



CONSTRUCTING FOREIGN VOCABULARY IN THE QUR'ĀN: COMPARING IBN AL-JAWZĪ AND AL-KIRMĀNĪ

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Abstract

This article examines the contested issue of the existence of foreign elements in the Qur'ān, with particular attention to the interpretive frameworks of Ibn al-Jawzī and al-Kirmānī. The debate represents a persistent intellectual tension between claims of linguistic purity and historical processes of language contact, making it a crucial site for understanding the epistemological construction of Qur'ānic language. While classical scholars such as al-Shāfi'ī and Ibn Fāris emphasize the absolute Arabness of the Qur'ān, others acknowledge the presence of non-Arabic elements that have undergone processes of Arabization (ta'rib). This study situates itself within this debate by proposing a comparative hermeneutical analysis to map how foreign vocabulary is conceptualized, categorized, and legitimized within classical tafsīr traditions. Using a qualitative library-based approach, the research employs comparative hermeneutics and structural analysis to examine the interpretive strategies of both scholars and to identify their underlying linguistic assumptions. The findings demonstrate that both Ibn al-Jawzī and al-Kirmānī recognize the historical existence of foreign-origin vocabulary in the Qur'ān but reinterpret such elements through the framework of Arabization, thereby preserving the doctrinal claim of 'arabiyy mubīn. However, their approaches differ significantly: Ibn al-Jawzī tends to integrate linguistic, lexicographical, and historical arguments, while al-Kirmānī emphasizes classificatory and semantic distinctions rooted in the concept of 'ajam. This study argues that the discourse on foreign vocabulary in the Qur'ān is not merely a linguistic issue but reflects broader epistemological negotiations between textual authority, linguistic identity, and historical context. Accordingly, the concept of Arabization serves as a mediating framework that reconciles apparent contradictions between linguistic purity and historical plurality. The study contributes to Qur'ānic studies by offering a structured analytical model for understanding classical linguistic debates and their implications for contemporary hermeneutics.

Keywords: Foreign language, Arabization (ta'rib), Ibn al-Jawzī, al-Kirmānī, 'arabiyy mubīn.

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji masalah yang diperdebatkan tentang keberadaan unsur-unsur asing dalam Al-Qur'an, dengan perhatian khusus pada kerangka interpretasi Ibn al-Jawzī dan al-Kirmānī. Perdebatan ini mewakili ketegangan intelektual yang terus-menerus antara klaim kemurnian linguistik dan proses historis kontak bahasa, menjadikannya situs penting untuk memahami konstruksi epistemologis bahasa Al-Qur'an. Sementara para sarjana klasik seperti al-Shāfi'ī dan Ibnu Fāris menekankan keArab mutlak Al-Qur'an, yang lain mengakui keberadaan unsur-unsur non-Arab yang telah mengalami proses Arabisasi (ta'rib). Studi ini menempatkan dirinya dalam perdebatan ini dengan mengusulkan analisis hermeneutika komparatif untuk memetakan bagaimana kosakata asing dikonseptualisasikan, dikategorikan, dan dilegitimasi dalam tradisi tafsīr klasik. Menggunakan pendekatan berbasis perpustakaan kualitatif, penelitian ini menggunakan hermeneutika komparatif dan analisis struktural untuk memeriksa strategi interpretatif kedua sarjana dan untuk mengidentifikasi asumsi linguistik yang mendasarinya. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa baik Ibn al-Jawzī maupun al-Kirmānī mengakui keberadaan historis kosakata asal asing dalam Al-Qur'an tetapi menafsirkan kembali unsur-unsur tersebut melalui kerangka Arabisasi, sehingga melestarikan klaim doktrin 'arabiyy mubīn. Namun, pendekatan mereka berbeda secara signifikan: Ibn al-Jawzī cenderung

mengintegrasikan argumen linguistik, leksikografi, dan sejarah, sementara al-Kirmānī menekankan perbedaan klasifikasi dan semantik yang berakar pada konsep 'ajam. Studi ini berpendapat bahwa wacana tentang kosakata asing dalam Al-Qur'an bukan hanya masalah linguistik tetapi mencerminkan negosiasi epistemologis yang lebih luas antara otoritas tekstual, identitas linguistik, dan konteks sejarah. Oleh karena itu, konsep Arabisasi berfungsi sebagai kerangka mediasi yang mendamaikan kontradiksi yang nyata antara kemurnian linguistik dan pluralitas historis. Studi ini berkontribusi pada studi Al-Qur'an dengan menawarkan model analitis terstruktur untuk memahami perdebatan linguistik klasik dan implikasinya terhadap hermeneutika kontemporer.

Kata Kunci: Bahasa asing, Arabisasi (ta'rib), Ibn al-Jauzī, al-Kirmānī, 'arabiyy mubīn.

