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Participant Reference in Qur'anic Arabic: Dialogues of Moses: A Corpus Based Study

Abstract

Participant reference in Arabic, a language with a sophisticated pronominal system, is dependent on several factors. Most of the previous research considered rule-based analyses of text and ignored other important factors such as pragmatic, sociolinguistic, and native speaker's nonlinguistic knowledge. In this study of Qur'anic Arabic, two theoretical frameworks were taken into account: primarily Givón's measurements of topic continuity and, secondarily, Binding Theory. The study shows that the language is accessible for native speakers of Arabic. However, if translated into another language, the alternations of the use of full noun phrases (NP) and pronouns and dropped pronouns (pro) seem necessary. A more comprehensive text analysis approach might be called for, so that no prejudice judgments about any language are made.
Keywords: Participant Reference, topic continuity, Arabic

0   Introduction

Participant reference and topic continuity in Arabic texts have been studied by a limited number of researchers such as Albaldawi (2004). The fact that Arabic is a language that allows multiple word orders provides a large body of data which makes studies of this type effort and time consuming. The different word orderings allowed in Arabic would require a specific study that deals with each word order. Moreover, it has a sophisticated pronominal system.

This paper attempts to analyze selected texts from Qur'anic Arabic (QA); a text whose authenticity is not doubted by Muslims; a text that contains all possible word orderings. Since the body of data is huge, only dialogues of narrative kind were selected. Specifically, the dialogues involving Allah (i.e. God), Moses and the Pharaoh were chosen.

The selection of these dialogues was not random. It was noticed that these dialogues represent a narrative widely known and accepted by people as true since it is mentioned in the New and Old Testaments. Hence, the story is famous but the language and the way it was presented differ. In other words, it is not the narrative itself that is of concern to us, but the way the narrative manifests participant reference and topic continuity

We postulate that the readers of these dialogues, at some point, would find themselves at a loss as to what referent the pronoun refers to or who the speaker and the hearer are.

Another question that arises and needs to be addressed is related to whether it is important to know or to have knowledge of the narrative in order to recognize the speaker from the

hearer, (i.e. does the reader need to have some historical background or knowledge of the story to be able to identify referents?)

This study has been conducted to point out clearly the problems that the issue of topic continuity presents in understanding and comprehending Arabic texts. The study is descriptive and explanatory in nature. Explanations of the rules are taken from a primarily formal point of view, hence adopting Binding Theory of the Principles and Parameters approach of syntax as developed by Chomsky 1982 and Hellan 1988. Beside the formal approach used in the analysis of the selected text, a detailed functional approach to topic/participant continuity (cf. Givón 1983) is used to allow us to trace the analysis of the text from a functional linguistic point of view which we find plausible for such study.

The paper is organized as follows. The first section provides background information about the Arabic language and the related topics of the study such as the pronominal system, subject verb agreement, and word order. The second section provides brief summaries of the theoretical frameworks used. The third section provides sample texts and their analysis showing the tracing process of reference and participants. The final section discusses the results and concludes the paper.

1   The Arabic language: Agreement and Pronominal System

Arabic is a Semitic language that allows six different word orders. These are VSO, VOS, SVO, SOV, OVS, and OSV. The two prevalent word orders are VSO and SVO. The examples in (1) show these orders.

(1)

      a. bana   al-waladu   al-qasra
          built-Pt   the-boy-NOM the-castle-ACC
          "The boy built the castle."

      b. bana   alqasra   al-waladu
          built-Pt   the-castle-ACC   the-boy-NOM
          "The boy built the castle."

      c. al-waladu   bana   alqasra
          the-boy-NOM   built-Pt   the-castle-ACC
          "The boy built the castle."

      d. al-waladu   alqasra   bana-
          the-boy-NOM   the-castle-ACC   built-Pt
          "The boy built the castle."

      e. alqasra   bana-hu   al-waladu
          the-castle-ACC   built-Pt-it   the-boy-NOM
          "The boy built the castle."

      f. alqasra   al-waladu   bana-hu
          the-castle-ACC   the-boy-NOM   built-Pt
          "The boy built the castle."

