin is committed.

The next two examples are also interesting:

(6a) *qāla li-l-mala’i ḥawlahu ‘inna hādā la-sāḥirun ‘alīm* (Q 26:34)

“[He said to the chiefs around him, “This is indeed a learned sorcerer.”.

(6b) *ya’ tūka bi-kulli saḥḥārin ‘alīmin* (Q 26:37)<sup>35</sup>

“[The messengers will] bring every accomplished sorcerer to you”.

To understand the difference between *saḥḥār* and *sāḥir* the context must be considered. Q 26:32-33 describes an instance when Moses threw down the staff that he had in his hand and it changed into a serpent. Then he drew out his hand and it was radiant white to the beholders. In response, (Pharaoh) said to the chiefs around him that Moses is a skilled sorcerer (*hādā la-sāḥirun ‘alīmun*). Then, to mobilize the audience against Moses, Pharaoh continued by saying: “Who intends to drive you out of your land with his sorcery, what do you command?”. His companions suggested that in order to stall Moses and his brother, he should send heralds to the cities to bring all the skillful sorcerers to Pharaoh (*ya’ tūka bi-kulli saḥḥārin ‘alīmin*). In fact, in Q 26:38 it is stated that the sorcerers were assembled on a particular day at a set time (*fa-ġumi’a s-saḥaratu li-mīqāti yawmin ma’ lūmin*). In Q 26:32-38 there is a transition between the active participle (*sāḥir*), the hyperbolic form (*saḥḥār*) and the plural form (*saḥāra*).

The transition between these forms can be explained as follows. The act of sorcery performed by Moses is described, so Pharaoh refers to him as the one who performs magic, focusing on the action itself, and therefore uses the active participle form (*sāḥir*). In contrast, when his people tell him that they will gather all the sorcerers, they use the hyperbolic form (*saḥḥār*) referring to their role. Sorcerers are associated with acquired magic, often through study and practice, they have the power to use magic or supernatural abilities, typically to influence or control natural forces or they have supposed magical powers to influence events or predict the future. They possess the knowledge and ability and can advise others on how to act, as in the case of Pharaoh. Finally, there

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<sup>35</sup> In Q 7:112 the active participle is used *ya’ tūka bi-kulli sāḥirin* though there is an additional reading which is *saḥḥār*. See for example al-Zamaḥṣārī who further explains that *saḥḥār* means that Pharaoh’s companions will bring him every magician equal to him in knowledge and skill, or better. See AL-ZAMAḤṢARĪ 1998, vol. 2, p. 139.

is use of a regular plural form (*saḥara*), but not the plural form of the hyperbolic (*saḥḥārūn*), so the regular plural form can be interpreted in its basic meaning; namely the sorcerers arrived, with no intention to focus on the action or the profession/role itself.

The commentators explain the use of the hyperbolic form by saying that Pharaoh's comments contradict his statement (*hādā la-sāḥirun 'alīmun* "This is [a man who] performs magic") by saying that every expert magician will be brought to him. Thus, they use a comprehensive word and an intensified description (*saḥḥār*) to humble his spirit and calm some of his anxiety<sup>36</sup>. In other words, they are seemingly saying to Pharaoh, 'don't worry, we will not bring you every simple sorcerer but rather the most expert'.

The following two examples deal with the role of the Prophet Muḥammad as a warner. In this initial phase, namely in his early messages in Mecca, Muḥammad's primary duty was to deliver God's warnings. He was commanded to "admonish" (*ḍakkara*, e.g. Q 6:70; 14:5; 50:45) and to "warn" (*'anḍara*, e.g. Q 6:51; 42:7; 46:12) his audience and to "give glad tidings" (*baššara*, e.g. Q19:97; 36:11; 45:8). Accordingly, Muḥammad is defined as a warner (*naḍīr* or *munḍir*, e.g. Q 17:105; 25:56; 50:2) and as a "bearer of eschatological tidings" (*bašīr* or *mubaššir*, see Q 11:2; 17:105). In the later chapters of the Qur'ān revealed in Medina, the idea of Muḥammad as a messenger who warns people continues to be present, although it becomes less prominent. The verb *baššara* has a significant number of Medinan occurrences. Similarly, the Medinan verses continue to designate Muḥammad as the "bearer of eschatological tidings" and a "warner" (e.g. Q 2:119; 5:19)<sup>37</sup>.

