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THE RHETORICAL DOMINANCE PATTERNS OF ĪJĀZ, IṬNĀB, AND MUSĀWAH IN THE QUR'AN: A STYLISTIC AND PRAGMATIC REVIEW

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Abstract

This article examines the rhetorical dominance patterns of three foundational concepts in Arabic rhetoric (balāghah): īj̄āz (conciseness), iṭnāb (elaboration), and musāwah (equivalence) as manifested in the Qur'anic discourse. Employing an integrated stylistic and pragmatic analytical framework, this study reassesses how each pattern functions not merely as a formal linguistic device, but as a purposive rhetorical strategy oriented toward communicative effectiveness, theological argumentation, and aesthetic-emotive impact. Through close reading of selected Qur'anic verses, the analysis demonstrates that īj̄āz—particularly īj̄āz al-qaṣr (brevity by omission) and īj̄āz al-ḥadhf (ellipsis)—achieves remarkable semantic density and cognitive potency. Conversely, iṭnāb through devices such as repetition (tikrār), apposition (badal), and parenthetical insertion (i'tirāḍ) fulfills functions of rhetorical emphasis, emotional intensification, and pedagogical clarity. Musāwah, though often treated as a neutral middle ground, emerges as a deliberate rhetorical choice that enacts syntactic balance and propositional completeness. The study further argues that these three patterns do not operate in rigid isolation, but exhibit fluid, context-dependent interactions governed by the communicative and theological imperatives of the Qur'anic text. This reassessment contributes to a deeper understanding of Qur'anic stylistics and invites a reconsideration of classical balāghah categories through a contemporary pragmatic lens.

Keywords: Īj̄āz, Iṭnāb, Musāwah, Qur'anic Rhetoric, Balāghah, Stylistics, Pragmatics

Introduction

The Qur'an, as the sacred text of Islam, has long been recognized not only as a source of religious teachings but also as the pinnacle of Arabic aesthetic achievement. The linguistic uniqueness of the Qur'an—known in Islamic tradition as i'jaz al-Qur'an—has attracted the attention of balāghah scholars for over fourteen centuries. One of the most fundamental aspects of the study of Qur'anic balāghah is the phenomena of īj̄az, iṭnāb, and musāwah, namely, three patterns of message delivery closely related to the quantity and quality of word usage in linguistic expressions.

These three concepts are traditionally studied in the chapter al-qawl bimā yuwāfiq al-maqām (speaking according to context) within the science of ma'ānī—one of the main branches of balāghah. Al-Sakkākī (d. 626 AH) in Miftāḥ al-'Ulūm and al-Qazwīnī (d. 739 AH) in al-Talkhlīṣ fī 'Ulūm al-Balāghah have laid a systematic foundation for the classification of these three concepts. However, these classical studies tend to be descriptive-normative and have not fully explored the functional-pragmatic dimensions of these three rhetorical patterns within the context of Qur'anic discourse as a whole.

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In the development of modern linguistics, the emergence of stylistics (uslūbiyyah) and pragmatics as established disciplines has opened new horizons in textual analysis. Stylistics provides a set of analytical tools for examining linguistic choices and their aesthetic effects, while pragmatics offers a framework for understanding how meaning is constructed in the context of actual language use. These two approaches are highly compatible with the study of Qur'anic rhetoric, given that rhetoric itself is essentially a discipline that examines the relationship between linguistic expression, meaning, and context (maqām).

Based on the above background, this article aims to: (1) identify and classify the patterns of ījāz, iṭnāb, and musāwah in a representative selection of Qur'anic verses; (2) analyze the rhetorical and pragmatic functions of each pattern within the context of Qur'anic discourse; (3) examine the interactions and interrelationships between these three patterns; and (4) offer a reassessment of classical categorizations by integrating contemporary stylistic and pragmatic perspectives.

This study is expected to make a twofold contribution: theoretically, enriching the body of Qur'anic rhetoric with an interdisciplinary perspective; and practically, providing an analytical model that can be applied in Arabic language teaching and Qur'anic studies at the academic level.

