

Al-majāz in the Qur'an: Classification, Semantic Function, and Its Implications for Qur'anic Interpretation

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Abstract

This article examines *al-majāz* in the Qur'an as a structured rhetorical-semantic mechanism that plays a central role in Qur'anic interpretation. The study addresses a conceptual, methodological, and interpretive problem in existing scholarship: Qur'anic figurative language is often treated either as a decorative aspect of *balāghah* or as a broad category of nonliteral expression without sufficient classification and textual control. Using a qualitative textual-hermeneutical design, the article analyzes selected Qur'anic passages through close reading, classical Arabic rhetorical classification, semantic analysis, and hermeneutical interpretation. The study focuses on how *majāz* can be classified through categories such as *majāz lughawī*, *majāz 'aqlī*, *majāz mursal*, attributional transfer, part-whole relation, locality, causality, and contextual displacement. The findings show that *majāz* performs significant semantic functions in constructing Qur'anic concepts of guidance, misguidance, faith, disbelief, moral responsibility, divine-human relation, and eschatological consequence. Figurative expressions involving darkness and light, disease and the heart, opening and hardness, trade and loss, rootedness and instability demonstrate that *majāz* does not merely embellish Qur'anic discourse, but organizes theological and ethical meanings into coherent semantic fields. The article further argues that *majāz* functions as a hermeneutical control that mediates between rigid literalism and uncontrolled figurative interpretation. Its theoretical contribution lies in integrating classical *balāghah*, Qur'anic semantics, and contemporary hermeneutical theory into a systematic model for studying figurative Qur'anic language.

Keywords: *al-majāz*, Qur'anic interpretation, *balāghah*, semantic function, Islamic hermeneutics

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji *al-majāz* dalam Al-Qur'an sebagai mekanisme retorik-semantik yang terstruktur dan memiliki peran penting dalam penafsiran Al-Qur'an. Kajian ini berangkat dari problem konseptual, metodologis, dan interpretif dalam studi sebelumnya, yaitu kecenderungan memperlakukan bahasa figuratif Al-Qur'an hanya sebagai hiasan *balāghah* atau sebagai kategori umum ungkapan nonliteral tanpa klasifikasi yang memadai dan kontrol tekstual yang jelas. Dengan menggunakan desain penelitian kualitatif tekstual-hermeneutis, artikel ini menganalisis ayat-ayat terpilih melalui pembacaan dekat, klasifikasi retorika Arab klasik, analisis semantik, dan interpretasi hermeneutis. Kajian ini menelaah bagaimana *majāz* dapat diklasifikasikan melalui bentuk-bentuk seperti *majāz lughawī*, *majāz 'aqlī*, *majāz mursal*, transfer atribusional, relasi bagian-keseluruhan, lokalitas, kausalitas, dan pergeseran kontekstual. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa *majāz* menjalankan fungsi semantik penting dalam membangun konsep Qur'ani tentang petunjuk, kesesatan, iman, kufur, tanggung jawab moral, relasi Tuhan-manusia, dan konsekuensi eskatologis. Ungkapan figuratif tentang kegelapan dan cahaya, penyakit dan hati, kelapangan dan kekerasan hati, perdagangan dan kerugian, serta keterakaran dan ketidakstabilan menunjukkan bahwa *majāz* tidak sekadar memperindah wacana Al-Qur'an, tetapi mengorganisasi makna teologis dan etis ke dalam medan semantik yang koheren. Artikel ini juga menegaskan bahwa *majāz* berfungsi sebagai kontrol hermeneutis yang menengahi literalisme kaku dan penafsiran figuratif yang tidak terkendali. Kontribusi teoretis artikel ini terletak pada integrasi *balāghah* klasik, semantik Qur'ani, dan teori hermeneutika kontemporer untuk membangun model sistematis dalam mengkaji bahasa figuratif Al-Qur'an.

Kata kunci: *al-majāz*, penafsiran al-qur'an, *balāghah*, fungsi semantik, hermeneutika Islam



Introduction

The Qur'an remains one of the most intensely interpreted texts in world intellectual history, not only because of its sacred status in Islam but also because of the linguistic density through which it communicates theology, law, ethics, narrative, warning, consolation, and eschatological vision. In contemporary global society, where Muslim communities form one of the largest religious populations and Qur'anic interpretation continues to shape education, law, ethics, public discourse, and devotional life, the question of how Qur'anic language produces meaning is not merely philological; it is also socio-intellectual and hermeneutical.¹ Recent scholarship in Qur'anic studies has increasingly treated the Qur'an as a text whose meaning emerges through the interaction of language, rhetoric, structure, historical setting, reception, and interpretive tradition.² Within this broader context, *al-majāz* occupies a crucial position because it concerns the movement of expression beyond its immediate literal sense toward a meaning authorized by linguistic, contextual, rhetorical, or theological indicators.

In the disciplines of *Ushuluddin* and Islamic Studies, the study of *al-majāz* is significant because it directly affects how readers understand divine speech. Qur'anic discourse frequently employs expressions that cannot be interpreted adequately through a flat literalist reading: God "brings people out of darkness into light," hearts may be sealed, diseased, hardened, or opened, human action may be described through the language of trade, and worldly life may be presented as vegetation that flourishes and then disappears. These expressions are not accidental figures of style. They are part of the Qur'an's rhetorical economy, where language transforms abstract meanings into concrete, memorable, and morally charged images. The problem, however, is that *al-majāz* has often been treated either too narrowly as a decorative aspect of *balāghah* or too broadly as any non-literal expression without sufficient analytical differentiation. Such reduction weakens the interpretive value of the concept and obscures its role in Qur'anic meaning-making.

