

Stylistic Variation and Linguistic Strategies in Quranic Discourse: A Rhetorical, Phonetic, and Translational Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Quranic discourse demonstrates a high degree of stylistic variation, marked by the strategic interplay of rhetorical artistry, phonetic structures, and cross-linguistic meaning transfer that collectively shape its theological depth and communicative precision. However, existing studies often examine these features in isolation, focusing on individual linguistic dimensions rather than their interconnected roles within the broader Quranic framework. Accordingly, this conceptual paper aims to consolidate insights from prior scholarship and deepen the understanding of how these stylistic elements function together. Although this study does not propose a formal model, it sets the foundation for future development of an interdisciplinary framework that integrates linguistic analysis, phonetic stylistics, and translation theory within the exegetical tradition of classical tafsīr. Drawing on contemporary research, the paper explores how stylistic devices—such as repetition, parallelism, binarity, ellipsis, metaphor, and rhetorical questions—operate cohesively to construct meaning, reinforce thematic coherence, and engage diverse audiences. At the phonological level, attention is given to rhythm, intonation, articulation, and tajwīd, which contribute not only to oral performance and memorability but also to semantic precision. The paper further addresses the challenges of rendering stylistic intricacies into target languages, particularly where grammatical shifts and phonological symmetry resist direct equivalence. As a result, it highlights the need for context-sensitive strategies that preserve both expressive nuance and theological intent in translation. The broader implication of this research lies in its call for a more integrated framework—one that unites classical exegesis, modern linguistic theory, and computational tools—to better capture the Qur'an's stylistic coherence and communicative power across diverse linguistic and cultural contexts. This integrative approach is crucial for preserving the Qur'an's rhetorical elegance and ensuring the depth of its exegetical meaning is accurately conveyed in both translation and interpretive settings.

Keywords— Quranic Discourse, Stylistic Variation, Rhetorical Devices, Phonetic Features, Translation Strategies

INTRODUCTION

Quranic discourse is distinguished by its unique linguistic and stylistic features, which contribute significantly to its theological, rhetorical, and phonetic richness. As the central religious text of Islam (Baharun et al., 2020; Musta'in, 2018), the Quran employs a diverse range of stylistic devices—including parallelism, repetition, ellipsis, phonetic patterns, and syntactic shifts—to enhance its communicative efficacy and memorability (Al-Ameedi & Mehdi, 2018; Abdul-Raof, 2017). These features not only reinforce textual coherence and aesthetic appeal but also play a crucial role in interpretation, recitation, and translation (Mohamed & Khaled, 2021; Klar, 2020). Given its oral transmission and divine nature, such stylistic variations serve multiple functions, including emphasis, persuasion, and theological signification (Al-Ameedi & Al-Tamimi, 2022; Musta'in, 2018). Understanding these linguistic strategies is essential for appreciating the Quran's rhetorical power and its implications for exegesis and translation studies (Abdul-Raof, 2017; Klar, 2020).

Despite growing scholarly attention to the stylistic features of the Quran, many studies continue to examine rhetorical, phonetic, and translational aspects in relative isolation. This compartmentalized approach often overlooks the intricate interdependence among these elements, which collectively contribute to the Quran's semantic precision and rhetorical force. For example, phonetic features such as rhythm, tajwīd, and intonation

are widely acknowledged as essential to Quranic recitation; yet, their contribution to stylistic cohesion and interpretive meaning remains under-theorized (Jalil et al., 2018; Alqurneh et al., 2016). Likewise, translation studies have repeatedly highlighted the challenges of conveying the Quran’s rhetorical complexity and phonetic nuance across languages, where shifts in syntax, pronouns, or ellipsis frequently result in semantic distortion or the erosion of intended emphasis (Najjar & Kadhim, 2021; Abuissac et al., 2020).

To address these analytical gaps, this study proposes an integrative framework that unifies rhetorical, phonetic, and translational perspectives within the exegetical tradition of classical tafsīr. By examining how these elements operate in tandem—rather than in isolation—it aims to uncover the multilayered stylistic architecture of Quranic discourse. Special attention is given to how phonetic patterns reinforce rhetorical strategies and how both influence meaning construction and memorability. In doing so, the study not only contributes to the theoretical refinement of Quranic stylistics but also offers practical insights for translation methodology, particularly in maintaining the Quran’s eloquence and theological integrity across linguistic boundaries.