Method

This research uses a qualitative-descriptive approach with discourse analysis methods integrated with stylistics and pragmatics. The primary data for this study is the text of the Qur'an, focusing on verses that representatively depict the three rhetorical patterns studied. The selection of sample verses was carried out purposively based on two criteria: (1) representativeness in displaying the distinctive characteristics of each rhetorical pattern, and (2) diversity of thematic contexts (belief, sharia, narrative, eschatology) to ensure generalizable findings.

The analysis procedure includes four stages: first, identification and classification of rhetorical patterns in the selected verses based on the classical balāghah taxonomy; second, stylistic analysis encompassing phonological, syntactic, and semantic dimensions; third, pragmatic analysis identifying illocutionary functions, discourse implicatures, and politeness strategies; and fourth, synthesis of the findings to identify patterns of dominance and interaction between the three rhetorical patterns.

Data were analyzed by referring to authoritative sources of linguistic interpretation, especially al-Kashshāf by al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538 AH), al-Baḥr al-Muḥīṭ by Abū Ḥayyān al-Andalusī (d. 745 AH), and Tafsīr al-Taḥrīr wa al-Tanwīr by Ibn 'Āshūr (d. 1973 AD), all of which pay special attention to the balāghī and stylistic dimensions of the Qur'anic text.

Results and Discussion

A. Ījāz Patterns in the Qur'an: Density of Meaning as a Rhetorical Strategy

1. Ījāz al-Qaṣr: Semantic Density

Ījāz al-qaṣr—which some scholars also call ījāz al-badī' (amazing ījāz)—is the most highly valued form of conciseness in the balāghah hierarchy. The most famous example is the expression of the Qur'an in the commandment of justice:

وَلَكُمْ فِي الْقِصَاصِ حَيَاةٌ

"And for you in qisas there is life" (QS. Al-Baqarah [2]: 179)

This verse is one of the most frequently cited examples of ījāz al-qaṣr in balāghah literature. In seven words (in its Arabic version), this verse summarizes a comprehensive legal argument: that the death penalty for intentional murder (qiṣāṣ) actually serves as a mechanism for preserving social life. Pragmatically, this phrase performs several speech acts simultaneously: it serves as an argument justifying the law of qiṣāṣ, as an assertion of the causal relationship between the sanction and life, and as an implicit directive for society to accept this law.

Al-Zamakhsharī in al-Kashshāf notes that this phrase surpasses the longer pre-Islamic Arabic proverb ("Qatlu ba'ḍikum ḥayātu ba'ḍ" — killing some of you is the life of others) in terms of both brevity and depth. Stylistically, the presence of the word "فِي" (in), which literally means containment, suggests a paradoxical causal relationship—death contains life—a conceptual chiasm that produces a strong cognitive defamiliarization.

Another example of ījāz al-qaṣr that demonstrates the pragmatic function of theological argument is:

أَلَيْسَ اللَّهُ بِأَحْكَمِ الْحَاكِمِينَ

"Isn't Allah the fairest judge?" (QS. At-Tīn [95]: 8)

This rhetorical question—called al-istifhām al-inkārī (the rhetorical question of refusal) in balāghah terminology—achieves extraordinary pragmatic density. It not only asserts God's greatness, but also: (a) silences theological objections to divine justice, (b) constructs an a fortiori argument (al-mafhūm bi al-aulawiyyah) that if humans demand justice, then God must be more just, and (c) creates an acceptance-inducing rhetorical effect that invites the reader to voluntarily affirm the conclusion preconditioned by the structure of the question itself.

2. Ījāz al-Ḥadhf: Ellipsis as a Discourse Strategy

Ījāz al-ḥadhf involves the omission of linguistic elements that are grammatically or logically recoverable from the context. In the balāghah tradition, al-ḥadhf (ellipsis) is seen as a rhetorically richer phenomenon than al-dhikr (explicit mention), as argued by Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (d. 471 AH) in Dalā'il al-I'jāz. Ellipsis creates an interpretive space that invites the active participation of the reader/listener in the construction of meaning—a phenomenon that in modern pragmatics is called underdetermination of meaning.

وَجَاءَ رَبُّكَ

"And your Lord will come" (Quran 89:22)

This verse is a classic example of ellipsis, controversial from a theological perspective but extremely rich rhetorically. The omission of the method (ḥāl) explaining how God's 'coming' occurs creates grandeur through indeterminacy—a rhetorical strategy Muslim theologians call tafwīḍ

(submission of meaning to God). From a pragmatic perspective, this omission actually enhances the effect of sublimity (al-jalāl) because the reader's imagination is not limited by any specific representation.