The theoretical tension surrounding *al-majāz* is not new. In the classical Islamic sciences, debates over *ḥaqīqah* and *majāz* were closely tied to theology, legal theory, linguistic philosophy, and *tafsīr*. The issue was never merely whether the Qur'an contains figurative language, but how figurative expression should be recognized, classified, and interpreted without compromising the authority of revelation. In *kalām* and *uṣūl al-fiqh*, the acceptance or restriction of *majāz* had serious consequences for interpreting divine attributes, legal commands, ethical injunctions, and eschatological descriptions. Modern scholarship has revisited these debates by showing that literal meaning in Islamic hermeneutics is itself a negotiated category rather than a self-evident point of departure.³ Yet the

¹ Ardiansyah, Al Fiqri. "Kritik terhadap Hermeneutika dalam Tafsir Al-Qur'an: Perspektif Ulama Tradisional dan Kontemporer." *Al-Muhith: Jurnal Ilmu Qur'an dan Hadits* 4, no. 1 (2025): 1. <https://doi.org/10.35931/am.v4i1.4232>.

² Jane Dammen McAuliffe, ed., *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, vol. 1–5 (Brill, 2001), <https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/browse/encyclopaedia-of-the-quran>; N Sinai, *The Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction*, *The Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction: The Qur'an*, 2017, <https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?eid=2-s2.0-85212730983&partnerID=40&md5=a21fde1ceb5ab73c4440175a64fcdac>; Angelika Neuwirth, *The Qur'an and Late Antiquity: A Shared Heritage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); M Shah and M A Haleem, *The Oxford Handbook of Qur'anic Studies*, *The Oxford Handbook of Qur'anic Studies*, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199698646.001.0001>.

³ Robert Gleave, *Islam and Literalism: Literal Meaning and Interpretation in Islamic Legal Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012); David R Vishanoff, *The Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics: How Sunni Legal Theorists Imagined a Revealed Law* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 2011).

analytical treatment of Qur'anic *majāz* remains uneven. Some studies emphasize classical rhetorical definitions, while others prioritize modern semantic or cognitive accounts of figurative language. The result is a methodological gap between inherited classifications and contemporary interpretive tools.

Previous studies may be grouped into three major scholarly tendencies. The first consists of works in Qur'anic studies that examine the Qur'an through literary, historical, and rhetorical approaches. These studies have shown that Qur'anic meaning is inseparable from textual arrangement, recurring imagery, intertextual resonance, and communicative strategy.⁴ Their contribution is important, but they do not always provide a focused classification of *majāz* as a technical concept within Arabic rhetoric. The second group includes linguistic and lexical studies that clarify Qur'anic vocabulary, semantic range, and the difficulty of rendering Arabic expressions into translation.⁵ These studies strengthen the empirical basis of semantic analysis, yet they often require a more explicit connection to *balāghah* categories. The third group consists of works on Arabic rhetoric, Islamic hermeneutics, and metaphor theory, which explain how figurative language operates in discourse and interpretation.⁶ These works provide useful theoretical tools, but their insights have not always been integrated into a systematic model for studying *al-majāz* in Qur'anic interpretation.

The research gap addressed in this article is therefore conceptual, methodological, and interpretive. Conceptually, *al-majāz* is often discussed without sufficient distinction between its major forms, such as *majāz lughawī*, *majāz 'aqlī*, *isti'ārah*, *majāz mursal*, and related figurative structures. Methodologically, many discussions rely on selected examples but do not clarify the criteria by which a Qur'anic expression is identified as *majāz*, distinguished from literal usage, or related to broader semantic fields. Interpretively, there remains a need to explain how *majāz* functions not only as a rhetorical device but also as a mechanism that shapes theological understanding, moral imagination, and legal-ethical reasoning. This gap is important because without a systematic approach, the interpretation of figurative Qur'anic language may fall into two extremes: rigid literalism that ignores rhetorical indication, or uncontrolled figurative interpretation that detaches meaning from textual discipline.

This article is guided by three research questions. First, how can the principal forms of *al-majāz* in selected Qur'anic passages be classified through the categories of Arabic rhetoric? Second, what semantic functions does *al-majāz* perform in constructing Qur'anic meanings related to guidance, disbelief, moral responsibility, divine-human relation, and eschatological consequence? Third, what are the implications of *majāz* analysis for Qur'anic interpretation within contemporary Islamic Studies and *Ushuluddin*? Correspondingly, the objectives of the study are to classify selected forms of Qur'anic *majāz*, analyze their semantic

⁴ The Holy Qur'an and M A S Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an: A New Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur'an and the Bible: Text and Commentary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

⁵ Elsaid M Badawi and M A S Abdel Haleem, *Arabic-English Dictionary of Qur'anic Usage* (Brill, 2008), <https://brill.com/display/title/12559>; Kais Dukes, "The Qur'anic Arabic Corpus: Annotated Linguistic Resource for the Holy Qur'an," *Language Resources and Evaluation* 47 (2013): 123–55.

⁶ H Abdul-Raof, "Textual Progression and Presentation Technique in Qur'anic Discourse: An Investigation of Richard Bell's Claims of 'Disjointedness' with Especial Reference to Q. 17-20," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 7, no. 2 (2005): 36–60, <https://doi.org/10.3366/jqs.2005.7.2.36>; Elena Semino, *Metaphor in Discourse* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/metaphor-in-discourse/>; Lara Harb, *Arabic Poetics: Aesthetic Experience in Classical Arabic Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/arabic-poetics/>.

and rhetorical functions, and explain their interpretive implications for understanding Qur'anic discourse.