INTRODUCTION

The question of whether the Qur'ān contains foreign linguistic elements has long been a central debate in Qur'ānic studies, reflecting a deeper tension between claims of linguistic purity and the historical reality of language contact. Classical Muslim scholars developed contrasting positions: some firmly asserted the absolute Arabness of the Qur'ān on the basis of scriptural statements such as *'arabiyy mubīn*,¹ while others admitted the possibility of non-Arabic elements that had been assimilated into Arabic through processes of linguistic adaptation.² This debate is not merely philological, but touches upon broader issues of revelation, authority, and the nature of scriptural language.³

The urgency of revisiting this issue lies in its epistemological implications. The concept of language in the Qur'ān is not simply a technical matter of vocabulary, but a foundational element in how revelation is understood, transmitted, and interpreted. In contemporary scholarship, particularly in Western academic traditions, the presence of foreign vocabulary has often been used to frame the Qur'ān as a product of historical and intercultural interactions. Conversely, within the Islamic scholarly tradition, the same phenomenon has been reinterpreted through concepts such as *ta'rib* (Arabization), which reconcile linguistic diversity with doctrinal assertions of Arabic clarity.⁴

Previous studies have examined the issue from various perspectives. Western scholars such as Arthur Jeffery⁵ and Sidney Griffith⁶ rely on historical-linguistic approaches to trace foreign lexical influences in the Qur'ān, often treating the text as part of a broader Semitic linguistic environment.⁷ Meanwhile, classical Muslim scholars including al-Shāfi'ī, Ibn Fāris, and al-Ṭabarī, emphasize the linguistic integrity of the Qur'ān, even when acknowledging lexical similarities across languages.⁸ More recent studies have revisited these debates, yet they tend to focus either on cataloguing foreign vocabulary or defending theological positions, without systematically analyzing how classical exegetes conceptualize and justify the notion of linguistic foreignness itself.

In the context of existing literature, a significant gap can be identified. While numerous works discuss the existence or absence of foreign vocabulary in the Qur'ān, relatively little

¹ Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Itqān fi 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* (Bairut: Resalah Publisher, 1429), 288

² Abū Ja'far Muḥammad Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr Al-Ṭabarī* (Badar Hijr: Unnamed, 2006), 12; uḥammad al-Amīn bin al-Mukhtār al-Syinqīṭī, *Tafsīr Al-Qur'ān al-Qur'ān min Auḍā'u al-Bayān* (Riyadh: Dār al-Faḍīlah, 1426), 279 and 1028.

³ Angelika Neuwirth, *The Qur'an and Late Antiquity: A Shared Heritage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 112–130.

⁴ Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Itqān fi 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* (Bairut: Resalah Publisher, 1429), 288

⁵ Arthur Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an*, Vol. 3 (Leiden: BRILL, 2007), 43.

⁶ Sidney Griffith, *Christian Lore and the Arabic Qur'an (The Companions of the Cave in Surah al-Kahf and in Syriac Christian Tradition)*, in the book Gabriel Said Reynolds (ed.), *The Qur'an in Its Historical Context* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 114.

⁷ More recent scholarship, such as Nicolai Sinai, also emphasizes the broader literary and linguistic context of the Qur'ān in Late Antiquity. Nicolai Sinai, *The Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 45–60.

⁸ Mustafā Yusūf Shālih Ahmad 'Awīdah, *Abū Manshūr al-Jawālīqī Wa Jubūdub Fī al-Lughab* (Cairo: Al-Maktabah al-Wathaniyah, 1994), 61–62.

attention has been given to the analytical frameworks employed by classical mufasssirs in identifying, classifying, and interpreting such vocabulary. In particular, the comparative dimension between different exegetical traditions remains underexplored. This gap is especially evident in the lack of systematic studies comparing the approaches of Ibn al-Jawzī and al-Kirmānī, two influential mufasssirs who engage extensively with the issue yet employ distinct conceptual strategies.⁹

Based on this gap, this study addresses the following research question: how do Ibn al-Jawzī and al-Kirmānī conceptualize the presence of foreign vocabulary in the Qur'ān, and what methodological frameworks do they employ in identifying and legitimizing such elements within the broader discourse of Qur'ānic language? The objective of this research is to analyze and compare the interpretive approaches of the two scholars, focusing on their methods of classification, their use of linguistic and historical sources, and their underlying assumptions about the nature of Qur'ānic language. By doing so, the study seeks to move beyond descriptive accounts of foreign vocabulary and toward a more structured understanding of the epistemological foundations of the debate. This study contributes to the field of Qur'ānic studies in two main ways. First, it offers a comparative analytical framework that highlights the diversity of classical exegetical approaches to linguistic issues, thereby enriching existing discussions that often treat tradition as homogeneous. Second, it demonstrates that the discourse on foreign vocabulary in the Qur'ān is not simply a binary opposition between acceptance and rejection, but a complex negotiation mediated by concepts such as Arabization, linguistic authority, and interpretive legitimacy.

The debate over the existence of foreign elements in the Qur'ān has developed across multiple intellectual traditions and historical phases, forming a complex field that intersects Qur'ānic studies, Arabic linguistics, philology, and theological doctrine.¹⁰ At its core, the discussion revolves around a fundamental question: how should the Qur'ān's claim as *'arabiyy mubīn* be understood in light of observable linguistic diversity within its vocabulary? This question has generated at least two major epistemological trajectories, each rooted in different assumptions about language, revelation, and textual authority.