Besides these verbal sentences, Arabic has nominal-subject predicate sentences; copula sentences. These also allow two different orders as shown in (2),

(2)

    a. al-wardatu   jameelatun
       the-flower-NOM   beautiful-NOM
       "The flower is beautiful."

    b. jameelatun   al-wardatu
       beautiful-NOM   the-flower-NOM
       "The flower is beautiful."

Examples in (1) and (2) show that certain words when topicalized are fronted and that the topicalization is a multistep process where the degree of importance differs from one word to the other; the more important the word for the context is, the more frontward it is. Hence, the different word ordering.

In Arabic the head noun precedes all other constituents in its phrase. Within its governing category, the NP is located in accordance with the examples in (1) and (2).[1] The pre-modifiers of a head noun in Arabic are limited to the definite article *al-* 'the' while the post-modifiers can be adjectives, and relative clauses.[2]

Arabic subject-verb agreement is determined by the word ordering of the sentence. Agreement includes number and gender. For example, the verb agrees with subject in number and in gender if the word order is SVO, SOV or OSV but only in gender if it is VSO, VOS or OVS (cf. Saidat 2003). This shows that whenever the subject precedes the verb, number and gender agreement is achieved, otherwise, only gender agreement. It is worth mentioning, here, that nouns in Arabic are either masculine or feminine. Unlike in English, neutral gender nouns do not exist. Natural gender nouns follow the rules explained here; however, inanimate nouns marked as masculine are treated as feminine if they are pluralized and masculine in their singular form. (cf. Al-Shorafat 2012)

In terms of its pronominal system, Arabic has independent – substitutional- and dependent – post/pre-nominal- pronouns or post-nominal *suffixes.* Table (1) summarizes these pronouns.

person	Independent and Substitutional	Pre-nominal	Post-nominal	Possessive
1s	anaa	a-	-niy	- iy
1pl	naHnu	na-	-naa	-naa
2ms	anta	ta-	-ka	-ka
2fs	anti	ta-	-ki	-ki
2du	antumaa	ta-	-kuma	-kuma
2mpl	antum	ta-	-kum	-kum
2fpl	antunna	ta-	-kuna	-kuna
3ms	huwa	ya-	-hu	- hu
3fs	hiya	ta-	-ha	-ha
3du	huma	ya-	-huma	-huma
3mpl	hum	ya-	-hum	-hum

Table 1. The Arabic Pronominal System

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[1]   The governing category for X is the minimal domain containing it, its governor and an accessible subject.
[2]   Adjectival and adverbial modifiers usually have similar agreement patterns with the head noun.

As a pro-drop language, Arabic permits the subject to be null provided that it can be recovered from the morphological inflection attached to the main verb of the sentence and from agreement rules.[3] Of course, the recovered subject is preliminarily a pronoun. A full noun is impossible to be recovered unless in a running context. The following table summarizes the agreement markers in the past and present tenses for the verb *faʕal* 'make'.

person	Past	Present	Recovered pronoun
1ˢ	faʕal-tu	a-fʕal-u	Anaa
1pl	faʕal -na	n-fʕal-u	naHnu
2ms	faʕal -ta	ta-fʕal-u	Anta
2fs	faʕal-ti	ta-fʕal-iin	Anti
2du	faʕal-tuma	ta-fʕal-an	Antumaa
2mpl	faʕal-tum	ta-fʕal-un	Antum
2fpl	faʕal-tuna	ta-fʕal-na	Antenna
3ms	faʕal-ta	ya-fʕal-u	Huwa
3fs	faʕal-at	ta-fʕal-u	Hiya
3d	faʕal-aa	ya-fʕal-an	Huma
3mpl	faʕal-u	ya-fʕal-un	Hum
3fpl	faʕal-na	ya-fʕal-na	Hunna

Table 2. Agreement markers in Arabic

As shown in the table above, we can notice that an independent or substitutional pronoun can be recovered for each person depending on the inflectional affixes attached to the root *fʕal* "to do". Again, unless it is in context and following the rules of NP tracing, the full noun cannot be recovered. In Agentless sentences, subjects are also recovered using the same rules.