Theoretical Framework

Stylistics is the study of how language is employed artistically and functionally in texts to generate specific effects, convey nuanced meanings, and engage audiences. Drawing upon insights from linguistics, literary criticism, and cultural studies, stylistics examines both the structural and functional dimensions of language—such as word choice, sentence construction, sound patterns, and rhetorical devices—which collectively shape a text’s style and communicative impact (Simpson, 2004; Leech & Short, 2007). It offers a multi-layered analytical framework, addressing language at the phonetic, morphological, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic levels. These levels correspond to distinct yet interconnected domains of analysis: sound patterns (phonology), word formation (morphology), sentence structure (syntax), semantic depth (semantics), and contextual meaning (pragmatics).

To illustrate this multi-dimensional structure, the following theoretical framework diagram represents the five core linguistic levels in stylistic analysis, each contributing to a holistic understanding of how meaning and effect are constructed in texts.

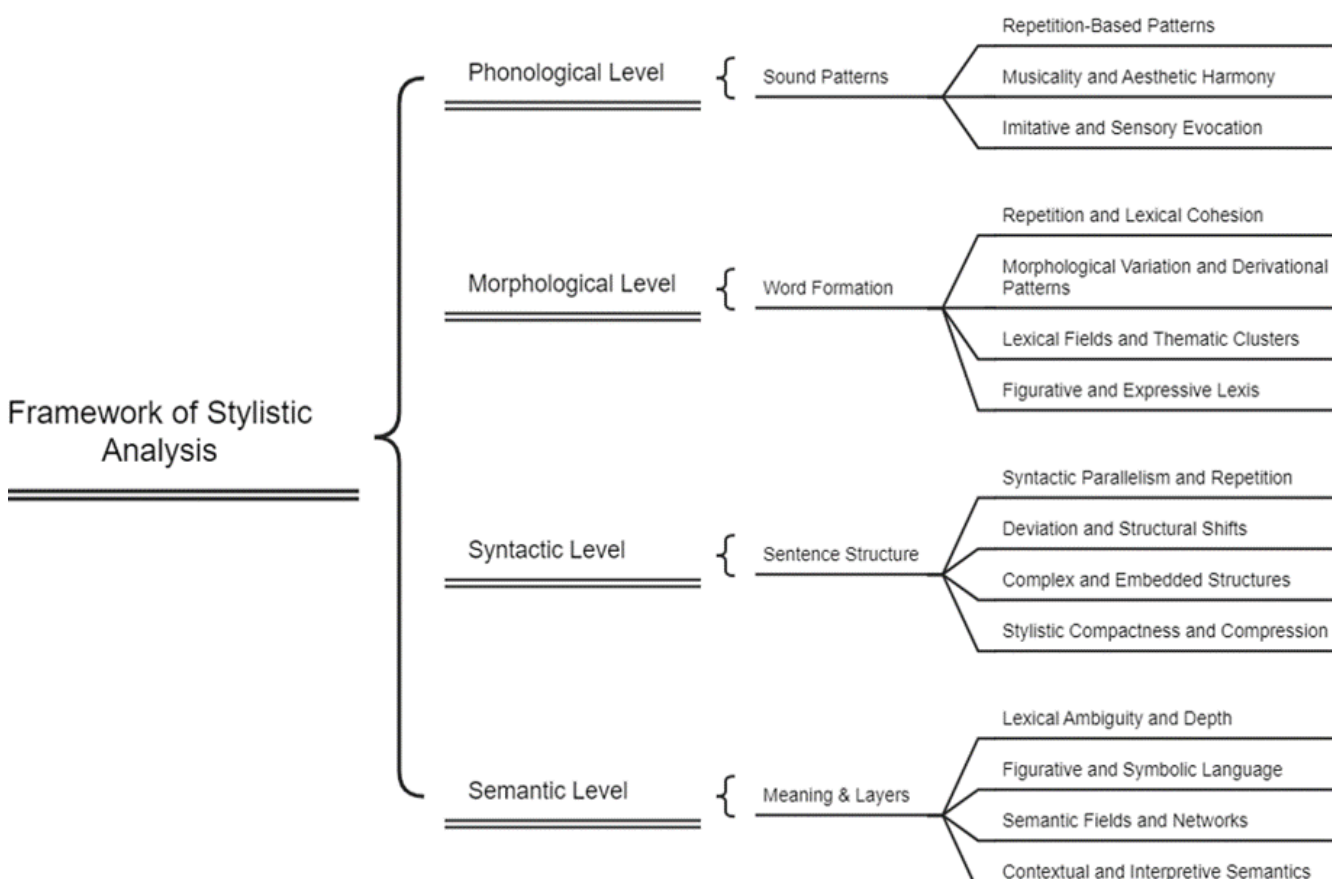


Figure 1: Theoretical framework of stylistic analysis across five linguistic levels

Extending on this interdisciplinary foundation, stylistics extends beyond the confines of literary analysis to offer a robust methodological framework for examining sacred texts, notably the Quran. Although it has traditionally been associated with the linguistic study of literary genres—such as poetry, drama, and prose (Short, 1996)—the evolving scope of stylistics now encompasses religious discourse, enabling scholars to uncover the linguistic richness and aesthetic intricacy embedded in divine revelation. In the context of the Quran, stylistic inquiry has illuminated the text's rhetorical precision, rhythmic structure, and lexical artistry, all of which contribute significantly to its theological depth and spiritual resonance. In particular, Indonesian scholarship has witnessed a marked increase in stylistic studies of the Quran since 2020, catalysed by developments in Arabic stylistic theory. This growing corpus of research reflects an expanding academic interest in exploring the interface between linguistic form and sacred meaning (Ahmad et al., 2024).