The theoretical framework of this study combines three perspectives. The first is classical Arabic rhetoric, especially the distinction between *ḥaqīqah* and *majāz* and the internal classification of figurative expression within *'ilm al-bayān*. The second is Qur'anic semantic analysis, which treats meaning as relational, contextual, and shaped by recurring lexical patterns across the text. The third is contemporary metaphor and discourse theory, which explains how figurative language structures cognition, persuasion, and interpretation rather than merely decorating speech.⁷ This combined framework allows *majāz* to be studied as a disciplined rhetorical-semantic phenomenon: it is grounded in Arabic linguistic tradition, verified through textual context, and interpreted through its function within Qur'anic discourse.

The novelty of this article lies in its attempt to move the study of Qur'anic *majāz* beyond ornamental description and beyond an undifferentiated theory of non-literal language. By linking classification, semantic function, and interpretive implication, the study proposes a more systematic model for analyzing how figurative expression contributes to Qur'anic meaning. Its academic contribution is to bridge classical *balāghah*, Qur'anic semantics, and contemporary hermeneutics in a way that preserves the specificity of Arabic-Islamic rhetorical thought while engaging current debates in Qur'anic studies. The article argues that *al-majāz* is not a marginal stylistic feature of the Qur'an, but a central interpretive category through which revelation communicates complex theological, ethical, and existential meanings.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative textual-hermeneutical research design with a rhetorical-semantic orientation. The design is appropriate because the object of analysis is not numerical distribution or reader response, but the way *al-majāz* operates within selected Qur'anic passages as a figurative, semantic, and interpretive phenomenon. The study is therefore positioned within textual Qur'anic studies, Arabic rhetoric, and Islamic hermeneutics. It seeks to classify forms of *majāz*, analyze their semantic functions, and explain their implications for Qur'anic interpretation. This approach allows the research to examine figurative language not as an isolated linguistic feature, but as a meaning-producing structure embedded in Qur'anic discourse, theological communication, and the interpretive tradition of Islamic thought.⁸

The primary source of this study is the Arabic text of the Qur'an. Methodological priority is given to the Arabic wording because *majāz* is inseparable from Arabic lexical relations, syntactic structure, contextual indication, and rhetorical convention. English translations, especially Abdel Haleem's translation, are used only as secondary aids to clarify meaning for non-Arabic academic readers; they are not treated as substitutes for the Arabic text. Lexical and semantic consultation is supported by Badawi and Abdel Haleem's *Arabic-English Dictionary of Qur'anic Usage*, while grammatical and morphological observations are checked through the *Quranic Arabic Corpus* where

⁷ Semino, *Metaphor in Discourse*; Zoltán Kövecses, *Extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/extended-conceptual-metaphor-theory/>.

⁸ Gleave, *Islam and Literalism: Literal Meaning and Interpretation in Islamic Legal Theory*; Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology* (Sage Publications, 2018).

relevant.⁹ Classical and modern *tafsīr* materials may be consulted selectively to observe whether a figurative reading has support within the exegetical tradition, but the central analysis remains focused on rhetorical classification, semantic function, and hermeneutical implication rather than legal derivation or doctrinal adjudication.

The data are selected through purposive textual sampling. The study does not claim to provide a complete inventory of all instances of *majāz* in the Qur'an. Instead, it selects passages that are analytically significant for answering the research questions. A Qur'anic expression is included when it meets four criteria. First, it contains a word, phrase, clause, or proposition whose contextual meaning departs from its primary or literal usage. Second, the shift of meaning can be justified through a recognized rhetorical relation, such as resemblance, causality, part-whole relation, containment, instrumentality, attribution, or contextual displacement. Third, the expression contributes to a major Qur'anic theme, such as divine guidance, disbelief, moral responsibility, divine-human relation, legal-ethical instruction, inner spiritual condition, worldly life, or eschatological consequence. Fourth, the passage possesses sufficient semantic density to allow analysis of classification, function, and interpretive implication. These criteria are intended to avoid arbitrary selection and to ensure that each example is relevant to the objectives of the study.

The analytical framework consists of three connected layers. The first layer is rhetorical classification. Each selected expression is examined through the classical distinction between *ḥaqīqah* and *majāz*, followed by classification into relevant subtypes such as *majāz lughawī*, *majāz 'aqlī*, *majāz mursal*, *isti'ārah*, *kināyah*, or related figurative forms where appropriate. This layer is necessary because Qur'anic figurative language cannot be analyzed rigorously if every non-literal expression is treated as metaphor in a general sense. Arabic rhetoric provides a more precise set of categories for identifying the type of semantic transfer involved in each expression.¹⁰

The second layer is semantic analysis. After an expression is classified rhetorically, the study examines how its meaning is produced in context. This involves identifying the basic lexical meaning, the contextual meaning, the semantic relation between them, and the *qarinah* or contextual indicator that prevents a purely literal interpretation. The analysis also considers broader Qur'anic usage, especially when the same lexical field appears across multiple passages. This step is important because *majāz* in the Qur'an often operates beyond single words; it may involve phrase-level, verse-level, or discourse-level meaning. Semantic analysis therefore prevents the study from reducing *majāz* to ornamentation and instead treats it as a mechanism that organizes Qur'anic concepts and interpretive relations.¹¹