2 Binding Theory and Givón measurements

Binding theory is a formal theory of syntax that deals with sentences with sharp boundaries (Edmondson & Burquest 1998); if a sentence does not abide by the principles, then it is ungrammatical. However, in this paper, we use authentic data in a running context, the Qur'an. The data are believed to be grammatical and are considered to be the first source for rules of Arabic grammar by Arabs; therefore, the use of Binding principles, here, is not to judge grammaticality but rather to see how it would account for the data and how it would help in determining the reference of a pronominal constituent to its antecedent.

From the literature (Büring 2005, Bresnan 2001 Bruening 2014, Carnie 2013, among many others), we can summarize the principles of Binding Theory in the following three principles:

Principle A: An anaphor must be bound in its Governing Category.
Principle B: A pronoun must be free in its Governing Category.
Principle C: An R-expression must be free everywhere.

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[3]   A subject is any NP inflected for the verb regardless of its thematic role whether agent or theme.

An anaphor or a reflexive pronoun must find its antecedent within the same governing category, otherwise the sentence is ungrammatical. A pronoun which is a dependent constituent must refer to something, however, its antecedent should be found outside its governing category. A referential expression (i.e. a full noun) does not require an antecedent as it stands. So, we have three elements to deal with in our analysis; anaphors, pronouns and nouns. To show the relation between an anaphor or a pronoun with its antecedents, we co-index them together using a subscript symbols (i.e. indices). For example,

(3)   The boy$_i$ kicked the ball$_m$. He$_i$ scored a goal$_n$.

In the example, we notice that 'the boy' and 'he' are co-indexed with $_i$ meaning that 'he' refers to the antecedent 'the boy'.

On the other hand, much research has been conducted on participant reference and participant tracing from a functional point of view; Grimes (1975), Longacre (1983, 1989), Dooley & Levinsohn (2001) and many others. Each nominal must crucially indicate an important role to the overall understanding of the text. Each constituent plays a role in the sentence and in the entire text. Sometimes, the role played by a constituent is local and important in the governing category; however, at other times its importance goes beyond the sentential level. Verbs, for example, play roles in their sentences by assisting in determining the thematic roles of nominals around them, and they sometimes run to influence the sentences that follow.

In addition, intonation, punctuation and the way speakers organize their speech whether spoken or written, play a key-role in the comprehension of the messages speakers convey. The speaker presumes that the listener will receive and comprehend these messages with ease. The listener will decode these messages and should not have trouble understanding what refers to what (Halliday 1967).

Of course, it is unlikely that a listener presumes a different topic from that the speaker is presuming as there is a tendency to stick to the same topic in a united wave of messages. Otherwise, signals of confusion and distraction would appear on the listener's face from the way he responds to these messages. Topics, however, could be grammatical and conversational. Brown and Yule (1983) pointed out there are two kinds of topics: *sentence topic*, and *discourse topic*. The former deals with the sentence level while the latter rules out the entire discourse usually in the form of a topic sentence or main idea.

According to Givón (1983) topic continuity is affected by some factors; two of which are: i) the length of absence of reference from the discourse file, and ii) the potential interference of other topics. How a listener recognizes an antecedent is referred to as Identifiablity as Chafe (1976) and Lambrecht (1994) put it. Givón's hypothesis could be summarized as follows,

    a. "What is continuing is more predictable".
    b. "What is predictable is easier to process".
    c. "What is discontinuous or disruptive is less predictable".
    d. "What is less predictable, hence surprising, is harder to process".

He claims that if the size of the reference is small, then it is more identifiable. In Arabic three pronominal elements exist. pro (a dropped subject, see table 2), pronouns (see table 1) and

NPs. This could mean that when a referent is a continuous one, it becomes more predictable. And if it is continuous then, a small pro could be used in languages that allow pro-drop, like Arabic. This could mean that to predict a pro is easy since it is a small unit. (Givón 1983) proposes a statistic method to measure accessibility and prediction. These measures are Referential Distance (RD), Potential Interference (PI), and Topic Persistence (TP). According to him, certain environmental levels of organization play a great role in the comprehension of a certain discourse. These measures could indicate the ease by which a hearer could follow and trace pronominal elements. For example, the distance between referents is given a value; the farther the distance, the less accessible and continuous the topic is. Also, if a referent and its antecedent are intervened by a new referent, we expect some ambiguity unless, of course, the intonation or the story line helps the hearer solve this ambiguity. The decay of the topic and its persistence is also measured in Givón (1995) to reach ten clauses; the greater the value, the more persistent the topic is.