The first trajectory, dominant among classical Muslim scholars, is grounded in a theological-linguistic framework that emphasizes the doctrinal authority of the Qur'ān's self-description. Figures such as al-Shāfi'ī, Ibn Fāris, and al-Ṭabarī represent this orientation, arguing that any claim regarding the presence of foreign elements must be reconciled with the Qur'ān's explicit assertion of Arabic clarity.¹¹ Within this framework, the notion of linguistic purity is not understood in a strictly genealogical sense, but as a functional and communicative reality. Thus, when lexical similarities with Persian, Syriac, or Hebrew are observed, they are reinterpreted as evidence of the extensiveness of the Arabic lexicon or as convergences within a shared Semitic linguistic environment, rather than as borrowings in a strict philological sense.¹²

This position is further reinforced by scholars such as al-Suyūṭī, al-Syinqīṭī, and Ibn Kathīr, who explicitly reject the idea that the Qur'ān contains foreign elements in a way that would compromise its linguistic integrity. Their arguments often rely on scriptural reasoning, emphasizing

⁹ Abī al-Farj Jamāl al-Dīn 'Abd al-Raḥmān bin 'Alī bin Muḥammad al-Jawzī, *Zād al-Masīr fī 'Ilmi al-Tafsīr* (Beirut: Dār ibn Ḥazm, 1423); Maḥmūd Ibn Hamzah al-Kirmānī, *Gharā'ib Al-Tafsīr wa 'Ajā'ib al-Ta'wīl*, Volume 1, (Beirut: Dār al-Qiblah li Ṣaḡāfah al-Islāmiyah, 1403).

¹⁰ Paul Glasser, "Max Weinreich," *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, 2010.

¹¹ Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Itqān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: Resalah Publisher, 1429 H), 288.

¹² Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī* (Cairo: Dār Hījir, 2006), 12; Ibn Fāris, *Al-Ṣaḥībī fī Fiqh al-Lughah*, n.d.

that revelation must be delivered in a language fully intelligible to its primary audience.¹³ In this sense, the insistence on Arabic purity is closely linked to broader theological concerns, including the nature of revelation, the clarity of divine communication, and the universality of its message.

In contrast, a second trajectory emerges from both classical and modern strands of scholarship that adopt a more historical-linguistic or philological approach. Classical figures such as al-Zamakhsharī, al-Jawālīqī, and Ibn al-Naḳīb recognize the possibility of foreign-origin vocabulary within the Qur'ān, drawing upon linguistic observation, lexical comparison, and historical context.¹⁴ Al-Jawālīqī, for instance, explicitly documents words that he classifies as having Persian, Syriac, or other non-Arabic origins, suggesting that linguistic interaction played a significant role in shaping the Arabic vocabulary at the time of revelation.¹⁵

This line of inquiry is later developed more systematically in modern Western scholarship. Arthur Jeffery's work *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an* represents one of the most influential attempts to catalogue and trace non-Arabic elements in the Qur'ānic lexicon through comparative philology.¹⁶ Similarly, Sidney Griffith examines the interaction between Arabic and Syriac in the context of late antique religious discourse, while scholars such as Alphonse Mingana and Christoph Luxenberg extend this approach by proposing hypotheses regarding Syriac-Aramaic influences on Qur'ānic language and structure.¹⁷ These studies situate the Qur'ān within a broader intercultural and multilingual environment, often framing it as a text that emerged through processes of linguistic and religious contact.

However, the interpretation of such findings varies significantly between traditions. While Western scholarship often treats linguistic borrowing as evidence of historical formation and textual development, classical Muslim scholars reinterpret similar observations within a different conceptual framework. This difference highlights that the divergence between these approaches is not merely empirical, but epistemological: the same data are interpreted through fundamentally different assumptions about the nature of language and revelation.¹⁸

At the center of this tension lies the concept of *ta'rib* (Arabization), which functions as a crucial mediating framework within classical scholarship. Rather than denying the existence of foreign-origin vocabulary, the concept of *ta'rib* reframes the issue as a process of linguistic transformation.¹⁹ Through phonological, morphological, and semantic adaptation, foreign words are assimilated into the Arabic linguistic system, thereby losing their status as foreign elements in any functional sense. In this way, *ta'rib* allows scholars to acknowledge historical linguistic interaction while preserving the doctrinal claim of the Qur'ān's Arabic nature.

This mediating role is elaborated differently by various scholars. For Ibn al-Jawzī, *ta'rib* is implicitly demonstrated through his extensive use of narrations, lexicographical references, and poetic evidence, which collectively show how vocabulary becomes naturalized within Arabic usage. For al-Kirmānī, the issue is approached from a more conceptual angle, where the distinction between *'ajam*, *a'jam*, and *'arabī* reflects a structured attempt to categorize linguistic phenomena

¹³ Muḥammad al-Amīn al-Saynqīṭī, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān min Auḍā' al-Bayān* (Riyadh: Dār al-Faḍīlah, 1426 H), 279; Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Itqān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, 289.

¹⁴ Abū al-Qāsim al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshaf 'an Haqā'iq Ghawāmiḍ al-Tanzīl* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 1430 H), 770; al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Itqān*, 289.

¹⁵ Abū Manṣūr al-Jawālīqī, *Al-Mu'arrab min al-Kalām al-A'jamī 'alā Hurūf al-Mu'jam* (Damascus: Dār al-Qalam, 1410 H), 61–62.

¹⁶ Arthur Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an*, vol. 3 (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 43.

¹⁷ Sidney H. Griffith, "Christian Lore and the Arabic Qur'ān," in *The Qur'an in Its Historical Context*, ed. Gabriel Said Reynolds (London: Routledge, 2008), 114; Alphonse Mingana, "Syriac Influence on the Style of the Koran," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 11, no. 1 (1927): 78; Christoph Luxenberg, "Relics of Syro-Aramaic Letters in Early Qur'ānic Codices," in *Christmas in the Koran* (Berlin: Verlag Hans Schiler, 2014), 547.

