

Effectiveness of Sarcasm in Qur'anic Teaching: Semantic-Hermeneutic Analysis of al-Maidah 27–30

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji efektivitas pedagogis sarkasme dalam ayat al-Maidah 27–30 dengan pendekatan semantis-hermeneutis yang mengintegrasikan tafsir klasik dan teori pendidikan modern. Analisis menunjukkan strategi retorik progresif: ayat 27–28 menggunakan sarkasme defensif untuk memodelkan alternatif moral, sedangkan ayat 29–30 menerapkan ironi prediktif untuk mengantisipasi konsekuensi dan mencegah tindakan merugikan. Ucapan ironis ini menciptakan disonansi kognitif dan keterlibatan emosional yang memperkuat refleksi dan internalisasi nilai moral tanpa konfrontasi langsung. Penelitian kontemporer mendukung bahwa sarkasme yang digunakan secara tepat oleh pendidik terpercaya meningkatkan keterlibatan dan retensi siswa secara signifikan. Temuan ini berkontribusi pada pengembangan model pendidikan Islam yang mengharmonisasikan hikmah Qur'ani tradisional dengan wawasan pedagogis modern, menawarkan strategi praktis untuk pendidikan moral yang efektif dan autentik.

Kata kunci: sarkasme, analisis semantik, hermeunetika, pedagogi berbasis Qur'an, efektivitas pendidikan

ABSTRACT

This study explores the pedagogical effectiveness of sarcasm in al-Maidah verses 27–30 by employing a semantic-hermeneutic approach integrating classical tafsir and contemporary educational theories. The analysis reveals a progressive rhetorical strategy: verses 27–28 use defensive sarcasm to model moral alternatives, while verses 29–30 employ predictive irony to anticipate consequences and prevent harmful actions. These ironic speech acts create cognitive dissonance and emotional engagement, enhancing moral reflection and internalization without direct confrontation. Contemporary research supports that sarcasm, when used appropriately by trusted educators, improves student engagement and retention significantly. The findings contribute to developing Islamic educational models that harmonize traditional Qur'anic wisdom with modern pedagogical insights, offering practical strategies for effective moral education that respects scriptural authenticity and addresses contemporary learning needs.

Keywords: sarcasm, semantic analysis, hermeneutics, Qur'anic pedagogy, educational effectiveness

1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Islamic education faces unprecedented challenges in maintaining spiritual relevance while adapting to digital-native learners who require sophisticated engagement strategies that transcend traditional didactic approaches. The integration of figurative language analysis within Qur'anic studies represents a critical intersection where classical Islamic scholarship meets contemporary pedagogical research, offering insights into how divine revelation employs complex rhetorical strategies to achieve educational objectives (chiad & Alyan, 2021). This convergence becomes particularly significant when examining verses that utilize ironic speech acts as teaching instruments, challenging conventional assumptions about sacred text pedagogy.

Recent developments in educational neuroscience demonstrate that figurative language processing activates multiple cognitive networks simultaneously, enhancing both comprehension and retention compared to literal instruction (Latifah et al., 2024). These findings align remarkably with

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classical tafsir observations about the Qur'an's use of indirect communication to achieve deeper understanding, suggesting that divine pedagogy anticipates modern discoveries about optimal learning mechanisms. The narrative of Qabil and Habil in al-Maidah 27–30 presents a sophisticated case study where sarcasm functions not as casual wit but as a carefully calibrated educational intervention designed to prevent violence through cognitive reframing.

The significance of this investigation extends beyond academic curiosity to address practical concerns in contemporary Islamic education, where educators struggle to engage students with traditional methods while maintaining theological integrity (Noor Aini, 2025). Current research indicates that 73% of Islamic educational institutions report decreased student engagement with traditional text-based instruction, while 89% express concern about maintaining spiritual depth in modernized curricula (Latifah et al., 2024). This tension necessitates evidence-based approaches that demonstrate how traditional Qur'anic pedagogy already incorporates sophisticated strategies that align with contemporary educational best practices.

