Ta'wil Al-Ahaadith: A philological perspective to semantic roots of strategic foresight in ancient Arabic

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Introduction

Different languages result in different mental models. Boroditsky (2009), an expert on symbolic systems, points out that "even what might be deemed frivolous aspects of language can have far reaching effects on how we see the world" and on the way we think about space, things, time, and events. Also, Chen (2012) provides a literature review of the documented effects of languages on human cognition. He suggests a new tested hypothesis: the more *futureless* your language, the more likely you tend to save for the future. In other words, more distinction between now and tomorrow in our speech will only results in more discounting of the future as compared to the present. The impacts of language, based on his model of choice, are not limited to the economic behavior, however, and could have implication for long term health too.

Bae (2012) demonstrates that how the elite class in East Asia, in particular China and South Korea, has adopted Mi-re as the more common term for the future to achieve an "internal colonization of the future" and therefore keep the ordinary citizens outside the future building projects. Mi-re has a religious origin in Buddhism and originally meant "afterlife". This implies that the future is less controllable for people and should be determined by the elite who are in power. These kinds of philological perspectives is essential for any native English speaker who would like to contribute to the study of the futures in these regions.

In this essay a similar aspect of the relationships between languages and futures thinking is addressed. I illustrate the historical semantics of Strategic Foresight in West Asia, a region which is under the huge influence of Arabic language and Islamic teachings. I shed light on the clouds of meaning associated with an ancient term, Ta'wil Al-Ahaadith, that has a religious origin in Abrahamic faiths but has been forgotten so long both by religious and secular scholars in West Asia to mean strategic foresight. I explore the cloud of interrelated meanings that are hidden, for a non-speaker, in an ancient Arabic term: Ta'wil Al-Ahaadith. I discuss how the ancient speakers of Arabic used the term to indicate what in the modern era is known as *strategic foresight* (and intelligence). Even though this term is not commonly used by modern Arabs it well described an art and science or a field of profession that was essential for governance in ancient times. It seems that the concepts and tools of doing quality futures work have changed and *evolved* over time but the basic semantic elements are almost the same.

The story of Joseph

Joseph, son of Jacob, is a champion of strategic foresight in stories told in the Abrahamic belief systems. Through a dream he develops a vision of his future when he is still a child. The vision comes true in his adulthood when he barely passes 30 years of old to become the top aid of the governor of Egypt. Being a beloved child of Israel, Joseph has a critical mental skill, the basis for his obtaining a high post of office, which is the ability to provide *reliable* insight into the future. He effectively foresees the impending famine in Egypt through interpreting the repeated dreams of the governor and then is fully empowered with developing and implementing plans for enhanced preparedness in the face of difficult times.

Modern professional futurists also become top advisors of governors and are often responsible for effective preparedness in the face of upcoming challenges. Yet they rarely, if at all, interpret dreams. What they do is called horizon scanning, environmental scanning,, observation and analysis of emerging issues, inductive reasoning, metaphorical thinking, and deep interpretation of information packages as they are surfaced through news, images, trends, and events. Below I show that Joseph was indeed celebrated as a futurist, as defined and perceived in 21st century, in the Arabic script of Koran and therefore, not merely a dream interpreter.

Joseph: a dream interpreter or a futurist?

The story of Joseph, labeled as the best of stories, is retold in the Koran for Muslims. A whole chapter is dedicated to it in the Arabic script. However, in almost all translations of the chapter on Joseph's story, people have used "dream interpretation" as the suitable equivalent for the Arabic expression that was used in the script. I argue here that the mental skill that was bestowed upon Joseph was of a more general nature if we adopt a philological perspective to analyze and synthesize the network of meanings, represented by the expression in the ancient Arabic language.