The third layer is hermeneutical interpretation. At this stage, the study asks how the identified form of *majāz* affects Qur'anic interpretation. The analysis considers whether the figurative expression clarifies an abstract theological reality, intensifies persuasion, guides moral perception, frames legal-ethical meaning, or reshapes the reader's understanding of divine-human relation. This

⁹ M A S Abdel Haleem, "Qur'an and Hadith," in *The Cambridge Companion to: Classical Islamic Theology*, 2008, 19–32, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521780582.002>; Qur'an and Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an: A New Translation*; Eric D Dukes, "The Quranic Arabic Corpus: A Bridge Between the Sacred Text and Computational Linguistics," *Proceedings of the Conference on Language Resources and Evaluation (LREC)*, 2010; Dukes, "The Qur'anic Arabic Corpus: Annotated Linguistic Resource for the Holy Qur'an."

¹⁰ Harb, *Arabic Poetics: Aesthetic Experience in Classical Arabic Literature*.

¹¹ Kövecses, *Extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory*.

layer is particularly important because debates over *majāz* in Islamic thought are never merely literary; they are connected to broader questions of meaning, authority, literalism, and interpretive discipline.¹²

The interpretive procedure follows six steps. First, the selected Qur'anic passage is read in Arabic and situated within its immediate textual context. Second, the potentially figurative expression is identified. Third, its basic or primary meaning is established through lexical evidence, grammatical structure, and broader Qur'anic usage. Fourth, its contextual meaning is analyzed in relation to the verse's rhetorical and theological function. Fifth, the semantic relation between the basic and contextual meanings is classified according to the categories of Arabic rhetoric. Sixth, the implication of the figurative expression for Qur'anic interpretation is explained. This procedure is repeated across the selected passages to allow comparison between different types and functions of *majāz*.

This study also adapts established metaphor identification procedures, particularly MIP and MIPVU, but it does not apply them mechanically. These methods are useful because they distinguish between basic meaning and contextual meaning in discourse.¹³ However, they were developed primarily for modern linguistic data, not for Qur'anic Arabic or classical Islamic rhetorical analysis. Therefore, the present study modifies their use by adding three controls: Arabic root and lexical analysis, *balāghah*-based classification, and *tafsīr*-sensitive contextual reading. This modification is necessary because Qur'anic *majāz* may involve not only metaphorical lexical units but also attributional shifts, metonymic relations, implicit rhetorical structures, and theological contexts that require interpretive caution.

To ensure methodological transparency, the study distinguishes between three types of claims. Descriptive claims refer to the Arabic wording, grammatical structure, and textual context of the selected passage. Classificatory claims refer to the identification of a given expression as a particular type of *majāz*. Interpretive claims refer to the theological, semantic, or hermeneutical consequences of that figurative expression. When more than one interpretation is possible, the study identifies the strongest reading and explains the textual and rhetorical reasons for preferring it. This distinction is intended to reduce impressionistic interpretation and make the analysis academically evaluable.

The validity of the analysis is strengthened through textual triangulation. The study compares the Arabic Qur'anic wording, lexical evidence, rhetorical classification, selected *tafsīr* discussions, and contemporary theories of figurative language. However, these sources are not treated as equal in authority. The Arabic Qur'anic text remains the primary object of analysis, while dictionaries, translations, commentaries, corpora, and modern theories function as supporting instruments. The limitation of this study is that it does not provide a statistical mapping of all Qur'anic instances of *majāz*. Its contribution is instead analytical and theoretical: it offers a systematic model for examining how *majāz* functions through classification, semantic operation, and interpretive implication within Qur'anic discourse.

¹² Vishanoff, *The Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics: How Sunni Legal Theorists Imagined a Revealed Law*; Gleave, *Islam and Literalism: Literal Meaning and Interpretation in Islamic Legal Theory*.

¹³ Pragglejaz Group, "MIP: A Method for Identifying Metaphorically Used Words in Discourse," *Metaphor and Symbol* 22, no. 1 (2007): 1–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10926480709336752>; Gerard J Steen et al., *A Method for Linguistic Metaphor Identification: From MIP to MIPVU* (John Benjamins, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.1075/celcr.14>.

Results and Discussion

Classifying Qur'anic *Majāz*: Between *Ḥaqīqah*, *Majāz Lughawī*, *Majāz 'Aqlī*, and Rhetorical Transfer

The first major finding of this study is that Qur'anic *majāz* cannot be reduced to a single category of “metaphor,” because figurative transfer in the Qur'an operates through several distinct rhetorical relations that require careful classification.¹⁴ The distinction between *ḥaqīqah* and *majāz* is therefore not a merely theoretical division inherited from Arabic rhetoric; it is an interpretive tool for determining when an expression should be read according to its primary lexical sense and when its meaning is redirected by context, rhetorical indication, or semantic relation. This finding supports the central insight of Arabic *balāghah* that figurative meaning is not arbitrary but governed by recognizable relations and contextual constraints.¹⁵ It also refines modern metaphor-based approaches by showing that not every nonliteral Qur'anic expression functions through resemblance. Some cases involve attribution, locality, causality, part-whole relation, or contextual displacement rather than direct metaphorical mapping.

