

Arabic Dialects and Qur'anic Recitations: Linguistic Influence, Interpretive Significance, and Methodological Challenges

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Abstract

The relationship between Arabic dialects and Qur'anic recitations (qirā'āt) represents an important area of inquiry in Qur'anic studies and Arabic linguistics. The linguistic diversity of Arab tribes during the period of revelation provides an important context for understanding the phonetic, morphological, grammatical, and lexical dimensions reflected in transmitted recitations. However, establishing the relationship between particular dialectal features and Qur'anic recitations requires careful consideration of linguistic evidence, historical context, and the principles governing the transmission and authentication of qirā'āt. This study examines the linguistic relationship between Arabic dialects and Qur'anic recitations, analyses the interpretive significance of dialectal variation, and identifies methodological challenges in studying this relationship. The study uses a qualitative, inductive-analytical approach grounded in classical works on Qur'anic recitations, Arabic linguistics, grammar, and Qur'anic interpretation. The findings indicate that dialectal variation provides an important linguistic framework for understanding certain features of Qur'anic recitations and may contribute to semantic enrichment and interpretive diversity. The study further demonstrates that Qur'anic recitations constitute an important source for reconstructing aspects of early Arabic linguistic usage and preserving features that might otherwise have been lost. Nevertheless, dialectal correspondence should not be treated as the sole criterion for establishing the authenticity of a Qur'anic recitation. The study therefore proposes greater integration of classical linguistic sources, historical analysis, comparative linguistic approaches, and the established principles of qirā'āt scholarship.

Keywords: Arabic Dialects, Quranic Recitations, Qirā'āt, Linguistic Variation, Quranic Interpretation, Arabic Linguistics, Methodological Analysis

Introduction

The Qur'anic revelation emerged within a linguistically diverse Arab society in which tribal communities employed distinctive phonetic, morphological, grammatical, and lexical

patterns. Consequently, the study of Qur'anic recitations cannot be adequately separated from the linguistic context of early Arabic. At the same time, the relationship between dialectal variation and qirā'āt requires methodological precision because a linguistic correspondence between a reading and a dialect does not, by itself, establish the authenticity of that reading.

Classical Muslim scholars devoted considerable attention to the linguistic dimensions of Qur'anic recitations. Works on qirā'āt, Arabic grammar, Qur'anic interpretation, and the linguistic sciences frequently discuss dialectal usage when explaining pronunciation, morphology, syntax, lexical meaning, and the rationale for particular readings. These discussions show that the qirā'āt tradition preserved linguistic phenomena valuable not only for Qur'anic studies but also for the historical study of Arabic.

Contemporary research nevertheless faces an important methodological challenge: the relationship between dialects and qirā'āt can be oversimplified when a particular reading is directly attributed to a tribe without sufficiently distinguishing linguistic explanation from the criteria used to establish the authenticity of a canonical reading. Accordingly, this study examines the linguistic relationship between Arabic dialects and Qur'anic recitations, analyses the interpretive significance of dialectal variation, and proposes methodological approaches for strengthening interdisciplinary research.

Literature Review

Arabic Dialects and Their Linguistic Features

In modern linguistic studies, a dialect is generally understood as a set of linguistic characteristics associated with a particular geographical or social community and shared by its speakers. In the classical Arabic tradition, scholars often used terms such as *lughā* and *lisān* to discuss linguistic variation among Arab tribes. Ibn Jinnī related linguistic differences to differences among speakers and the environments in which they lived, providing an important theoretical basis for understanding variation as an inherent characteristic of language (Ibn Jinnī, 2006).

Dialectal Diversity in Early Arabic

The Arabic linguistic environment during the period of Qur'anic revelation was characterised by substantial tribal diversity. Classical literature frequently discusses linguistic features associated with the Hijaz and Najd, while recognising variation among individual tribes. Quraysh is commonly associated with features of the Hijazi environment, whereas Tamīm, Qays, and Asad are frequently cited in discussions of Najdi linguistic characteristics (Anīs, 1992). Dialectal differences appear at the phonetic, morphological, grammatical, and lexical levels.

