



An Ethnolinguistic Approach for Criticizing Indonesian Interpretations of the Quran

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Abstract

Understanding the holy texts, such as the Quran, requires interpretation. As a means of communication between readers and texts, interpretation is tied to language and culture. To understand the Indonesian interpretation of the Quran, this paper proposes an ethnolinguistic approach. There are two important questions about the position of this approach in research on the interpretation of the Quran in Indonesia and the appropriate research design for this purpose. By using de-contextualization and re-contextualization techniques in library research and meta-analysis techniques, the author succeeded in formulating an ethnolinguistic approach that offers linguistic analysis of interpretation in its cultural context. This allows us to understand the nuances of meaning and the social implications of interpretation. Ethnolinguistic research can help identify cultural and ideological biases in interpretation that open up new interpretive possibilities. This paper discusses appropriate research designs for applying an ethnolinguistic approach to the interpretation of the Quran in Indonesia. Research designs must consider Indonesia's diverse cultural and linguistic contexts, as well as appropriate data collection and analysis methods. Ethnolinguistic research on the interpretation of the Quran in Indonesia has the potential to make an important contribution to a better understanding of Islam in Indonesia, and its relationship to local culture and language.

Keywords: Ethnolinguistics, Tafsir Al-Quran, Cultural Tafsir, Lay Interpretation

Introduction

The Quran is the holy book of Muslims and serves as a manual for Muslims worldwide. In Indonesia, millions of people study the Quran in various educational institutions, and it has become an essential element of society and culture. Understanding the meaning and lessons in the Quran requires interpretation, a crucial process. Wardani and Mahfuz (2022) successfully gathered several mapping studies and interpretations of the Quran from the 17th century to the

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present, ranging from Abd al-Rauf Singkel (Aceh) *Tafsir Tarjuman al-Mustafid* to Moh. Mufid's thematic tafsir titled "The Quran and Reclamation: Maritime Fiqh Based on Maqasid Syari'ah."

One method that can be applied to the study and interpretation of the Quran in Indonesia is ethnolinguistic research methodologies. When studying the meaning of words, ethnolinguistic techniques are employed as a valuable tool to assist uncover the speakers' worldviews, cultural aspects, or systems. (Engchuan, 2023). Thus, the method focuses on the language and cultural environment in which the Qur'an is studied and comprehended. This approach reveals the understanding and interpretation of the Qur'an by reviewers and interpreters in the Indonesian context, as well as the interpretation and application of the Qur'an by Indonesian society. Furthermore, a wide range of intellectuals, including laypeople, interpret the Quran in addition to Ulama (Qadafy, 2019).

Language is the only method used in the communication process, both verbal and nonverbal. Because it is impossible to communicate without using language (Jamallullail & Nordin, 2023), This includes conveying the meaning of messages from the Holy Quran, which is not only written but also conveyed verbally (Görke & Pink, 2014). Language develops within human groups with their own unique cultures. People form relationships with each other based on the assumption that the group shares the same beliefs and the assumption that collective beliefs and ideas exist. It is in this way that communicative communities are built, in which beliefs, ideas, values, norms of behavior, and ethical systems are stored and reflected in language (Wasiuta, 2023).

On that basis, ethnolinguistic research in the study and interpretation of the Quran in Indonesia has several important objectives. *First*, this approach can reveal how reviewers and interpreters understand the meaning of the Al-Qur'an better by considering the cultural and linguistic context in which the Al-Qur'an is studied and understood. *Second*, this approach can illustrate how reviewers and interpreters avoid erroneous or misleading studies and interpretations, which may arise from a lack of understanding of the cultural and linguistic context. *Third*, this approach can explain how reviewers and interpreters develop studies and interpretations of the Qur'an that are more relevant to the Indonesian context.

Literature Review

The ethnolinguistic approach in the study and interpretation of The Quran in Indonesia is still relatively new. However, this research has great potential to make a significant contribution to the understanding and interpretation of the Qur'an in Indonesia. As far as the author's research goes, only one study uses an ethnolinguistic approach to describe the interpretation of The Quran in Indonesia, specifically in the living dimension of The Quran in Islamic boarding schools. Laili dan Herwiana (2019) succeeded in collecting 11 lexicon groups used in Islamic boarding schools originating from Arabic, which strengthens the use of good language in character education. The results of the research were published in the MABASAN Journal in 2019, and then refined and published in book form the following year (Laili, 2020). However, Laili's research does not specifically describe the study and interpretation of The

Quran, Laili only explains several lexicon groups originating from the language of The Quran - namely Arabic - and looks at their relationship with character development.