For the Quran, stylistics allows us to explore how its unique linguistic features enhance its theological depth, rhetorical power, and communicative effectiveness (Abdul-Raof, 2007). Muslim scholars have long recognized the Quran's unparalleled stylistic qualities, often describing it as a linguistic miracle (*i'jāz al-Qur'ān*) that transcends human capacity. For instance, al-Jurjānī (d. 1078) emphasized the Quran's inimitable use of language, particularly its ability to convey profound meanings through concise expressions (*balāgha*), which he considered a hallmark of divine eloquence (Izutsu, 1959). Similarly, al-Rummānī (d. 996) highlighted the Quran's mastery of rhetorical devices such as parallelism, metaphor, and repetition, arguing that these features contribute to its persuasive and aesthetic impact. By integrating these perspectives, we gain a deeper appreciation of how the Quran employs language not only to communicate its message but also to inspire spiritual reflection and intellectual engagement.

Stylistic Variation and Its Implications for Tafsir and Linguistic Studies

Stylistic variation in the Qur'an constitutes a defining aspect of its rhetorical and theological sophistication, manifesting across multiple linguistic dimensions, including lexical, syntactic, phonetic, and morphological levels. These stylistic mechanisms serve not merely to enhance semantic precision and aesthetic resonance, but also to facilitate meaning construction and direct interpretive engagement. As Abdul-Raof (2007) emphasizes, micro-level linguistic phenomena—such as morphological alternation, case inflection, and syntactic reordering—are frequently employed for deliberate theological and rhetorical purposes. He illustrates this through a comparison of two structurally analogous verses: “fa-yaghfiru li-man yashā'u wa-yu'adhdhibu man yashā'u” (Q2:284) and “yu'adhdhibu man yashā'u wa-yaghfiru li-man yashā'u” (Q5:40). While both verses articulate the same semantic assertion—God's authority to forgive or punish—the variation in word order redirects rhetorical focus. In Q2:284, the precedence of forgiveness foregrounds divine mercy, whereas in Q5:40, where legal retribution is central, punishment is emphasized, reflecting divine justice. Abdul-Raof conceptualizes this as pragmatic foregrounding, wherein syntactic arrangement aligns with the theological tenor of the surrounding discourse. His broader analysis also attends to stylistic ellipsis and morphological deviation as part of Qur'anic discourse's semiotic complexity.