According to the Koran, at the happy end of the plot, when Joseph is high up on the throne he takes note of how his childhood vision came true before his eyes and beside his parents:

Surat 12, Ayat 100

> *"[Joseph] said: "O my father! This is the real meaning of my dream of long ago, which my Lord has made come true."*

Here the Arabic term in the script is *Ta'wil Ro'ya*. Ro'ya is equivalent to dream. In the contemporary Arabic people use Ro'yat, a word from the same family, to mean vision; these two words are formed from a basic root, literally speaking they are *what is or could be seen*. These two words also have *family resemblance* to other terms, again from a basic root, Basirat and Estebsar, which could be translated into English as vision, insight, and foresight, but definitely not dream. Yet again literally speaking they are what is or could be seen by eyes. With these, however, what is seen by the mind's eye is generally implied.

Arabic has a "root-and-pattern" morphology. In other words, one has to understand and capture semantically-related meanings (i.e. patterns) when using

different words from the same root. A root consists of a set of bare consonants (usually three). In the case of Ro'ya and Ro'yat the root is R-A-Y. In the formal verbatim to mean vision, Ro'yat is commonly used. And the root of Basirat and Estebsar is B-S-R. In the formal verbatim to mean foresight, Esebsar is commonly used.

However, my focus is on another Arabic term also used in the story of Joseph to identify his mental skills: *Ta'wil Al-Ahaadith*.

Today Arabs use *Tafsir Al-Ahlam*, and sometimes *Ta'bir Al-Ahlaam*, to mean interpretation of dreams. We can reasonably translate the ancient phrase of Ta'wil Ro'ya into (deep and multilayered) interpretation of dreams without significant loss of enriched semantic insights. However, this is not the case with Ta'wil Al-Ahaadith. I argue here that a) translating this into "interpretation of dreams" is incorrect, in particular when making sense of it out of the context; b) a cloud of semantic insights will be lost if we do so.

In the Koran, at the beginning of the story, instead of Ta'wil Ro'ya, we read Ta'wil Al-Ahaadith:

Surat 12, Ayat 6:

> *Thus will thy Lord choose thee and teach thee Ta'wil Al-Ahaadith and perfect His favor to thee and to the posterity of Jacob - even as He perfected it to thy fathers Abraham and Isaac aforetime! For Allah is full of knowledge and wisdom.*

I deliberately did not translate Ta'wil Al-Ahaadith to open the networks of meanings.

What is Ta'wil?

I begin by shedding some light on the meaning of Ta'wil. Grammatically it is an infinitive based on the tri-radical root of A-W-L. It has some family resemblance with Ta'bir and Ta'fsir. The former means expressing something through words, making clear through statements and the latter means explaining those words, interpreting them in more detail for people who cannot easily get the sophisticated meaning of those expressions and statements. However, Ta'wil is quite different. Basically it means referring or returning to the first place, taking something (here texts) back to its beginning. What was or could be *originally* intended. It could also suggest what are the implied meanings, the eventual, and the final outcome or ramifications. Thus, Ta'wil works in both directions, backward and forward. When doing Ta'wil we try to find a degree of correspondence between mental subjective images expressed through words and texts on the one hand and the objective reality that exists out there in the world. As mentioned above Joseph says his spectacular rising in the governing ranks of Egypt was the *real* meaning of his childhood dreams/visions. This also highlights the fact that Ta'wil may include metaphorical/symbolic thinking, intuitive-inductive reasoning and a significant degree of *open* interpretation. In short, while doing Ta'wil people do not need to take the texts literally. When applying Ta'wil to a text, it becomes open to interpretation, and because of this, the word Ta'wil itself is a major source of polemic among Islamist scholars, in particular when understanding the teachings of Islam in general, and the

meaning of the Koran script itself.