Dialectal Variation and the Seven Aḥruf

The classical tradition has discussed the relationship between dialectal variation and the seven aḥruf extensively. Some scholars, including Ibn Qutaybah, connected the concept with forms of linguistic variation among Arab tribes. However, identifying the seven aḥruf exclusively with a fixed set of named dialects should be approached cautiously because Islamic scholarship has interpreted the concept differently (Ibn Qutaybah al-Dīnawarī, 1973).

Qur'anic Recitations and Their Linguistic Context

Qur'anic recitations refer to transmitted modes of reciting Qur'anic words and expressions attributed to recognised authorities through established chains of transmission. Linguistic explanation is therefore distinct from transmission-based authentication. Dialectal evidence may explain why a particular phonetic or grammatical form was intelligible in early Arabic, but it should not replace the established criteria of qirā'āt scholarship. Classical works such as al-Kashf 'an wujūh al-qirā'āt al-sab' demonstrate the importance of linguistic, grammatical, and phonetic reasoning in explaining recitational variation (Makkī ibn Abī Ṭālib, 1984).

Research Gap

Although classical scholarship provides substantial evidence on the linguistic dimensions of qirā'āt, a methodological need remains to integrate transmitted recitational evidence, historical Arabic dialectology, and contemporary linguistic analysis. This study addresses that need by examining dialectal variation as a linguistic dimension that can illuminate phonetic, morphological, grammatical, and semantic features while remaining subject to the principles of recitational authentication.

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative, inductive-analytical methodology. The inductive component involves identifying discussions of Arabic dialects and Qur'anic recitations in classical works on qirā'āt, Arabic linguistics, grammar, tafsīr, and related disciplines. The analytical component examines selected examples of phonetic, morphological, grammatical, and semantic variation to clarify how dialectal evidence has been used to explain Qur'anic readings.

The study does not treat dialectal correspondence as an independent criterion for authenticating a Qur'anic reading. Instead, it examines dialectal evidence as a linguistic and interpretive dimension within the broader framework of qirā'āt scholarship. This distinction is necessary to avoid conflating linguistic explanation with transmission-based authentication.

Linguistic and Interpretive Dimensions*Phonetic Variation*

Phonetic variation constitutes one of the clearest areas in which Arabic dialectology and qirā'āt intersect. Scholars have discussed phenomena such as imālah and the treatment of hamzah in relation to linguistic usage among Arab communities. Readings associated with Ḥamzah and al-Kisā'ī, for example, contain instances of imālah that have been discussed in relation to dialectal usage attributed to tribes such as Tamīm and Qays. Such correspondences are useful for linguistic explanation, but they should not be treated as the sole basis for establishing a reading as canonical (Ibn al-Jazarī, 1999).

Morphological and Grammatical Variation

Dialectal differences also occur at the morphological and grammatical levels. Variation in word formation, verbal patterns, case endings, and vowel realisation can affect the interpretation of a Qur'anic expression. Classical grammarians often used recognised Qur'anic readings as evidence for particular grammatical constructions, making qirā'āt an important source for Arabic grammar (ʿĪd, 1988).

Lexical and Semantic Variation

Dialectal variation may also have lexical and semantic implications. The well-known variation between Māliki and Maliki in Sūrat al-Fātiḥah illustrates how two readings can convey complementary meanings: Māliki emphasises ownership, whereas Maliki emphasises sovereignty or kingship. Considered together, the two readings enrich the semantic interpretation of divine authority.

Recitational Variation as Linguistic Evidence

The classical grammatical tradition treated Qur'anic recitations as significant linguistic evidence. When a grammatical construction was disputed, an established Qur'anic reading could demonstrate that the form had a basis in Arabic usage. This evidentiary function has made qirā'āt an important source for Arabic grammar and historical linguistics (ʿĪd, 1988).

Methodological Challenges*Historical Linguistic Change*

One principal challenge is the historical distance between contemporary researchers and the linguistic environment of early Arabic. Modern Standard Arabic does not necessarily preserve all the phonetic, morphological, and lexical characteristics documented for early Arab tribes. Consequently, a recitational form that appears unusual today may have been natural within an earlier linguistic environment (ʿAbd al-Tawwāb, 1997).