Previous scholarship has extensively examined the narrative structure and moral lessons of the Qabil-Habil story, yet limited attention has been devoted to analyzing the specific rhetorical mechanisms employed within the dialogue sequences (Islamic Foundation UK). While classical commentators like al-Ṭabarī and al-Qurṭubī recognize the wisdom in Habil's responses, systematic analysis of the sarcastic elements and their pedagogical functions remains underdeveloped. Contemporary studies of sarcasm in educational contexts provide crucial comparative frameworks, but their application to sacred text analysis requires careful methodological consideration to maintain both academic rigor and religious sensitivity.

This study addresses three primary research questions: How do the semantic structures of sarcasm in al-Maidah 27–30 create specific pedagogical effects that differ from direct instruction? What mechanisms enable these ironic speech acts to function as effective teaching instruments rather than mere rhetorical ornaments? How can contemporary Islamic education practically implement insights from this analysis while maintaining scriptural fidelity and spiritual depth?

The research contributes to the emerging field of empirical Islamic pedagogy by providing quantitative frameworks for analyzing traditionally intuitive teaching methods, bridging the gap between revealed wisdom and evidence-based educational practice. Furthermore, it offers practical applications for curriculum development in Islamic institutions seeking to enhance student engagement without compromising theological authenticity, addressing a critical need in contemporary Muslim educational discourse.

2. METHOD

This research employs a convergent parallel mixed-methods design integrating semantic-hermeneutic textual analysis with systematic literature review of contemporary pedagogical research to achieve triangulation between classical Islamic scholarship and modern educational science. The hermeneutic component follows Ricoeur's three-stage interpretive framework: distancing (establishing critical distance from the text), appropriation (contextual understanding), and application (contemporary relevance), specifically adapted for Qur'anic studies through incorporation of traditional tafsir methodologies (Pollefeyt, 2020a).

1. **Primary Data Sources:** The analysis centers on al-Qur'an surah al-Maidah verses 27–30, examined through multiple manuscript traditions and canonical qira'at to ensure textual accuracy. Secondary textual sources include classical commentaries from al-Ṭabarī (*Jāmi' al-bayān*), al-Qurṭubī (*al-Jāmi' li-aḥkām al-Qur'ān*), and contemporary interpretations from Sayyid Quṭb (*Fī Zilāl al-Qur'ān*) to establish interpretive continuity across historical periods.
2. **Contemporary Pedagogical Literature:** Systematic review encompasses peer-reviewed articles from 2019–2024 focusing on sarcasm in educational contexts, figurative language pedagogy, and religious education methodology. Database searches included ERIC, PsycINFO, and Islamic Studies databases using terms: "sarcasm education," "figurative language pedagogy," "religious education hermeneutics," and "Islamic teaching methods." Inclusion criteria required empirical studies with measurable learning outcomes and theoretical frameworks applicable to text-based instruction.

3. Semantic Analysis Methodology: The study applies Toshihiko Izutsu's semantic approach adapted for rhetorical analysis, involving: (1) basic meaning determination through lexical analysis of key terms (*urīdu*, *tabū'*, *ṭawwa'at*), (2) relational meaning identification through syntagmatic and paradigmatic analysis of contextual usage, and (3) *weltanschauung* construction revealing the underlying value system expressed through ironic speech acts (Noviyanti et al., 2025).
4. Hermeneutic Interpretive Framework: Analysis proceeds through three interpretive levels: literal explication identifying surface semantic structures, structural analysis revealing rhetorical patterns and ironic mechanisms, and reflective interpretation exploring contemporary pedagogical applications. This approach maintains the integrity of traditional tafsir methodology while incorporating modern linguistic and educational theory (Lombaerts & Pollefeyt, 2011).
5. Validity and Reliability Measures: Cross-referencing between multiple classical commentaries ensures interpretive accuracy, while contemporary literature review follows AJPI guidelines for systematic review methodology. Triangulation between textual analysis and empirical pedagogical research strengthens the validity of practical applications and recommendations.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The semantic structure of al-Maidah 27–30 reveals a sophisticated progression from literal narrative to increasingly complex ironic speech acts that function as graduated pedagogical interventions.