¹⁸ Andrew Rippin, "Syriac in the Qur'ān: Classical Muslim Theories," in *The Qur'an in Its Historical Context*, ed. Gabriel Said Reynolds (London: Routledge, 2008), 249.

¹⁹ Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Muḥḥir fī 'Ulūm al-Lughah wa Anwā'uhā* (Beirut: Al-Maktabah al-'Aṣriyah, 2009), 268.

based on criteria such as fluency, intelligibility, and function. This indicates that the discourse is not limited to identifying the origin of words, but extends to defining the epistemic status of language itself.

In addition to these classical and modern perspectives, contemporary scholarship has increasingly revisited the debate with a more interdisciplinary orientation. Researchers such as Andrew Rippin and Fred Donner emphasize the importance of situating the Qur'ān within its historical context while remaining attentive to the internal logic of the Islamic exegetical tradition. Indonesian scholars, including Mahyuddin Ritonga and Hammam, have also contributed to this discourse by examining the dynamics of *ta'rib* and the ongoing debate between Muslim and Western perspectives. These studies highlight that the question of foreign vocabulary remains a contested and evolving field, shaped by methodological choices and intellectual commitments.

Despite the breadth of existing scholarship, two significant gaps can be identified. First, many studies focus primarily on identifying and cataloguing foreign vocabulary without adequately examining the analytical frameworks used by classical *mufasssirs* in constructing such classifications.²⁰ Second, there is a tendency to treat the exegetical tradition as homogeneous, overlooking the diversity of methodological approaches among individual scholars. In particular, the comparative dimension between figures such as Ibn al-Jawzī and al-Kirmānī remains insufficiently explored.²¹

Considering these gaps, the present study adopts a comparative and analytical approach to examine how different exegetical frameworks conceptualize the notion of foreign language within the Qur'ān. The comparison between Ibn al-Jawzī and al-Kirmānī reveals that the discourse operates across at least three interrelated dimensions: the historical origin of vocabulary, the mechanisms of linguistic transformation through *ta'rib*, and the epistemological status of language within the framework of revelation. These dimensions together form a more comprehensive model for understanding the debate, moving beyond simplistic binaries toward a nuanced analysis of how linguistic categories are constructed, negotiated, and legitimized.

By situating this study within these overlapping fields (Qur'ānic exegesis, Arabic linguistics, and historical philology) it becomes possible to reposition the debate on foreign vocabulary as a central issue in the study of Qur'ānic language. Rather than viewing it as a marginal or technical discussion, this study argues that it provides a critical lens for examining the relationship between language, meaning, and authority in the Qur'ān, as well as the intellectual strategies employed by classical scholars in navigating this relationship.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in library-based inquiry, aiming to examine how classical *mufasssirs* conceptualize and interpret the presence of foreign vocabulary in the Qur'ān. A qualitative approach is considered most appropriate because the object of analysis consists of textual interpretations, conceptual classifications, and epistemological assumptions embedded within classical *tafsīr* literature rather than quantifiable data.²² Accordingly, the research prioritizes interpretive depth and contextual understanding over statistical generalization.

The primary unit of analysis in this study is the exegetical discourse found in two classical works: *Zād al-Masīr fī 'Ilm al-Tafsīr* by Ibn al-Jawzī and *Gharā'ib al-Tafsīr wa 'Ajā'ib al-Ta'wīl* by al-

²⁰ Abū al-Faraj 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-Masīr fī 'Ilm al-Tafsīr* (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 1423 H), 66 and 121.

²¹ Maḥmūd ibn Ḥamzah al-Kirmānī, *Gharā'ib al-Tafsīr wa 'Ajā'ib al-Ta'wīl* (Beirut: Dār al-Qiblah, 1403 H), 438–450.

²² John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2014), 4–5.

Kirmānī.²³ These texts are selected because they explicitly engage with the issue of non-Arabic vocabulary and provide detailed discussions on the categorization and interpretation of such terms. The analysis focuses specifically on passages that address the origins, classifications, and semantic interpretations of vocabulary identified as *'ajam* or non-Arabic, as well as the conceptual distinctions constructed by each scholar.

To capture the complexity of these interpretive processes, this study adopts a comparative hermeneutical approach. Hermeneutics is used to uncover the underlying meanings and interpretive assumptions within classical texts, particularly by situating each mufasssīr within his intellectual and linguistic context.²⁴ The comparative dimension allows for the identification of both convergences and divergences between Ibn al-Jawzī and al-Kirmānī, thereby highlighting the diversity of exegetical strategies in dealing with linguistic phenomena. In addition, a structural-analytical approach is employed to examine how each scholar organizes and systematizes the concept of foreign vocabulary. Rather than treating individual interpretations as isolated observations, this approach seeks to identify recurring patterns, classification schemes, and implicit analytical frameworks that shape their understanding of *'ajam* within the Qur'ān. This is particularly important given that classical tafsīr often presents arguments in dispersed forms, requiring reconstruction in order to reveal their methodological coherence.

The process of data collection involves identifying relevant textual segments within the primary sources, supplemented by secondary literature that provides linguistic, historical, and theoretical context. These include works on Arabic linguistics, classical lexicography, and modern studies on Qur'ānic language.²⁵ However, the role of secondary sources in this study is not to dominate the analysis, but to support the interpretation of primary exegetical materials.

