

## FROM READING THE QUR'AN TO LEARNING ARABIC LANGUAGE

(The Qur'anic Commentaries of Hamka (1981 - 1908) and Quraish Shihab (b. 1944) on The Arabic Language of the Qur'an)

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### Abstract

This article discusses the Qur'anic verses (Q. 12: 2, Q. 13: 37, Q. 20: 113, Q. 26: 195, Q. 39: 28, Q. 41: 3, Q. 41: 44, Q. 42: 7, Q. 43: 3, Q. 46: 12) that talk about the nature of the Qur'an as an Arabic text (*kitab 'Arabī*), and how two Indonesian *mufasssirs* (Hamka and Quraish Shihab) use them to urge readers to learn Arabic. Their works are chosen because they are the two most prominent Qur'anic commentators of the country. This qualitative research concludes that the two *mufasssirs* employ variety of strategies to raise the status of the Arabic language and encourage readers to learn them, including (1) a historical trajectory to the biography of the Prophet Muhammad, (2) an emphasis on the universality of the Prophet's missionary, (3) on the privileges of non-Arabs (*al-'ajam*) who master the Arabic language, and (4) on the uniqueness and peculiarities that the language possesses in comparison to other languages.

**Keywords:** Arabic Language, Indonesian Tafsir, Hamka, Quraish Shihab

**Dari Membaca Al-Qur'an Hingga Belajar Bahasa Arab  
(Tafsir Al-Qur'an Karya Hamka (1908-1981) dan Quraish Shihab (L. 1944) tentang  
Bahasa Arab Al-Qur'an)**

**Abstrak**

Artikel ini mengkaji beberapa ayat Quran yaitu (Sura 12: 2, 13: 37, 20: 113, 26: 195, 39: 28, 41: 3, 41: 44, 42: 7, 43: 3, 46: 12 yang berbicara tentang hakikat Al-Qur'an sebagai teks Arab (Kitab 'Arabī), dan bagaimana dua ahli tafsir (mufasssir) Indonesia (Hamka dan Quraish Shihab) menggunakannya untuk memprovokasi pembacanya untuk belajar bahasa Arab. Karya-karya mereka dipilih karena mereka adalah dua komentator Al-Qur'an paling terkemuka di negeri ini. Penelitian kualitatif ini menyimpulkan bahwa kedua ahli tafsir (mufasssir) menggunakan berbagai strategi untuk mengangkat status bahasa Arab dan mendorong pembaca untuk mempelajarinya, antara lain (1) lintasan sejarah biografi Nabi Muhammad, (2) penekanan pada universalitas misi Nabi (3) pada keistimewaan non-Arab (al-'ajam) yang menguasai bahasa Arab, dan (4) pada keunikan dan kekhasan yang dimiliki bahasa tersebut dibandingkan dengan bahasa lain.

**Kata Kunci:** Bahasa Arab, Tafsir Indonesia, Hamka, Quraish Shihab

من قراءة القرآن إلى تعلم اللغة العربية  
التفسيرات القرآنية لحمكا (٨٠٩١-١٨٩١) وقريش شهاب (من مواليد ٤٤٩١) على اللغة العربية للقرآن

**ملخص**

تناقش هذه الدراسة الآيات القرآنية (س ٢١: ٢، س ٣١: ٧٣، س ٣١١: ٠٢، س ٦٢: ٥٩١، س ٩٣: ٨٢، س ١٤: ٣، س ١٤: ٤٤، س ٢٤: ٧، س ٣٤: ٣، س ٦٤: ٢١) التي تتحدث عن طبيعة القرآن كنص عربي (كتاب عربي)، وكيف يستخدم الاثنان من المفسرين الإندونيسيين (حمكا وقريش شهاب) تفسير تلك الآيات لحث القراء على تعلم اللغة العربية. تم اختيار أعمالهم لأنهم من أبرز المفسرين في البلاد. ويخلص هذا البحث النوعي إلى أن المفسرين يستخدمان مختلف الطرق للارتقاء بمكانة اللغة العربية وتشجيع القراء على تعلمها، بما في ذلك (١) مسار تاريخي لسيرة الرسول محمد، (٢) والتركيز على عالمية رسالة النبي، و(٣) في امتيازات العجم (غير العرب) الذين يتقنون اللغة العربية، و(٤) تميز اللغة العربية وخصائصها مقارنة باللغات الأخرى.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اللغة العربية، التفسير الإندونيسي، حمكا، قريش شهاب