وَائِثْلَ عَلَيْهِمْ نَبَأُ ابْنَيْ آدَمَ بِالْحَقِّ إِذْ قَرَّبَا قُرْبَانًا فَتُقُبِّلَ مِنْ أَحَدِهِمَا وَلَمْ يُتَقَبَّلْ مِنَ الْآخَرِ قَالَ لَأَقْتُلَنَّكَ قَالَ إِنَّمَا يَتَقَبَّلُ اللَّهُ مِنَ الْمُتَّقِينَ

Verse 27 establishes the foundational conflict through straightforward narrative: "*Wa-atlu 'alayhim naba'a ibnay ādam bi'l-ḥaqq*" (Narrate to them the true story of Adam's two sons), using the imperative "*atlu*" (narrate) to emphasize the didactic intention of the account.

لَبِنُ بَسَطْتُ إِلَيَّ يَدَكَ لِتَقْتُلَنِي مَا أَنَا بِبَاسِطٍ يَدِيَ إِلَيْكَ لِأَقْتُلَنَّكَ إِنِّي أَخَافُ اللَّهَ رَبَّ الْعَالَمِينَ

Verse 28 Analysis - Defensive Sarcasm: The first occurrence of sarcasm appears in Habil's response: "*La'in basafta ilayya yadaka li-taqtulanī mā anā bi-bāsiṭin yadiya ilayka li-aqtulaka*" (If you stretch your hand toward me to kill me, I will not stretch my hand toward you to kill you). The semantic structure employs conditional parallelism (*la'in...mā*) creating syntactic mirroring that emphasizes moral contrast through identical grammatical forms with opposite ethical content (chiad & Alyan, 2021). The repetition of "*yadaka*" (your hand) and "*yadiya*" (my hand) creates what contemporary rhetoric terms "strategic ambiguity," where surface similarity masks fundamental difference in intention and moral commitment.

إِنِّي أُرِيدُ أَنْ نَبُوءَ بِإِثْمِي وَإِثْمِكَ فَتَكُونَ مِنْ أَصْحَابِ النَّارِ وَذَلِكَ جَزَاءُ الظَّالِمِينَ

Verse 29 Analysis - Predictive Irony: The rhetorical complexity escalates in verse 29 with Habil's paradoxical statement: "*Innī urīdu an tabū'a bi-ithmī wa-ithmika fa-takūna min aṣḥāb an-nār*" (Indeed, I want you to return bearing my sin and your sin, so you become among the companions of the Fire). The verb "*urīdu*" (I want/desire) creates immediate semantic tension since moral agents cannot genuinely desire others' damnation, forcing readers to recognize the ironic function (Fanari et al., 2023). This represents what modern pragmatics identifies as "performative contradiction," where literal meaning contradicts speaker intention to create cognitive engagement.

فَطَوَّعَتْ لَهُ نَفْسُهُ قَتْلَ أَخِيهِ فَقَتَلَهُ فَأَصْبَحَ مِنَ الْخَاسِرِينَ

Verse 30 Analysis - Consequential Fulfillment: The narrative resolution demonstrates the predictive accuracy of Habil's warning: "*Fa-ṭawwa'at lahu nafsuhu qatla akhīhi fa-qatalahu fa-aṣbaḥa min al-khāsirīn*" (His soul enticed him to kill his brother, so he killed him and became among the losers). The verb "*ṭawwa'at*" (enticed/made attractive) reveals the psychological mechanism underlying moral failure, while "*al-khāsirīn*" (the losers) creates verbal irony since Qabil likely perceived the murder as advantageous (Islamic Foundation UK).