From these findings, the author asks two important questions: (1) what is the position of the ethnolinguistic approach in research regarding the study and interpretation of The Quran? (2) What aspects of the study and interpretation of The Quran - especially in Indonesia - should involve an ethnolinguistic approach? From these two research questions, the author hopes that this paper can find the right position of the ethnolinguistic approach in research on the study and interpretation of The Quran, and map important variables from the study and interpretation of The Quran in Indonesia that must involve this approach.

Research Method

This article is the result of *library research* using a qualitative content analysis approach using de-contextualization and re-contextualization methods to examine the position of the ethnolinguistic approach in research on The Quran interpretation, especially in Indonesia. The de-contextualization process begins with reading the unit of analysis and then continues with data compression and coding. Re-contextualization begins with grouping codes into sub-categories/sub-themes, then forming categories and themes at various levels (Lindgren et al., 2020).

The data analysis technique used is basic inductive. *First*, data reduction by simplifying the data by summarizing and identifying important points in the unit of analysis. *Second*, grouping similar data based on themes or concepts that appear in secondary units. *Third*, the formation of a more abstract concept from data grouping to answer research questions. The analysis process involves reading, organizing, integrating, and forming categories, concepts, and themes with a careful comparison of similarities and differences between data (Helvi Kyngäs, 2020). The analysis technique used is meta-analysis by combining and analyzing the results of several relevant references (Abdurrahman, 2024).

Result and Discussion

Ethnolinguistics as Cultural Interpretation

Before discussing the position of the ethnolinguistic approach to research on The Quran interpretation, it is necessary to first describe the design of The Quran interpretation itself. God's message in The Quran must be able to be understood from a human perspective or "human reading of religious text" (*qira'ah basyariyyah li al-Din*) (Wijaya, 2011). The definition of interpretation by Az-Zarqani as a science that discusses the content of The Quran both in terms of understanding the meaning or meaning according to God's will, and according to the level of human ability. Therefore, tafsir becomes important as a dialectical process between the interpreter, the Quran, and reality or millions of interpreters which are constantly changing (Jonwari & Faiz Zainuddin, 2020). Compare it with the pillared concept of hermeneutics: *text*, *author*, and *audience*. Also, Nasr Hamid's views on the theory of *muntaj al-tsaqafat* as

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well as *muntij li al-tsaqafat* which occurs in two phases: *tasyakul* and *tasykil* (Abdurrahman, 2019). As well as the three pillars of interpretation by Ibn Taymiyyah: speaker (*al-mutakallim bih*), listener (*mukhatab*), and context (*siya q al-kalam*) (Syafruddin, 1994).

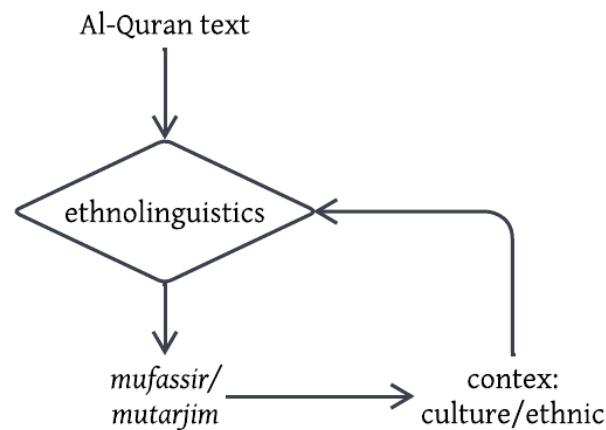


Figure 1: Position of one Ethnolinguistic Phase in the Three Pillars of Interpretation

In Figure 1, the three pillars of interpretation can be connected only by language communication, which is inseparable from culture. According to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, language contains interpretations (conceptualizations) that are culturally relative to a view. People with different languages will have different perspectives on a particular phenomenon (Bert, 2017; Wasiuta, 2023). So research with an ethnolinguistic approach to interpreting The Quran is an interpretation with cultural awareness surrounding the interpreter and the language of the interpretation, as well as an interpretation of these cultural features in the interpreter's interpreting and translation work. This can also be called “cultural interpretation”.