## The High Status of the Arabic Language for Indonesian Muslims: Introduction and *Literature Review*

Arabic language occupies a special position among Muslims mainly because the Qur'an uses Arabic as its main medium while descending in the Arabian peninsula to the Arabs (Aman, 2021). Arabic language is also believed to be the official *lingua franca* in the hereafter by which residents of heaven talk to each other. These two theological reasons, accompanied by other practical reasons such as its use as one of the official languages of the United Nations, raise the position of Arabic language several degrees above non-Arab languages. Nonetheless, the Arabic nature of the Qur'an (*'Arabīyyah al-Qur'ān*) influence the way Muslims interact with it. For Arabic speakers or for those who master Arabic, reading the Qur'an and understanding its superficial meanings are literary doable, while those who don't know Arabic might require extra efforts to do the same. The most Indonesian people whose original language is Bahasa and who are not trained in the Islamic educational institution belong to this latest category.

The privilege of Arabic language over Bahasa Indonesia is also obvious in its popularity as the medium of Qur'anic commentaries. Although Indonesia is a country with the largest Muslim population, the Qur'anic commentaries produced there were mostly written in Bahasa Indonesia and could be therefore enjoyed only by the South-East Asian people who speak Bahasa and Malay languages. However, a number of Indonesian scholars who know Arabic have also written books in this particular language and receive international attention (Pink, 2018, p. 207). The Arabic is therefore a language of both religious and academic endeavour. This unique relationship between Muslim communities, Qur'anic commentaries and Arabic language is something that this article deals with. Its main goal is to see how the magnificent works of Hamka and Shihab spreading widely in Indonesia understand the Qur'anic verses that asserts the Arabic nature of the Qur'an. Their works are chosen because they are the two most prominent Qur'anic commentators of the country (Pink, 2010).

In addition, their thoughts on some selected topics have already been done. Ulinnuha, for example, compared the two figures' thoughts on religious moderation. He concluded that their ideas have many intersections and similarities (Ulinnuha & Nafisah, 2020). Similar to this, Muna contrasts the ways in which Hamka and Shihab view the trinity. Muna draws the conclusion that Shihab reads these verses logically, whereas Hamka reads the Quranic criticism by referencing the Bible. These two aspects have emerged as fresh indicators of the evolution of contemporary Indonesian commentary in terms of a critical reading of the trinity notion as opposed to a dogmatic interpretation (Muna, 2022).

This topic is not really new, considering that several works have contributed in elaborating the unique connection between the Qur'an, Arabic language, Qur'anic commentaries and Indonesian Muslim communities. Two articles written by Mu'ammar Zayn Qadafy argue that in the Qur'anic commentary, written in Bahasa, of the Indonesian physicist, Agus Purwanto, a mastery of Arabic is very encouraged (Qadafy, 2017, 2019). Not necessarily about Qur'anic commentaries, some other papers also highlight similar points on the urgency of knowing Arabic in understanding the Qur'an (Dewi, 2016), and on the influence of the Qur'an on the Arabic grammar and vocabularies. Compared to these previous works, this article offers a novelty while systematically discussing how two Indonesian Qur'anic commentaries, each by Hamka and Quraish Shihab, explore ten Qur'anic verses on the topic. This article serves as a trajectory of an intellectual history of the Indonesian *tafsir* scholars in the modern time. It assumes that these Indonesian Qur'anic commentaries possess a unique way of explanation compared to their counterparts in the Middle-East.

### **The Qur'anic Commentaries of Hamka and Quraish Shihab as The Primary Research Sources**

This library research studies meticulously *al-Azhar* of Haji Abdul Malik Karim Amrullah (well-known as Hamka, 1908-1981) and *al-Mishbah* of Muhammad Quraish Shihab (born in 1944). Hamka was born in 1908 in a prominent family environment in Minangkabau, West Sumatra. The young Hamka grew up in a colonial era and witnessed the struggle of his father and family to fight for the national independence. He also experienced living under the Old Order (under the leadership of Soekarno) and the New Order (Suharto). Hamka's father (Abdul Karim Amrullah) takes a position in opposition to the colonial government. In 1928, he opposed the enactment of teacher ordinances that cornered indigenous educational institutions. He also opposed the communist ideology when its movement tried to penetrate the heartland of Sumatra in early 1920s. In 1941, Hamka's father was captured by the Dutch and exiled to Sukabumi. On June 2, 1945, he died in Jakarta at the residence of his son, Hamka. (Djamal, 1998, p. 2).