A clear case of *majāz lughawī* appears in Q. 2:16, where the hypocrites are described as those who “purchased error for guidance” and whose “trade” brought no profit: *ishtarawū al-ḍalālata bi-l-hudā fa-mā rabīḥat tijāratuhum*. The lexical field of buying, exchange, loss, and profit belongs to commercial activity, yet the verse concerns moral and spiritual miscalculation. The transfer occurs at the level of language: words normally associated with economic transaction are used to describe an existential exchange between guidance and misguidance. This is not simply a decorative metaphor, because the commercial register gives moral failure a structure of choice, valuation, and consequence. The expression shows how *majāz lughawī* converts an abstract theological condition into a concrete semantic scenario that can be judged and remembered. Lexically, the terms *al-ḍalālah*, *al-hudā*, and *tijārah* cannot be interpreted in isolation; their force emerges from their arrangement within the verse and from the contrast between false gain and real loss.

A different type of transfer appears in Q. 12:82: *wa-s'ali al-qaryata allatī kunnā fihā*, commonly rendered as “ask the town in which we were.” The intended meaning is not to ask buildings, streets, or physical space, but the people of the town. This is better classified as *majāz mursal*, because the relation is not resemblance but locality: the place is mentioned while its inhabitants are intended. Such an example is methodologically important because it prevents the analyst from labeling all figurative expressions as *isti'ārah*. The verse works through a rhetorical economy in which the container stands for those contained within it. This type of *majāz* also illustrates how Qur'anic discourse may employ ordinary Arabic idiom with interpretive precision: the reader understands the shift not because the literal meaning is impossible in a crude sense, but because the communicative context supplies the *qarinah* that directs the expression toward its intended referent.¹⁶

The category of *majāz 'aqlī* is also necessary for interpreting expressions in which the rhetorical shift occurs through attribution rather than lexical

¹⁴ Warda Mardiana Tambunan, Tiara Hidayah B, and Miftahur Rahmah, “Recontextualizing Āyāt al-Aḥkām: Maqāṣid-Based Legal Hermeneutics in Contemporary Qur'anic Exegesis,” *Journal of Qur'anic Legal Studies and Exegesis* 1, no. 1 (2026): 21–39, <https://journal.bahsisfikir.or.id/index.php/JQLSE/article/view/7>.

¹⁵ Hussein Abdul-Raof, *Arabic Rhetoric: A Pragmatic Analysis* (Routledge, 2006), [https://www.routledge.com/search?kw=Arabic Rhetoric A Pragmatic Analysis Abdul-Raof: Harb, Arabic Poetics: Aesthetic Experience in Classical Arabic Literature](https://www.routledge.com/search?kw=Arabic+Rhetoric+A+Pragmatic+Analysis+Abdul-Raof+Harb).

¹⁶ Abdul-Raof, *Arabic Rhetoric: A Pragmatic Analysis*; Abdel Haleem, “Qur'an and Hadith.”

substitution. Q. 18:77 describes a wall as *yurīdu an yanqadḍa*, “wanting to collapse.” Taken literally, the wall does not possess intention or volition. The rhetorical effect lies in attributing an act associated with animate agency to an inanimate object to intensify the immediacy of the scene. The wall is represented as if collapse were already pressing toward realization. This form of attributional transfer differs from *majāz lughawī* because the issue is not only the meaning of one word, but the relation between predicate and subject. It demonstrates that Qur'anic *majāz* may operate syntactically and propositionally, not merely lexically. The example also shows why grammatical and contextual analysis is essential: without attention to agency, attribution, and sentence structure, the rhetorical force of the verse may be flattened into a simple paraphrase.¹⁷

Another illustrative case is Q. 2:19, where those terrified by thunder are described as placing their “fingers” in their ears: *yaj'alūna aṣābi'ahum fī ādhānihim*. Physically, one places fingertips, not whole fingers, into the ears. The expression may be read as a part-whole rhetorical usage that intensifies panic and exaggerates the urgency of self-protection. It is not a metaphor of resemblance, but a figurative compression grounded in bodily action. The verse therefore demonstrates that *majāz* may function through semantic narrowing or expansion within an embodied scene. This supports the broader claim that Qur'anic figurative language often produces meaning through precise rhetorical shifts rather than through ornament alone.¹⁸

These examples show that the classification of Qur'anic *majāz* requires a layered procedure: identifying the literal sense, locating the contextual indicator, determining the semantic relation, and explaining the interpretive effect. These findings challenge overly general approaches that treat *majāz* as equivalent to metaphor and also corrects rigid literalism that overlooks rhetorical indication. Theoretically, the analysis demonstrates that classical *balāghah* remains indispensable for distinguishing types of figurative transfer, while contemporary semantic theory helps clarify how those transfers organize meaning in discourse. Methodologically, the study contributes a more disciplined model for Qur'anic interpretation: *majāz* should be read neither as free symbolic play nor as accidental stylistic embellishment, but as a structured rhetorical process through which the Qur'an communicates theological, moral, and existential meaning.

Semantic Functions of *Majāz*: Constructing Guidance, Moral Responsibility, and Theological Meaning

The principal finding of this subsection is that Qur'anic *majāz* functions as a semantic mechanism through which abstract religious concepts are made intelligible, affective, and interpretively structured. Rather than operating as a decorative departure from literal meaning, *majāz* organizes central Qur'anic ideas into concrete fields of experience. Guidance, misguidance, faith, disbelief, moral responsibility, and divine-human relation are repeatedly expressed through images of movement, illumination, disease, closure, opening, and accountability. This indicates that figurative language in the Qur'an does not merely embellish theological discourse; it provides the conceptual form through which theological meaning is communicated and received.¹⁹

¹⁷ Dukes, “The Qur'anic Arabic Corpus: Annotated Linguistic Resource for the Holy Qur'an”; Gleave, *Islam and Literalism: Literal Meaning and Interpretation in Islamic Legal Theory*.