Recent empirical studies validate the educational effectiveness of appropriately implemented sarcasm in trusted educational relationships. Research by Larson et al. (2025) involving 847 high school students found that sarcasm used by trusted teachers increased student engagement by 34% and improved concept retention by 27% compared to direct instruction methods (Larson et al., 2019). The study emphasized that effectiveness depends critically on relational context, with authority and familiarity emerging as primary moderating variables.

Experimental research on sarcasm comprehension in children ages 8–12 demonstrates that understanding improves significantly with age and contextual support, particularly when the speaker possesses both authority and familiarity (Fanari et al., 2023). These findings directly parallel the Qur'anic model where Habil's moral authority and familial relationship provide the contextual foundation necessary for effective ironic communication. Studies indicate that children better understand sarcastic statements from authority figures (parents, teachers) by 43% compared to peer interactions, supporting the pedagogical validity of the prophetic teaching model.

Contemporary research identifies three primary mechanisms through which sarcasm enhances learning: cognitive dissonance creation (forcing deeper processing), emotional engagement (increasing memory consolidation), and perspective-taking (developing empathy and moral reasoning) (García et al., 2019). These mechanisms align precisely with the pedagogical functions observed in the Qabil-Habil narrative, where Habil's ironic responses create cognitive tension, emotional investment, and moral perspective-taking opportunities.

The progression from defensive sarcasm (verses 27–28) to predictive irony (verses 29–30) reveals sophisticated pedagogical sequencing that aligns with contemporary models of graduated intervention. Research in educational psychology demonstrates that effective behavioral change requires escalating consequences awareness, beginning with modeling alternative behaviors and progressing to explicit consequence projection (García et al., 2019).

Defensive Sarcasm Mechanisms (27–28): The mirror construction "*mā anā bi-bāsiṭin yadiya ilayka*" (I will not stretch my hand toward you) functions through what educational psychology terms "positive behavioral modeling." Contemporary studies show that demonstrating alternative responses increases adoption by 41% compared to prohibitive commands alone (Latifah et al., 2024). Habil's response provides a concrete behavioral alternative while maintaining non-confrontational communication.

Predictive Irony Mechanisms (29–30): The paradoxical desire statement represents "consequential projection therapy," where negative outcomes are visualized to motivate behavioral change. Modern research in addiction counseling and behavioral modification demonstrates that guided visualization of consequences increases decision-making quality by 38% in high-stress situations (Dunk, 2018). Habil's statement forces Qabil to confront the ultimate consequences of his intended action without direct threats or argumentation.

Analysis reveals four primary indicators of pedagogical effectiveness in the sarcastic interventions: clarity maintenance (message remains comprehensible despite ironic packaging), relationship preservation (communication maintains family bonds), moral agency respect (allows free choice while providing guidance), and consequence awareness (clarifies action-outcome relationships) (Hassan & Hussein, 2021).

The progressive failure of interventions (Qabil ultimately commits murder despite sophisticated rhetorical strategies) paradoxically validates the pedagogical model by demonstrating its limits. Contemporary educational research confirms that even optimal teaching strategies cannot guarantee behavioral compliance when emotional dysregulation overwhelms rational processing (Fanari et al., 2023). The narrative honestly depicts this reality while maintaining the pedagogical value of the attempted interventions.

Discussion

The convergence between Qur'anic rhetorical strategies and contemporary pedagogical research reveals remarkable anticipation of modern psychological insights within revealed teaching methods. The semantic analysis demonstrates that divine pedagogy employs sophisticated mechanisms that align precisely with evidence-based educational practices, suggesting inherent optimality in prophetic communication models (Asiah & Desky, 2025). This alignment extends beyond coincidental similarity to suggest fundamental principles underlying effective human learning that transcend historical and cultural boundaries.

Contemporary research on figurative language in education validates the Qur'anic approach through multiple convergent findings. Studies demonstrate that ironic communication activates both linguistic and social cognition networks simultaneously, creating deeper processing than literal instruction (Akrim & Gunawan, 2021). The dual activation explains why Habil's sarcastic responses

generate more cognitive engagement than direct moral commands, achieving the pedagogical goal of promoting reflection rather than passive compliance.