Ellipsis is also evident in the phenomenon of al-ḥadhf wa al-īṣāl (omission and connection), where the conjunction or jawāb syarṭ (conditional apodosis) is omitted to create urgency and rhetorical tension:

وَلَوْ أَنَّ قُرْآنًا سُيِّرَتْ بِهِ الْجِبَالُ

"If there were a Qur'an with which mountains could be moved..." (Qur'an 13:31)

This verse has a deliberately omitted apodosis (answer to the question). Commentators differ on what is omitted, but it is precisely this ambiguity that creates a more powerful rhetorical effect than any apodosis that could possibly be expressed explicitly. Pragmatically, this is a rhetorical litotes strategy that creates a hyperbolic effect through understated ellipsis—this Qur'an is greater than anything that can be expressed even in the most extreme hypothetical conditions.

B. Patterns of Iṭnāb in the Qur'an: Elaboration as Intensification

1. Tikrār (Repetition): Affective and Cognitive Functions

Tikrār (repetition) is one of the most prominent forms of iṭnāb in the Qur'an and also the most frequently misunderstood. From a balāghah perspective, meaningful tikrār (tikrār maqbūl) must fulfill the requirement of rhetorical benefit that cannot be achieved without repetition. Al-Jurjānī distinguishes between tikrār al-lafẓ (repetition of words) and tikrār al-ma'nā (repetition of meaning), and shows that the former does not always produce the latter.

The most striking example is the repetition of the refrain in Surah Ar-Raḥmān:

فَبِأَيِّ آلَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ

"So which of the favors of your Lord will you deny?" (Surah Ar-Raḥmān [55]: (repeated 31 times))

The repetition of this refrain 31 times in one surah is not redundancy, but rather a multi-layered rhetorical strategy. From a stylistic perspective, this repetition creates a litanical structure that produces a distinctive musical-liturgical rhythm. From a pragmatic perspective, each repetition functions as a reframing of the context—each refrain comes after a different explanation of the favor, so that the same question has different referents. This is what is called anaphoric intensification in rhetoric: structural repetition that cumulatively builds emotional and theological tension.

Neurocognitively, this repetition also exploits the phenomenon of the exposure effect in cognitive psychology—a stimulus repeated in a positive context tends to produce stronger associations. In the context of the Qur'an, this repetition builds a cumulative conviction about the impossibility of denying God's blessings, making it both an assertive and a directive speech act.

2. I'tirāḍ (Parentetic): Meaningful Additional Information

I'tirāḍ is the insertion of a sentence or clause between two elements that should be grammatically connected. At first glance, this appears to be a syntactic interruption, but in the Qur'anic balāghah, i'tirāḍ is one of the most sophisticated iṭnāb techniques because it creates layers of mutually supporting meaning.

وَيَجْعَلُونَ لِلَّهِ الْبَنَاتِ سُبْحَانَهُ وَلَهُمْ مَا يَشْتَهُونَ

"They assign to Allah daughters—Glory be to Him—and to themselves whatever they desire." (Quran 16:57)

The word سُبْحَانَهُ (Glory be to Him) is inserted in the middle of the clause as i'tirāḍ. Grammatically, the clause is perfect without it. However, the presence of i'tirāḍ achieves two pragmatic functions simultaneously: first, it serves as an immediate repudiation of the attribution just mentioned, thereby neutralizing the mention of something that might jeopardize theological purity; second, it creates a sharp contrast between the attribute of God's holiness and the actions of humans who attribute to Him what they themselves belittle.

3. Dhikr al-Khāṣṣ ba'da al-'Āmm: Rhetorical Specification

The technique of mentioning something specific after something general (dhikr al-khāṣṣ ba'da al-'āmm) is a form of iṭnāb that serves to provide special emphasis and attention to an element that is raised from the general group:

حَافِظُوا عَلَى الصَّلَوَاتِ وَالصَّلَاةِ الْوُسْطَى

"Guard all your prayers, and the Wuṣṭā prayer." (Quran 2:238)

After the general command to guard all prayers (الصَّلَوَاتِ), this verse specifically mentions one particular prayer (الصَّلَاةِ الْوُسْطَى). Grammatically, this specific mention is redundant—if all prayers have already been mentioned, why mention one more? However, pragmatically, this technique produces what is known in rhetoric as foregrounding: this particular prayer receives a higher degree of attention and priority than the others, a pragmatic information that cannot be conveyed solely through general expressions.