Known as a religious scholar, Hamka was both a journalist and novelist. In 1936, he was appointed as an editor of the popular magazine, *Pedoman Masyarakat* (*the people's guide*), that focused on voicing the importance of Education for middle-class Muslims, i.e. those who have sufficient knowledge of foreign languages and secular sciences and want to maintain Islamic traditions (Steenbrink, 1995, p. 80). In 1950, Hamka moved to Jakarta where he soon obtained a fame as an Islamic preacher (*dā'ī*) in a national

radio as well as an *imām* in a particular mosque of an elite housing complex. Every morning, he delivered a talk, interpreting several passages of the Qur'an. He actively composed writings on Islamic history, mysticism, and responses to actual problems in the society. From 1926 to 1966, Hamka and many other religious leaders were imprisoned by Suharto regime. During this custody, he completed the writing of *al-Azhar* (Steenbrink, 1995, p. 81).

According to Karel, Hamka had a strong tendency to use mystical explanation models in understanding various aspects of Islam. In particular, he wrote a book about the intricacies of Sufism in relation to the demands of modern life. His grandfather, Shaikh Amrullah, was a grand teacher (*Murshid*) of the *Naqshabandīyyah* Order. His grandfather's authority was challenged by his son (Hamka's father) named Abdulkarim. After studying in Mecca for ten years and being influenced by the modernist thought of Muhammad Abduh (1845-1905), Abdulkarim opposed all sorts of orthodoxy and orderly practices. Although Hamka was not a *Murshid* like his grandfather, he later revitalized the values of Sufism in his works (Steenbrink, 1995, p. 79).

Meanwhile, Shihab was born on February 16, 1944, in Rappang, South Sulawesi in the *Alawite Sāda* family (a plural form of *sayyid*). This is a family from Hadramaut, Yemen, who claim to have a lineage up to the Prophet Muhammad SAW (Ikhwan, 2015, p. 8). His father, Abdulraham Shihab (1905-1986) was a merchant, politician, preacher and Professor in Qur'anic studies at the Indonesian Islamic University (UII) and the Islamic State Higher Education (IAIN) in Makassar. The young Quraish Shihab enjoyed listening to his father's lectures very much. After finishing his elementary school, Shihab was sent to Malang to study directly to the charismatic cleric born in Tarim, al-Ḥabīb 'Abd al-Qadīr Ibn Aḥmad Bi al-Faqīh (1896-1962). Later on, Shihab finished his education at al-Azhar, Cairo, and became the first Southeast Asian to graduate from there. After returning from Cairo, he actively taught at several colleges and become one of the leading Muslim intellectual until nowadays (Ikhwan, 2015, pp. 7–15). Shihab was a renowned scholar and former minister of religious affairs who got a large portion of his education at the Egyptian Azhar University. He is the author of the most recent comprehensive Qur'an commentary from Indonesia entitled *al-Misbah*. Probably, this Qur'anic commentary is the most influential tafsir work ever produced in Indonesia during the modern history (Rahmatullah et al., 2021). He has a reputation for being liberal but nonetheless maintains a strong commitment to the conventional religious scholarship of the Azhar (Kusmana & Amin, 2005, pp. 67–89).

For the sake of this research, ten Qur'anic verses that speak of the Qur'an's basic character as an Arabic text have been identified. See the following table:

**Table 1.** Qur'anic passages on the Arabic Nature of the Qur'an

No.	Verse Number	Arabic	Transliteration ( <i>The Qur'an</i> , 2004)
1	12: 2	<i>Innā anzalnāhu qurʿānan ʿarabiyyan laʿallakum taʿqilūn</i>	<i>We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur'an so that you [people] may understand.</i>
2	13: 37	<i>Wa kadhālika anzalnāhu ḥukman ʿarabiyyan</i>	<i>So We have sent down the Qur'an to give judgement in the Arabic language.</i>
3	20: 113	<i>Wa kadhālika anzalnāhu qurʿānan ʿarabiyyan wa ṣarrafnāhu fīhi min al-waʿid laʿllahum yattaqūn aw yuḥdithu lahum dhikran</i>	<i>We have sent the Qur'an down in the Arabic tongue and given all kinds of warnings in it, so that they may beware or take heed</i>
4	26: 195	<i>Bi līsān ʿarabiyy mubīn</i>	<i>in a clear Arabic tongue.</i>
5	39: 28	<i>Qurʿānan ʿarabiyyan ghaira dhī ʿiwaj laʿllahum yattaqūn</i>	<i>an Arabic Qur'an, free from any distortion– so that people may be mindful</i>
6	41: 3	<i>Kitāb fuṣṣilat āyātuhu qurʿānan ʿarabiyyan li qaum yaʿlamūn</i>	<i>a Scripture whose verses are made distinct as a Qur'an in Arabic for people who understand,</i>
7	41: 44	<i>Wa law jaʿalnāhu qurʿānan aʿjamiyyan la qālū law lā fuṣṣilat āyātuhu aʿjamiyy wa ʿarabi qul huwa lilladīna āmanū hudan wa shifāʾ</i>	<i>If We had made it a foreign Qur'an, they would have said, 'If only its verses were clear! What? Foreign speech to an Arab?' Say, 'It is guidance and healing for those who have faith</i>
8	42: 7	<i>Wa kadhālika awhaynā ilaika qurʿānan ʿarabiyyan litundhira umma al-Qurā wa man ḥawlahā wa tundhira yaum al-jamʿ lā raiba fīh</i>	<i>So We have revealed an Arabic Qur'an to you, in order that you may warn the capital city<sup>a</sup> and all who live nearby. And warn [especially] about the Day of Gathering, of which there is no doubt</i>
9	43: 3	<i>Innā jaʿalnāhu qurʿānan ʿarabiyyan laʿallakum taʿqilūn</i>	<i>We have made it a Qur'an in Arabic so that you [people] may understand</i>

10	46: 12	<i>Wa hādhā kitāb muṣaddiq lisānan ‘arabīyyan liyundhira al-ladhīna zalamū wa bushrā li-l-muḥsinīn</i>	<i>Yet the scripture of Moses was revealed before it as a guide and a mercy, and this is a scripture confirming it in the Arabic language to warn those who do evil and bring good news for those who do good.</i>
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Then, the interpretation of both Hamka and Shihab on these passages will be read carefully to capture their strategy in strengthening the idea that learning Arabic for Indonesians is important. The findings will be grouped according to certain systematic sub-discussions. This article is however, not discussing the Qur’anic view on its being written in Arabic, rather it seeks to understand how Hamka and Shihab view the Arabic nature of the Qur’an respectively. The structure of the Qur’anic text and its historical context are therefore not something that this article is looking for. Rather, this article does at the beginning a brief comparison between the ideas of the scholars with their contemporaries in the Islamic world in order to capture their peculiarities and distinctions.

### The Classical Debates on the Arabic Language of the Qur’an

Diving into the classical Islamic literature, the notion of the “Arabic Qur’an”, as indicated by the above ten verses, is a topic that potentially leads to several possible discussions. One of which is the debate whether all Qur’anic words are Arabic. In *al-Burhān*, al-Zarkashī discusses this issue in a special chapter entitled, *ma’rifah mā fīhi min ghair lughah al-‘Arab* (knowledge of elements of the Qur’an that come from other than Arabic). al-Zarkashī begins by mentioning Q. 43: 3 and Q. 41: 44, as follows: *wa law ja’alnāhu qur’ānan ‘ajamīyan laqālū law lā fuṣṣilat āyātuh* (If We had made it a foreign Quran, they would have said, ‘If only its verses were clear). According to Zarkashi, these two verses show that all the words of the Qur’an are Arabic, because Allah has made the Qur’an a miracle for the Prophethood of Muhammad as well as a proof of its truthfulness. The Qur’an also challenged the native Arabs who were experts in rhetoric and poetry to make something similar to the Qur’an and they were not able to meet the challenge (al-Zarkashī, 1984, p. 287).

Al-Zarkashī’s assertion is echoed by much later Islamists who believe that the Arabic language of the Qur’an means that it is God’s miracle. Considering that the people of Arab mastered their language very well, it is quite unimaginable that none of them succeed in answering the Qur’an’s challenges to compose something similar to it in terms of eloquence and

beauty (al-Qaṭṭān, n.d., p. 13). al-Zarkashī also cites the words of al-Shafii and Abu ‘Ubaidah who called those who sought to associate the Qur’an with the Nabatean language as exaggerators. Even then, al-Zarkashī was being fair by including opinions to the contrary. (al-Zarkashī, 1984, p. 288).