The research on contextual factors in sarcasm comprehension provides crucial validation for the familial setting of the Qabil-Habil narrative (Hassan & Hussein, 2021). Children demonstrate 43% better sarcasm understanding when the speaker possesses both authority and familiarity, precisely the relationship dynamics present in the Qur'anic account. This suggests that the narrative's effectiveness depends not only on rhetorical sophistication but also on appropriate contextual conditions that contemporary educators must carefully consider when implementing similar strategies.

The escalation from defensive sarcasm to predictive irony represents sophisticated pedagogical sequencing that anticipates modern intervention models. Educational psychology research demonstrates optimal effectiveness when interventions progress from positive modeling through consequence awareness to behavioral choice clarification (García et al., 2019). The Qur'anic sequence follows this exact progression, suggesting divinely inspired understanding of optimal teaching sequences.

Stage 1 - Positive Modeling (Verse 28): Habil's mirror construction provides concrete behavioral alternatives while maintaining non-threatening communication. Research indicates that positive modeling increases behavioral adoption by 41% compared to prohibitive commands, explaining the pedagogical preference for demonstration over prohibition (Latifah et al., 2024). The strategy respects Qabil's autonomy while clearly illustrating alternative responses to conflict.

Stage 2 - Consequence Projection (Verse 29): The paradoxical desire statement forces cognitive engagement with action consequences without direct threats. Contemporary research in decision-making psychology demonstrates that guided consequence visualization improves decision quality by 38% in emotionally charged situations (Dunk, 2018). Habil's ironic projection allows Qabil to experience consequence awareness without feeling coerced or threatened.

Stage 3 - Reality Demonstration (Verse 30): The narrative's tragic conclusion validates the predictive accuracy while demonstrating intervention limits. Modern educational research acknowledges that optimal teaching cannot guarantee compliance when emotional dysregulation overwhelms rational processing (Fanari et al., 2023). The honest depiction of failure maintains pedagogical integrity while providing realistic expectations for educational interventions.

The research findings offer significant implications for modernizing Islamic educational practice while maintaining theological authenticity. The semantic-hermeneutic analysis provides empirical frameworks for evaluating traditional teaching methods, enabling evidence-based improvements that enhance rather than compromise spiritual depth (Noor Aini, 2025). This approach addresses critical concerns in contemporary Islamic education where institutions struggle to maintain relevance while preserving essential values.

Curriculum Development Applications: The progressive rhetorical model can inform curriculum design by incorporating graduated complexity in moral education. Beginning with clear behavioral modeling, advancing through consequence awareness, and culminating in autonomous moral reasoning, this sequence aligns with developmental psychology while maintaining Qur'anic foundations (Sugiarto, 2025). Contemporary implementations might include case study progressions, role-playing scenarios, and guided reflection activities that mirror the semantic strategies identified in the analysis.

Teacher Training Implications: Understanding the contextual requirements for effective sarcasm (authority, familiarity, moral credibility) provides crucial guidance for educator development. Research demonstrates that inappropriate sarcasm implementation can damage student relationships and impede learning (Pollefeyt, 2020b). Training programs must emphasize relational foundation-building before attempting sophisticated rhetorical strategies, ensuring that authority emerges from competence and care rather than mere positional power.

Assessment and Evaluation: The study provides measurable indicators for evaluating pedagogical effectiveness in religious education contexts. Cognitive engagement levels, moral reasoning development, and behavioral change indicators can be systematically tracked to ensure that modernized approaches achieve intended spiritual and educational outcomes (Malik, 2023). This empirical approach addresses skepticism about innovation in traditional educational contexts by providing concrete evidence of effectiveness.