The following table is taken from Howard (2002). It shows the three measurements of Givón.

	SCALE	LOW VALUE	HIGH VALUE
RD	1-20	continuous/accessible topic	discontinuous/inaccessible topic
PI	1-2	sometimes can be left implicit	may need more explicit reference
TP	0+	discontinuous topic	continuous topic

Table 3. Measurements of Topic Continuity

If the values of RD and PI are low, then the difficulty in identifying the topic is low and the topic could be covert. If they are high, then an overt topic is required. Albaldawi (2004: 71) explains that "if the participant is already mentioned in a previous clause and these two measurements are low, the minimum marking in Arabic can be the null subject… If there is another participant mentioned within the three clauses to the left, the need for a more explicit reference emerges."

3   Sample Data Analysis

In this section, a sample of the data analysis is provided. The examples are chosen from the longest of four dialogues between Allah and Moses; and between Moses and the Pharaoh found in chapter 26 of the Quran.[4,5] This dialogue comprises 47 verses with several conversational turns. These turns contain single and multiple clauses. The analysis of the data was manual at times and automatically annotated at others. The following figure shows a sample

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[4]   The story of Moses was mentioned in Quran ten times. Some of them show certain incidents of the prophet's life. In this paper, only those involving his dialogue with Allah and with the Pharaoh are used.

[5]   For further details refer to http://vb.tafsir.net/tafsir35490/#.VOeNgrccTDc.

from the corpus annotation where the pronouns and morphological inflections are tagged. (cf. Sharaf (2011).

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<pron id='23' ant='78056 78056' con='39'><seg id='78071'> ئ </seg></pron>
<pron id='24' ant='78056 78056' con='39'><seg id='78073'> ئ </seg></pron>
……
<pron id='85' ant='0 0' con='189'><seg id='78336'> ﻩ </seg></pron>
<pron id='86' ant='0 0' con='33'><seg id='78345'> ﻛﻢ </seg></pron>
<pron id='87' ant='0 0' con='33'><seg id='78348'> ﻛﻢ </seg></pron>
<pron id='88' ant='0 0' con='39'><seg id='78351'> ﺓ </seg></pron>
<pron id='89' ant='0 0' con='33'><seg id='78355'> ﻭﻥ </seg></pron>
<pron id='90' ant='0 0' con='33'><seg id='78357'> ﻭﺍ </seg></pron>
<pron id='91' ant='0 0' con='39'><seg id='78359'> ﺓ </seg></pron>
<pron id='92' ant='0 0' con='39'><seg id='78362'> ﻩ </seg></pron>
<pron id='93' ant='0 0' con='673'><seg id='78370'> ﻭ </seg></pron>
<pron id='94' ant='0 0' con='189'><seg id='78371'> ﻙ </seg></pron>
……
<pron id='143' ant='0 0' con='673'><seg id='78599'> ﻫﻢ </seg></pron>
<pron id='144' ant='0 0' con='1'><seg id='78613'> ﻥ </seg></pron>
<pron id='145' ant='0 0' con='711'><seg id='78614'> ﻫﺎ </seg></pron>
<pron id='146' ant='0 0' con='673'><seg id='78619'> ﻭ </seg></pron>
<pron id='147' ant='0 0' con='29'><seg id='78620'> ﻫﻢ </seg></pron>
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The sample data (the number of nominals corresponding to Allah, Moses and the Pharaoh taken from Qur'an chapter 26) is as shown in the following table.[6]

	NP	Pron	Pro
Allah	3	1	5
Moses	0	5	26
Pharaoh	2	2	16
Mean	1.6666	2.6666	15.6666

Table 4. Nominal Frequencies

The table shows that the number of full NPs is the lowest while the number of pro is the greatest. The difference between them is great and this indicates that the use of pro, which is a null phonological unit in the language, is preferred over full NPs and pronouns. This confronts with Givón's measurements that the smallest phonological forms are the more accessible and continuous in any running text. Although the use of pronouns is greater than the use of full NPs, we can see that the difference between them is not as great as it is between pronouns and pros and this leads us to believe that NPs and pronouns can be grouped under the same category of being less accessible and continuous. Interestingly, Moses, as a full NP, does not appear in the sample as a subject. In the first clause, it was the object and this was the first referential antecedent for all the pronouns and pros that come after. The use of full NPs is a