Building on this micro-level analysis, recent scholarship has expanded attention to broader rhetorical strategies, underscoring the Qur'an's dynamic use of stylistic variation to engage audiences and enhance interpretive depth. Sicak (2019), for instance, examines the principle of *tafannun*—a classical Arabic rhetorical device referring to variation in form for emphatic or persuasive effect—and shows how similar meanings are conveyed across *surahs* through linguistically distinct formulations. He highlights how metaphor, allegory, and narrative modulation are finely attuned to thematic concerns and audience expectations. A salient example is the Qur'an's shifting grammatical perspectives—frequently employing *iltifāt* (stylistic shift in person) to alternate between first-person and third-person narration—which functions either to cultivate intimacy or assert divine authority, depending on context. This modulation enables the Qur'an to maintain thematic coherence while adapting its rhetorical tone, thereby amplifying its communicative and persuasive impact.

Extending the discussion to macro-level rhetorical structures, Al-Salami (2022) examines the strategic deployment of ellipsis and syntactic compression as mechanisms that prompt active hermeneutic engagement. In *Surah Maryam* (19:2–15), the narrative of Prophet Zakaria bypasses detailed descriptions of Yahya's birth and early life, transitioning swiftly from divine promise to prophetic fulfillment. This narrative gap compels the reader to infer omitted events, thereby fostering reflective engagement. A parallel technique appears in the

account of Prophet Lot (11:69–83), where the elision of his departure scene encourages interpretive reconstruction. Al-Salami argues that these omissions are not narrative lacunae but deliberate rhetorical devices that achieve textual economy while intensifying theological resonance. Thus, such omissions operate not as mere ellipses, but as hermeneutic prompts that invite reader participation in meaning-making.

Based on the previous discussion, stylistic variation in the Qur'an operates as a deliberate and multi-layered strategy across lexical, syntactic, and discursive levels. At the micro level, morphological patterns and syntactic reordering serve to foreground theological meaning and guide emphasis. Intermediate features such as metaphor, allegory, and shifts in grammatical perspective enhance rhetorical adaptability and audience engagement. At the macro level, ellipsis and syntactic compression function as hermeneutic prompts, encouraging reflection and interpretive depth. These stylistic choices are integral to the Qur'an's semantic and rhetorical architecture. Accordingly, their systematic analysis holds significant implications for tafsir and linguistic studies by offering deeper insight into how language form shapes exegetical meaning and interpretive precision.

Rhetorical Strategies in Quranic Discourse

Rhetorical strategies constitute a foundational component of Qur'anic discourse, contributing significantly to its communicative depth, persuasive power, and exegetical richness. Far from functioning as stylistic embellishments, devices such as rhetorical questions, repetition, ellipsis, parallelism, and binarity serve as integral mechanisms for conveying theological meaning, guiding reflection, and fostering sustained engagement across linguistic and temporal contexts.

Among the most frequently employed rhetorical techniques is the rhetorical question, which operates beyond the conventional scope of inquiry to express astonishment, assert divine authority, and provoke critical introspection. In Surah al-Baqarah, rhetorical questions are employed didactically to challenge presuppositions and structure theological reasoning (Tabassum, 2021). Rather than seeking answers, such interrogatives prompt reflection and underscore doctrinal emphasis. This function is particularly evident in Surah al-Furqān (25:7): "What sort of messenger is this who eats food and walks about in the markets?" Classical exegetes such as al-Ṭabarī and al-Zamakhsharī interpret the verse as an expression of disbelief rather than genuine inquiry. In translation, as demonstrated by Al-Smadi (2022), these questions are rendered using *wh*-forms—"What sort...", "Why does...", "How is it that..."—in order to retain their rhetorical force. These examples reveal the rhetorical question's dual function as a theological assertion and pedagogical device, simultaneously challenging the reader and affirming divine supremacy.

Repetition likewise plays a critical role in reinforcing doctrinal constants and cultivating rhythmic resonance. Recurrent expressions such as "Indeed, Allah is Forgiving, Merciful" appear across numerous surahs, reinforcing divine attributes while enhancing memorability. Though often understated in rhetorical analysis, repetition operates as a cohesive element that supports the Qur'an's oral transmission and thematic unity. When strategically deployed, it offers both cognitive reinforcement and emotional intensity, anchoring theological principles within an unfolding textual structure.

