Qur'anic Readings and Modern Arabic Dialects: A Descriptive-Comparative Linguistic Study

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Abstract

*This study **aims** to explore the phonological relationship between Qur'anic readings (qirāʾāt) and modern Arabic dialects by examining how variations in the recitations reflect the diversity of Arabic pronunciation from the early Islamic period to the present. Grounded in historical linguistics and sociolinguistic theory, the research views the qirāʾāt as linguistic evidence of early Arabic dialectal diversity and as a foundation for understanding the development of spoken Arabic. It draws upon classical works such as Ibn Mujāhid's Al-Sabʿah fī al-Qirāʾāt and Ibn al-Jazarī's Al-Nashr fī al-Qirāʾāt al-ʿAshr, alongside the contributions of modern linguists such as Tammam Hassan and Ahmed Mukhtar Omar, who have highlighted the linguistic significance of the qirāʾāt, noting that few studies have directly compared these phonological features with those of contemporary dialects. Employing a **descriptive, analytical**, and **comparative linguistic approach**, the study examines phonetic phenomena such as imālah (vowel fronting), tashīl al-hamz (glottal easing), idghām (assimilation), and ibdāl (substitution) across Qur'anic readings and modern dialects. The **findings** reveal direct correspondences between certain phonetic traits in present-day dialects — such as the softening of the glottal stop and vowel fronting — and patterns documented in the qirāʾāt. This connection underscores the historical continuity of the Arabic language and provides valuable linguistic insights for Qur'anic and phonological studies. The **novelty** of this research lies in its unique integration of Qur'anic phonology and modern dialectology, demonstrating that the qirāʾāt preserve ancient dialectal features that remain alive in contemporary spoken Arabic.*

Keywords: *Qur'anic readings; Arabic dialects; phonetic; sociolinguistics; linguistic variation.*

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Introduction

The Qurʾan stands as the central text of Islam and the most influential linguistic monument in the history of the Arabic language. Among its many dimensions, the phenomenon of Qurʾanic readings (qirāʾāt) represents one of the clearest manifestations of its linguistic and phonetic miracle [1]. These readings are not simply alternative modes of recitation but are deeply rooted in the linguistic diversity of the Arabs during the period of revelation. They reflect a wide spectrum of dialectal variations that existed among the Arab tribes of the Arabian Peninsula in the 7th century CE, demonstrating the remarkable adaptability and inclusivity of the Qurʾanic message [2].

The Qurʾan was revealed in a clear Arabic tongue (lisān ʿarabī mubīn), but it was not restricted to the dialect of Quraysh alone. Instead, it incorporated linguistic features drawn from the dialects of other major tribes, such as Tamīm, Asad, Hudhayl, and Qays. Each of these tribes had its own phonetic tendencies, patterns of articulation, and morphological habits [3]. The Qurʾan's accommodation of these differences through multiple canonical readings reflects divine wisdom in preserving the unity of the message while acknowledging linguistic diversity. This pluralism in pronunciation and expression did not alter the meanings of the verses; rather, it enriched them and affirmed the flexibility and depth of the Arabic language [4].

The study of qirāʾāt therefore provides scholars with an exceptional window into the linguistic reality of early Arabic. Each reading preserves authentic phonetic and dialectal traits that were prevalent among the Arabs during the first century of Islam [5]. Features such as imālah (the fronting of the vowel /a/ toward /i/), tashīl al-hamz (the softening of the glottal stop /ʔ/), idghām (the assimilation of adjacent consonants), and ibdāl (the substitution of one sound for another) reveal the variety of spoken Arabic during the Prophet's time. These phenomena are well-documented in both Qurʾanic recitations and pre-Islamic poetry, which together form the earliest records of Arabic phonology [6].

Moreover, many of these phonetic characteristics have not disappeared; they continue to exist, often unconsciously, within the modern dialects spoken throughout the Arab world [7]. For instance, the tendency to simplify or omit the glottal stop—one of the most prominent features in Warsh's reading—can still be heard in Egyptian and Levantine Arabic, where saʾala ("he asked") becomes sāla, and muʾmin ("believer") becomes mūmin. Similarly, the phenomenon of imālah, frequently used by reciters such as Hamzah and al-Kisāʾī, appears in Maghrebi Arabic, where the vowel /a/ often shifts toward /i/, as in qāl being pronounced

closer to qīl. These correspondences suggest that the Qur'anic readings preserved genuine linguistic realities that later evolved naturally into modern dialects [8].

Consequently, the qirāʾāt are not merely religious traditions or ritual differences; they constitute a living linguistic archive that connects the Arabic of the revelation period with that of today [9]. They provide evidence that Arabic, while undergoing significant change across time and geography, has maintained deep structural and phonetic continuity. Through this continuity, the Qur'an serves not only as a sacred text but also as a linguistic record, documenting the state of Arabic in its earliest stages [10].