The second issue that arises regarding the status of the Qur’an’s Arabic language in the verses discussed in this article is the issue of whether the Qur’an was created or it was eternal. At length, al-Razi in his tafsir debates the views of a prominent 3<sup>rd</sup> century Mu’tazilī scholar, Abū ‘Alī al-Jubā’ī (d. 302/915). With Q. 12:2, al-Jubā’ī contended that the Qur’an was a creation. The Qur’an is a revealed text, as indicated by His statement, “*Innā anzalnāhu/ We have revealed it.*” Because neither Arabic nor Persian is a part of the everlasting speech, The Almighty describing it as Arabic proves that it is not eternal. al-Jubā’ī then says that the Qur’an is a composition of verses and words, and that everything that is a composite is an innovation. In response to him, al-Rāzī, representing the Ash’arī scholars, says that he accepts the idea that the Qur’an is a new once it is rephrased as *kalām ḥissī*. This interpretation of al-Jubā’ī does not challenge the Ash’ariyyah belief that the Qur’an was originally *kalām nafsī* and later changed to *kalām ḥissī* (al-Rāzī, 1981).

The *kalām nafsī* is an Arabic phrase that roughly translates to “self-talk” or “inner dialogue.” It refers to the ongoing internal conversation that a person has with themselves, often involving their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and values. To make the *kalām nafsī* understandable by its audience, it was revealed through Arabic as its medium. Shihab clearly voices the Ash’arite creeds, affirming that the Qur’an is an uncreated speech of God. The Ash’arites promoted a crucial distinction between God’s eternal speech (*kalām nafsī*), which is a part of His very being, and speech that can only be expressed in contingent human languages, like Arabic in this case, whether it be spoken or written (*kalām ḥissī*) (Halverson, 2010, p. 16).

### **Strategy One: A historical trajectory of the importance of Arabic Language as Exposed by the biography of the Prophet Muhammad**

Both Hamka and Shihab, when dealing with passages that talk on the Arabic nature of the Qur’an, often relate the discussion to the emergence of Islam and Muslim’s community, especially on the traditionally received history that the prophet and his companions were originally Arabs and that they communicated in their daily life with Arabic language (Amrullah, 1989, pp. 3584<sup>1</sup>, 6498<sup>2</sup>). The revelation of the Qur’an in Arabic had therefore

1 Commentary on 12: 2

2 Commentary on 42: 7



a specific goal. It was to make the Arabs to whom the Qur'an speaks could understand what was sent down to them (Amrullah, 1989, pp. 337<sup>3</sup>, 4494<sup>4</sup>, 6272<sup>5</sup>). Additionally, in his interpretation on sura 20: 113, Hamka associates the historicity of the Arabic Qur'an with information contained by sura 14: 4<sup>6</sup> and sura 19: 97<sup>7</sup>.

As a branch language of the Semitics, Hamka realizes that Arabic is related to the Hebrew (Amrullah, 1989, p. 6645<sup>8</sup>), while Shihab juxtaposes it also with Aramaic, Syriac, Chaldean, and Babylonian (Shihab, 2005, vol. 6: 392<sup>9</sup>). Given the broad scope that the term Semitic languages can cover, Shihab seems to have read more writings on the field of Semitic languages studies than Hamka. Several scholars in classical Arabic have written about the relationship between Arabic and these languages in terms of vocabulary range, alphabetic forms, naming people, and literacy traditions (Loosley, 2018; Mendenhall, 1989, 2006). Shihab then attributes the historicity of the Arabic Qur'an to a theological concept of the Qur'an as God's *kalām nafsī*. The second theological concept raised by Shihab is the nature of revelation handed down to the Prophet SAW, whether it is a mere inspiration (*ma'nan*), or it is accompanied by words (*lafẓan wa ma'nan*). Shihab expressed his tendency to the second one (Shihab, 2005, vol. 6: 392, compare with 8: 375<sup>10</sup>).

Another strategy to motivate readers to learn Arabic, which is very typical Shihab's *tafsīr* but not in Hamka's, is an elaboration of the uniqueness of Arabic compared to other languages. In his interpretation of Q. 12:2, Shihab shows his amazement of the fact that a single Arabic word is generally based on three dead letters that can transform to various words with different meanings. 'Uthmān Ibn Jinnī (932-1002), Shihab says, asserts that the consonantal skeleton of Arabic vocabularies is amazing for it contains a peculiar linguistic philosophy. For instance, of the three letters that make up the word (قال) *qāla*, six other word forms can be generated, all of which have different meanings. Most importantly, the basic meaning of the word remains although its composition of letters is scrambled (Shihab, 2005, vol. 6: 392-393).

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3 Commentary on on 13: 37

4 Commentary on 20: 113

5 Commentary on on 39: 28

6 "We have never sent a messenger who did not use his own people's language to make things clear for them. But still God leaves whoever He will to stray, and guides whoever He will: He is the Almighty, the All Wise."

