

RESEARCH ARTICLE 

Linguistic Structures and Methodological Approaches in Qur'ānic Exegesis: Selected Interpretative Models

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Keywords

Qur'ānic Exegesis; Linguistic Analysis; Classical Tafsīr; Arabic Rhetoric; Textual Coherence; Nazm; Hermeneutics; Discourse Analysis.

Abstract

The linguistic dimension has historically constituted one of the principal methodological foundations of Qur'ānic exegesis, shaping the interpretative practices of classical Muslim scholars and influencing the evolution of Arabic linguistic sciences. Classical exegetes recognized that a comprehensive understanding of the Qur'ānic text necessitates mastery of the structural, semantic, rhetorical, and contextual properties of the Arabic language. Consequently, linguistic inquiry emerged not merely as an auxiliary interpretative instrument, but as a systematic epistemological framework through which exegetes derived meanings, identified rhetorical subtleties, and articulated the coherence of Qur'ānic discourse. This study examines the major linguistic levels employed in classical Qur'ānic exegesis, with particular emphasis on phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, and rhetorical analysis. Drawing upon selected interpretative models from leading exegetes—including al-Ṭabarī, al-Zamakhsharī, Ibn 'Aṭīyyah, al-Qurṭubī, and Abū Ḥayyān—the article explores how linguistic methodologies contributed to the construction of exegetical authority and the interpretation of textual coherence (nazm). Methodologically, the study adopts an analytical and comparative textual approach grounded in classical exegetical literature and contemporary linguistic perspectives. The findings demonstrate that linguistic analysis in Qur'ānic exegesis functioned as an integrated interpretative system in which grammatical precision, rhetorical structure, and semantic contextualization collectively shaped exegetical reasoning. The study further argues that classical linguistic exegesis anticipated several conceptual dimensions associated with modern discourse analysis and textual linguistics, thereby reaffirming the enduring scholarly significance of the linguistic tradition within Qur'ānic studies.

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INTRODUCTION

The Qur'ān occupies a central position in the intellectual and linguistic history of Arabic civilization, serving not only as the foundational text of Islam but also as a major catalyst in the development of Arabic linguistic sciences. Its linguistic structure, rhetorical sophistication, and semantic depth stimulated generations of scholars to formulate systematic approaches to textual interpretation, thereby contributing to the emergence of grammar, rhetoric, morphology, semantics, and philology as distinct scholarly disciplines. Within this context, language became an indispensable methodological instrument for Qur'ānic exegesis, enabling scholars to investigate the semantic layers, structural organization, and rhetorical subtleties embedded within the sacred text.

Classical exegetes such as al-Ṭabarī (d. 310 AH), al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538 AH), Ibn 'Aṭīyyah (d. 541 AH), al-Qurṭubī (d. 671 AH), and Abū Ḥayyān (d. 745 AH) developed sophisticated linguistic approaches that extended beyond the boundaries of transmitted interpretation (al-tafsīr bi al-ma'thūr). Their exegetical methodologies incorporated grammatical analysis, semantic contextualization,

rhetorical interpretation, and structural examination of Qur'anic discourse in order to uncover dimensions of meaning and textual coherence. These interpretative efforts contributed substantially to the consolidation of Arabic linguistic thought and the refinement of rhetorical theory.

The linguistic orientation of classical tafsīr was fundamentally linked to the concept of Qur'anic inimitability (*i'jāz al-Qur'ān*), particularly through the study of lexical selection, syntactic arrangement, verse endings (*fawāṣil*), semantic harmony, and rhetorical imagery. As a result, exegetes increasingly viewed language not merely as a communicative medium, but as an integrated system whose structural organization reflects the aesthetic and epistemological dimensions of the Qur'anic text.

Against this background, the present study seeks to examine the principal linguistic levels employed in classical Qur'anic exegesis and to explore the methodological functions they served in the interpretation of Qur'anic discourse. The article addresses the following research question: How did classical exegetes employ linguistic analysis as a systematic methodological framework for understanding and interpreting the Qur'anic text? Through analytical engagement with selected exegetical models, the study aims to demonstrate the extent to which linguistic inquiry shaped the epistemological foundations of classical tafsīr and contributed to broader developments in Arabic linguistic scholarship.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between language and Qur'anic interpretation has occupied a central position in both classical Islamic scholarship and contemporary Qur'anic studies. Since the formative period of tafsīr, exegetes have emphasized that the understanding of Qur'anic discourse is inseparable from the mastery of Arabic linguistic sciences, including grammar, rhetoric, morphology, semantics, and stylistics. Classical scholars such as al-Jurjānī (2001), al-Khaṭṭābī (1976), al-Ṭabarī (2001), and al-Zarkashī (1957) established foundational theoretical frameworks through which linguistic analysis became a principal methodological instrument for interpreting the Qur'anic text. Their works collectively emphasized the relationship between textual arrangement (*naẓm*), semantic coherence, and rhetorical inimitability (*i'jāz al-Qur'ān*).

Within the classical tradition, rhetorical and stylistic dimensions occupied a particularly prominent place. Al-Jurjānī's theory of *naẓm* conceptualized meaning as emerging from syntactic organization and relational structure rather than isolated lexical units. Similarly, al-Rāfi'ī (2002), Quṭb (2002), and Darrāz (1984) argued that the aesthetic and rhetorical power of the Qur'ān derives from the harmony between linguistic form and semantic intention. These approaches significantly contributed to the development of Arabic rhetoric (*balāghah*) and influenced subsequent exegetical methodologies concerned with metaphor, ellipsis, repetition, and semantic precision.

Modern scholarship has expanded these classical insights through contemporary linguistic and hermeneutical approaches. Abdel Haleem (1992, 2004, 2024) examined grammatical shifts, discourse coherence, and rhetorical transitions within Qur'anic language, demonstrating that structural variation often serves highly sophisticated semantic and communicative functions. His studies on *iltifāt* and rhetorical coherence have become influential in modern Qur'anic discourse analysis. Similarly, Farrin (2014, 2023) explored ring composition and structural symmetry in Qur'anic narrative organization, arguing that textual coherence constitutes a defining characteristic of Qur'anic discourse.

The concept of textual coherence (*naẓm*) has also received renewed scholarly attention in contemporary Qur'anic studies. Mir (1986, 2023) emphasized that thematic unity and semantic interconnectedness represent essential dimensions of Qur'anic interpretation, particularly in relation to the organization of *sūrah*s and narrative structures. Contemporary discussions have increasingly linked classical theories of *naẓm* with modern discourse analysis and textual linguistics, thereby positioning Qur'anic studies within broader interdisciplinary conversations concerning language, structure, and interpretation.

Recent scholarship has further diversified the linguistic study of the Qur'ān through translation studies, digital humanities, and bibliometric analysis. Al-Adwan and Al-Abbas (2023) investigated the translation of near-synonymous Qur'anic expressions, highlighting the semantic and theological complexities embedded within lexical choice. Alhaj (2023) explored syntactic and cultural difficulties in translating Qur'anic Arabic into English, emphasizing the limitations of literal equivalence in preserving semantic nuance. More recently, Albalawi (2026) compared human and artificial intelligence approaches to translating Qur'anic euphemisms, demonstrating the emerging role of AI-assisted linguistic analysis in Qur'anic studies.

In parallel, bibliometric studies have revealed substantial growth in global research on Qur'anic linguistics and interpretation. Aini and Shafie (2024) identified major thematic trends in Qur'anic linguistic studies indexed in Scopus, noting increasing scholarly interest in discourse analysis, rhetoric, semantics, and translation studies. Likewise, Kaleel et al. (2024) demonstrated the rapid expansion of interdisciplinary Qur'anic research between 1880 and 2023, particularly in areas intersecting linguistics, communication studies, and digital analysis. Yaacob et al. (2025) further highlighted the increasing integration of Qur'anic teaching and linguistic studies within international Scopus- and Web of Science-indexed scholarship.

Despite these important developments, a significant gap remains in integrating classical linguistic methodologies with contemporary linguistic theories within a unified analytical framework. Much contemporary research tends either to focus exclusively on traditional

rhetorical analysis or to apply modern linguistic models without adequately contextualizing them within the classical exegetical heritage. Consequently, the methodological continuity between classical tafsīr traditions and contemporary linguistic approaches remains insufficiently explored.