For my purposes in this essay I should also mention that Ta'wil suggests trying to go beyond what is trivial, uncovering the inner and deeper layers of meaning. There are some evidences that Arabs invented this particular infinitive, which is not in common use by ordinary people today, well before the advent of Islam to refer to something different from Ta'fsir which can be translated into English simply as *interpretation*. Encyclopedia Britannica suggests *allegorical* interpretation and *esoteric* commentaries for what Ta'wil meant in ancient Arabic. Now I can build a cloud of meanings, see Figure 1 below, which shows all concepts that were packed inside the word Ta'wil as used in ancient Arabic (1). In other words, for the historical practitioners of the language, this term in itself includes a cloud of interrelated meanings. Non-speakers of Arabic, therefore, could miss all these meanings if they just translate Ta'wil into one or two equivalent words in English.
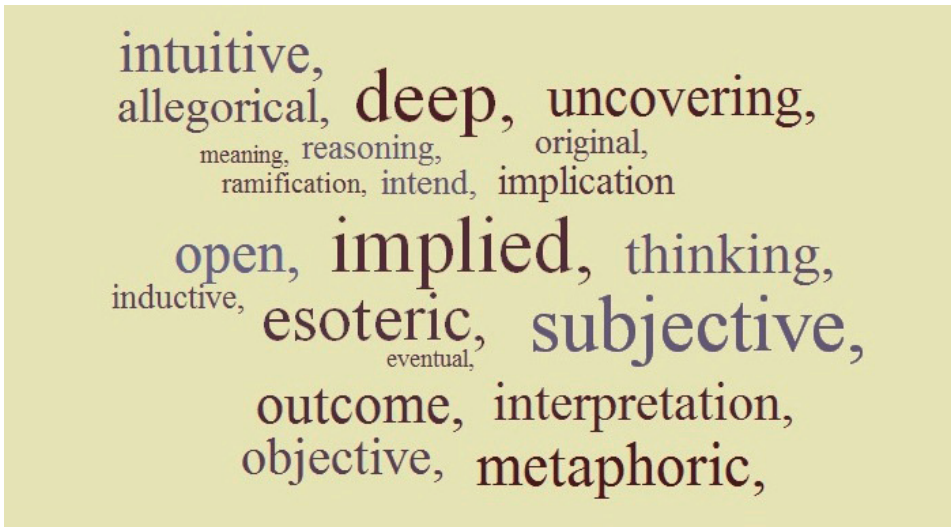

Figure 1. A cloud of meanings for Ta'wil

What is Al-Ahaadith?

Al-Ahaadith is the second part in the term Ta'wil Al-Ahaadith. It is a plural noun. In Arabic there are three kinds of plural: a couple of things, a few of things (between three and ten), a lot (eleven or more). Al-Ahaadith indicates the third kind of plural which implies that it is potentially countless. There is, however, some ambiguity regarding what could be the singular of this plural. Here the basic root is H-D-TH.

The first possibility is that Al-Ahaadith is the plural of Al-Hadith. In ancient Arabic, Al-Hadith as a noun means everyday conversation, speech, a people's conversation. However, in modern Arabic people use a different term from the same root, Al-Mohadathah, to mean conversation. Today, for Islamist scholars, Al-Hadith, almost exclusively means recorded sayings or reported acts of Prophet Muhammad (in Sunni Islam) or the Fourteen Infallibles (in Shia Islam). But in ancient Arabic

it simply meant a piece of information conveyed either in a small quantity or large or the speech of any ordinary person. Al-Hadith is also an adjective which means something new, modern, fresh, recent, and contemporary, what has emerged and that did not exist before. In this regard both today and ancient Arabs have almost the same perception and usage. Interestingly, people's talks are sources of new developments. So in ancient Arabic, both as a noun and an adjective, Al-Hadith had interrelated semantics.

This becomes clearer when the second possibility is introduced. Al-Ahaadith could also be the plural of Al-Ohdothah which is an ancient term not in current use. It is from the same root of H-D-TH and means bizarre and surprising speech, news, extraordinary events, something legendary, new things, recent developments, and wonderful stories. Today Arabs use another term from the same root, Al-Hadath and Al-Hadeth, to mean event, happening, occurrence and incident.

I do not tend to reject either of the two possibilities. Instead I build a cloud of meanings that is packed inside the word Al-Ahaadith as used in ancient Arabic. In other words, for the historical practitioners of the language, this term in itself includes a world of interrelated meanings which is presented in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. A cloud of meanings for Al-Ahaadith

What is Ta'wil Al-Ahaadith?

In the context of Joseph story Ta'wil Al-Ahaadith boils down to (deep) interpretation of dreams. Because he was able to comment on the ramifications and esoteric aspects of images that were quite extraordinary and bizarre AND people were talking about them in their daily conversations. However, out of the context, and taking into account the above philological perspective we have to admit that the mental skills of Joseph characterized in ancient Arabic as Ta'wil Al-Ahaadith was not exclusively related to the interpretation of dreams.