The present study aims to analyze this relationship systematically by exploring how Qur'anic readings reflect the dialectal diversity of early Arabic and how they correspond to features in modern dialects. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions: To what extent do Qur'anic readings capture the dialectal variations of the Arabs at the time of revelation? And how can these readings help explain similarities between ancient phonetic phenomena and those still found in contemporary Arabic dialects?

This inquiry is particularly significant because it bridges two fields that are often studied separately — ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān (the sciences of the Qur'an) and modern linguistics [11]. By combining the analytical rigor of phonology and historical linguistics with the authenticity of Qur'anic tradition, the study aims to demonstrate that the qirāʾāt provide not only spiritual insight but also scientific evidence of how language evolves, adapts, and preserves its identity across centuries [12].

Method

The present study adopts a descriptive–analytical and comparative linguistic methodology designed to examine the phonological and dialectal dimensions of Qur'anic readings (qirāʾāt) and their relationship with modern Arabic dialects. The methodology aims to link traditional Qur'anic sciences with contemporary linguistic analysis, allowing for an integrated approach that respects the authenticity of transmitted readings while applying modern linguistic tools to interpret their patterns [13].

Research Design

The research follows a qualitative analytical design. Rather than relying on numerical data or statistical models, the study focuses on linguistic description, comparison, and interpretation. It employs descriptive techniques to identify distinctive phonetic and linguistic features within canonical readings and then uses comparative analysis to trace these features across modern Arabic dialects [14].

The descriptive component involves cataloging and analyzing linguistic phenomena such as imālah (vowel fronting), tashīl al-hamz (glottal easing), idghām (consonant assimilation), and ibdāl (substitution). The comparative component examines how these features appear, persist, or transform in modern dialects such as Egyptian, Levantine, Gulf, and Maghrebi Arabic [15].

Data Sources

This study draws upon both classical and modern sources to ensure scholarly accuracy and analytical depth. The classical sources provide authentic data on the Qur'anic readings and their dialectal characteristics, serving as a foundation for understanding the linguistic phenomena under investigation [16]. In contrast, modern linguistic studies contribute contemporary theoretical perspectives and analytical frameworks that support a deeper examination of these features. Together, these sources establish a comprehensive basis for exploring the phonological relationship between Qur'anic recitations and modern Arabic dialects [17].

Analytical Procedures

The analysis of this study follows a systematic sequence designed to ensure both linguistic precision and interpretative depth. It begins with the identification of phonetic phenomena, in which each distinctive feature mentioned in classical qirā'āt sources is carefully extracted and classified according to modern phonological terminology [18]. Following this, a descriptive analysis is conducted to provide detailed linguistic explanations of these phenomena, focusing on their articulatory characteristics, sound changes, and distribution across the canonical readings [19]. The next stage involves a comparative analysis, where the identified features are examined alongside contemporary dialectal data to reveal patterns of continuity, modification, or divergence. Finally, an interpretative correlation is established, connecting ancient and modern linguistic features within the broader framework of phonological evolution and sociolinguistic variation, thereby illustrating the enduring relationship between Qur'anic phonology and living Arabic speech [20].

Scope and Limitations

The study focuses on the ten canonical Qur'anic readings transmitted through authentic isnād chains and excludes irregular or weak readings. The comparison is limited to phonological and phonetic features, leaving aside syntactic or morphological aspects that require separate treatment. Moreover, while the study includes representative modern dialects (Egyptian, Levantine,

Gulf, and Maghrebi), it does not attempt a full dialectal survey due to the immense diversity within each region [21].

 Ethical and Scholarly Considerations

Given the sacred nature of the Qur'an, all references to qirāʾāt are made with strict adherence to the sources and without speculative reinterpretation. The study aims to maintain academic rigor while upholding reverence for the Qur'anic text. Citations follow standard scholarly practice, ensuring transparency and traceability [22].
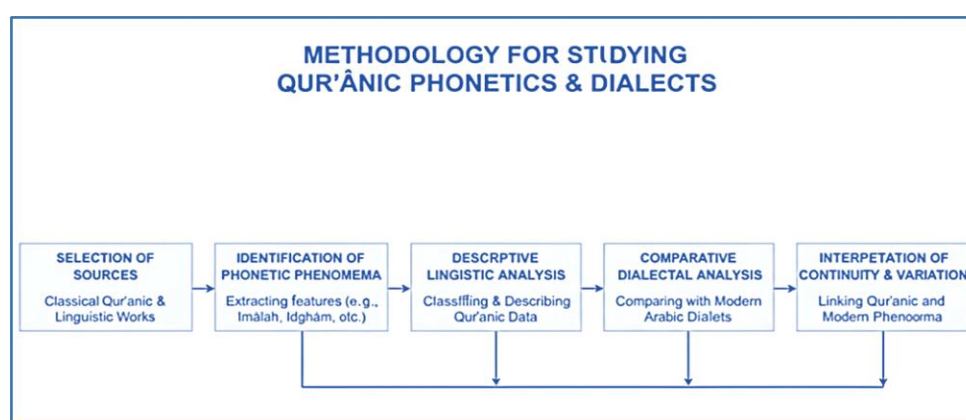