The present study seeks to address this gap by examining the linguistic levels employed in classical Qur'ānic exegesis through a combined analytical and comparative framework. By synthesizing insights from classical tafsīr literature and modern linguistic scholarship, the study aims to demonstrate that linguistic inquiry in Qur'ānic exegesis constitutes a systematic interpretative methodology that continues to hold relevance within contemporary discourse analysis, textual linguistics, and hermeneutical studies.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative analytical design grounded in linguistic, rhetorical, and hermeneutical approaches to Qur'ānic exegesis. The research primarily investigates the methodological role of language in the interpretation of the Qur'ānic text, with particular emphasis on theories of Qur'ānic inimitability (i'jāz al-Qur'ān) developed within both classical and modern exegetical traditions. Since the study concerns interpretative structures, rhetorical organization, and linguistic analysis rather than empirical measurement, a descriptive-analytical and comparative methodology was considered most appropriate.

The study further incorporates elements of historical and discourse-oriented analysis in order to trace the intellectual development of linguistic approaches to Qur'ānic interpretation across different scholarly periods. Through this multidimensional framework, the research examines how exegetes employed grammar, rhetoric, semantics, stylistics, and textual organization as methodological tools for uncovering the meanings and inimitable dimensions of Qur'ānic discourse.

Data Sources

The study relies primarily upon classical and modern Arabic exegetical, rhetorical, and linguistic sources. Classical references include major works of tafsīr, rhetoric (balāghah), philology, and theories of inimitability authored by scholars such as al-Ṭabarī, al-Zamakhsharī, al-Qurṭubī, al-Bāqillānī, al-Jurjānī, al-Rummānī, Ibn 'Aṭīyyah, and Abū Ḥayyān. These sources provide the foundational theoretical frameworks through which the linguistic dimensions of Qur'ānic interpretation are examined.

In addition, the study incorporates modern and contemporary scholarship addressing Qur'ānic linguistics, discourse analysis, stylistics, hermeneutics, and rhetorical theory. Contemporary works by scholars such as Muṣṭafā Ṣādiq al-Rāfi'ī, Sayyid Quṭb, Muḥammad 'Abd Allāh Darāz, Abdel Haleem, Farrin, Mir, and Neuwirth were consulted in order to contextualize classical theories within modern linguistic and literary discussions. Furthermore, recent Scopus- and Web of Science-indexed studies related to Qur'ānic discourse analysis, textual coherence, and rhetorical interpretation were reviewed to strengthen the contemporary academic positioning of the study.

Method of Analysis

The methodological analysis proceeded through four interconnected stages.

First, a descriptive stage was employed to identify the principal linguistic sciences utilized in Qur'ānic exegesis, including grammar (naḥw), morphology (ṣarf), semantics (ma'ānī), rhetoric (balāghah), stylistics (badī'), and textual arrangement (naẓm). This stage focused on explaining the theoretical functions of these linguistic disciplines within exegetical methodology.

Second, an analytical stage was conducted through close textual examination of selected Qur'ānic verses and exegetical interpretations. Particular attention was devoted to passages frequently discussed in relation to rhetorical structure, semantic ambiguity, syntactic organization, and Qur'ānic inimitability. The study analyzed how classical and modern exegetes employed linguistic evidence to derive interpretative meanings and rhetorical implications.

Third, a comparative approach was adopted to examine similarities and differences among exegetical theories of inimitability. The perspectives of al-Khaṭṭābī, al-Rummānī, al-Bāqillānī, al-Jurjānī, Sayyid Quṭb, Darāz, and al-Sha'rāwī were comparatively evaluated in terms of their conceptualization of rhetoric, textual coherence, structural arrangement, and epistemological authority.

Fourth, the study employed a discourse-oriented interpretative framework linking classical theories of naẓm and rhetorical organization with contemporary approaches in discourse analysis, textual linguistics, and literary hermeneutics. Through this synthesis, the research seeks to demonstrate the continuity between classical Arabic rhetorical thought and modern linguistic theories.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study is based upon the concept that Qur'ānic discourse constitutes an integrated linguistic and rhetorical system whose meanings emerge through structural relationships rather than isolated lexical elements. Accordingly, the study

draws upon classical theories of *naẓm* developed by ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī alongside contemporary approaches in textual coherence, discourse analysis, and stylistic criticism.

The research also incorporates principles derived from modern hermeneutics and literary linguistics, particularly regarding semantic contextualization, thematic unity, rhetorical structure, and the interaction between language and meaning. This interdisciplinary framework enables the study to approach Qur’ānic inimitability not merely as a theological doctrine, but as a sophisticated linguistic and rhetorical phenomenon.

Research Limitations

The study is limited primarily to linguistic and rhetorical dimensions of Qur’ānic exegesis and does not attempt to provide a comprehensive treatment of theological, juridical, or philosophical debates surrounding inimitability. Furthermore, the research focuses selectively on representative exegetical models rather than offering exhaustive coverage of all schools of *tafsīr*. The analysis is also restricted to textual and interpretative sources available in Arabic and English academic literature.

Despite these limitations, the study aims to provide a comprehensive analytical framework capable of demonstrating the central role of linguistic methodology in shaping both classical and contemporary understandings of Qur’ānic discourse and inimitability.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

The findings of the present study demonstrate that linguistic analysis has historically constituted one of the most influential methodological foundations of Qur’ānic exegesis. The investigation reveals that classical and modern exegetes consistently approached the Qur’ānic text as an integrated linguistic and rhetorical system in which phonological structures, lexical choices, syntactic relations, semantic organization, and rhetorical arrangement function collectively to generate meaning and establish textual coherence. Consequently, Qur’ānic inimitability emerges not as an isolated rhetorical phenomenon, but as a multidimensional interpretative structure grounded in the interaction between language, discourse, and epistemology.

One of the principal findings concerns the centrality of *naẓm* (structural arrangement) within theories of Qur’ānic inimitability. The analysis demonstrates that scholars such as al-Khaṭṭābī, al-Rummānī, al-Bāqillānī, and especially ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī regarded structural coherence as the primary locus of Qur’ānic uniqueness. Their theories collectively indicate that meaning in Qur’ānic discourse is not generated through isolated lexical items, but through syntactic relationships, rhetorical organization, and semantic interaction within the broader textual system. This finding strongly corresponds with contemporary approaches in discourse analysis and textual linguistics, particularly theories emphasizing cohesion, semantic interdependence, and structural unity.

The study further reveals that classical exegetes developed highly sophisticated methodologies for analyzing semantic ambiguity, rhetorical variation, and grammatical structure. Through detailed examination of prepositions, syntactic constructions, lexical derivation, and contextual usage, exegetes were able to derive nuanced interpretative meanings that extended beyond literal readings. Such analyses demonstrate that classical *tafsīr* was not confined to theological commentary alone, but functioned simultaneously as an advanced form of linguistic criticism and textual interpretation.

Another important finding concerns the relationship between rhetoric and epistemological authority within Qur’ānic discourse. The examined exegetical models consistently associate rhetorical perfection with divine transcendence, arguing that the structural harmony and semantic precision of the Qur’ān exceed the limits of human expressive capability. In this context, rhetoric operates not merely as an aesthetic category, but as evidence of revelation itself. This perspective is particularly evident in the theories of al-Rummānī, al-Bāqillānī, and al-Jurjānī, who collectively positioned rhetoric and compositional coherence at the center of the Qur’ānic challenge.

The findings additionally indicate that modern scholars expanded classical theories of inimitability by integrating literary criticism, stylistics, discourse analysis, and aesthetic theory into Qur’ānic studies. Sayyid Quṭb’s theory of artistic imagery, for example, reconceptualized Qur’ānic discourse as a dynamic artistic experience in which imagery, rhythm, emotional resonance, and movement function together within a unified aesthetic system. Similarly, Darāz’s systemic approach anticipated modern theories of textual coherence by examining inimitability across multiple structural levels, including verses, *sūrahs*, inter-*sūrah* relationships, and the Qur’ān as a complete textual totality.

The study also demonstrates that modern discussions concerning Qur’ānic inimitability increasingly intersect with contemporary linguistic and hermeneutical disciplines. Recent scholarship in discourse analysis, literary linguistics, stylistics, and semantic theory reflects methodological continuities with earlier theories of *naẓm* and rhetorical coherence. This suggests that classical Arabic rhetorical thought contains analytical dimensions that remain relevant within modern humanities scholarship.

Another major finding concerns the functional role of linguistic sciences within Qur’ānic interpretation. Grammar, morphology, rhetoric, semantics, and philology were not treated by exegetes as isolated technical disciplines; rather, they operated as interconnected interpretative mechanisms designed to preserve semantic precision and regulate exegetical authority. The study therefore confirms that linguistic inquiry constituted an epistemological necessity within Qur’ānic exegesis rather than a supplementary interpretative activity.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that theories of Qur'anic inimitability evolved historically in response to changing intellectual and cultural contexts. Classical scholars primarily emphasized rhetoric, linguistic challenge, and theological proof, whereas modern scholars increasingly focused on aesthetics, textual coherence, emotional influence, and interdisciplinary interpretation. Despite these methodological transformations, the central assumption underlying both classical and modern approaches remains remarkably consistent: namely, that the Qur'anic text possesses a unique structural and semantic organization unattainable through ordinary human discourse.