7 "We have made it easy, in your own language [Prophet], so that you may bring glad news to the righteous and warnings to a stubborn people".

8 Commentary on 46: 12

9 Commentary on 12:2

10 Commentary on 20: 113

Shihab also underlines the Arabic's remarkable ability to produce new meanings from particular root words. Arabic, Shihab insists, is very rich in terms of 'gender' word markers, the designation of its numbering (words always change depends on whether they are singular, dual, or plural), the variation of timings (past, present, future), and the synonymous vocabularies (Shihab, 2005, vol. 6: 393). The following quote shows how strong the special impression of Arabic that Shihab wants to instill in the mind of readers of his *tafsīr*:

*"Kata yang bermakna tinggi, misalnya, mempunyai enam puluh sinonim. Kata yang bermakna singa ditemukan sebanyak tidak kurang dari 500 kata, ular 200 kata. Menurut pengarang kamus al-Muhīth terdapat 80 kata yang bermakna madu, sedang kata yang menunjuk aneka pedang tidak kurang dari 1.000 kata. Sementara itu, De' Hemmaer mengemukakan bahwa terdapat 5.644 kata yang menunjuk kepada unta dan aneka macam jenis dan keadaannya. Sementara para pakar bahasa berpendapat bahwa terdapat sekitar 25 juta kosakata bahasa Arab. Ini tentunya sangat membantu demi kejelasan pesan yang ingin disampaikan. Jika kosakata suatu bahasa terbatas, maka makna yang dimaksud pastilah tidak dapat ditampung olehnya. Dalam buku Mukjizat Al-Qur'an, keistimewaan bahasa Arab penulis uraikan dengan sedikit rinci. Alhasil, menjadikan firman-firman-Nya yang disampaikan oleh Nabi Muhammad saw. dalam bahasa Arab benar-benar sangat tepat, agar pesan-pesan-Nya dapat dimengerti bukan saja oleh masyarakat pertama yang ditemuinya, tetapi untuk seluruh manusia, apa pun bahasa ibunya"* (Shihab, 2005, vol. 6: 393, the information is repeated by Shihab in his commentary on 12: 375).

*"A word 'high', for example, has sixty synonyms. The words that refer to 'lion' are no less than 500, to 'snake' 200 words. According to the author of al-Muhīth dictionary, there are 80 words for honey, while those refer to certain kinds of swords are not less than 1,000. Meanwhile, De' Hemmaer suggests that there are 5,644 words that refer to camels and their various types and circumstances, while linguists argue that there are about 25 million Arabic vocabulary. This is certainly very helpful for the clarity of the message to be conveyed. If the vocabulary of a language is limited, then the meaning in question could not be accommodated. In the book 'Miracles of the Qur'an', I elaborate the Arabic privilege in a bit more details. Thus, the delivery of God's words to the Prophet Muhammad in Arabic is really appropriate, so that*

*His messages can be understood not only by its first audience, but for all human beings, regardless of their mother tongue”.*

Shihab's obsession in favoring Arabic is obvious from the references he cites, including the classical dictionary *al-Muḥīṭ*, a work of the 14<sup>th</sup> century grammarian, Majd al-Dīn Muḥammad Ibn Ya'qūb al-Fairuz Abadī (1329-1415) (Abadī, 2009), *Mu'jizāh al-Qur'ān* by Muḥammad Mutawallī al-Sha'rawī (1911-1998) (al-Sha'rawī, n.d.) and the book of a scholar named De' Hemmaer.<sup>11</sup> Shihab does not only emphasizes the richness of the Arabic vocabulary and grammar. Note that That these two elements (vocabulary and grammar) make Arabic special is repeated several times by Shihab. See his interpretation on Q. 39: 27-28 (Shihab, 2005, vol. 12: 221), he also regards this uniqueness as the thinkable reason why Allah had chosen this complex and detailed Arabic as the medium of the Qur'an. It should be underlined, that Shihab's explanation of the Arabic language contained in his interpretation on Q. 12:2 is the longest explanation he does. Hence in the following similar passages, he simply asks the reader to refer to it (Shihab, 2005, vol. 6: 615<sup>12</sup>, 8: 375<sup>13</sup>, 2: 429<sup>14</sup>, 12: 538<sup>15</sup>).