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[6]   Allah and any word equivalent were counted. For example, *rab* 'Lord'.

method used in the language, specifically, in dialogues to avoid confusions or misinterpretation. However, the use of these does not have to be marked in the subject position; sometimes, they appear as objects of the verb and some other times as objects of prepositions. Either way, this seems to help avoid reference confusions and possible misinterpretations. On the other hand, if such text is translated into English, for example, the use of full NPs in place of pronouns and pros may seem necessary.

The following is a coindexation map of the sample; Allah with A, Moses with M, and the Pharaoh with P.[7]

$|A_{subj}|$ $|M_{subj}$ *pro* $|$ $|P_{subj}|$ $|P_{subj}$ *pro* $|$ $|M_{subj}$ *pro* $|$ $|M_{subj}$ *pron* $|$ $|M_{subj}$ *pro* $|$ $|P_{subj}$ *pro* $|$

$|X_{subj}|$ $|X_{subj}|$ $|A_{subj}$ *pro* $|$ $|P_{gen}$ *pron* $|$ $|M_{subj}$ *pro* $|$ $|P_{subj}$ *pro* $|$ $|A_{subj}$ *pro* $|$ $|M_{subj}$ *pro* $|$

$|A_{subj}$ *pron* $|$ $|A_{subj}$ *pro* $|$ $|M_{subj}$ *pro* $|$ $|M_{subj}$ *pro* $|$ $|M_{subj}$ *pron* $|$ $|P_{subj}$ *pro* $|$ $|P_{subj}$ *pro* $|$

$|P_{subj}$ *pro* $|$ $|M_{subj}$ *pro* $|$ $|M_{subj}$ *pro* $|$ $|M_{subj}$ *pro* $|$ $|M_{subj}$ *pron* $|$ $|M_{subj}$ *pro* $|$ $|M_{subj}$ *pro* $|$

$|M_{subj}$ *pron* $|$ $|M_{subj}$ *pro* $|$ $|M_{subj}$ *pro* $|$ $|A_{subj}|$ $|A_{subj}$ *pro* $|$ $|A_{subj}$ *pro* $|$ $|X_{subj}|$ $|P_{subj}$ *pro* $|$

$|P_{subj}$ *pro* $|$ $|P_{subj}|$ $|A_{subj}|$ $|M_{subj}$ *pro* $|$ $|P_{subj}$ *pro* $|$ $|P_{subj}$ *pro* $|$ $|P_{subj}$ *pron* $|$ $|X_{subj}$ *pron* $|$

$|M_{subj}$ *pro* $|$ $|P_{subj}$ *pro* $|$ $|M_{subj}$ *pro* $|$ $|M_{subj}$ *pro* $|$ $|P_{subj}$ *pro* $|$ $|P_{subj}$ *pro* $|$ $|M_{subj}$ *pro* $|$ $|P_{subj}$ *pro* $|$

$|M_{subj}$ *pro* $|$ $|P_{subj}$ *pro* $|$ $|M_{subj}$ *pro* $|$ $|M_{subj}$ *pro* $|$ $|M_{subj}$ *pro* $|$ $|X_{subj}$ *pron* $|$ $|M_{subj}$ *pro* $|$

$|X_{subj}$ *pron* $|$ $|P_{subj}$ *pro* $|$ $|M_{subj}$ *pron* $|$ $|M_{subj}$ *pro* $|$ $|M_{subj}$ *pro* $|$

4   Results and Discussion

The sample data show that there are several nominals potentially competing for references in the text. By assigning values in accordance with Givón's measurements for each of these, we get the following values:

| | Allah N=9 | | | Moses N=31 | | | Pharaoh   N=20 | | |
	RD	PI	TP	RD	PI	TP	RD	PI	TP
Mean	6.2222	1.2222	.4444	2.2581	1.4194	1.6452	3.5000	1.4000	.8000
Std. Deviation	7.12000	.44096	.72648	3.56808	.50161	2.19922	4.77383	.50262	.83351
Std. Error Mean	2.37333	.14699	.24216	.64085	.09009	.39499	1.06746	.11239	.18638