¹⁸ Semino, *Metaphor in Discourse*; Steen et al., *A Method for Linguistic Metaphor Identification: From MIP to MIPVU*.

¹⁹ Semino, *Metaphor in Discourse*.

The semantic function of *majāz* is especially visible in Qur'anic expressions of guidance and misguidance. In Q. 2:257, God is described as bringing believers “out of darkneses into light” (*yukhrijuhum mina al-ẓulumāti ilā al-nūr*), whereas false protectors bring disbelievers “out of light into darkneses.” The expression does not simply contrast two physical conditions. Darkness becomes a figurative field for confusion, moral disorientation, and spiritual estrangement, while light signifies guidance, clarity, truth, and divine direction. The plural form *ẓulumāt* and the singular form *nūr* are semantically significant: misguidance is represented as fragmented and multiple, whereas guidance is presented as unified and directive. This pattern shows that *majāz* shapes Qur'anic epistemology by translating the problem of belief into a field of perception. It confirms the broader claim in metaphor and discourse studies that figurative language can organize reasoning, not merely decorate expression.²⁰

A related semantic function appears in Q. 24:35, where the phrase *Allāhu nūru al-samāwāti wa-l-arḍ* presents “light” as a dense theological signifier. The verse's extended imagery niche, lamp, glass, shining star, blessed tree, and “light upon light” does not provide a literal physical description of God. Instead, it builds a figurative field in which light communicates manifestation, guidance, ontological dependence, and divine disclosure. The verse shows that *majāz* can generate layered theological meaning without collapsing into unrestricted allegory. Its figurative structure remains controlled by the semantic coherence of the verse and by the Qur'an's wider use of light as a sign of guidance and divine presence. This supports Qur'anic studies scholarship that emphasizes the importance of reading Qur'anic imagery within its textual and rhetorical networks rather than as isolated poetic fragments.²¹

Majāz also constructs moral responsibility by relocating ethical failure from external action to inner disposition. Q. 2:10 states that “in their hearts is a disease” (*fī qulūbihim maraḍun*), while Q. 47:24 asks whether there are “locks upon their hearts” (*alā qulūbin aqfāluhā*). These expressions cannot be read as medical or anatomical descriptions. The heart functions as the center of understanding, receptivity, intention, and moral orientation, whereas disease and locks signify corruption, obstruction, and resistance to truth. The semantic force of these expressions lies in their ability to make moral failure appear as an inward condition that grows, hardens, and prevents recognition. This does not remove human responsibility; rather, it intensifies it by showing that repeated rejection reshapes the subject's capacity to perceive guidance. Lexical studies of Qur'anic usage confirm that *qalb* frequently carries cognitive and ethical meanings beyond emotional feeling alone.

The same logic is visible in Q. 39:22, where the one whose breast God has opened to Islam is contrasted with those whose hearts are hardened against remembrance. The expression *sharāḥa Allāhu ẓadrahu li-l-islām* gives guidance a spatial and embodied form: openness, expansion, and receptivity.²² Its opposite, hardness of heart, represents moral insensitivity and interpretive closure. Here *majāz* does not merely communicate that one person accepts faith and another rejects it; it explains acceptance and rejection through embodied semantic contrasts. Guidance becomes expansion, while rejection becomes hardness. This

²⁰ Kövecses, *Extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory*.

²¹ Neuwirth, *The Qur'an and Late Antiquity: A Shared Heritage*.

²² Al Fiqri Ardiansyah and Marhamah Annazah Tambunan, “From Normative Citation to Critical Analysis: Evaluating Methodological Problems in Contemporary Indonesian Qur'anic Scholarship,” *Dialogues in Qur'anic and Hadith Studies* 1, no. 1 (2026): 1–26, <https://journal.bahsisfikir.or.id/index.php/DQHS/article/view/12>.

finding refines purely literal approaches to Qur'anic interpretation because the verse's meaning depends on recognizing the figurative relationship between bodily experience and theological transformation.²³

These examples demonstrate that *majāz* performs a central semantic function in Qur'anic discourse: it links cognition, moral agency, and theological meaning through disciplined figurative structures. Compared with approaches that treat *majāz* as rhetorical ornament, this analysis shows that figurative expression is part of the Qur'an's conceptual architecture. Compared with broad cognitive metaphor theory, it adds that Qur'anic *majāz* is not value-neutral mapping; it is governed by Arabic rhetorical convention, textual context, and theological purpose. The academic contribution of this finding lies in showing that *majāz* should be treated as a category of interpretation, not merely a stylistic phenomenon. It allows the interpreter to explain how the Qur'an transforms concrete experience into a medium for understanding guidance, responsibility, and the human condition before God.

***Majāz* and the Literal–Figurative Debate in Qur'anic Interpretation**

The central finding of this subsection is that *majāz* functions as a hermeneutical control in Qur'anic interpretation by mediating between strict literalism and unrestricted figurative reading.²⁴ The literal–figurative debate is not a peripheral linguistic issue, because the way an interpreter identifies *majāz* directly affects theological meaning, legal reasoning, ethical instruction, and the limits of *ta'wīl*. In the Qur'anic context, figurative language does not cancel the authority of the text; rather, it requires the interpreter to recognize when the apparent literal sense is redirected by context, rhetorical convention, semantic relation, or theological coherence. This finding supports studies of Islamic hermeneutics that show how debates over literal meaning were central to legal theory, theology, and scriptural interpretation, especially when scholars attempted to distinguish valid interpretation from arbitrary reinterpretation.