Figure 1 is a framework for ethnolinguistic analysis in one phase. This phase will increase in the Indonesian context with an *ajam* (non-Arab) population who do not speak Arabic. Because before interpretation, usually a translation of The Quran text is carried out first, namely the meaning of Arabic words into regional languages in Indonesia, for example into Javanese (Arrasyid et al., 2023). Likewise, the translation of tafsir texts, still mostly uses Arabic. As reported, several periodizations of the history of The Quran studies in Indonesia by several researchers, such as Howard M. Federspiel (1996), Nasrudin Baidan (2003), and Peter G. Riddell (2009), are not only periodizations of tafsir works but there are also many periodizations of translated text works (Rahman, 2019).

Translation has even been carried out since the 13th century AD (Elmubarok, Zaim, 2020), even in the form of cultural penetration in the form of *Satar* and *Maknani traditions* with *Pegon script*, using Javanese, Malay, Madurese, and other regional languages, and adopting the Arabic *Hijaiyah alphabet*. In Javanese, not all *hijaiyah alphabets* are used, but only 20 alphabets according to the number of Pallawa *hanacaraka alphabets* (Mahzumi, 2017). As stated in the formulation by Hidayani (2020). In Indonesia – in the 17th-19th centuries AD – several translated works became references for the wider community using local languages and the *pegon script*. For example, 14 works by Kyai Shaleh Darat (d. 1321/1903) which are

translations of several Arabic books in various fields into Javanese, including Tafsir Faidlurrahman. Besides other Javanese works which also use *pegon script*, such as the interpretation of Al-Ibriz by KH. Bisri Mustofa (Abdullah et al., 2021;. Abdullah, 2022).

Translations using the meaning of *pegon* or in a special term for translation of the Arabic *kitab kuning* called “*makna gandul*”, are still very massive, especially among Pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) (Wahyuni & Ibrahim, 2017). This means that there are two or more translations and/or interpretations work of the The Quran. *First*, the interpretation of the text of The Quran verses by *mufasssir*, which is still widely produced in Arabic. *Second*, translating the interpretation into a local language with *Pegon script*, such as Javanese for example. Recent developments indicate that there must be a *third work*, namely providing further explanation regarding local language translations using *Pegon script*, even in Islamic educational institutions, such as Pesantren (Islamic boarding schools). Sa’adah (2019) noted two problems in understanding the *makna gandul pegon* by Santri (students at Pesantren). *First*, linguistic problems, in terms of morphology, syntax or restructuring. *Second*, non-linguistic problems, such as not understanding the target language (Javanese) or technical problems in writing the *makna gandul pegon* using certain “formulas”. In fact, according to Hidayani (2020), the *makna gandul pegon* is an ancient script that now requires a separate science to understand it, namely paleography. This makes it possible to carry out the ethnolinguistic analysis phase more than once, as seen in Figure 2.

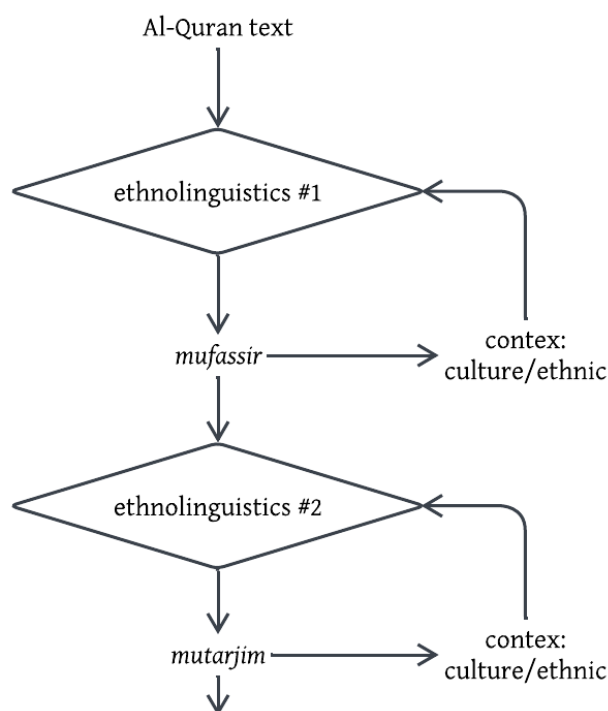


Figure 2: Ethnolinguistic Position of More than One Phase in the Three Pillars of Interpretation