Data analysis is conducted through a multi-stage interpretive procedure. First, the study identifies vocabulary that is explicitly categorized as non-Arabic by each mufasssīr, along with the associated explanations provided in their commentaries. Second, it examines the criteria used to justify such classifications, including references to historical narration, poetic usage, and lexicographical authority. Third, it analyzes the mechanisms by which these vocabularies are integrated into the Arabic linguistic system, particularly through the concept of *ta'rib*.²⁶ Finally, the study compares the interpretive frameworks of both scholars to identify their underlying assumptions about language, authority, and the nature of Qur'ānic discourse.

Through this methodological framework, the study seeks not only to document the presence of foreign vocabulary in the Qur'ān as discussed by classical scholars, but more importantly to reconstruct the analytical logic through which such a category is defined, negotiated, and legitimized within the tradition of tafsīr.

RESULT

The findings of this study are presented through a structured analytical framework that distinguishes between descriptive observations, interpretive analysis, and conceptual synthesis. This layered approach is necessary to move beyond a purely descriptive account of foreign vocabulary in the Qur'ān toward a more systematic understanding of how such linguistic phenomena are identified, interpreted, and theoretically framed within classical tafsīr. By first outlining the empirical patterns found in the works of Ibn al-Jawzī and al-Kirmānī, and subsequently analyzing their underlying interpretive strategies, this section aims to reveal not only the diversity of their approaches but also the epistemological logic that sustains the discourse. In

²³ Abū al-Faraj 'Abd al-Rahmān ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-Masīr fī 'Ilm al-Tafsīr* (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 1423 H); Maḥmūd ibn Ḥamzah al-Kirmānī, *Gharā'ib al-Tafsīr wa 'Aja'ib al-Ta'wīl* (Beirut: Dār al-Qiblah, 1403 H).

²⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 269.

²⁵ Paul Glasser, "Max Weinreich," *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, 2010.

²⁶ Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Muḥḥir fī 'Ulūm al-Lughah wa Anwā'uhā* (Beirut: Al-Maktabah al-'Aṣriyah, 2009), 268.

doing so, the results highlight how discussions of foreign vocabulary are embedded within broader concerns about language, meaning, and authority in the Qur'ān.

1. Descriptive Layer: Patterns of Foreign Vocabulary Identification

The examination of Ibn al-Jawzī and al-Kirmānī's exegetical works reveals that both scholars explicitly engage with the issue of vocabulary considered to be of non-Arabic origin within the Qur'ān. Their discussions include lexical items such as *istabraq*, *qirtās*, *al-injil*, *al-firdaws*, and *Ṭūr*, which are commonly traced to Persian, Greek, Syriac, and other linguistic environments.²⁷ These terms are not treated as marginal anomalies but appear within broader exegetical contexts that connect linguistic origin with semantic interpretation.

Ibn al-Jawzī, in *Zād al-Masīr*, presents these vocabularies through a synthesis of narrations, lexicographical sources, and early authorities such as Ibn 'Abbās and Mujāhid.²⁸ For example, his discussion of terms such as *al-injil* and *al-dinār* reflects engagement with classical philological traditions that recognize foreign origins while situating the words within Arabic linguistic usage.²⁹ Similarly, references to poetic usage serve to demonstrate that certain words such as *Jahannam*, were known among pre-Islamic Arabs, thereby reinforcing their functional inclusion within Arabic.

In contrast, al-Kirmānī's analysis in *Gharā'ib al-Tafsīr wa 'Ajā'ib al-Ta'wīl* adopts a more systematic classificatory structure. He identifies vocabulary such as *Uẓayr*, *Ibrāhīm*, and *maqālid* as belonging to the category of *'ajam*, while further distinguishing between types of linguistic expression based on their morphological and semantic characteristics.³⁰ His classification of *maqālid* as *ism 'ajamī mu'arrab* illustrates a clear distinction between origin and linguistic integration.³¹ Despite these differences, both scholars converge in emphasizing that such vocabulary does not undermine the Arabic character of the Qur'ān. Rather, these words are understood as part of the linguistic reality of Arab society at the time of revelation, having undergone processes of adaptation and familiarization.

2. Analytical Layer: Divergent Strategies of Linguistic Legitimation

A closer analysis of the data reveals that the similarities observed at the descriptive level conceal significant differences in analytical orientation. Ibn al-Jawzī's approach can be characterized as integrative and process-oriented. His frequent reliance on narrations, lexicons, and poetic usage suggests that he is primarily concerned with explaining how certain vocabularies came to be accepted within the Arabic linguistic system.³² In this sense, his analysis implicitly foregrounds the process of linguistic naturalization, even when it is not explicitly theorized.

Al-Kirmānī, on the other hand, employs a more classificatory and conceptual strategy. His distinction between categories such as *'ajam*, *a'jam*, *gharīb*, and others reflects an attempt to define the epistemic boundaries of language rather than reconstruct its historical trajectory. In his framework, the question is not primarily how a word entered Arabic, but how it should be categorized within a system of linguistic knowledge.³³ This approach leads to a more formalized structure of analysis, where vocabulary is evaluated based on its relation to established linguistic categories.

²⁷ Abū Manṣūr al-Jawālīqī, *Al-Mu'arrab min al-Kalām al-A'jamī 'alā Hurūf al-Mu'jam* (Damascus: Dār al-Qalam, 1410 H), 61–62.

²⁸ Abū al-Faraj 'Abd al-Rahmān ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-Masīr fī 'Ilm al-Tafsīr* (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 1423 H), 66.

²⁹ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-Masīr*, 121, 177, 203.