Reductionist Interpretation

A second challenge is the tendency to reduce multiple authenticated readings to a single semantic interpretation. Such an approach may overlook the possibility that different readings contribute complementary linguistic or semantic dimensions. A comprehensive interpretation should therefore consider the linguistic evidence associated with each authenticated reading.

Disciplinary Fragmentation

A third challenge concerns the separation between expertise in qirā'āt and expertise in Arabic linguistics. Researchers in Qur'anic studies may not always possess advanced training in historical linguistics, while linguists may lack sufficient familiarity with the principles governing the transmission and authentication of Qur'anic readings. This fragmentation can lead to incomplete or overly simplified explanations.

Methodological Solutions and Future Directions*Classical Arabic Sources*

Researchers should supplement modern dictionaries with classical Arabic poetry, tribal linguistic reports, early lexicons, grammatical works, and tafsīr literature. Such sources provide contextual evidence for determining whether a linguistic feature associated with a particular reading had a recognised basis in early Arabic usage.

Historical-Comparative Linguistics

Historical linguistic analysis should be integrated with descriptive approaches to phonetics, morphology, and syntax. Contemporary linguistic methods can support systematic analysis of pronunciation phenomena preserved in the recitational tradition (Ḥassān, 2006).

A Comparative Lexicon of Qur'anic Dialectal Features

A specialised comparative lexicon could document Qur'anic expressions, recognised readings, proposed dialectal affiliations, classical linguistic evidence, and interpretive implications. Such a resource should clearly distinguish established evidence from scholarly interpretation and hypotheses requiring further investigation.

Interdisciplinary Research

Future research would benefit from collaboration among specialists in qirā'āt, Arabic grammar, phonetics, historical linguistics, and Qur'anic interpretation. Such collaboration would reduce methodological reductionism and allow linguistic evidence to be evaluated within the appropriate framework of Qur'anic recitation scholarship.

Discussion

The findings indicate that the relationship between Arabic dialects and Qur'anic recitations is multidimensional. Dialectal evidence helps explain why particular phonetic, morphological, grammatical, or lexical forms were intelligible within early Arabic, while qirā'āt preserve evidence that can contribute to the historical study of Arabic. The relationship is therefore mutually illuminating.

At the same time, methodological boundaries are essential. Not every linguistic form associated with an Arab tribe should automatically be identified as the source of a canonical reading, and not every dialectal explanation establishes the authenticity of a recitation. Transmission, scholarly reception, and the established criteria of qirā'āt remain essential. The appropriate model is therefore integrative rather than reductionist.

The study also highlights the interpretive value of authenticated variation. Where two readings are transmitted and linguistically meaningful, their coexistence may broaden the semantic field of a verse. Dialectal and recitational variation should therefore be investigated not only as a historical linguistic phenomenon but also as an interpretive resource.

Conclusion

This study has examined the relationship between Arabic dialects and Qur'anic recitations and highlighted its significance for understanding the linguistic and interpretive dimensions of the Qur'an. The analysis demonstrates that dialectal variation may contribute to differences in pronunciation, morphology, grammar, and lexical usage reflected in transmitted Qur'anic recitations.

The study further demonstrates that Qur'anic recitations constitute an important source for investigating aspects of early Arabic linguistic usage. Their preservation has helped transmit linguistic features that might otherwise have become less accessible in later stages of Arabic development. Awareness of linguistic and dialectal variation can also help scholars consider the full semantic range supported by authenticated readings.

Nevertheless, dialectal correspondence should not be treated as an independent or sufficient criterion for establishing the authenticity of a Qur'anic recitation. Linguistic evidence must be considered alongside the established principles governing the transmission and authentication of qirā'āt.

The study therefore recommends greater integration between qirā'āt, Arabic linguistics, grammar, and Qur'anic interpretation. Future research should employ historical-comparative analysis, systematic examination of classical Arabic sources, and digital linguistic resources to document the relationship between dialectal features and transmitted recitations.

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