The findings additionally reveal that the concept of Qur'anic inimitability extends beyond purely linguistic considerations to encompass historical narratives, unseen realities, legal structures, existential truths, and cosmological dimensions. Nevertheless, linguistic and rhetorical organization consistently remain the foundational mechanisms through which these broader dimensions become intelligible within the text.

Finally, the study demonstrates that the enduring relevance of Qur'anic linguistic analysis lies in its capacity to bridge classical Islamic scholarship with contemporary humanities research. The integration of classical rhetorical theories with modern discourse analysis, textual linguistics, and literary hermeneutics opens significant possibilities for interdisciplinary approaches to Qur'anic studies. Accordingly, the findings suggest that Qur'anic linguistic methodology should not be viewed merely as part of a historical exegetical tradition, but as an evolving intellectual framework capable of contributing meaningfully to broader discussions concerning language, meaning, interpretation, and textuality within contemporary scholarship.

Language as Method and Interpretative System

A close examination of the classical exegetical tradition reveals that early Muslim scholars conceptualized the Arabic language as a highly structured and systematic entity governed by coherent linguistic principles. Linguistic inquiry was therefore not confined to intuitive reflection or aesthetic appreciation; rather, it evolved into a disciplined field of knowledge possessing its own methodological foundations, analytical tools, and theoretical assumptions. This conception resonates with modern linguistic theories that approach language as an interconnected system of signs and structures whose meanings emerge through contextual and relational interaction.

Within Qur'anic exegesis, linguistic methodology functioned as an integrated interpretative framework through which exegetes analyzed phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, and rhetorical dimensions of the text. These linguistic levels were not treated as isolated components; instead, they operated collectively within a unified interpretative structure designed to uncover the coherence and precision of Qur'anic discourse. Such an approach reflects an advanced awareness of textual organization and semantic interdependence within the classical exegetical tradition.

The Arabic linguistic system itself is characterized by hierarchical and interrelated levels of structure. At the foundational level lies phonology, where sound functions as the material basis of linguistic expression. Through the arrangement and interaction of phonetic units, meaningful morphological patterns emerge, giving rise to lexical forms and syntactic constructions. These structures subsequently generate complex semantic relationships that contribute to the formation of coherent discourse. The interaction between phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics therefore constitutes a unified linguistic system that underpins the stylistic and rhetorical sophistication of the Qur'anic text.

In this regard, 'Abd al-'Aziz Maṭar defines linguistics as "the scientific study of language and dialects according to objective analytical principles aimed at identifying their phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, and derivational characteristics, as well as the interrelations among these linguistic phenomena and their connections with psychological, social, and environmental dimensions" (Maṭar, 1985, p. 102). Such a definition reflects the multidimensional nature of linguistic inquiry and its relevance to the methodological practices of Qur'anic exegesis.

The culmination of linguistic integration within the Qur'anic text is manifested in an exceptionally precise structural system in which phonetic units, lexical choices, syntactic arrangements, and rhetorical patterns function as inseparable components of a unified textual architecture. Within this framework, meaning is not generated through isolated lexical items alone, but rather through the interconnected relationships that organize the discourse as a coherent whole. Consequently, any deficiency in perceiving the structural interdependence of these linguistic elements inevitably leads to interpretative distortion and semantic fragmentation. From this perspective, the linguistic method in Qur'anic exegesis emerges not as an auxiliary interpretative device, but as an epistemological necessity indispensable for understanding the internal coherence and semantic precision of the Qur'anic system.

The linguistic levels of the Qur'anic text operate through an organic and integrated relationship that reflects the complexity and sophistication of the Arabic linguistic system. These interconnected levels begin with the phonological system, extend through vocalization and morphological structures, and culminate in syntactic and rhetorical organization. Each subsystem contributes to the production of meaning according to the contextual and communicative demands of discourse. Lexical selection, rhetorical imagery, grammatical structure, and semantic arrangement therefore function collectively within a comprehensive framework governed by harmony rather than fragmentation.

This integrated linguistic order reaches its highest degree of refinement within the Qur'ānic discourse itself. Al-Nīlī (2003) emphasizes that the Qur'ānic text is constructed upon an exceptionally rigorous compositional system in which letters, lexical forms, and syntactic arrangements collectively constitute an indivisible semantic unity. According to this perspective, understanding the Qur'ān requires awareness of the interdependence between its structural and semantic dimensions, since any disruption in analyzing its linguistic components leads directly to deficiencies in interpretation and comprehension.

The emergence of linguistic exegesis was therefore historically linked to the necessity of clarifying semantic ambiguity and regulating interpretative practice. Early Muslim scholars increasingly turned toward Arabic poetry and pre-Islamic linguistic usage as authoritative sources for understanding the semantic and rhetorical dimensions of Qur'ānic discourse. Arabic poetic corpora provided exegetes with methodological tools through which they could analyze metaphorical expression, syntactic construction, lexical variation, and rhetorical style. Through this interaction between poetic language and Qur'ānic discourse, scholars established a systematic interpretative methodology capable of uncovering latent semantic and rhetorical dimensions within the sacred text.

As linguistic scholarship developed, grammarians and philologists devoted substantial efforts to codifying the structural principles governing the Arabic language. Their studies produced sophisticated analyses of phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and rhetoric, thereby transforming Arabic linguistics into a highly organized intellectual discipline. Successive generations inherited and expanded this linguistic tradition, motivated not only by scholarly inquiry but also by the broader objective of preserving the linguistic integrity of the Qur'ānic text against error, distortion, and misinterpretation.

Importantly, the linguistic orientation of early Arabic scholarship was not pursued merely for abstract theoretical purposes; rather, linguistic inquiry initially evolved in direct connection with Qur'ānic exegesis and the regulation of religious meaning. As Ḥamūda (2001) observes, the language of revelation became the supreme model for linguistic analogy and grammatical standardization, while the Qur'ān itself functioned as the principal source for refining Arabic eloquence and preserving linguistic authenticity. In this context, the development of Arabic linguistic sciences cannot be separated from the interpretative demands generated by Qur'ānic discourse.

The close relationship between religion and language profoundly shaped the intellectual identity of early Muslim scholars. Specialists in grammar, philology, and rhetoric were frequently also exegetes, jurists, theologians, or transmitters of prophetic traditions. Educational systems during the formative Islamic centuries integrated linguistic and religious sciences into a unified scholarly framework, thereby reinforcing the methodological interdependence between language and exegesis. As 'Ābidīn (1951) notes, the majority of early linguists simultaneously possessed expertise in Qur'ānic recitation, tafsīr, jurisprudence, and ḥadīth studies, reflecting the interdisciplinary character of classical Islamic scholarship.

One of the most important manifestations of this linguistic-exegetical enterprise was the extensive scholarly attention devoted to *gharīb al-Qur'ān* (obscure or rare Qur'ānic vocabulary). The effort to determine the precise meanings of unfamiliar lexical items generated a vast body of philological and exegetical literature that remains authoritative within Arabic linguistic studies. These investigations sought to establish semantic precision through comparative linguistic evidence, poetic citation, and contextual interpretation, thereby contributing to the development of Arabic lexicography and semantic analysis (Bübū, 1982).

Numerous scholars dedicated specialized works to the study of Qur'ānic vocabulary and linguistic ambiguity. Among the earliest contributors was Abān b. Taghlib (d. 141 AH), whose work on obscure Qur'ānic expressions incorporated poetic evidence as a means of semantic clarification. As reported by Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī (1993), Abān's approach established an important methodological precedent within Qur'ānic philology. Subsequent generations expanded this tradition through the works of Yahyā b. al-Mubārak, al-Naḍr b. Shumayl, Abū 'Ubayda, al-Akhfash al-Awsat, al-Qāsim b. Sallām, Ibn Qutayba, and Tha'lab, among others. Collectively, these scholars laid the foundations for a rigorous linguistic tradition that profoundly influenced both Arabic philology and the methodology of Qur'ānic interpretation (Ibn al-Nadīm, 1971).

Language Issues in Qur'ānic Exegesis: Methodological and Referential Foundations

The science of Qur'ānic exegesis (*ilm al-tafsīr*) occupies a central position within the Islamic intellectual tradition, as it is fundamentally concerned with analyzing Qur'ānic discourse, investigating semantic structures, and uncovering interpretative meanings embedded within the sacred text. Among the diverse methodological approaches that emerged within the exegetical tradition, the linguistic method developed as one of the most influential and enduring frameworks for understanding the Qur'ān. This approach is grounded in the assumption that access to the semantic depth and rhetorical sophistication of the Qur'ānic text necessarily depends upon mastery of the Arabic linguistic sciences.