Figure 1. Methodology for Analyzing Qur'anic Phonetic Phenomena and Modern Arabic Dialect

Result and Discussion

1. Qur'anic Readings as a Reflection of Early Arabic Dialects

The analysis of Qur'anic readings (qirāʾāt) reveals that the phonetic variations recorded among the canonical recitations are not arbitrary differences but deliberate reflections of the dialectal realities of early Arabia [23]. Each reading, transmitted through a continuous and authenticated chain, preserves distinctive phonetic traits that correspond to the speech patterns of specific Arab tribes during the time of revelation. This finding confirms that the qirāʾāt serve as linguistic evidence of the diversity that characterized the Arabic language in the 7th century CE [24].

For instance, the feature of imālah—the tendency to shift the vowel /a/ toward /i/—appears frequently in the readings of Hamzah and al-Kisāʾī, particularly in words such as Mūsā and ʿĪsā. This phenomenon was well known among the tribes of Tamīm and Asad and demonstrates that their dialectal speech was preserved within the Qur'anic text [25]. Similarly, tashīl al-hamz, or the easing of the glottal stop, occurs in the reading of Warsh from Nāfiʿ, as in

muʾminūn pronounced mūminūn. This trait reflects the Hijāzī dialect, which favored smoother articulation and avoided heavy glottal sounds [26].

The phenomenon of idghām (assimilation), as in the reading of Abū ʿAmr al-Baṣrī—where qad tabayyana becomes qattabayyana—illustrates a widespread tendency among southern Arabian dialects to merge similar consonants for ease of pronunciation. Likewise, ibdāl, or the substitution of one sound for another, appears in readings such as aʾimmah rendered as aymah, a feature also attested in pre-Islamic poetry [27].

These results demonstrate that the Qur'an, through its multiple readings, not only tolerated dialectal diversity but sanctified it within a unified and divinely preserved linguistic system.

2. Continuity of Qur'anic Phonetic Features in Modern Arabic Dialects

A major outcome of this research is the clear continuity between the phonetic features found in Qur'anic readings and those existing in modern Arabic dialects. Many of the same sound tendencies observed in the qirāʾāt are still active in the speech of millions of Arabic speakers today [28].

For example, the simplification of the glottal stop (tashīl al-hamz) remains evident in Egyptian Arabic, where saʾala ("he asked") is pronounced sāla and muʾmin ("believer") as mūmin, identical to Warsh's reading pattern. The imālah phenomenon is widespread in North African dialects, where qāl ("he said") sounds closer to qīl due to vowel fronting [29]. Similarly, idghām is a natural feature in the Gulf dialects, where qad taʿlam becomes qattaʿlam, following the same assimilation principles described by early grammarians. Even ibdāl appears in Bedouin dialects, where interdental sounds are often replaced (e.g., /θ/ → /t/), paralleling substitutions mentioned in classical readings [30].

These observations suggest that the Qur'anic readings have acted as a linguistic bridge between the Arabic of revelation and the Arabic of everyday communication [31]. Far from being obsolete, the phonetic systems of the qirāʾāt continue to influence the living language, confirming the historical depth and resilience of Arabic [32].

3. Linguistic and Sociolinguistic Implications

From a phonological perspective, the qirāʾāt provide a precise record of the natural phonetic variation that occurs in all human languages. The sound changes they reflect—such as vowel fronting, assimilation, and substitution—are consistent with universal principles of phonological evolution. Thus, the Qur'anic readings preserve not only the linguistic diversity of Arabic but also patterns that align with modern theories of sound change [33].

From a sociolinguistic standpoint, the Qur'anic acceptance of multiple readings demonstrates a unique model of linguistic pluralism [34]. Unlike many linguistic communities that standardize one dialect at the expense of others, early Muslims preserved several dialectal forms within a single sacred text. This inclusion fostered a collective linguistic identity among the Arabs, transcending tribal boundaries and reinforcing the idea that diversity can exist within unity [35].