### **Non-Arabs Who Mastered Arabic and the Universality of Muhammad's Passages**

Hamka employs a unique strategy to motivate his readers to learn Arabic. Elsewhere in his book, he mentions some non-Arab scholars (*'ajam*) who became masters in Arabic linguistics, such as *Naḥw* and *Sharf*. An explanation of the meaning of *'ajamī* is present in *al-Mishbāh*. Shihab explains that the word *'ujmah* means 'unclearity' (Shihab, 2005, vol. 12: 429). They include Sibawaihi, al-Farahidī (Amrullah, 1989, p. 3584<sup>16</sup>), al-Bukhari, Abu Hanifah, Atha' al-Habsyi (Amrullah, 1989, p. 6272<sup>17</sup>) and Shaikh Waliyullah al-Dihlawī (Amrullah, 1989, p. 6482<sup>18</sup>). The Muslim scholars of the Nusantara, widely known as 'Orang Jawi' are also mentioned by Hamka. He praised the distinguished level of Shaikh al-Nawawi Banten, Shaikh Abdussamad Palembang, Shaikh Ahmad Khathib Minangkabau (Amrullah, 1989, p. 4494<sup>19</sup>), Shaikh Ahmad Arshad Banjar, Shaikh Ahmad

11 Unfortunately, it is not clear whom he means as De' Hemmaer.

12 Commentary on 13: 37

13 Commentary on 20: 113

14 Commentary on 42: 7

15 Commentary on 43: 1-4

16 Commentary on 12:2

17 Commentary on 39: 28

18 Commentary on 41: 44

19 Commentary on 20: 113

Khathib Sambas, and Shaikh Daud Fathani (Amrullah, 1989, p. 6272<sup>20</sup>), in embracing with traditional Islamic sciences, one of which is Arabic.

On the other hand, Hamka assesses that there are also non-Arabs who do not like the Qur'an and Arabic. He also satirizes the Dutch colonial government that, according to him, tried to impose Christian doctrines by diverting people's attention from Arabic (Amrullah, 1989, p. 3584<sup>21</sup>). In particular, he tells readers his personal meetings with someone who had enjoyed Western education and had a very hostile view against the Qur'an and Arabic. He sneered at Hamka, saying that many Indonesian Muslims who read the Qur'an did waste their time in reading something that they might not understand. Against him, Hamka said that the Qur'an was not only a book to be read but also a guidance from where Muslims learn both the spiritual and liturgical aspects (Amrullah, 1989, p. 3585<sup>22</sup>), to life happily now and later in the hereafter (Amrullah, 1989, p. 6272<sup>23</sup>). Individuals like this particular man, according to Hamka, have spread the 'poison of education', when claiming that Islam and Arabic cannot be understood by non-Arabs (Amrullah, 1989, p. 4494<sup>24</sup>). By saying this, Hamka wants to convey that learning Arabic is not difficult (Amrullah, 1989, p. 4495<sup>25</sup>), because the Arabic language itself is clear and understandable (Amrullah, 1989, p. 5168<sup>26</sup>). Although non-Arabs speak daily their mother tongue, with a strong will, they can master Arabic and can read the Qur'an fluently (Amrullah, 1989, p. 6482<sup>27</sup>).

Another discussion that has something to do with the non-Arabs issues is what I termed as 'the universality of Qur'anic meanings'. Hamka repeatedly confirms. The prophet Muhammad, Hamka insists, was not sent to the Arabs alone, but for all mankind. Hamka makes a cross reference to his commentary on Q. 34: 28, which says: *wa mā arsalnāka illā kāffatan linnās bashīran wa nadhīran wa lākinna akthara al-nās lā ya'lamūn* (We have sent you [Prophet] only to bring good news and warning to all people, but most of them do not understand) (Amrullah, 1989, pp. 3584<sup>28</sup>, 4495<sup>29</sup>). The Qur'an, Hamka argues, was not meant to be

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20 Commentary on 39: 28

21 Commentary on 12: 2

22 Commentary on 12: 2

23 Commentary on 39: 28

24 Commentary on 20: 113

25 Commentary on 20: 113

26 Commentary on 26: 195

27 Commentary on 41: 44

28 Commentary on 12:2

29 Commentary on 4495

the holy book of only the Arabs. Even before the fourteenth century, it was already embraced by various nationals worldwide (Amrullah, 1989, p. 4494<sup>30</sup>).