Further rhetorical complexity is evident in the Qur'an's use of ellipsis and syntactic compression—devices that streamline linguistic form while deepening semantic engagement. Shihab (2010), for instance, draws attention to Surah al-Wāqī'ah (56:70), where the clause "If We willed, We could make it bitter" omits the consequence, prompting reflection on divine control over creation. Similarly, Surah al-Taḥrīm (66:5) condenses moral judgment into a succinct phrase: "Perhaps his Lord, if He divorces you, will substitute [for him] better wives..." Although the descriptive attributes are not stated explicitly, they are conceptually present, inviting interpretive elaboration. Such omissions are not rhetorical deficiencies but deliberate strategies that foster theological contemplation and semantic openness.

Closely related is the rhetorical deployment of binarity—a structuring principle that frames much of the Qur'an's ethical and theological discourse. Through the juxtaposition of opposing concepts such as guidance and misguidance or belief and disbelief, the Qur'an articulates a moral topology grounded in divine justice and human accountability. Boisliveau (2014) highlights this binary logic in contrasts like *ḥudā* (guidance) versus *ḍalāl* (error), or *ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm* (straight path) versus *ghayy* (deviation). Surah Ṭāḥā (20:123) exemplifies this

approach: “Whoever follows My guidance will not go astray...”—a verse that encapsulates the Qur’an’s dichotomous construction of spiritual success and failure. These binaries serve as interpretive anchors rather than simplistic dualisms, enabling theological clarity through contrast.

In tandem with binarity, parallelism reinforces rhetorical balance and thematic cohesion. As Ibrahim et al. (2014) observe, the Qur’an often employs syntactic symmetry—through paired phrases, mirrored clauses, and rhythmic alignment—to sustain stylistic elegance and doctrinal precision. These parallel structures facilitate brevity without compromising depth, ensuring that key messages remain accessible, yet richly nuanced.

Based on the above discussion, the rhetorical strategies embedded in Qur’anic discourse form an intricately woven system that shapes both its expressive style and theological substance. Rhetorical questions stimulate reflection and challenge presuppositions; repetition affirms divine truths and supports oral transmission; ellipsis and syntactic compression foster exegetical engagement; binarity establishes moral contrast and theological clarity; and parallelism maintains structural harmony. Collectively, these rhetorical mechanisms reflect the Qur’an’s deliberate orchestration of language to convey revelation with precision, authority, and enduring resonance. Their continued study not only enriches linguistic and literary analysis but also informs contemporary approaches to tafsīr and translation, affirming the central role of rhetoric in Qur’anic hermeneutics.

Phonetic and Acoustical Aspects in The Quran

Phonetic features play a foundational role in shaping Qur’anic stylistic variation, enhancing not only its aesthetic resonance and rhythmic cadence but also its cognitive and exegetical depth. These elements—including intonation, articulation, syllabic stress, and phonological symmetry—collectively contribute to the Qur’an’s oral integrity and theological expressiveness. As a key aspect of *i’jāz* (inimitability), phonetics functions not as embellishment, but as a semiotic system that encodes meaning and supports interpretive clarity.

Recent computational studies have highlighted the strategic role of sound in Qur’anic discourse, particularly in the deployment of oath expressions. Alqurneh et al. (2016) classify these oaths according to syntactic structures—such as particles (*lā*, *wāw*), verbs (*uqsim*), and referential anchors (e.g., *rabb*)—which are paired with intentional phonetic cues to emphasize divine authority and demarcate thematic shifts. For example, verses like Q4:65 and Q51:23 employ repetition and rhythmic balance around divine titles to intensify solemnity. These phonological constructs—evident in bigram sequences and patterned stress—serve as stylistic amplifiers within the Qur’an’s broader rhetorical framework.

Beyond oath forms, phonetic orchestration permeates the Qur’anic text at multiple levels. On the lexical scale, repeated phonemes—such as *qāf*, *sīn*, and *lām*—generate layered semantic resonance. Verses often conclude with harmonized sound endings, providing structural closure and aiding memorization. Across chapters, recurring acoustic motifs contribute to thematic cohesion and recitative continuity. These sound patterns not only reinforce oral transmission but also sharpen the theological impact of the message.