Figure 3. A cloud of meanings for Ta'wil Al-Ahaadith

Ta'wil Al-Ahaadith in 21st Century

Above discussion clearly suggests that *hermeneutics* could be an appropriate equivalent for the term *Ta'wil Al-Ahaadith*. Figure 4 presents a cloud of meanings for the term hermeneutics which has a great deal of overlap with the Figure 3. (2)
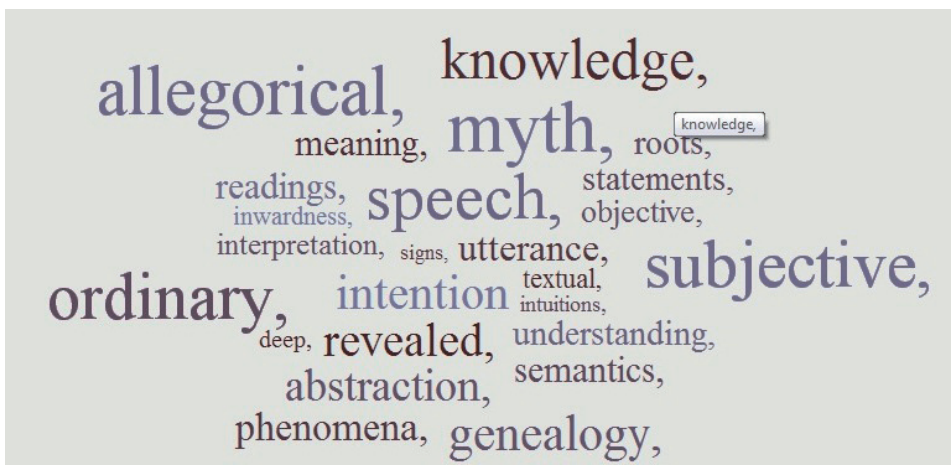

Figure 4. A cloud of meanings for hermeneutics

Moreover, in our modern world, data scientists are helping the US government to do reliable Ta'wil Al-Ahaadith too. Lockheed Martin, for instance, was given a $27 million contract in 2007 to develop the Web Information Spread Data Operations Module, or WISDOM, which analyses posts made to news forums, blogs and social media in order to get hints of political unrests across the globe (Giles, 2012). They are trying to make deeper sense of a torrent of people's conversations and tweets to make predictions about social and economic trends that affect us all, in particular political unrest. Even though these capabilities are quite novel and cutting edge, the core concept of this profession is at least as old as the story of Joseph. This became clearer after I deciphered the cloud of meanings packed under the term of

Ta'wil Al-Ahaadith in ancient Arabic. Data science as a new term (and job title) in itself includes a cloud of interrelated meanings which is presented in Figure 5 below (3).
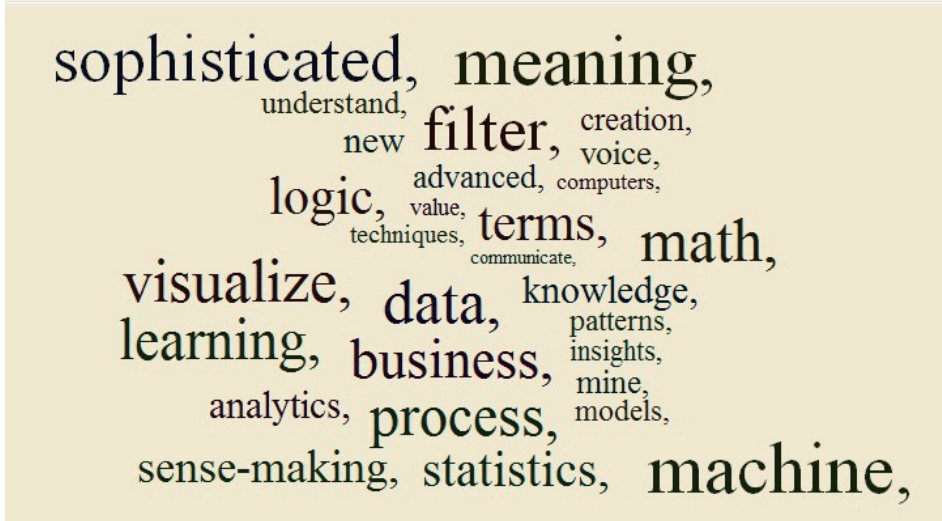