One of the most sensitive areas of this debate concerns Qur'anic expressions related to divine attributes. Verses such as Q. 48:10, which states that “the hand of God is over their hands” (*yadu Allāhi fawqa aydīhim*), cannot be treated as ordinary figurative language without methodological caution. A rigid literal reading risks attributing corporeality to God, while an uncontrolled figurative reading may detach the verse from its immediate context of allegiance, covenant, and divine authority. The expression therefore demands disciplined interpretation. From the perspective of *majāz*, the term “hand” may function through a semantic relation associated with power, authority, support, or confirmation; however, the validity of such a reading depends on contextual indicators and the broader theological grammar of Qur'anic discourse. This demonstrates that *majāz* is not a license for interpretive freedom, but a rule-governed mechanism for preserving meaning where literal reading becomes theologically or rhetorically inadequate.²⁵

The same issue appears in verses where physical imagery is used to describe divine relation, judgment, or nearness. Q. 2:115 states that “wherever you turn,

²³ Gleave, *Islam and Literalism: Literal Meaning and Interpretation in Islamic Legal Theory*; Vishanoff, *The Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics: How Sunni Legal Theorists Imagined a Revealed Law*.

²⁴ Riski Suriani Lubis, Jesimawati Jesimawati, and Ummatul Hasanah, “Reframing Qur'anic Hermeneutics Beyond the Text–Context Binary: A Dialogical Model for Contemporary Interpretation,” *Dialogues in Qur'anic and Hadith Studies* 1, no. 1 (2026): 27–49, <https://journal.bahsisfkr.or.id/index.php/DQHS/article/view/13>.

²⁵ Abdul-Raof, *Arabic Rhetoric: A Pragmatic Analysis*.

there is the face of God” (*fa-aynamā tuwallū fa-thamma wajhu Allāh*). The verse is not primarily concerned with spatial location in a physical sense; it communicates divine presence, orientation, and the impossibility of confining God to a single spatial direction. The figurative force of *wajh* is therefore hermeneutically significant because it shifts the reader from corporeal imagination toward theological meaning. This does not mean that the literal wording is ignored. Rather, the wording is read through its rhetorical and semantic function within the verse. The example shows that Qur'anic *majāz* helps prevent a false opposition between textual fidelity and interpretive depth: a figurative reading may be more faithful to the communicative intention of the text when supported by context and linguistic convention.²⁶

Majāz also plays a decisive role in legal and ethical interpretation. In Q. 5:6, the command concerning ritual purification includes the expression *aw lāmastumu al-nisā'*, which has generated interpretive discussion because the verb may be read literally as physical touch or understood more broadly through contextual and idiomatic usage. This example shows that the literal–figurative debate is not limited to theology; it can influence legal reasoning and ritual practice. The interpretive task is therefore to determine whether a term remains within its primary lexical range or whether context permits a transferred meaning. Such cases confirm that *majāz* functions as a methodological category in *uṣūl al-fiqh*, where linguistic analysis, contextual evidence, and juristic reasoning interact in the production of meaning.

These examples show that *majāz* is best understood as an interpretive discipline rather than a decorative category. It protects the interpreter from two opposite errors: literalism that refuses to recognize rhetorical indicators, and figurative that converts every difficult expression into symbolic abstraction. This finding refines previous scholarship by demonstrating that the significance of *majāz* lies not only in classification, but also in its regulatory role within Qur'anic hermeneutics. Classical Arabic rhetoric provides the categories needed to identify semantic transfer, while modern Qur'anic studies and hermeneutical theory clarify why the distinction between literal and figurative meaning remains central to interpretation. The theoretical implication is that *majāz* should be treated as a structured mode of meaning-making. Methodologically, it enables interpreters to evaluate figurative readings through textual evidence, semantic relation, and contextual coherence. Academically, this strengthens the study of Qur'anic language by showing that figurative interpretation is not opposed to textual authority; when properly controlled, it is one of how the authority and depth of Qur'anic discourse are preserved.

Hermeneutical Implications of Qur'anic *Majāz* for Contemporary Islamic Studies

The central finding of this subsection is that Qur'anic *majāz* has significant hermeneutical implications because it provides a disciplined way to understand how figurative language expands meaning without dissolving textual authority. In contemporary Islamic Studies, the question is not merely whether the Qur'an contains figurative expressions, but how such expressions should be identified, classified, and interpreted in relation to theology, ethics, law, and spiritual formation. *Majāz*, when read through the combined lenses of *balāghah*, Qur'anic semantics, and hermeneutics, becomes more than a rhetorical category. It functions as an interpretive instrument that allows the reader to move beyond

²⁶ Sinai, *The Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction*.

superficial literalism while remaining accountable to the structure of the Arabic text, its semantic relations, and its communicative purpose.