The Field of Ethnolinguistic Interpretation in Indonesia

Following the theory Görke dan Pink (2014) - especially in the treasury of tafsir in Indonesia - that the interpretation of The Quran is not limited to interpretations written and

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printed in tafsir books - moreover it is limited only to Arabic tafsir books - but interpretations of The Quran can be very diverse, which can be classified into four types: oral tafsir, partial tafsir, lay tafsir and tafsir with regional characteristics. Among these four types, oral tafsir is the only type of tafsir that is not written. While others can be in written or oral form. This oral interpretation is increasingly widespread because the influence of orally translated translation is getting stronger, and tends to weaken the literacy tradition among researchers and interpreters of The Quran in Indonesia (Abdullah, 2022). In addition to the previous classification, Görke cites the theory of Federspiel (1992) in his article “Muslim Intellectuals and National Development in Indonesia”, he also mapped the four types of interpreters in Indonesia into four groups: religious scholars (*ulama*), Muslim intellectuals, Muslim laypeople and Muslim students. (Qadafy, 2019).

Table 1. Types of Tafsir and Interpreter Groups

Types of Interpretation	Interpreter Group
Oral Interpretation	Ulama, Muslim Intellectuals, Muslim Laymen, Muslim Students
Partial Interpretation	Ulama, Muslim Intellectuals, Muslim Laity
Lay Interpretation	Muslim Laity
Interpretation with the Specifics of a Region	Ulama, Muslim Intellectuals, Muslim Laity

As in Table 1, currently, many types of oral interpretation can be found scattered around, both in mainstream media and on social media, and conveyed by all groups. Of course, the interpretation referred to here is a serious interpretation activity and is intended to study the meaning of the verses of The Quran, not a haphazard or haphazard interpretation and is not intended or not in the program of The Quran exegesis study activities, either partially or as a study of start to finish. For example, the interpretation of paragraph 15 of the Saba letter (34) which conveyed the meaning of the message by the Minister of Finance of the Republic of Indonesia. Sri Mulyani in a trial at the Constitutional Court. In the video broadcast by the Warta Kota Production channel on YouTube on April 5, 2024, not only Sri Mulyani but the news anchor also explained a little about this verse. (Rusdi, 2024). If Sri Mulyani, who is the Minister of Finance, is a lay Muslim according to the Federspiel classification, then the presenter whose scientific background is unknown regarding the The Quran and its interpretation is of course also a lay person.

In Table 1 it is also indicated that all types of interpretations can be given by lay people. As in Sri Mulyani's previous case, Federspiel included Azwar Anas, a politician and former governor of West Sumatra and New Order minister who wrote a book entitled "The Quran is the Absolute Truth", and HB Jassin, a literary critic who graduated from Yale and is author of the book "The Quran Reading Noble" as a writer of interpretations of The Quran for Muslim laypeople (Qadafy, 2019). This means that laypeople here are anyone, even though they are educated and community leaders, who have little contact with Islamic religious knowledge, let alone the knowledge of The Quran interpretation. Moreover, if the interpretation activity is

carried out orally, currently it is very easy for anyone to find media that can be used as a platform for delivering the interpretation. So of course there is a very big possibility for anyone - including lay people - to deliberately discuss, analyze, and interpret the verses of The Quran. This condition opens the door to research using an ethnolinguistic approach - as the author intended - regarding the interpretation of The Quran in Indonesia, with its wide area, types, and reach.

Conclusion

This research formulates two important findings: *First*, the position of the ethnolinguistic approach in research related to The Quran interpretation in Indonesia is a connector that must exist in the three pillars of interpretation. That interpretation must deal with language that cannot be separated from its culture. Second, the interpretation of the The Quran in Indonesia is not only limited to written interpretations in books but also oral interpretations conveyed by various groups, including lay people. These two findings open up very broad research opportunities with an ethnolinguistic approach to understanding how culture and language influence the interpretation of The Quran in Indonesia, both in the context of translation and exegesis. The author realizes that this paper is still very early to be called an ethnolinguistic interpretive design, especially in Indonesia. Because there are still many components of language and culture studies that are still missing in it. Therefore, more serious research is needed to find a more mature design of the idea of ethnolinguistic interpretive criticism.

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