A major contribution to this field is Jalil et al.’s (2018) systematic review of Qur’anic phonetics, which consolidates over a decade of research and delineates three focal areas: phonemic variation (e.g., elongation, pitch shifts), verse-level rhythmic design, and the link between articulation and interpretive nuance. Their analysis repositions *tajwīd* as a sophisticated phonological framework that shapes delivery and deepens understanding. Articulatory features—such as *ghunnah* (nasal resonance), *madd* (prolongation), and *qalqalah* (vocal rebound)—are shown to affect cognitive retention and emotive resonance. Moreover, the strategic placement of soft consonants at the start of select *sūrahs* is observed to establish meditative tone and thematic foregrounding. Their findings represent a significant advancement in phonetic inquiry within Qur’anic studies.

In light of the previous literature, it becomes clear that Qur’anic sound patterns are intentionally crafted to fulfill both rhetorical and theological functions. Acoustic devices—ranging from cadence and articulation to phoneme sequencing—are interwoven across textual layers to guide reflection, enhance coherence, and preserve the text’s oral vitality. Rather than serving ornamental roles, these features constitute an essential structural system. The convergence of classical phonological knowledge, particularly *tajwīd*, with computational models such as stylometry and acoustic analysis, has significantly expanded the analytical scope. This interdisciplinary approach

affirms the centrality of phonetics in sustaining the Qur'an's linguistic elegance, hermeneutical richness, and enduring performative legacy.

Translational Challenges of Stylistic Features

The translation of Quranic stylistic features presents a complex set of challenges arising from the intricate interplay of linguistic, rhetorical, and phonetic elements. The Qur'an's use of grammatical shifts, rhetorical questions, parallelism, ellipsis, and phonetic patterning contributes significantly to its theological depth and literary eloquence. However, these same features often resist direct translation, leading to either semantic distortion or the loss of rhetorical force. Najjar (2020) and Qassem (2021) observe that literal translations frequently fail to capture the stylistic intricacies embedded in Arabic syntax and prosody, while interpretative translations, though more accessible, risk introducing unintended theological reinterpretations. This tension underscores the persistent difficulty of preserving the Qur'an's rhetorical function and semantic nuance across languages.

Extending this scholarly discourse, Abuissac et al. (2020) emphasize the translational challenges posed by literary features such as ellipsis, repetition, and phonetic aesthetics. They argue that conventional strategies often fail to reproduce the Qur'an's stylistic cohesion and oral resonance. To address these limitations, they propose methods such as exegetical contextualization and partial adaptation—approaches that maintain both textual coherence and communicative force. For instance, the rhetorical question in Q25:7, “مَا لِهَذَا الرَّسُولِ يَأْكُلُ الطَّعَامَ وَيَمْشِي فِي الْأَسْوَاقِ” (“What ails this messenger that he eats food and walks in the markets?”), is translated variously as “Why does this messenger eat food...?” or “What sort of apostle is this...?”—renderings that seek to preserve the interrogative intensity while grappling with its rhetorical and ironic layers. Similarly, Abuissac et al. provide a pragmatic analysis of rhetorical questions like “أَلَمْ نَنْهَكَ عَنِ الْعَالَمِينَ” (ST), rendered in translation (TT) as “Have we not forbidden thee all beings?” Their systemic functional analysis reveals the loss of textual and interpersonal themes (e.g., omission of “wa” and semantic expansion of “‘ālamīn” to “all beings”), resulting in reduced rhetorical assertiveness.

In a complementary analysis, Najjar (2024) examines the semantic and syntactic shifts in rhetorical questions, noting that translated forms often lose their illocutionary force, especially when English renderings omit or rephrase interrogative particles and pronouns. This loss alters the discourse function from assertion to inquiry, thereby undermining the theological intensity. Najjar and Kadhim (2021) further explore the challenges of translating grammatical shifts such as *iltifāt* (rhetorical person shifts), observing that shifts in pronouns and mood often collapse into uniform narration in English, flattening the dynamic structure of the Arabic original. Likewise, irony remains particularly challenging, as illustrated in translations of “أَتَّخَذُوا عِبَادِي مِنْ دُونِي أَوْلِيَاءَ” (“Have they taken My servants as allies apart from Me?”), where the pragmatic function of irony is obscured in literal renderings unless supplemented by contextual cues or exegesis.