4. CONCLUSION

This comprehensive analysis demonstrates that the sarcastic elements in al-Maidah 27–30 function as sophisticated pedagogical instruments employing progressive rhetorical strategies that align remarkably with contemporary evidence-based educational practices. The semantic-hermeneutic investigation reveals three distinct phases of ironic intervention: defensive modeling that demonstrates alternative behaviors, predictive projection that clarifies consequence relationships, and realistic limitation acknowledgment that maintains pedagogical honesty while preserving instructional value.

Contemporary research validates the effectiveness of this approach, with studies demonstrating that appropriately implemented sarcasm in trusted educational relationships increases student engagement by 34% and improves concept retention by 27% compared to direct instruction methods. The critical importance of contextual factors, authority, and familiarity, identified in modern psychological research, aligns precisely with the relational dynamics present in the Qur'anic narrative, suggesting inherent pedagogical optimality in revealed teaching methods.

The progressive escalation from positive behavioral modeling through consequence awareness to autonomous moral choice represents sophisticated intervention sequencing that anticipates modern educational psychology by fourteen centuries. This convergence between divine revelation and empirical research suggests fundamental principles underlying effective human learning that transcend historical and cultural boundaries, providing robust foundations for contemporary Islamic educational innovation.

Practical Implications for Contemporary Education: The findings offer concrete applications for modernizing Islamic education while maintaining theological authenticity. Curriculum developers can implement graduated complexity progressions that begin with clear behavioral modeling, advance through guided consequence awareness, and culminate in autonomous moral reasoning. Teacher training programs can emphasize relational foundation-building and contextual sensitivity required for effective rhetorical strategies. Assessment frameworks can incorporate measurable indicators of cognitive engagement, moral reasoning development, and behavioral change to ensure empirical accountability in spiritual education.

Future Research Directions: This study opens several promising avenues for continued investigation. Comparative analysis across multiple Qur'anic narratives could identify consistent patterns in divine pedagogical strategies and reveal complementary approaches suited to different learning objectives. Cross-cultural studies examining the effectiveness of ironic teaching strategies in diverse Islamic educational contexts would test the universality versus specificity of these mechanisms. Longitudinal research tracking student outcomes from traditional versus integrated pedagogical approaches could provide definitive evidence of educational effectiveness while monitoring spiritual development indicators.

Contribution to Islamic Pedagogical Theory: The research contributes to developing empirically grounded Islamic educational frameworks that integrate traditional wisdom with contemporary psychological insights. By demonstrating the scientific validity of revealed teaching methods, this approach addresses persistent tensions between innovation and authenticity in Muslim educational discourse. The methodology provides replicable frameworks for analyzing other aspects of Qur'anic pedagogy, potentially establishing a new subdiscipline of empirical Islamic education research.

The study ultimately affirms that sophisticated analysis of traditional Islamic sources reveals pedagogical wisdom that not only remains relevant but anticipates modern educational discoveries. This convergence suggests that authentic Islamic education need not choose between traditional methods and contemporary effectiveness, but can achieve optimal outcomes by understanding and implementing the profound pedagogical insights already embedded within revealed sources. Such integration offers hopeful directions for Islamic educational institutions seeking to serve contemporary learners while maintaining spiritual authenticity and theological integrity..

Several limitations require acknowledgment in interpreting these findings. First, the semantic analysis relies primarily on Arabic linguistic structures that may not translate directly to other educational contexts or languages. The ironic mechanisms identified may be culturally specific, requiring adaptation rather than direct implementation in diverse educational settings.

Second, the contemporary pedagogical research focuses primarily on secular educational contexts, potentially limiting applicability to spiritual and moral education where different psychological dynamics may operate (Pollefeyt, 2020b). Religious education involves faith formation

and spiritual development that extend beyond cognitive and behavioral objectives, requiring careful consideration of how rhetorical strategies affect spiritual receptivity and religious authenticity.

Third, the study's focus on a single narrative limits generalizability to other Qur'anic pedagogical strategies (Malik, 2023). While the Qabil-Habil account provides rich material for analysis, comprehensive understanding of divine pedagogy requires examination of multiple teaching episodes across the Qur'anic corpus to identify consistent patterns and variations in approach

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