The origins of linguistic exegesis are commonly traced to the Companion 'Abd Allāh b. 'Abbās, who is widely regarded as one of the earliest authorities to employ linguistic analysis in interpreting obscure Qur'ānic expressions. Ibn 'Abbās frequently relied upon pre-Islamic Arabic poetry as an interpretative source for clarifying difficult lexical items and contextual meanings. His methodological principle is reflected in the well-known statement: "If something in the Qur'ān appears obscure to you, refer to poetry, for it is the

register of the Arabs” (Al-Suyūṭī, n.d., Vol. 1, p. 112). Similarly, exegetical reports indicate that Ibn ‘Abbās often supported his interpretations through poetic citations that illustrated semantic usage within classical Arabic discourse (Al-Mubarrad, 1975).

Classical exegetes subsequently recognized that deriving the intended meanings and objectives of revelation requires comprehensive knowledge of the Arabic linguistic sciences. As a result, linguistic disciplines came to occupy a foundational position within the methodology of tafsīr. Traditional scholars identified several sciences as indispensable for the exegete, including lexicography, grammar, morphology, derivation, semantics, rhetoric, stylistics, and the science of Qur’ānic readings (qirā’āt). Collectively, these disciplines formed an integrated interpretative apparatus through which exegetes examined the semantic, grammatical, and rhetorical dimensions of Qur’ānic discourse.

Within this methodological framework, Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā emphasized the necessity of interpreting Qur’ānic terminology according to the semantic conventions prevailing at the time of revelation. Riḍā argued that exegetes should first seek to understand a Qur’ānic expression through the Qur’ān itself by tracing the occurrence of lexical items across multiple passages and examining their contextual variations. Such an approach reflects the hermeneutical principle that “the Qur’ān explains one part of itself by another” (Riḍā, 1947, Vol. 1, pp. 21–22). This principle established a hierarchical framework of interpretative reference beginning with the Qur’ānic text itself, followed by the Prophetic Sunnah, and finally the linguistic usage of the Arabs and their poetic traditions.

Linguistic debates concerning Qur’ānic interpretation occupied a prominent place within the discussions of exegetes, grammarians, and rhetoricians. One illustrative example concerns the interpretation of the Qur’ānic expression: “alladhīna hum ‘an ṣalātihim sāhūn” (“those who are heedless of their prayer”) (Qur’ān 107:5). According to reports transmitted by Abū al-Khaṭṭāb from Abū al-‘Āliyah, the latter interpreted the term sāhūn as referring to uncertainty during prayer regarding the number of performed units. However, al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī rejected this interpretation and argued that the verse instead refers to individuals who neglect the prescribed times of prayer. His argument relied upon a subtle grammatical distinction between the particles fī (“in”) and ‘an (“from” or “away from”), demonstrating how semantic interpretation depends fundamentally upon syntactic and contextual analysis. Had the intended meaning referred to distraction during prayer itself, the verse would have employed the expression fī ṣalātihim rather than ‘an ṣalātihim. This example illustrates the extent to which linguistic precision functioned as a decisive interpretative tool within classical tafsīr.

Another example appears in discussions concerning the verse: “wa-man ya’shu ‘an dhikri al-raḥmāni nuqayyid lahu shayṭānan fa-huwa lahu qarīn” (“Whoever turns away from the remembrance of the Most Merciful, We appoint for him a devil who becomes his companion”) (Qur’ān 43:36). Ibn Qutaybah reportedly interpreted the expression ya’shu as deriving from a root associated with visual perception or looking. Later scholars, however, criticized this interpretation and argued that the expression in this context signifies “turning away” rather than “looking toward.” The interpretative error was attributed to insufficient differentiation between the constructions ‘ashawtu ilā al-shay’ (“I directed my gaze toward something”) and ‘ashawtu ‘anhu (“I turned away from it”) (Al-Zarkashī, n.d., Vol. 1, pp. 294–295). This discussion further demonstrates the importance of syntactic relations and prepositional structures in determining semantic meaning within Qur’ānic discourse.

Similarly, reports attributed to ‘Ikrimah on the authority of Ibn ‘Abbās reveal the role of contextual linguistic usage in clarifying Qur’ānic terminology. Ibn ‘Abbās is reported to have initially struggled with the meaning of the expression al-faṭḥ in the verse: “rabbanā iftaḥ baynanā wa-bayna qawminā bil-ḥaqq” (“Our Lord, decide between us and our people in truth”) (Qur’ān 7:89). He later explained that he understood the meaning after hearing a Himyarite expression employing the verb ufāṭihuka in the sense of “I bring a legal case against you.” Consequently, the term al-faṭḥ in this context was interpreted as “judgment” or “legal decision” rather than physical opening (Al-Zarkashī, n.d., Vol. 1, p. 298). This example highlights the extent to which exegetes relied upon regional linguistic usage and semantic contextualization in interpreting Qur’ānic vocabulary.

Collectively, these examples illustrate that linguistic inquiry within classical Qur’ānic exegesis was not limited to superficial lexical explanation; rather, it constituted a sophisticated methodological system grounded in grammar, semantics, rhetoric, contextual analysis, and philological comparison. Through this linguistic framework, exegetes sought to preserve semantic precision, regulate interpretative authority, and uncover the deeper structural coherence of Qur’ānic discourse.

Table 1. Major Linguistic Sciences Utilized in Classical Qur’ānic Exegesis and Their Interpretative Functions

Linguistic Discipline	Arabic Term	Primary Function in Tafsīr	Representative Exegetes	Illustrative Application
Lexicography	Al-Lughah	Clarification of lexical meanings and rare Qur’ānic vocabulary	Ibn ‘Abbās, Abū ‘Ubayda	Interpretation of obscure terms (gharīb al-Qur’ān) through Arabic poetic usage

Grammar	Al-Naḥw	Determination of syntactic relations and grammatical structures	Al-Zajjāj, Al-Farrāʾ	Differentiation between semantic meanings based on prepositional structures
Morphology	Al-Ṣarf	Analysis of word formation, derivation, and verbal patterns	Ibn Jinnī, Al-Akhfash	Identifying semantic shifts through morphological variation
Etymology	Al-Ishtiqāq	Investigation of root meanings and lexical derivations	Ibn Fāris	Tracing semantic origins of Qurʾānic terminology
Semantics	Al-Maʿānī	Contextual interpretation and semantic coherence	Al-Jurjānī, Al-Zamakhsharī	Analysis of contextual meaning and textual arrangement (nazm)
Rhetoric and Eloquence	Al-Bayān	Interpretation of figurative language, metaphor, and imagery	Al-Rāfiʿī, Sayyid Quṭb	Identification of metaphorical and symbolic expression
Stylistics	Al-Badīʿ	Analysis of stylistic embellishment and rhetorical beauty	Al-Sakkākī	Examination of repetition, emphasis, and rhetorical harmony
Qurʾānic Readings	Al-Qirāʾāt	Clarification of semantic variation through canonical readings	Ibn al-Jazarī	Interpretative differences generated by variant recitations

Source: Developed by the author based on classical and contemporary studies in Qurʾānic linguistics and exegesis.

Rhetoric as the Foundation of Qurʾānic Exegesis and the Measure of Textual Inimitability

Within the methodological framework of Qurʾānic exegesis, rhetoric (balāghah) occupies a central epistemological position, functioning as one of the principal instruments through which exegetes investigate the semantic, stylistic, and structural dimensions of the Qurʾānic text. The three foundational branches of Arabic rhetoric—al-maʿānī (semantics and contextual meaning), al-bayān (clarity and figurative expression), and al-badīʿ (stylistic embellishment)—collectively provide the exegete with analytical tools necessary for identifying the precise relationship between wording, context, and intended meaning. Classical scholars regarded these sciences not merely as aesthetic disciplines, but as methodological foundations indispensable for understanding the rhetorical and semantic complexity of Qurʾānic discourse.

The centrality of rhetoric in Qurʾānic interpretation is strongly emphasized by al-Zarkashī, who described the sciences of rhetoric as the foundational basis of exegesis for those seeking to comprehend the miraculous eloquence of divine speech. According to his formulation, mastery of rhetorical analysis constitutes “the foundation of exegesis” and the essential means through which the secrets of eloquence and rhetorical coherence are perceived (Al-Suyūṭī, n.d., Vol. 1, p. 312). This perspective reflects the broader classical understanding that the miraculous nature of the Qurʾān (iʿjāz al-Qurʾān) is inseparable from its rhetorical and linguistic organization.