Table 5. Measurements Statistics

The table shows that the RD for the nominal used is around 4, the PI is above 1; and the TP is close to 1. To explain these numbers according to Givón's measurements, we can say that:
1. RD; this value refers to the distance between the two references. The minimum value is one and the maximum is 2O. The lower the value, the more accessible/continuous

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7   In this map, we have marked the nominals in the subject position to ease the tracing process.

the topic is. The table shows a low value of RD. This seems adequate enough to claim that the text is accessible and continuous.

2. PI; this value measures the confusion potentially caused by an interfering referent that is competing with the referent under investigation. A value above one indicates that there is difficulty in identifying the topic referent. The table shows that the value is above one. However, it does not reach the point where we can say that identifying the topic is difficult. The value is between 1 and 2. This could lead us to think that at certain points it is difficult to identify the topic; however, other factors such as intonation and the reader's background could assist in the identification process.

3. TP; this value measures the mortality of a topic. If it decays immediately, this indicates that low importance of the topic. The lower the value is, the less important the topic is. The table shows that the decay value for all the topics is rather high. The persistence was very low, and this leads us to believe that topics have low importance. This could be due to turn-talking rules of the dialogue. As each speakers assign the turn to the listener immediately. Only one instance of high topic persistence was seen in the text where the value reached 8 and the speaker was Moses addressing the Pharaoh.

When we look at the text from a formal perspective, we find that it abides with the principles of Binding Theory. The text contained five referential expressions in the subject position and 40 in other positions. These R-expressions serve as viable antecedents of the other nominals used in the text with no difficulty in coindexation. All the pronouns and pros find their antecedents outside their governing categories.

5   Conclusion

Although numbers do not lie, statistical analyses of texts have sometimes shown prejudice. Other factors play key-roles in understanding and comprehending texts. The reader's background, intonation, and turn-taking rules of the language can greatly influence the comprehension. These pragmatic and sociolinguistic factors cannot be ignored in such analysis. Otherwise, false or inaccurate judgments about the accessibility of texts can be made. Add to this, that encoding and decoding messages is a mutual process between the speakers and hearers of the same language. We would expect encoding and decoding issues with language learners but not native speakers of the same language.

Clark (2012: 2) shows how Prince's (1981) clarified the importance of decoding the instructions interacted between the speaker and the hearer. It is a mutual relationship which all participants are expected to be involved in equally. Dooley and Levinsohn's (2001), also, stressed the idea that this relationship means that both the speaker and the hearer are able to encode and decode interactions with ease.

The text in this study is a highly valued text among native speakers taken as their first and most authentic text for grammar due to the perfection of its grammatical rules. The dialogues run smoothly and native speakers have no decoding problems at all. The text marks the powers of good and evil and for this reason, among others, the message encoded can be related to the specified speaker with ease. We would not expect the pharaoh to lead a mission for Allah! We can assume that people, by nature, would expect good deeds from good people. This, in fact, is a key factor in text comprehension. Sociolinguistic studies, for example, have

shown that women differ from men in the way they use language and the topics they talk about; adults differ from youngsters, hence good and evil.

The results of the study show that the text is accessible from a formal and functional point of view. At some points, Givón's measurements postulated that there might be inaccessibility. These measurements seem to have ignored crucial factors in analyzing and comprehending topic continuity. The pronominal system is, in fact, one and only one factor in determining referents. Other factors must be taken into account; otherwise we might end up making prejudice judgments about the language.

Due to the differences between the pronominal systems of different languages, at some point, a pronoun cannot be translated into a pronoun in the target language and there is a need to use a full NP. In a language that does not allow the subject to be phonologically dropped, the need to recover the subject is a must. To know better when to use a full NP or a pronoun in English, for example, one must be acquainted with the grammatical rules and discourse-pragmatic principles of English. What applies to Arabic does not necessarily apply to English or any other language.

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