³⁰ Maḥmūd ibn Ḥamzah al-Kirmānī, *Gharā'ib al-Tafsīr wa 'Ajā'ib al-Ta'wīl* (Beirut: Dār al-Qiblah, 1403 H), 438–450.

³¹ Al-Kirmānī, *Gharā'ib al-Tafsīr*, 1019.

³² Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-Masīr*, 121.

³³ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-Masīr*, 345.

These divergent strategies indicate that the issue of foreign vocabulary is addressed through different modes of legitimation. For Ibn al-Jawzī, legitimacy is established through transmission and usage, then words become acceptable because they are attested in authoritative sources and recognized in linguistic practice. For al-Kirmānī, legitimacy is constructed through classification and conceptual coherence when words are validated by their place within an internally consistent system of linguistic categories.³⁴ At this level, the concept of *ta'rib* emerges as a critical analytical bridge. Both scholars rely, implicitly or explicitly, on the notion that foreign-origin vocabulary undergoes a process of adaptation that renders it compatible with Arabic phonology, morphology, and semantics. However, while Ibn al-Jawzī tends to illustrate this process empirically through examples and narratives, al-Kirmānī incorporates it into a broader system of classification in which the distinction between foreign and Arabic is mediated by conceptual criteria.

3. Conceptual Layer: Reconstructing the Epistemology of Qur'ānic Language

Building on the analytical findings, it becomes evident that the debate over foreign vocabulary in the Qur'ān is fundamentally an epistemological issue rather than a purely linguistic one. The differences between Ibn al-Jawzī and al-Kirmānī point to two complementary but distinct models of understanding Qur'ānic language.³⁵

The first model, represented by Ibn al-Jawzī, can be described as a process-based epistemology. In this model, language is understood as historically dynamic, shaped by interaction, adaptation, and usage. The acceptance of foreign-origin vocabulary is explained through the process of its integration into Arabic, which allows the Qur'ān to remain fully intelligible and contextually relevant without sacrificing its linguistic identity. The second model, represented by al-Kirmānī, reflects a category-based epistemology. Here, language is approached as a structured system in which meanings and classifications are defined by conceptual boundaries. The distinction between Arabic and non-Arabic is not erased, but reorganized through a framework that assigns different epistemic statuses to different forms of language.³⁶

The convergence of these two models is found in the shared reliance on *ta'rib* as a mediating concept. Through this concept, both scholars reconcile the apparent contradiction between textual claims of Arabic clarity and empirical observations of linguistic diversity. As such, *ta'rib* does not merely describe a linguistic process, but functions as an epistemological mechanism that preserves the authority of the Qur'ān while accommodating historical complexity. From this perspective, the discourse on foreign vocabulary in the Qur'ān can be understood as a negotiation between three interrelated dimensions: historical origin, linguistic transformation, and epistemic legitimacy. This triadic framework offers a more comprehensive way of understanding classical exegetical discussions, moving beyond binary oppositions toward a more integrated analytical model.

DISCUSSION

Interpreting Foreign Vocabulary in the Qur'ān through Exegetical and Epistemological Perspectives

The findings of this study demonstrate that the discourse on foreign vocabulary in the Qur'ān cannot be adequately understood as a simple disagreement over the presence or absence of non-Arabic elements. Rather, the issue reflects a deeper epistemological tension concerning how language, revelation, and authority are conceptualized within the tradition of Qur'ānic exegesis. This tension becomes visible when examining not only general claims, but also the

³⁴ Al-Kirmānī, *Gharā'ib al-Tafsīr*, 450, 837–838.

³⁵ Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Muḥbir fī 'Ulūm al-Lughah wa Anwā'uhā* (Beirut: Al-Maktabah al-'Aṣriyah, 2009), 268.

³⁶ Al-Kirmānī, *Gharā'ib al-Tafsīr*, 837–838.

detailed treatment of specific lexical items, transmission patterns, and classification schemes found in classical tafsīr works. In this sense, the debate is not merely abstract, but grounded in concrete interpretive practices that reveal how scholars negotiate the relationship between textual claims and linguistic realities.³⁷

At the descriptive level, the data show that both Ibn al-Jawzī and al-Kirmānī explicitly identify a wide range of Qur'ānic vocabulary that appears to have non-Arabic origins. These include well-known lexical items such as *istabraq* (Persian), *qirtās* (Greek), *al-injil* (Greek/Syriac), *al-firdaws* (Roman/Syriac), *tūr* (Syriac), and proper names such as *Ibrāhīm*, *Mūsā*, and *Yūsuf*, which are commonly associated with Hebrew origins. In addition, both scholars refer to expressions such as *min taḥtibā* and *Jahannam*, as well as terms categorized under different linguistic origins such as Nabataean, Persian, and Ethiopic. These examples demonstrate that the recognition of linguistic diversity is not marginal but is systematically embedded within classical exegetical discourse.³⁸ However, what is striking is that this recognition does not lead to the conclusion that the Qur'ān contains “foreign languages” in any absolute sense.

This position resonates with earlier classical discussions, particularly those of al-Shāfiʿī, Ibn Fāris, and al-Ṭabarī, who emphasize that the Qur'ān must remain fully Arabic in its communicative function.³⁹ Their interpretation of verses such as Q.S. Yūsuf (12): 2 and Q.S. al-Shuʿarāʾ (26): 195 underscores the principle that revelation must be delivered in a language understood by its primary audience. Yet, as shown in the present study, this principle does not eliminate the empirical observation of lexical diversity.⁴⁰ Rather, it leads to a reinterpretation of such diversity as part of the historical and social reality of Arabic itself, especially in Mecca as a cosmopolitan environment characterized by trade and cultural interaction.