Because the Qurʾān challenged the Arabs within the very domain of their linguistic mastery, exegetes considered it necessary to analyze the subtleties of contextual arrangement, figurative expression, syntactic placement, emphasis, ellipsis, semantic implication, and rhetorical variation in order to uncover the dimensions of Qurʾānic inimitability. Consequently, rhetorical phenomena were not treated as merely ornamental linguistic features; rather, they were understood as semantic structures that organize meaning and sustain textual coherence beyond the explanatory capacity of grammar alone. Within this framework, rhetoric emerged as the principal axis through which exegetes explored the relationship between linguistic form and semantic intention.

One illustrative example concerns the interpretation of the concept of al-mīzān (“the balance”) in the verse: “wa-al-waznu yawma-idhin al-ḥaqq fa-man thaqulat mawāzīnuhu fa-ulāʾika humu al-mufliḥūn” (“The weighing on that Day will be true. Those whose scales are heavy—it is they who will be successful”) (Qurʾān 7:8–9). In discussing this verse, al-Ṭabarī rejected metaphorical interpretations of al-mīzān and argued in favor of understanding the balance in its literal sense as an actual instrument through which human deeds are weighed by God on the Day of Judgment (Al-Ṭabarī, 2001, Vol. 10, p. 69). Other scholars, however, proposed alternative interpretative perspectives. Mujāhid interpreted the balance as weighing good and evil deeds directly, whereas al-Daḥḥāk and al-Aʿmash associated al-wazn and al-mīzān with divine justice and judgment (Al-Qurṭubī, 1938, Vol. 7, p. 185). This exegetical diversity demonstrates how rhetorical and semantic analysis shaped differing approaches to literal and figurative meaning within classical tafsīr.

Table 2. Comparative Perspectives on Linguistic Interpretation Among Classical Qurʾānic Exegetes

Qur'anic Expression	Exegete	Linguistic Approach	Interpretative Position	Methodological Implication
“an ṣalātihim sāhūn” (Qur'an 107:5)	Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī	Syntactic-semantic analysis	Interpreted “heedlessness” as neglecting prayer times rather than distraction during prayer	Demonstrates the role of prepositions in semantic determination
“wa-man ya'shu 'an dhikri al-raḥmān” (Qur'an 43:36)	Ibn Qutaybah	Lexical derivation	Initially associated the verb with visual perception	Highlights semantic ambiguity resulting from derivational interpretation
Same verse	Later grammarians	Contextual linguistic analysis	Reinterpreted the expression as “turning away” from remembrance	Emphasizes contextual semantics and syntactic precision
“wujūhun yawma-idhin nāḍirah ilā rabbihā nāḍirah” (Qur'an 75:22–23)	Al-Zamakhsharī	Rhetorical-contextual interpretation	Understood nāḍirah as expectation and hope	Reflects figurative interpretation based on Arabic usage
Same verse	Al-Samīn al-Ḥalabī	Grammatical-rhetorical analysis	Interpreted nāḍirah as visual perception	Demonstrates the interpretative authority of grammatical structure
“al-ḥamdu lillāhi rabbi al-ālamīn” (Qur'an 1:2)	Al-Ṭabarī and Al-Mubarrad	Lexical-semantic equivalence	Considered ḥamd and shukr semantically interchangeable	Illustrates semantic overlap within Arabic discourse
Same verse	Al-Qurṭubī	Semantic differentiation	Distinguished between praise and gratitude conceptually	Highlights rhetorical nuance and semantic specificity
“wa-al-waznu yawma-idhin al-ḥaqq” (Qur'an 7:8–9)	Al-Ṭabarī	Literal interpretation	Understood al-mīzān as a real balance	Demonstrates preference for literal semantic analysis
Same verse	Al-Daḥḥāk and Al-A'mash	Figurative-rhetorical interpretation	Associated al-mīzān with divine justice and judgment	Illustrates symbolic and metaphorical interpretation

Source: Compiled by the author from classical tafsīr literature and rhetorical analyses.

Exegetes also relied extensively upon Prophetic traditions (ḥadīth) as linguistic and semantic evidence for clarifying Qur'anic terminology, particularly obscure or contextually complex expressions. Al-Qurṭubī, for example, explains the term al-ba'ūlah in the verse: “wa-bu'ūlatuhunna aḥaqqu bi-raddihinna” (“Their husbands have a better right to take them back”) (Qur'an 2:228) by tracing its linguistic derivation and semantic usage within Arabic discourse. He identifies al-ba' as meaning “husband,” while related verbal forms denote marital relations and conjugal interaction (Al-Qurṭubī, n.d., Vol. 3, pp. 128–129). To reinforce this interpretation, he cites a Prophetic narration concerning the Days of Tashrīq in which the Prophet Muḥammad described them as “days of eating, drinking, and marital relations (bi'āl)” (Al-Mizzī, 1999, Vol. 9, p. 6). Such examples demonstrate the integration of linguistic evidence and Prophetic tradition within the exegetical process.

Similarly, rhetorical interpretation often depended upon expanding the semantic possibilities of Qur'anic expressions through contextual linguistic analysis. In his commentary on the verse: “wujūhun yawma-idhin nāḍirah ilā rabbihā nāḍirah” (“Faces that Day will be radiant, looking toward their Lord”) (Qur'an 75:22–23), al-Zamakhsharī argued that the expression nāḍirah should be understood in the sense of expectation and hope rather than physical sight. He supported this interpretation through examples from common Arabic usage in which the expression “looking toward” signifies awaiting favor or anticipating generosity (Al-Zamakhsharī, 1998, Vol. 6, p. 270). However, al-Samīn al-Ḥalabī strongly rejected this interpretation and argued that the preposition ilā necessarily indicates visual perception rather than expectation. According to his grammatical analysis, interpreting nāḍirah as “awaiting” contradicts both syntactic structure and linguistic usage (Al-Ḥalabī, n.d., Vol. 10, p. 577). This disagreement illustrates the depth of linguistic and rhetorical debate among classical exegetes and highlights the methodological significance of grammatical analysis within Qur'anic interpretation.

The extensive linguistic investigations conducted by classical exegetes reinforce the principle that language in the Qurʾān is not merely a neutral vehicle for transmitting meaning; rather, it constitutes the interpretative domain through which semantic intention, rhetorical coherence, and textual inimitability are realized. Accordingly, the linguistic and rhetorical method emerged as an indispensable epistemological framework within Qurʾānic exegesis. Nevertheless, this methodological approach remained closely connected to the interpretative capacity of the exegete, whose analytical reasoning, contextual sensitivity, and scholarly diligence played a decisive role in applying linguistic evidence to the interpretation of the Qurʾānic text.

This interpretative diversity becomes particularly visible in discussions concerning seemingly synonymous expressions. For example, exegetes debated the semantic relationship between the terms ḥamd (“praise”) and shukr (“gratitude”) in the verse: “al-ḥamdu lillāhi rabbi al-ʿālamīn” (“All praise is due to God, Lord of the worlds”) (Qurʾān 1:2). Al-Mubarrad and al-Ṭabarī considered the two terms functionally equivalent within Arabic usage, arguing that the expression “al-ḥamdu lillāh shukran” would not be linguistically acceptable unless shukr carried the semantic meaning of ḥamd (Al-Ṭabarī, n.d., Vol. 1, p. 138). Al-Qurṭubī, however, distinguished between the two concepts by arguing that ḥamd refers to praising the intrinsic qualities of the praised entity regardless of prior benefaction, whereas shukr specifically denotes gratitude in response to received favor (Al-Qurṭubī, n.d., Vol. 1, p. 207). According to this interpretation, ḥamd possesses broader semantic scope than shukr because it encompasses praise, commendation, and gratitude simultaneously. This example demonstrates the extent to which semantic precision and rhetorical differentiation shaped exegetical analysis within the classical tradition.

Theories of Qurʾānic Inimitability in Classical Arabic Rhetorical Thought: Selected Models

The concept of Qurʾānic inimitability (iʿjāz al-Qurʾān) occupies a central position within classical Arabic rhetoric, theology, and Qurʾānic exegesis. Muslim scholars devoted extensive intellectual efforts to explaining the nature of the Qurʾān’s uniqueness and identifying the linguistic, rhetorical, semantic, and structural dimensions through which its miraculous character is manifested. Over the centuries, various theoretical models emerged, each attempting to define the precise locus of inimitability and the methodological principles required for perceiving it. Among the most influential contributors to this intellectual tradition were Abū Sulaymān al-Khaṭṭābī, Abū al-Ḥasan al-Rummānī, Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī, and ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī, whose theories collectively shaped the foundations of Arabic rhetorical criticism and Qurʾānic linguistic studies.