Furthermore, this perspective helps explain the positive attitude toward phonetic diversity within Islamic civilization. The existence of multiple canonical readings was not viewed as a flaw but as a sign of linguistic richness and divine flexibility. This model contrasts with modern tendencies to stigmatize dialectal variation, offering an instructive precedent for contemporary language policy and education [36].

4. Pedagogical and Cultural Dimensions

The pedagogical implications of these findings are significant. Understanding the dialectal background of Qur'anic readings enables students of Arabic and Qur'anic sciences to appreciate the historical continuity of their language. Recognizing that features in modern dialects—once thought to be "errors" or "simplifications"—actually have ancient roots in the Qur'an itself can transform the way Arabic is taught and perceived [37].

Culturally, the results affirm the Qur'an's role as a repository of Arab linguistic identity. The qirāʾāt encapsulate voices from different tribes, preserving not just religious meaning but also the sound of Arab heritage [38]. The endurance of these phonetic patterns in modern speech underscores how language and faith have evolved together, maintaining an unbroken connection across fourteen centuries [39].

5. Interpretative Analysis

The continuity illustrated in the table above supports the argument that Qur'anic phonological diversity is not an artificial construct but a direct reflection of the linguistic ecology of the Arabian Peninsula. The preservation of these features in modern dialects underscores the historical authenticity of Qur'anic recitations as well as the stability of Arabic phonetic systems [40].

This finding also suggests that Arabic dialects did not diverge randomly after the Islamic era but evolved along natural and predictable phonetic pathways already evident in the qirāʾāt. In this sense, Qur'anic readings serve as linguistic fossils, offering a rare glimpse into the earliest forms of spoken Arabic [41].

Moreover, the qirāʾāt demonstrate how variation and unity coexist harmoniously in language. While each reading reflects a specific tribal pronunciation, all remain semantically identical, preserving the divine message without distortion. This balance between variation and invariance is linguistically remarkable and mirrors the sociocultural cohesion that characterized the early Muslim community [42].

6. Summary of Findings

The results of this study confirm that the Qur'anic readings are an indispensable linguistic archive documenting both the diversity and continuity of Arabic. They embody a phonetic map connecting early tribal dialects to the regional varieties spoken today [43].

This interconnection provides strong evidence that Arabic has maintained remarkable structural stability despite centuries of geographical expansion and social change. Ultimately, the qirāʾāt exemplify the Qur'an's linguistic miracle: a sacred text capable of preserving human diversity within divine unity [44].

Table 1. Summary of Major Findings and Discussion Points

Focus Area	Main Finding	Implication
Phonological Continuity	Qur'anic features such as *imālah*, *idghām*, and *tashīl al-hamz* persist in modern dialects.	Demonstrates historical stability and unity of Arabic.
Linguistic Diversity	The *qirāʾāt* reflect tribal dialects without altering Qur'anic meaning.	Affirms divine inclusion of dialectal variation.
Sociolinguistic Insight	Variation in *qirāʾāt* represents accepted linguistic pluralism.	Provides a model for respecting modern dialect diversity.
Educational Application	Teaching Qur'anic phonology enriches Arabic linguistic studies.	Strengthens cultural and linguistic identity.
Research Potential	Comparative and acoustic studies can expand findings.	Opens new interdisciplinary research paths.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Qur'anic readings (*qirāʾāt*) are not merely ritual variations but a linguistic repository that documents the phonetic and dialectal diversity of Arabic from the time of revelation to the present. Through a descriptive–comparative analysis, it was shown that phenomena such as *imālah* (vowel fronting), *tashīl al-hamz* (glottal easing), *idghām* (assimilation), and *ibdāl* (substitution) reflect authentic tribal speech patterns that have continued, in modified form, in modern Arabic dialects. The persistence of these features — seen, for instance, in the simplification of the glottal stop in Egyptian Arabic or the vowel fronting in Maghrebi dialects — demonstrates a clear continuity between the sacred language of the Qur'an and the living speech of today. From a linguistic perspective, the *qirāʾāt* provide valuable empirical data that support modern theories of phonological change, while from a sociolinguistic viewpoint, they embody an early model of linguistic pluralism that accepted diversity within unity. Educationally and culturally, recognizing the dialectal roots of the *qirāʾāt* deepens appreciation for the historical depth and adaptability of Arabic. Ultimately, the Qur'an emerges as both a divine message and a linguistic monument — preserving the sound of early Arabic and shaping its evolution across centuries. This enduring relationship between revelation and language confirms that the *qirāʾāt* remain a bridge linking the eloquence of the past with the spoken realities of the present.

Author Contributions

Rushdi Al-Sabahi: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration. **Ainur Rhain**: Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Investigation. **Mariam Elbanna**: review & editing, Investigation.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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