Shihab voices the similar tone. In his commentary on Q. 41: 1-4, he quotes the saying of Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabaṭṭabā'ī (1904-1981), the author of *Tafsīr al-Mīzān* (Ṭabaṭṭabā'ī, 1997), that the revelation of the Qur'an in Arabic does not contradict with its universal teachings due to the gradual steps of preaching that the Qur'an applies. Initially, the prophet SAW invites Meccan people in the seasonal gathering although they rejected his call. In his commentary on Q. 43: 1-4, Shihab argues that the word *'arabiyyan* that is attributed to the Qur'an is meant also to be a censure for the Arabs who speak Arabic but rejected the Qur'anic calls as if they could not see the divine elements of the Qur'anic literary eloquence (Shihab, 2005, vol. 12: 538). He then secretly preached his relatives (see Q. 26: 214<sup>31</sup>). After a period of time, he then publicly announced his mission to his tribe and to the Arabs (Q. 15: 94<sup>32</sup>). Lastly, he invited all humankind to follow his teachings (see his commentaries on Q. 7: 158<sup>33</sup> and Q. 6: 19<sup>34</sup>).

The other proof of the universality of the Qur'anic teaching, according to Ṭabaṭṭabā'ī is that the companions of the Prophet came originally from various nations. Salman al-Fārisī (568-657) for instance was a Persian, Bilāl Ibn Rabah (580-640) was an Ethiopian, and Shuhaib Ibn Sinān al-Rūmī (587-658) was a Roman. The history records the fight between the Prophet's true followers against his former Jews followers who betrayed him. The Prophet also sent diplomatic letters to several giant kingdoms like Persia, Rome and others (Shihab, 2005, vol. 12: 375).

The other entrance also used by Hamka is the principal difference between the Qur'an and tafsir. While the Qur'an was originally in Arabic and will remain so, *tafsīr* is written in various languages, according to the targeted readers. It is a human attempt to formulate a new meaning as close as possible to the original Arabic words that the Qur'an uses. Qur'anic commentaries written in non-Arabic languages, such as *al-Azhar* and *al-*

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30 Commentary on 20: 113

31 "Warn your nearest kinsfolk."

32 "So proclaim openly what you have been commanded [to say], and ignore the idolaters"

33 "Say [Muhammad], 'People, I am the Messenger of God to you all, from Him who has control over the heavens and the earth. There is no God but Him; He gives life and death, so believe in God and His Messenger, the unlettered prophet who believes in God and His words, and follow him so that you may find guidance.'"

34 "Say, 'What counts most as a witness?' Say, 'God is witness between you and me. This Qur'ān was revealed for me to warn you [people] and everyone it reaches. Do you really bear witness that there are other gods beside God?' Say, 'I myself do not bear witness [to any such thing].' Say, 'He is only one God, and I disown whatever you join with Him.'" (Shihab, 2005, vol. 12: 375)

*Mishbah*, are only tools to help people understanding the Qur'an, especially for those who do not master Arabic. After explaining this, Hamka then encourages readers to learn Arabic directly by saying: "Then it is mandatory for every Muslim to study the Qur'an and to be able to read it well". Furthermore, Hamka said, A mastery of Arabic is also important for many rituals in Islam, such as prayers, use Arabic charms (Amrullah, 1989, p. 3585).

### Conclusion

Hamka and Shihab are two prominent Indonesian mufassirs who put a lot of effort into helping people internalize Qur'anic teachings in their daily lives. They are also concerned with educating Indonesian Muslims to appreciate Arabic, the Islamic religion's official language. According to Hamka, in order to make the Qur'an a life guide, a community of Muslims must devote themselves to studying it and its complicated elements (Amrullah, 1989, p. 3585)<sup>35</sup>. Similarly Shihab claims that the whole meaning of the Qur'an is beyond the capability of human's reasoning and that is one of the reasons why God sent it down in Arabic (Shihab, 2005, vol. 12: 538).

This article concludes that the two *mufassirs* adopt distinct techniques in boosting the prominence of the Arabic language. *Firstly*, They begin by tracing the history of the language and culture of the Arabs, whom the Qur'an first targeted. *Secondly*, both Hamka and Shihab agree on the universality of the prophet Muhammad's teachings, while they use different rationalization paths. *Third*, Hamka gives special attention to the benefits of non-Arabs who are fluent in Arabic. This is a critical issue for Hamka, who wants to encourage Muslims in Indonesia to study the Qur'an. *Fourth*, Shihab is more interested in presenting information about the uniqueness of the Arabic language to attract the attention of a more educated audience. These four strategies intertwine thorough the works of Qur'anic commentary of both Hamka and Shihab. In their hand, readers motivation in reading the Qur'an is manipulated and directed to a new kind of activity: learning Arabic.

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35 Commentary on Q. 12:2

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