The two nouns *naḍīr* and *munḍir* have different indications:

(7a) *qul 'innamā l-'ilmu 'inda llāhi wa-'innamā 'ana naḍīrun mubīnun* (Q 67:26)

"Say: God alone has knowledge of this: my only duty is to give clear warning".

In Q 67:23-26 God commands Muḥammad how to respond to the disbelievers. In verse 23 God commands Muḥammad to say that He (God) has created the people and endowed them with hearing and seeing and hearts, but they show Him little gratitude. In verse 24 Muḥammad is asked to say that it is God Who has created people on the earth and to Him they shall return. In verse 26 people ask Muḥammad when this promise of Resurrection and the other the numerous chastisements will be inflicted in this world; e.g., earthquakes and lightning. Muḥammad is instructed to answer by saying that God alone knows when the Resurrection will take place and that he is just a warner. The noun *naḍīr* "warner" refers to the role of Muḥammad which is warn people about the consequences of their actions and admonish them to cleave to the right path. It also requires Muḥammad to evidence several key traits as a warner. The first is truthfulness, *naḍīr*, which is characterized by honesty and integrity in delivering the divine message. He also must persevere, since he often faces rejection but continues his mission despite adversity. He warns out of concern for people's well-being, not out of desire for punishment. He strives to convey the message clearly and comprehensibly and he sets an example for the people.

The next example, however, forefronts the action of warning:

<sup>36</sup> See for example AL-ZAMAḤṢARĪ 1998, vol. 3, p. 811.

<sup>37</sup> SINAI 2018, p. 5-7.

(7b) *wa-yaqūlu llaḏīna kafarū law-lā 'unzila 'alayhi 'āyatun min rabbīhi 'innamā 'anta mundaḏirun wa-li-kulli qawmin hāḏin* (Q 13:7)

“The disbelievers say: Why has no miracle been sent down to him from his Lord? But you are only there to give warning: [earlier] communities each had their guide”.

In Q 13:7 the disbelievers address Muḥammad and ask him why he has not received a sign from his Lord? God commands him to respond to these requests saying that he (Muḥammad) only warns and guides the people. Hence, the active participle *mundaḏir* indicates the action of warning and can be translated as “you warn”.

Thus overall, the hyperbolic form often indicates a comprehensive role, profession, or identity, and covers all the characteristics associated with it, rather than solely frequency or intensity of action. The activity vs. role/practice has the following features which give hyperbolic forms their meaning:

1. Divine Attributes: For divine attributes like *ḥallāq* (Creator), the hyperbolic form represents a comprehensive divine function rather than a repetitive action. It encompasses the expertise, special knowledge, skills, and ethical obligations associated with the role.

2. Contextual Meaning: The meaning of hyperbolic forms is often determined by context rather than strictly by grammatical form. For example, *sahḥār* (sorcerer) is used to emphasize expertise and comprehensive ability rather than just frequent action.

3. Contrast with Active Participles: Active participles (like *ḥāliq*) focus on specific actions or ongoing processes, while hyperbolic forms (like *ḥallāq*) describe more encompassing roles or identities.

4. Descriptive Power: Hyperbolic forms can convey a more comprehensive description of attributes or capabilities, as seen in the example of God as *al-ḡaffār* (the Most Forgiving), which not only implies the act of forgiveness but also the knowledge, power, and willingness to forgive.