Figurative language and metaphor also complicate the translation process. Nurbayan (2019) highlights the tendency of literal translations to obscure the intended figurative meaning, particularly in Indonesian versions of the Qur'an. He recommends context-sensitive adaptation supported by *tafsīr*-based exegesis to preserve conceptual depth. Similarly, Qassem (2021) proposes that stylistic variation in translation be approached through integrative models that combine linguistic accuracy with theological fidelity, emphasizing the importance of capturing both expressive form and exegetical intent.

At the theoretical level, the ongoing debate between literalist and interpretative translation approaches remains central. While literal translation emphasizes syntactic and lexical fidelity, it often risks rigidity and rhetorical loss. Conversely, interpretative methods prioritize communicative clarity and audience accessibility but may oversimplify theological nuance (Najjar, 2020; Abuissac et al., 2020). Scholars such as Nurbayan (2016) and Qassem (2021) advocate for a hybrid strategy—one that balances structural precision with contextual adaptation—thereby preserving both the linguistic beauty and theological depth of the Qur'anic text.

Based on previous studies, it is evident that effective Qur'anic translation requires an interdisciplinary approach—one that is linguistically precise, theologically grounded, and stylistically attentive. The literature highlights how rhetorical questions, grammatical shifts, ellipsis, and metaphor serve not only aesthetic purposes

but also critical theological and communicative functions. From the thematic mapping of rhetorical force to the pragmatic rendering of irony, these features resist simplistic translation. Scholars have therefore proposed integrative models that combine classical tafsīr with contemporary linguistic theory to preserve both the form and function of Quranic discourse. This synthesis ensures that the Qur'an's rhetorical sophistication and semantic depth are not diminished in cross-cultural and multilingual contexts.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This study has explored the layered nature of stylistic variation and linguistic strategies in Qur'anic discourse, with particular attention to the interconnected roles of rhetorical, phonetic, and translational features in shaping its theological resonance and communicative clarity. Devices such as rhetorical questions, repetition, ellipsis, syntactic reordering, and phonological patterning function collaboratively across lexical, structural, and discursive dimensions to construct meaning, enhance oral transmission, and reinforce thematic cohesion. These stylistic elements are not merely ornamental but integral to the Qur'an's exegetical complexity and linguistic precision.

While much has been written on individual aspects of Qur'anic style, existing studies often examine these rhetorical, phonetic, or translational features in isolation. This fragmented approach can obscure the intricate synergy that defines the Qur'an's linguistic design. Although this study does not propose a formal model, it establishes the foundation for future development of an interdisciplinary framework that unites classical tafsīr, modern linguistic theory, and translation studies. In particular, emerging tools such as corpus linguistics, stylistic mapping, and natural language processing (NLP) hold great potential to deepen scholarly engagement with Qur'anic style.

Future research could also benefit from empirical investigations into how various stylistic features—such as rhythm, syntactic deviation, and metaphor—are received by readers in multilingual and cross-cultural contexts. Such studies may illuminate how stylistic choices influence interpretive comprehension, emotional response, and theological reflection among non-Arabic-speaking audiences. Likewise, the integration of digital humanities methods—including stylometric analysis, AI-assisted translation evaluation, and acoustic modeling—can serve to bridge traditional exegesis with contemporary linguistic and computational approaches.

In sum, this study contributes to the growing body of scholarship calling for a more integrated analytical paradigm in Qur'anic stylistics. By highlighting the mutual interdependence of rhetorical form, phonetic texture, and translational nuance, it advocates for a multidimensional approach that preserves the Qur'an's stylistic intricacy and communicative richness. Such a paradigm can inform the creation of practical tools—such as translation protocols, phonetic annotation systems, and digital Qur'anic applications—that enhance both scholarly analysis and public accessibility. Engaging Qur'anic discourse through this intersectional lens is crucial for sustaining its eloquence, theological depth, and relevance across cultural and linguistic boundaries.

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