C. Musawah in the Qur'an: Balance as a Rhetorical Choice

Unlike ījāz and iṭnāb, which each have clearly identifiable technical devices, musāwah is often more difficult to quantify because it relies on an assessment of the equivalence between pronunciation and meaning—an assessment that is interpretive and contextual. Nevertheless, a number of Qur'anic verses can be identified as examples of deliberative musāwah, where syntactic balance serves as a proxy for semantic and theological balance.

لَا الشَّمْسُ يَنْبَغِي لَهَا أَنْ تُدْرِكَ الْقَمَرَ وَلَا اللَّيْلُ سَابِقُ النَّهَارِ

"It is not possible for the sun to overtake the moon, nor for the night to overtake the day." (Quran 36:40)

This verse demonstrates musāwah in its most aesthetic sense: two syntactically balanced parallel clauses represent two equivalent cosmological facts—the boundary between the sun and the moon, and the boundary between night and day. Linguistic balance iconically reflects the cosmic equilibrium it depicts. In modern linguistic terminology, this is what is called diagrammatic iconicity: the form of language mimics the structure of the reality it denotes.

The deliberative pattern of musāwah is also evident in verses containing conceptual pairs (al-muqābalah) arranged in equal proportions:

فَمَن يَعْمَلْ مِثْقَالَ ذَرَّةٍ خَيْرًا يَرَهُ ۝ وَمَن يَعْمَلْ مِثْقَالَ ذَرَّةٍ شَرًّا يَرَهُ

"Whoever does an atom's weight of good will see it. And whoever does an atom's weight of evil will see it." (Surah Az-Zalzalah [99]: 7-8)

These two closing verses of Surah Az-Zalzalah are a perfect example of musāwah in the literal sense: their grammatical structure is identical, differing only by one word (خَيْرًا/شَرًّا). This balance is not rhetorical neutrality, but rather a theological statement about the perfection and impartiality of divine justice: the moral causal law operates with equal precision and consistency for both good and evil. The musāwah here becomes the theological argument itself.

D. Interaction and Dominance Patterns: Towards a Dynamic Taxonomy

One important finding of this study is that ījāz, iṭnāb, and musāwah do not always operate independently, but rather often exist in a mutually reinforcing or contrastive relationship within a larger discourse unit. This phenomenon challenges classical categorizations that tend to treat the three as mutually exclusive.

An interesting example is the discourse structure of Surah Al-Fātiḥah as a whole. The opening verses (1-3) can be categorized as musāwah in their description of God's attributes, while verses 5-7 demonstrate iṭnāb through their differentiated elaboration of supplications. However, the entire surah, in its seven verses, exemplifies ījāz, encompassing all the theocentric elements of Islam: theology (tawhid), ethics (worship and tawakkul), and eschatology (the afterlife)—a totality referred to in the exegetical tradition as Al-Qur'an al-A'ẓam (The Mother of the Qur'an).

The dominance of certain rhetorical patterns in the Qur'an appears to correlate with the thematic context and pragmatic purpose of the surah/verse:

First, verses dealing with creeds and theological arguments tend to employ ījāz, particularly ījāz al-qaṣr, to achieve high argumentative density with maximum linguistic efficiency. This reflects the principle that the most fundamental truths can and should be expressed in the most direct manner.

Second, verses dealing with law (ahkam) and narrative stories (qaṣaṣ) tend to employ iṭnāb, as both require uncompromising completeness and clarity. In legal contexts, ambiguity can have fatal practical consequences; in narrative contexts, elaboration serves to construct a complete mental model in the audience.

Third, cosmological and descriptive verses tend to employ musāwah, as linguistic balance serves as an iconic representation of the order and harmony of the universe depicted.

This distribution pattern is not absolute—many verses combine more than one pattern within a single discourse unit, sometimes even within a single verse. However, this dominant pattern provides the basis for a more dynamic pragmatic taxonomy than the purely formal classical categorization.