Abū Sulaymān al-Khaṭṭābī and the Structural Foundations of Discourse

Abū Sulaymān al-Khaṭṭābī (d. 388 AH) was among the earliest scholars to formulate a systematic linguistic explanation for Qurʾānic inimitability. Rather than merely affirming the miraculous nature of the Qurʾān, he sought to analyze the structural foundations upon which this inimitability is established. According to al-Khaṭṭābī, the essence of iʿjāz resides in naẓm (structural composition), understood as the organizing principle that unites wording (lafẓ) and meaning (maʿnā) into a coherent and inseparable whole (al-Rummānī, 1976, p. 26).

Al-Khaṭṭābī argued that discourse is constituted by three interdependent pillars: a conveying expression (lafẓ ḥāmīl), an established meaning (maʿnā qāʾim), and a structuring relationship (ribāṭ nāẓim) that harmonizes expression and meaning within a unified compositional framework (al-Rummānī, 1976, p. 27). When applied to the Qurʾān, these components attain the highest possible degree of rhetorical perfection. Its lexical expressions exhibit eloquence, precision, and fluidity; its compositional structure reflects exceptional coherence and balance; and its meanings demonstrate intellectual and aesthetic elevation that surpasses ordinary human discourse (al-Dāyah, 1968, p. 138). Consequently, al-Khaṭṭābī located the secret of inimitability not in isolated words or meanings independently considered, but rather in the organic structural relationship that fuses them into an integrated rhetorical system.

Al-Rummānī and the Hierarchical Theory of Rhetoric

Abū al-Ḥasan al-Rummānī (d. 384 AH) developed one of the earliest systematic classifications of Qurʾānic inimitability. He identified seven principal dimensions of iʿjāz, including the impossibility of imitation (tark al-muʿāraḍah), the universal challenge (al-taḥaddī), rhetorical excellence (al-balāghah), foretelling unseen matters (al-ikhbār bi-al-ghayb), and the disruption of customary norms (naqḍ al-ʿādah). Nevertheless, al-Rummānī considered rhetoric to be the supreme criterion through which the uniqueness of the Qurʾān is realized (al-Dāyah, 1968, p. 135).

Central to his theory was the concept of rhetorical stratification, according to which rhetoric operates through hierarchical levels: the highest level (al-ṭabaqah al-ʿulyā), the middle level (al-ṭabaqah al-wuṣṭā), and the lower level (al-ṭabaqah al-dunyā). Al-Rummānī positioned Qurʾānic rhetoric at the highest and unattainable level, beyond the capacity of human expression. Lower rhetorical levels remain accessible to skilled rhetoricians, whereas the Qurʾānic mode of discourse transcends ordinary linguistic capability and thereby constitutes the essence of inimitability (al-Rummānī, 1976, p. 75).

In this regard, al-Rummānī emphasized the importance of rhetorical embellishment (badīʿ) and the various dimensions of eloquence (wujūh al-balāghah) as the principal aesthetic mechanisms through which Qurʾānic discourse rises from the sphere of human

communication to the domain of divine miraculous expression. His theory therefore established rhetoric not merely as a stylistic phenomenon, but as the foundational criterion of textual transcendence and aesthetic superiority.

Al-Bāqillānī and the Epistemology of Qur'ānic Composition

Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī (d. 403 AH) represents a mature phase in the intellectual history of Qur'ānic inimitability studies. In his influential work *I'jāz al-Qur'ān*, he developed a comprehensive methodological response to skeptics by synthesizing theological, rhetorical, and linguistic dimensions of Qur'ānic uniqueness. Al-Bāqillānī distributed the aspects of inimitability across multiple domains, including foreknowledge of unseen realities, narratives of earlier communities, and the illiteracy of the Prophet Muḥammad as evidence of divine revelation. Nevertheless, he ultimately regarded excellence of composition (*barā'at al-naẓm*) and ingenuity of textual arrangement (*badī' al-ta'līf*) as the highest manifestation of Qur'ānic inimitability.

A distinctive aspect of al-Bāqillānī's theory lies in its epistemological orientation. He argued that the miraculous nature of the Qur'ān is not immediately perceptible through external linguistic forms alone, but instead requires specialized knowledge and methodological competence to be properly understood (al-Bāqillānī, n.d., p. 47). In this respect, he maintained that only individuals possessing advanced mastery of Arabic language and rhetoric are capable of recognizing the subtleties of Qur'ānic inimitability.

Al-Bāqillānī further explained that the Qur'ānic challenge arises precisely because many individuals fail to perceive the miracle directly, as miraculous discourse is not distinguished merely by its outward linguistic form, but by deeper structural and rhetorical qualities accessible only through disciplined analysis (al-Bāqillānī, n.d., p. 496). Consequently, he established the sciences of rhetoric and Arabic linguistic analysis as the definitive methodological framework through which the semantic richness and compositional sophistication of the Qur'ān may be apprehended.

'Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī and the Theory of Naẓm

Among all classical theorists of Qur'ānic inimitability, 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (d. 471 AH) occupies perhaps the most decisive and influential position. Through his seminal works *Dalā'il al-I'jāz* and *Al-Risālah al-Shāfiyāh*, al-Jurjānī transformed the concept of *naẓm* from a general rhetorical observation into a fully articulated linguistic theory grounded in syntactic relations and structural organization.

Al-Jurjānī argued that the Qur'ān derives its inimitability primarily from rhetoric (*balāghah*), and that rhetoric itself is fundamentally realized through structural arrangement (*naẓm*) rather than isolated lexical items or phonetic effects (Barakah, 1989, p. 65). According to his theory, meaning emerges through syntactic relationships and compositional interaction rather than through individual words considered independently.

Rejecting theories that located inimitability in isolated metaphors, lexical choices, or sonic resonance, al-Jurjānī instead emphasized the importance of syntactic organization and grammatical relations. He defined *naẓm* as arranging discourse according to the principles and requirements of grammar (*'ilm al-naḥw*), thereby transforming grammar from a merely technical discipline into the supreme rhetorical law governing semantic production (Barakah, 1989, p. 55).

Through this formulation, al-Jurjānī established one of the most sophisticated linguistic theories in the classical Arabic tradition. His conception of inimitability rests upon the harmonious interaction of syntax, semantics, rhetoric, and contextual arrangement, making *naẓm* the ultimate criterion distinguishing ordinary human discourse from divine revelation. Consequently, his theory continues to occupy a foundational place within modern studies of Arabic rhetoric, discourse analysis, and Qur'ānic linguistics.

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The Development of Exegetical Engagement with Qur’anic Inimitability: From Classical Tradition to Modern Interpretative Paradigms

Exegetical engagement with the concept of Qur’anic inimitability (*i‘jāz al-Qur’ān*) has historically occupied a central position within Islamic intellectual thought. For classical exegetes, the study of inimitability was neither a marginal scholarly pursuit nor a merely rhetorical exercise intended to impress audiences; rather, it constituted a foundational framework through which theological, juridical, linguistic, and rhetorical interpretations of the Qur’ān were constructed. Exegetes approached the Qur’ān as a multidimensional miracle whose aspects of uniqueness address different levels of human understanding and intellectual capacity. For the Arabs in particular, the miraculous nature of the Qur’ān was manifested primarily through the excellence of its composition (*badī‘ al-naẓm*), the refinement of its structural organization (*ḥusn al-ta’līf*), and the sublimity of its rhetoric (*sumū al-balāghah*), to such an extent that imitation became impossible. At the same time, other dimensions of inimitability were understood as universal signs accessible to rational reflection across all societies and historical periods.

Within this interpretative context, Shaykhūn (1978) identifies three principal dimensions through which Qur’anic inimitability may be understood: first, the revelation of unseen realities (*al-ikhbār bi-al-ghayb*); second, the narration of historical accounts extending from the creation of Adam to the prophetic mission of Muḥammad; and third, the comprehensive and precise legislative system embodied within the Qur’anic text (p. 23). These dimensions collectively demonstrate that classical theories of inimitability extended beyond purely linguistic concerns and incorporated theological, historical, ethical, and juridical perspectives.

The scholarly concern with inimitability became manifest within exegetical literature on both theoretical and applied levels. At the theoretical level, leading exegetes frequently devoted extensive introductory discussions to Arabic linguistic sciences and the principles of inimitability prior to engaging in verse-by-verse interpretation. Such methodological introductions appear prominently in works including Ibn ‘Aṭīyah’s *Al-Muḥarrar al-Wajīz*, al-Qurṭubī’s *Al-Jāmi‘ li-Aḥkām al-Qur’ān*, and al-Suyūṭī’s *Al-Durr al-Manthūr*. These introductory discussions established the epistemological foundations necessary for approaching the rhetorical and linguistic dimensions of Qur’anic discourse.