5. Rhetorical Effect: In some cases, like the story of Pharaoh and the sorcerers, the hyperbolic form is used for rhetorical effect to emphasize expertise or to assuage anxiety, rather than to indicate frequent action.

6. Prophet Muhammad's Role: The use of *naḏīr* (warner) for Muhammad emphasizes his overall role and the characteristics associated with it (truthfulness, persistence, concern), rather than just the frequency of his warnings.

### 3. Conclusion

Hyperbole serves as a powerful rhetorical device that emphasizes points through exaggerated language. Unlike literal statements, hyperbole is not meant to be taken at face value; rather, it conveys deeper emotional or social truths. The multiple functions of hyperbole contribute to its versatility in communication. Hyperbole primarily serves to emphasize specific ideas or concepts, by highlighting points through deliberate exaggeration.

In Arabic literature, the study of hyperbole, known as *mubālaḡa*, has a rich history and has attracted significant attention from traditional grammarians and modern scholars. These experts often focus on the themes of excess and exaggeration, with Arabic rhetoricians debating the semantic implications and the critical role hyperbole plays in literary expression. Hyperbolic

expressions in Arabic frequently utilize active participles to intensify meaning. Furthermore, hyperbole is characterized by standardized forms that fall under specific grammatical categories, thus significantly influencing sentence structure. However, the semantic implications of hyperbole can be complex; the precise meaning of hyperbolic expressions is often ambiguous, especially in translations of Qur'ānic verses, where varying interpretations can lead to different understandings.

Here, in an attempt to better capture the precise meaning of hyperbolic forms used in the Qur'ān, we compared them to their equivalent active participle forms. We also considered the context in which these hyperbolic forms occur. The analysis revealed the multifaceted nature of hyperbolic forms in the Qur'ān, thus shedding light on their importance in conveying concepts related to individualism, collectivism, divine attributes, and the roles of individuals and divine entities.

The analysis showed that most of the hyperbolic forms are in the singular and primarily emphasize individual responsibility and personal traits. They portray each person (or divine entity) as an exemplar of a characteristic, which aligns with the concept of individualism. The equivalent active participle forms are usually in the plural and emphasize collective behavior and shared values or norms. They highlight group dynamics and how individual actions are interpreted within the context of a collective identity. We showed that hyperbolic forms in the singular often indicate a comprehensive role, profession, or identity, that encompasses all the associated traits rather than simply frequency or intensity of action. By contrast, active participles focus on specific actions or ongoing processes. Thus, hyperbolic forms are not necessarily related to exaggeration or multiplicity but rather to the attributes or capabilities and responsibility of the individual person and to the unique, individual nature of God's qualities.

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**ABSTRACT**

Hyperboles are exaggerated statements that are not meant to be taken literally, and function as rhetorical devices that serve to reinforce emotional expression, create vivid imagery, and heighten emphasis. Hyperbole in Arabic is characterized by standardized forms such as *fa' 'āl* and *fa' 'ūl*. Although these forms have been studied intensively by rhetoricians, grammarians and modern scholars, the precise meaning of hyperbolic forms is often ambiguous, especially in translations of Qur'ānic verses, where varying interpretations can lead to different understandings.

This article aims to clarify the semantic meaning of hyperbolic forms that occur in the Qur'ān. To capture these semantic nuances we analyzed and compared active participle forms and their equivalent hyperbolic forms. The findings suggest that Qur'ānic hyperbolic forms usually convey concepts related to individualism. Hyperboles in the Qur'ān usually occur in singular forms and primarily emphasize individual responsibility and personal traits. They portray each person (or divine entity) as an exemplar of a characteristic, which aligns with the concept of individualism. The equivalent active participle forms emphasize collective behavior and shared values or norms. The second distinction between hyperbolic forms and active participles is that hyperbolic forms often indicate a comprehensive role, profession, or identity encompassing all its associated traits rather than simply frequency or intensity of action. By contrast, active participles focus on specific actions or ongoing processes.