E. Reassessment: Beyond Formal Categorization

The reassessment offered by this article has two dimensions: first, a deeper examination of classical categorization by integrating pragmatic analysis; second, a paradigmatic shift from a formal-taxonomic perspective to a discourse-functional perspective.

In the first dimension, this study shows that the classical definitions of ījāz, iṭnāb, and musāwah—while formally adequate—do not fully make explicit the pragmatic dimensions inherent in each category. For example, in the definition of ījāz, the phrase "conveying many meanings with few words" needs to be supplemented with the understanding that "meaning" here is not only denotative but also encompasses illocutionary acts, implicatures, and perlocutionary effects. Similarly, the definition of iṭnāb as "the addition of words for benefit" needs to be clarified: what kind of benefit, for whom, and in what context of communicative interaction.

In the second dimension, this study proposes that these three patterns be understood not as static categories with clear boundaries, but as rhetorical strategies operating on a continuum, with each text taking a dynamic position within the rhetorical space formed by these three patterns. This understanding is more compatible with the reality of the Qur'anic text, which demonstrates the

flexibility and richness of interactions between patterns, and is also more methodologically productive for comprehensive discourse analysis.

Conclusion

This study has yielded several findings and contributions, which can be summarized as follows:

First, īj̄āz in the Qur'an—both in the form of īj̄āz al-qaṣr and īj̄āz al-ḥadhf—functions as a rhetorical strategy that achieves extraordinary semantic and pragmatic density. It is not merely a formal brevity, but rather a mechanism for compressing meaning that simultaneously performs various speech acts, constructs theological arguments, and creates cognitive effects such as surprise, sublimity, or argumentative intensity. Qur'anic Ījāz is thus the most sophisticated manifestation of linguistic economy in the Arabic tradition.

Second, iṭnāb in the Qur'an is an elaboration strategy that goes far beyond mere linguistic redundancy. Through its various devices—tikrār, i'tirāḍ, dhikr al-khāṣṣ ba'da al-'āmm, and others—iṭnāb functions for affective intensification, pedagogical clarification, theological emphasis, and the creation of a discursive rhythm that facilitates memorization. The most significant pragmatic dimension of iṭnāb is its ability to build cumulative emotional pressure and create a persuasive effect that concise expression cannot achieve.

Third, musāwah in the Qur'an is not a passive neutral or zero-point condition, but rather an active and deliberative rhetorical choice. Through syntactic and propositional balance, musāwah creates linguistic iconicity—a form of language that reflects the structure of the reality it depicts. Particularly in cosmological and theological verses, musāwah functions as a rhetorical argument for balance, justice, and order as divine attributes.

Fourth, these three patterns do not operate rigidly and in isolation, but rather form a dynamic rhetorical system with complex interactions. The dominance of certain patterns correlates with the thematic context and pragmatic purpose of the text, thus identifying: īj̄āz (theological argument) predominates in theological arguments and statements of faith; iṭnāb (theological argument) predominates in narrative, legal, and emotive appeals; and musāwah (theological argument) predominates in cosmological descriptions and statements of justice.

Fifth, the integration of stylistic and pragmatic perspectives has proven productive in enriching the study of classical Qur'anic balāghah. This approach does not replace, but rather complements and deepens traditional categorizations by explaining the functional mechanisms underlying rhetorical effects that have long been intuitively recognized by balāghah scholars. This demonstrates that classical Arabic balāghah inherently contains the seeds of pragmatic intuition that can be developed more systematically with modern analytical tools.

This study opens up several exciting further research agendas: first, a comparative study of the rhetorical patterns of the Qur'an with those of sacred texts from other religious traditions from a religious stylistics perspective; second, a more systematic corpus analysis using computational linguistics to map the distribution of these three rhetorical patterns throughout the Qur'an; and third, a reception study of how variations in the Qur'an's rhetorical patterns influence the comprehension and emotional responses of readers/listeners from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Finally, this study hopes to contribute to a deeper understanding of the linguistic uniqueness of the Qur'an, not only from a faith perspective but also from a strictly linguistic perspective—a methodological bridge between classical Islamic intellectual heritage and contemporary academic discourse.

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