In this context, the comparison between classical Muslim scholarship and modern Western studies becomes particularly illuminating. Scholars such as Arthur Jeffery, Sidney Griffith, and Christoph Luxenberg approach the Qur'ān through historical-linguistic and philological frameworks, emphasizing the role of intercultural contact in shaping Qur'ānic vocabulary.⁴¹ Jeffery's identification of hundreds of foreign-origin terms, for example, reflects an attempt to situate the Qur'ān within a broader multilingual environment of Late Antiquity.⁴² However, the present study demonstrates that classical mufasssirs had already observed similar phenomena, albeit interpreted through a different epistemological lens. The divergence, therefore, lies not in the data itself, but in how the data are theorized. While Western scholarship often interprets foreign vocabulary as evidence of textual formation and external influence, classical scholars reinterpret it as evidence of linguistic adaptation within an already Arabicized system.

The distinction between Ibn al-Jawzī and al-Kirmānī further reinforces the internal diversity of classical tafsīr. Ibn al-Jawzī's integrative approach can be seen in his extensive reliance on multiple sources of authority, including narrations from companions such as Ibn ʿAbbās, lexicographical works such as those of al-Jawālīqī, and examples from classical Arabic poetry.⁴³ For instance, his use of pre-Islamic poetic evidence to demonstrate the familiarity of terms such as

³⁷ Abū Maṣṣūr al-Jawālīqī, *Al-Muʿarrab min al-Kalām al-Aʿjamī ʿalā Ḥurūf al-Muʿjam* (Damascus: Dār al-Qalam, 1410 H), 61–62.

³⁸ Abū al-Faraj ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-Masīr fī ʿIlm al-Tafsīr* (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 1423 H), 66, 121; Maḥmūd ibn Ḥamzah al-Kirmānī, *Gharāʾib al-Tafsīr wa ʿAjāʾib al-Taʾwīl* (Beirut: Dār al-Qiblah, 1403 H), 438–450.

³⁹ Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Itqān fī ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān* (Beirut: Resalah Publisher, 1429 H), 288.

⁴⁰ Mustansir Mir, *Coherence in the Qurʾān: A Study of Islābī's Concept of Naẓm in Tadabbur-i Qurʾān* (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1986), 10–18.

⁴¹ Arthur Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qurʾān*, vol. 3 (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 43.

⁴² Sidney H. Griffith, “Christian Lore and the Arabic Qurʾān,” in *The Qurʾān in Its Historical Context*, ed. Gabriel Said Reynolds (London: Routledge, 2008), 114.

⁴³ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-Masīr*, 121.

Jahannam suggests that linguistic legitimacy is closely tied to usage and transmission. Similarly, his engagement with lexical debates, such as whether *ʿUẓayr* derives from Hebrew or Arabic roots, reveals a concern with tracing the historical pathways through which words become integrated into Arabic.⁴⁴

In contrast, al-Kirmānī's approach is marked by a stronger emphasis on classification and conceptual differentiation. His distinction between *ʿajam*, *aʿjam*, *gharīb*, and related categories reflects a systematic effort to define the boundaries of language within an epistemological framework.⁴⁵ For example, his classification of *maqālid* as *ism ʿajamī muʿarrab* demonstrates a clear awareness of both origin and transformation, while his categorization of *ʿajam* into multiple conceptual levels, including linguistic, cognitive, and even ethical dimensions, indicates that the term is not limited to language alone. In his interpretation, *ʿajam* can refer not only to non-Arabic speech, but also to a lack of intelligibility or even a failure of understanding, thereby expanding its scope beyond purely linguistic considerations.

This diversity of approaches highlights that the concept of *taʿrīb* operates as more than a descriptive linguistic process. In the analysis of both scholars, *taʿrīb* functions as a mechanism through which vocabulary undergoes transformation at multiple levels. At the phonological level, foreign words are adapted to Arabic sound patterns; at the morphological level, they conform to established Arabic structures; and at the semantic level, they acquire meanings that align with Arabic usage. More importantly, at the epistemological level, *taʿrīb* serves to legitimize these words within the framework of Qurʾānic language, ensuring that their presence does not contradict the principle of *ʿarabiyy mubīn*.

The examples discussed in this study illustrate this process clearly. Words such as *istabraq* and *qirtās*, although attributed to Persian and Greek origins, are treated as fully integrated into Arabic due to their conformity with Arabic phonology and their widespread usage among Arabs. Likewise, names such as *Ibrāhīm* and *Mūsā*, despite their non-Arabic origins, are considered part of the Arabic linguistic system as they are adapted into its grammatical and phonetic structures. Even expressions such as *min taḥtibā*, which have been linked to Nabataean linguistic influence, are interpreted in ways that align with Arabic semantic patterns. These examples show that the boundary between Arabic and non-Arabic is not fixed, but mediated through processes of transformation and reinterpretation.

From this perspective, the triadic framework identified in this study, which is comprising origin, transformation, and epistemic legitimacy, provides a more comprehensive model for understanding the discourse. Earlier studies often isolate one of these dimensions, focusing either on the origin of words or on their linguistic features. However, the present findings demonstrate that classical mufasssirs implicitly operate across all three dimensions simultaneously. A word may originate from a non-Arabic language, but through the process of *taʿrīb*, it becomes integrated into Arabic and is subsequently legitimized within the framework of revelation. This integrated process challenges reductionist approaches and underscores the sophistication of classical exegetical reasoning.