Figure 5. A cloud of meanings for data science

Concluding Remarks

If we run a comparative analysis on the clouds of meanings for Ta'wil Al-Ahaadith (Figure 3), hermeneutics (Figure 4); and date science (Figure 5) a significant amount of similarity is found among them as shown in Table 1. It demonstrates that how the elements of quality futures work have evolved over time in terms of material/sources, objectives, methods, agents, products and features. All of them share a common characteristic in that they are, professionally, both art and science. Yet one can argue that *Strategic Foresight* is a general comprehensive term that covers and includes all these different clouds of meanings. In Slaughter's (2002) definition:

> *[It] is the ability to create and maintain a high-quality, coherent and functional forward view and to use the insights arising in organisationally useful ways; for example: to detect adverse conditions, guide policy, shape strategy; to explore new markets, products and services. It represents a fusion of futures methods with those of strategic management.*

Table 1.*Comparison of futures work elements based on the terminology used*

Terminology used for	Ta'wil Al-Ahaadith	Hermeneutics	Data Science	Strategic Foresight
Material and Sources	conversations, talks, events, news incidents, happenings, occurrences, developments, information, images, stories	speeches, utterance, statements, signs, text, script, phenomena, myth	data, terms, voices, text, news, feeds, tweets, web, papers, articles, books, reports	*intentional, behavioral, cultural, and social quadrants*
Objectives	reliable insight into the future	truth, understanding	business value, understand, learning, sense-making, predict, forecast, communicate	*create and maintain a forward view, guide policy, shape strategy; explore new markets, products and services*
Methods	interpretation, thinking, reasoning	interpretation, semantics, genealogy	mathematics, statistics, models, analytics, techniques, process	*Futures/Foresight Research Methods*
Agents	Joseph, the posterity of Jacob, Isaac, Abraham	scholars, critics	experts, data scientists, machines, computers	*futurists, scholars, experts, ordinary humans, machines, computers*
Products	deep meaning, intelligence on real outcomes, prophecy	deep meaning, knowledge, roots, intentions	forward meaning, knowledge, intelligence, intentions, patterns, insights	*organizationally useful insights*
Features	intuitive, open, implied, allegorical, metaphoric, esoteric	subjective, revealed, allegorical, inwardness,	sophisticated, advanced, creative, visualizing	*high-quality, coherent and functional*
Profession	art and science	art and science	art and science	*art and science*

Joseph was able to apply his knowledge of Ta'wil Al-Ahaadith, and not merely interpretation of dreams, to create and maintain a high-quality, coherent, and functional forward view for himself and for the governor of Egypt. He essentially was proficient in Ta'wil or *allegorical* interpretation of interesting stories, images,

events, and daily conversations, all in all known as Al-Ahaadith, to suggest future developments. While in power he successfully used his mental skill in organizationally useful ways to detect adverse conditions, guide policy, and shape strategy. As a matter of fact he received government recognition as a forerunner of all hermeneutic scholars, data scientists and strategic foresight practitioners yet had to use only his intuition and metaphorical thinking to do inductive reasoning on bizarre and surprising speeches and wonderful stories with the aim of providing strategic intelligence on the future.

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Notes

1 All clouds of meanings shown in this paper were generated by adding keywords in the editor page of this website: http://worditout.com/
2 Keywords for generating this cloud were obtained from Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hermeneutics/
3 Keywords for generating this cloud were obtained from a presentation by Harlan D. Harris, Sept 26, 2011: https://docs.google.com/present/view?id=0AXaXKp9bt6OXZ Gd4YzlnYmRfNThjMmo4dm5yaA&hl=en_US

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