At the methodological and applied level, exegetes focused on analyzing the verses of challenge (*āyāt al-taḥaddī*) and examining the rhetorical and stylistic dimensions of Qur’anic expression within the structure of the text itself. Their analyses explored the significance of letters, lexical choices, syntactic arrangements, and compositional harmony in generating the miraculous character of the Qur’ān. These approaches varied considerably in scope and orientation. Al-Zamakhsharī’s *Al-Kashshāf* emphasized rhetorical precision and linguistic subtlety, whereas Abū Ḥayyān’s *Al-Baḥr al-Muḥīṭ* demonstrated exceptional grammatical and linguistic comprehensiveness. Similarly, the exegesis of Abū al-Su‘ūd reflected a strong aesthetic orientation focused on rhetorical elegance and expressive sophistication.

In the modern period, discussions concerning Qur’anic inimitability assumed new forms in response to changing intellectual and cultural contexts. Modern exegetes and linguists increasingly sought to reinterpret classical theories through contemporary literary, linguistic, philosophical, and rhetorical frameworks. This development is particularly evident in the writings of Muṣṭafā Ṣādiq al-Rāfi‘ī, who approached the Qur’ān through the philosophy of expression and stylistic genius; Sayyid Quṭb, whose theory of artistic imagery (*al-taṣwīr al-fannī*) emphasized the aesthetic and emotional dimensions of Qur’anic discourse; and Muḥammad ‘Abd Allāh Darāz, who developed a systemic and structural approach to Qur’anic coherence and rhetorical unity. The interpretative trajectory further extends to the works of al-Sha‘rāwī, who presented the dimensions of Qur’anic inimitability through an accessible rhetorical style that reached both specialists and broader audiences.

Muṣṭafā Ṣādiq al-Rāfi‘ī and the Theory of Stylistic Genius

Muṣṭafā Ṣādiq al-Rāfi‘ī represents one of the most influential modern contributors to the theory of Qur’anic inimitability. His approach begins with a critical reassessment of earlier discussions, which he considered excessively burdened by polemical theology, abstract logic, and philosophical disputation. According to al-Rāfi‘ī, many classical debates concerning inimitability focused more on defeating opponents intellectually than on uncovering the intrinsic reality of Qur’anic uniqueness (al-Rāfi‘ī, n.d., p. 99). In response, he proposed a theory rooted in the depth of human innate perception (*fiṭrah*), arguing that the true secret of inimitability lies in the unparalleled expressive power of the Qur’ān, which remains beyond human capability regardless of rhetorical mastery.

Al-Rāfi'i maintained that Qur'anic inimitability is fundamentally grounded in structural organization, stylistic consistency, and compositional coherence. Through inductive examination of the Qur'anic text, he concluded that its miraculous nature operates in an absolute sense, entirely negating the possibility of successful imitation within the limits of human expression (al-Rāfi'i, n.d., p. 156). Importantly, he viewed inimitability not merely as rhetorical eloquence, but as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing historical influence, psychological impact, moral transformation, and enduring intellectual relevance.

In elaborating the distinctive nature of Qur'anic style, al-Rāfi'i identified three principal characteristics. The first is absolute stylistic distinction and structural unity, whereby the Qur'an maintains consistent rhetorical excellence and compositional coherence throughout the entirety of the text without fluctuation or decline in expressive force (al-Rūmī, 2003, p. 280). The second characteristic is semantic flexibility and temporal inclusiveness, referring to the capacity of the Qur'anic text to accommodate renewed interpretation across different historical periods while preserving the integrity of its wording and meaning. The third characteristic is restrained simplicity, whereby the Qur'anic style combines clarity and accessibility with profound rhetorical sophistication, thereby achieving expressive harmony without artificiality or obscurity (al-Rūmī, 2003, p. 205).

Through these observations, al-Rāfi'i developed a modern interpretative framework that connects classical rhetorical theories with broader questions concerning human nature, literary aesthetics, historical continuity, and the psychology of linguistic influence. His work therefore represents a significant transitional moment in the evolution of Qur'anic linguistic studies from classical rhetoric toward modern literary and stylistic criticism.

Sayyid Quṭb: Artistic Imagery and the Aesthetic Authority of Qur'anic Discourse

Within modern approaches to Qur'anic inimitability, Sayyid Quṭb occupies a distinctive position due to his emphasis on the aesthetic vitality and artistic dynamism of Qur'anic expression. His theory of inimitability revolves around the concept of artistic imagery (*al-taṣwir al-fannī*), through which the Qur'an is approached not merely as a linguistic or rhetorical structure, but as a living artistic experience in which sound, movement, rhythm, emotion, and imagery interact harmoniously within a unified expressive system.

Sayyid Quṭb was profoundly influenced by the emotional and rhetorical force of Qur'anic discourse, arguing that the Qur'an exercises simultaneous authority over both intellect and emotion. According to his perspective, the aesthetic power of the Qur'an becomes perceptible immediately upon encountering the text, even before systematic analysis of its rhetorical and linguistic dimensions takes place (al-Rūmī, 2003, pp. 280–285). This immediate experiential impact, in his view, constitutes one of the clearest manifestations of Qur'anic uniqueness.

Quṭb further argues that the Qur'anic text contains a subtle and elusive expressive secret that penetrates human consciousness directly through auditory and emotional perception. He suggests that the source of this extraordinary influence cannot be reduced solely to isolated lexical items, semantic content, or rhetorical ornamentation. Rather, it emerges from the organic interaction between wording (*lafẓ*), compositional structure (*naẓm*), phonetic rhythm, emotional atmosphere, and artistic imagery (Quṭb, 2002b, Vol. 7, p. 605). Such a perspective reflects Quṭb's awareness of the integrated and inseparable nature of Qur'anic aesthetic expression.

The originality of Quṭb's contribution lies particularly in his development of the theory of artistic imagery as a central methodological framework for understanding Qur'anic discourse. Within this framework, Qur'anic language transcends conventional rhetorical analysis focused exclusively on eloquence, grammatical precision, or sonic harmony. Instead, the Qur'anic text is viewed as an artistic structure capable of transforming abstract concepts into vivid sensory scenes and emotionally charged experiences. Through this interpretative approach, rhetorical arrangement becomes a mechanism for visualizing meaning and generating experiential participation in the text.

Moreover, Quṭb's literary sensitivity enabled him to reveal the phonetic and rhythmic dimensions of Qur'anic expression with exceptional depth. His analyses frequently emphasize the organic relationship between sound patterns, lexical choice, syntactic movement, and emotional resonance. Consequently, he directs the reader toward the aesthetic loci through which the Qur'an continuously renews its persuasive and emotional power across changing historical and cultural contexts (Zūzū, 1998, p. 169). In this respect, Quṭb's work represents a major transition from classical rhetorical analysis toward modern literary and aesthetic criticism within Qur'anic studies.

Muḥammad 'Abd Allāh Darāz and the Systemic Structure of Inimitability

Muḥammad 'Abd Allāh Darāz developed one of the most comprehensive modern theories of Qur'anic inimitability through his influential work *Al-Naba' al-'Azīm*. Darāz conceptualized inimitability as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing legislative, scientific, and linguistic dimensions. His approach is distinguished by its systemic orientation, according to which the miraculous nature of the Qur'an manifests not merely in isolated rhetorical features, but within the integrated coherence of the text as a whole.

Darāz further elaborated his theory by identifying four hierarchical levels of rhetorical dominance and structural coherence. The first level concerns inimitability within the individual passage or verse. At this level, even the shortest Qur'anic expressions demonstrate

extraordinary economy of wording combined with semantic completeness. According to Darāz, Qur'ānic discourse simultaneously addresses both ordinary audiences and intellectual elites, integrating rational persuasion with emotional influence while balancing brevity and clarity without sacrificing expressive depth (Abū Zahrah, 1970, pp. 84–110).

The second level concerns inimitability within the sūrah as a unified structural entity. Darāz argues that each sūrah exhibits remarkable thematic coherence and organizational harmony despite the fact that Qur'ānic revelation occurred gradually across varying historical circumstances. Through sophisticated compositional arrangement, seemingly diverse themes become integrated into a unified rhetorical and semantic structure.

The third level involves coherence between the sūrahs themselves. At this stage, Darāz identifies subtle conceptual and thematic connections linking different sections of the Qur'ān into a comprehensive textual system whose components mutually reinforce one another. Such interconnectedness contributes to both the aesthetic unity and epistemological consistency of the Qur'ānic text.