Furthermore, the analysis refines the concept of *ʿajam* as a dynamic and layered category. Rather than functioning as a simple marker of non-Arabic language, *ʿajam* in al-Kirmānī's framework encompasses multiple dimensions, including levels of fluency, clarity, and even epistemic receptivity. This expanded understanding is evident in his interpretation of Qurʾānic verses such as Q.S. Fuṣṣilat (41): 44, where the distinction between *ʿarabī* and *aʿjamī* is linked not only to language, but also to the capacity for understanding and accepting revelation.⁴⁶ Such an

⁴⁴ Al-Kirmānī, *Gharāʾib al-Tafsīr*, 450.

⁴⁵ Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Muḥbir fī ʿUlūm al-Lughah wa Anwāʾuhā* (Beirut: Al-Maktabah al-ʿAṣriyah, 2009), 268.

⁴⁶ Al-Kirmānī, *Gharāʾib al-Tafsīr*, 837–838.

interpretation demonstrates that linguistic categories in classical tafsīr are deeply intertwined with broader questions of cognition, communication, and religious authority.

In relation to the broader field of Qur'ānic studies, these findings emphasize the need to move beyond viewing classical tafsīr as merely descriptive or traditionalist. Instead, it should be recognized as a complex intellectual tradition that employs sophisticated analytical strategies to address linguistic and epistemological challenges.⁴⁷ The comparison between Ibn al-Jawzī and al-Kirmānī reveals that even within a shared commitment to the Arabic character of the Qur'ān, scholars developed diverse methodological approaches that reflect different ways of conceptualizing language and knowledge.⁴⁸

At the same time, the study offers important implications for contemporary hermeneutics. By showing how classical scholars reconcile the universality of revelation with the specificity of language, it provides a framework for addressing similar tensions in modern Qur'ānic interpretation. The concept of *ta'rib*, in particular, offers a valuable conceptual tool for understanding how linguistic diversity can be integrated into a unified interpretive framework without undermining textual authority.

Thus, the discourse on foreign vocabulary in the Qur'ān should be reframed not as a binary opposition between “pure Arabic” and “foreign influence,” but as an ongoing intellectual effort to articulate the nature of Qur'ānic language within a dynamic and historically situated linguistic landscape. Through detailed analysis of classical exegetical practices, this study demonstrates that the question of language in the Qur'ān is inseparable from broader concerns about meaning, interpretation, and authority, making it a central issue in the study of Qur'ānic thought.⁴⁹

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that the debate on the existence of foreign vocabulary in the Qur'ān cannot be reduced to a binary opposition between acceptance and rejection. Rather, it constitutes a complex epistemological discourse in which classical scholars seek to reconcile textual authority with historical linguistic reality. Through a comparative analysis of Ibn al-Jawzī and al-Kirmānī, the study reveals that both scholars acknowledge the presence of vocabulary with non-Arabic origins, yet reinterpret such elements through the conceptual framework of *ta'rib*, thereby preserving the doctrinal claim of *'arabiyy mubīn*.

This research shows that classical exegetical thought operates through distinct analytical models. Ibn al-Jawzī represents a process-oriented approach in which linguistic legitimacy is grounded in transmission, usage, and historical integration, while al-Kirmānī reflects a category-based approach that emphasizes conceptual classification and semantic boundaries. These two models, although different in orientation, converge in their use of *ta'rib* as a mediating mechanism that transforms foreign-origin vocabulary into an acceptable component of the Arabic linguistic system. The primary contribution of this study lies in the reconstruction of a triadic analytical framework consisting of linguistic origin, transformation through Arabization, and epistemic legitimacy. This framework offers a more comprehensive way of understanding classical discussions on Qur'ānic language by integrating dimensions that are often treated separately in previous studies. In doing so, the study moves beyond descriptive catalogues of foreign vocabulary and provides a structured model for analyzing how linguistic categories are constructed and justified within the tradition of tafsīr.

⁴⁷ Andrew Rippin, *The Qur'an and Its Interpretative Tradition* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 23–35.

⁴⁸ Al-Kirmānī, *Gharā'ib al-Tafsīr*, 1019.

⁴⁹ Toshihiko Izutsu, *God and Man in the Qur'an: Semantics of the Qur'anic Weltanschauung* (Tokyo: Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1964), 18–25.

Furthermore, the findings highlight that the concept of *'ajam* in classical scholarship is not merely a designation of non-Arabic language, but a dynamic category shaped by considerations of fluency, intelligibility, and interpretive authority. This insight challenges simplified understandings of linguistic difference and underscores the importance of examining internal exegetical logic rather than imposing external classifications. From a broader perspective, this study affirms that classical tafsīr constitutes a sophisticated intellectual tradition capable of negotiating tensions between universality and particularity in the language of revelation. The discourse on foreign vocabulary, therefore, should not be viewed as a peripheral issue, but as a key entry point into understanding how Muslim scholars conceptualize the relationship between language, meaning, and authority in the Qur'ān.

Nevertheless, this study is limited to a comparative analysis of two mufasssirs and a selected corpus of exegetical texts. Future research could expand this framework by incorporating a wider range of classical and contemporary scholars, as well as integrating more advanced linguistic and philological methods. Such extensions would not only refine the analytical model proposed here but also contribute to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of Qur'ānic language in both classical and modern scholarship.

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