Finally, the fourth and highest level concerns the inimitability of the Qur'ān as a complete and self-sustaining textual totality. At this level, the Qur'ān appears as a fully integrated miracle characterized by absolute coherence, consistency, and absence of contradiction. For Darāz, this total structural harmony ultimately demonstrates the transcendence of the Qur'ānic source beyond the limits of human authorship and intellectual capacity (Darāz, 1984, pp. 138–204).

Darāz's systemic perspective significantly contributed to modern discussions concerning textual coherence, discourse unity, and structural organization in Qur'ānic studies. His work may therefore be regarded as an important precursor to contemporary approaches in discourse analysis, textual linguistics, and literary hermeneutics.

Al-Sha'rāwī and the Expansion of Methodological Inimitability

Imām Muḥammad Mutawallī al-Sha'rāwī devoted extensive attention to explaining the dimensions of Qur'ānic inimitability through a broad methodological framework that transcended purely rhetorical analysis. Unlike approaches limited exclusively to linguistic eloquence, al-Sha'rāwī conceptualized the Qur'ān as an open and continuously unfolding field of miraculous signs accessible to specialists across diverse domains of knowledge. According to his perspective, every discipline is capable of perceiving dimensions of Qur'ānic inimitability relevant to its own methodological framework. Thus, the linguist encounters rhetorical and stylistic inimitability, while physicians, astronomers, and natural scientists identify dimensions corresponding to their respective fields of expertise (al-Sha'rāwī, 1991, Vol. 1, p. 106).

Despite this expansive intellectual vision, al-Sha'rāwī remained methodologically connected to the broader classical tradition of Qur'ānic exegesis. His works, particularly *Mu'jizat al-Qur'ān*, integrate linguistic, rhetorical, theological, and intellectual dimensions without privileging one aspect at the expense of another. Nevertheless, his discourse maintains a particularly strong rhetorical and linguistic orientation, characterized by extensive use of stylistic analysis, semantic nuance, and artistic illustration.

Al-Sha'rāwī grounded his theory of miracle upon two principal conditions. First, the miracle must constitute a violation of ordinary human capability and natural convention, thereby revealing a phenomenon beyond the productive power of creation. Second, the miracle must occur precisely within the domain in which the addressed community possesses the highest degree of expertise, thereby rendering the challenge fully comprehensible and intellectually decisive. Since the Arabs excelled in language and rhetoric, the Qur'ānic miracle necessarily manifested itself through the domain of linguistic expression and rhetorical organization.

Within this framework, al-Sha'rāwī regarded the Arabic language as the primary medium through which human incapacity before divine discourse becomes evident. Accordingly, the structural arrangement (*naẓm*), rhetorical coherence, semantic precision, and expressive vitality of the Qur'ān collectively function as manifestations of a discourse that transcends the limits of human creativity and confirms the divine origin of revelation.

Within this broader interpretative framework, it is important to note that Imām al-Zamakhsharī, in his celebrated exegesis *Al-Kashshāf*, limits the foundations of Qur'ānic inimitability to two principal dimensions. The first concerns the miraculous nature of compositional structure and rhetorical arrangement (*naẓm wa-ta'līf al-kalām*), which represents the highest level of linguistic and rhetorical excellence attainable within Arabic discourse. The second concerns the inclusion of reports regarding unseen realities (*al-ikhbār bi-al-ghuyūb*), which remain inaccessible to ordinary human knowledge and therefore constitute definitive evidence of divine revelation (Al-Zamakhsharī, n.d., Vol. 3, p. 138).

This methodological perspective becomes particularly evident in al-Zamakhsharī's interpretation of the Qur'ānic verse: "*Bal kadhhabū bimā lam yuhītū bi-ilmih wa lammā ya'tibim ta'wīlūh*" ("Rather, they denied that whose knowledge they did not encompass and whose interpretation had not yet come to them") (Qur'ān 10:39). In his commentary on this verse, al-Zamakhsharī emphasizes that divine revelation contains dimensions whose ultimate reality remains known only to God. Such dimensions are manifested both in the miraculous structure of Qur'ānic discourse, which renders imitation impossible, and in its disclosure of unseen truths that transcend the limits of human cognition (Al-Zamakhsharī, n.d., Vol. 2, p. 262).

Accordingly, the scope of Qur'anic inimitability extends beyond rhetorical beauty alone to encompass existential truths, historical narratives concerning earlier prophetic communities, and forms of scientific and cosmic knowledge inaccessible through ordinary human means. Within this framework, rhetorical precision and epistemological depth become inseparable dimensions of a unified divine discourse.

This integration between linguistic perfection and epistemic authority contributes to the Qur'an's characterization as a text "free from doubt," whose structural coherence and semantic precision transcend the limits of human creativity. Classical scholars therefore maintained that even if all humans and jinn were collectively to cooperate in producing a single verse comparable to the Qur'an in both form and meaning, they would remain incapable of doing so. Consequently, continued reflection upon the rhetorical structure and compositional harmony of the Qur'an only deepens intellectual conviction concerning the transcendence and sacred origin of the text.

CONCLUSION

A careful historical examination of linguistic inquiry within the Islamic intellectual tradition demonstrates that the Arabic language has consistently functioned in service of elucidating the Qur'anic text. Phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, and rhetorical systems were progressively integrated into exegetical methodology in order to regulate meaning, clarify ambiguity, and investigate subtle semantic and stylistic dimensions embedded within Qur'anic discourse. This engagement was not pursued as an abstract intellectual exercise or a form of scholarly ornamentation; rather, it emerged from the practical necessity of interpreting revelation accurately and preserving the integrity of its meanings.

The present study sought to examine the relationship between linguistic analysis and Qur'anic exegesis through a systematic exploration of classical and modern theories of inimitability. By tracing the methodological role of language in explicating Qur'anic composition, the study demonstrates that the Qur'an has historically functioned as the supreme reference point for Arabic linguistic analogy and rhetorical theory.

Several major conclusions may be drawn from this analysis.

First, the Qur'an occupies a foundational position within both Islamic and Arabic intellectual traditions. The development of grammar, rhetoric, philology, semantics, and related disciplines was deeply connected to the objective of understanding and interpreting the Qur'anic text. Consequently, Qur'anic discourse served not merely as a religious text, but also as the principal catalyst for the formation of Arabic linguistic sciences.

Second, the linguistic method in Qur'anic exegesis functions as a methodological instrument designed to approximate meaning, investigate textual organization, and uncover dimensions of rhetorical and semantic inimitability. Language itself is therefore not treated as an autonomous end, but as an analytical mechanism through which exegetes explore compositional structure and interpretative significance.

Third, the Qur'an possesses epistemological authority over grammatical theory rather than functioning merely as an object regulated by grammatical rules. Classical grammarians frequently derived linguistic principles from Qur'anic usage, thereby establishing revelation as a primary source for grammatical and rhetorical standardization within Arabic scholarship.

Fourth, the role of the linguistic exegete extends beyond lexical clarification to include analysis of syntactic structures, rhetorical devices, metaphorical expressions, declarative forms, performative constructions, and semantic relationships. Through these interpretative mechanisms, exegetes sought to eliminate ambiguity and preserve the precision of Qur'anic meaning.

Finally, the study demonstrates that Qur'anic inimitability does not reside in isolated letters or individual lexical units considered independently, but rather in the integrated system of composition (*naẓm*), structural coherence (*nasaq*), and semantic organization (*ma'ānī*). Even the phenomenon of the disjointed letters (*al-ḥurūf al-muqāṭṭa'ah*) may be understood as a form of rhetorical challenge demonstrating the inability of human beings to reproduce the compositional and semantic uniqueness of the Qur'anic text. Thus, the miracle of the Qur'an ultimately resides in the harmonious integration of language, structure, meaning, and rhetorical organization within a unified and transcendent discourse.

DECLARATIONS

Author Contributions

The author solely conceived the study, conducted the literature review, performed the linguistic and exegetical analysis, interpreted the findings, and prepared the manuscript for publication.

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Ethical Approval. This study does not involve human participants, animals, clinical data, or experimental procedures. Therefore, ethical approval was not required.

Research Scope Statement

This study approaches the Qur'anic text from a linguistic, rhetorical, and hermeneutical perspective within the fields of discourse analysis and Arabic linguistic studies. The research does not aim to promote theological, sectarian, or doctrinal positions; rather, it examines methodological and interpretative structures employed in classical and modern Qur'anic exegesis as part of broader scholarly inquiry in language and textual studies.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Use Statement

During the preparation of this manuscript, AI-assisted language technologies were used exclusively to improve academic language quality, grammatical clarity, structural organization, and stylistic refinement. All conceptual interpretations, analytical arguments, scholarly evaluations, and final content decisions remain the sole responsibility of the author.

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