One implication of this finding is that *majāz* helps interpreters avoid the false opposition between literal fidelity and interpretive depth. Qur'anic expressions often employ concrete imagery to communicate theological and ethical meanings that cannot be adequately captured by a strictly literal reading. For example, Q. 14:24–26 presents the “good word” as a good tree with firm roots and branches reaching the sky, while the “bad word” is compared to an uprooted tree without stability. The passage does not merely beautify the concept of faith and falsehood; it gives them an interpretive structure. Truth is presented as rooted, elevated, fruitful, and enduring, whereas falsehood appears unstable, detached, and incapable of sustaining life. Such imagery shows that *majāz* can function as a hermeneutical bridge between language and moral ontology. It enables the interpreter to read faith not only as doctrinal assent but as an existential condition marked by depth, growth, and consequence.²⁷

Majāz also has implications for reading Qur'anic discourse on divine-human relations. In Q. 2:257, the movement from darkneses into light presents guidance as a transformative passage from confusion to clarity, while the reverse movement signifies the loss of moral and spiritual orientation. This figurative structure gives theological meaning to human response: guidance is not simply the reception of information, but a reorientation of perception and existence. Likewise, Q. 39:22 describes the person whose breast God has opened to Islam, giving guidance an embodied form of expansion, receptivity, and inward ease. These examples demonstrate that Qur'anic *majāz* does not operate as a secondary ornament added to doctrine; it shapes how doctrine is imagined, internalized, and interpreted. This supports modern Qur'anic studies that emphasize the importance of textual coherence, rhetorical patterning, and recurring imagery in the production of Qur'anic meaning.²⁸

The hermeneutical value of *majāz* is also visible in its ability to regulate interpretation. On one side, it prevents rigid literalism from flattening expressions whose meanings are clearly directed by contextual and rhetorical indicators. On the other side, it prevents uncontrolled allegorization by requiring every figurative reading to be justified through linguistic relation, *qarinah*, textual coherence, and accepted rhetorical convention. This is especially important in Islamic theological and legal interpretation, where the status of literal and figurative meaning has historically shaped debates about divine attributes, moral obligation, and the boundaries of *ta'wīl*. In this respect, *majāz* does not weaken the authority of revelation; rather, it provides a method for preserving that authority through careful attention to how the text itself signals meaning.

These findings refine earlier approaches in two ways. First, they challenge literary readings that treat *majāz* primarily as aesthetic embellishment. The analysis shows that *majāz* contributes directly to theological reasoning and ethical interpretation. Second, they qualify broad semantic or cognitive approaches that discuss figurative language without sufficient attention to Arabic rhetorical taxonomy. Qur'anic *majāz* is not merely a universal feature of human cognition; it is a textually governed phenomenon shaped by Arabic expression, revelatory discourse, and exegetical discipline. The theoretical implication is that *majāz*

²⁷ Mehdi Azaiez et al., eds., “The Qur'an Seminar Commentary: A Collaborative Study of 50 Qur'anic Passages” (De Gruyter, 2016); Badawi and Abdel Haleem, *Arabic-English Dictionary of Qur'anic Usage*.

²⁸ Neuwirth, *The Qur'an and Late Antiquity: A Shared Heritage*; Reynolds, *The Qur'an and the Bible: Text and Commentary*; Shah and Haleem, *The Oxford Handbook of Qur'anic Studies*.

should be treated as a category of Qur'anic hermeneutics, not only as a device of style. Methodologically, this study shows that a stronger model of interpretation emerges when classification, semantic function, and hermeneutical implication are analyzed together. Such an approach contributes to contemporary Islamic Studies by offering a more systematic way to examine figurative Qur'anic language while preserving both rhetorical precision and theological seriousness.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that *al-majāz* in the Qur'an is not a marginal stylistic feature, but a structured rhetorical-semantic mechanism that plays a decisive role in Qur'anic interpretation. In response to the first research objective, the analysis shows that Qur'anic *majāz* cannot be reduced to a single category of metaphor. It appears through several forms of figurative transfer, including *majāz lughawī*, *majāz 'aqlī*, *majāz mursal*, attributional transfer, part-whole relation, locality, causality, and contextual displacement. These classifications show that the distinction between *ḥaqīqah* and *majāz* is not merely theoretical, but functions as an interpretive tool for identifying how meaning moves from primary lexical usage to contextually authorized figurative meaning.

In relation to the second objective, the study finds that *majāz* performs significant semantic functions in constructing Qur'anic concepts such as guidance, misguidance, faith, disbelief, moral responsibility, divine-human relation, and eschatological consequence. Figurative expressions involving darkness and light, disease and the heart, opening and hardness, trade and loss, rootedness and instability, do not merely embellish the text. They organize theological and ethical meanings into concrete semantic fields that make abstract realities more intelligible, memorable, and morally compelling. Thus, *majāz* functions as a disciplined means through which Qur'anic discourse communicates complex religious meanings.

Regarding the third objective, the study establishes that *majāz* has important implications for Qur'anic hermeneutics. It mediates between rigid literalism and uncontrolled figurative interpretation by requiring attention to linguistic relation, contextual indication, rhetorical convention, and textual coherence. This makes *majāz* a necessary category for interpreting verses related to divine attributes, legal-ethical meaning, moral agency, and spiritual transformation. Properly understood, *majāz* does not weaken the authority of revelation; rather, it helps preserve that authority by clarifying how the Qur'anic text itself signals nonliteral meaning.

The theoretical contribution of this article lies in its integration of classical *balāghah*, Qur'anic semantics, and contemporary hermeneutical theory. Classical Arabic rhetoric provides precise categories for classifying figurative transfer, semantic analysis explains how meaning is produced within Qur'anic discourse, and hermeneutical reflection clarifies the interpretive consequences of figurative language. This integrated approach offers a systematic model for studying *majāz* through the relation between classification, semantic function, and interpretive implication.

Academically, the study contributes to Qur'anic studies, Ushuluddin, Arabic rhetoric, and Islamic hermeneutics by showing that *majāz* should be treated as an interpretive category, not merely a literary ornament. Its broader implication is that Qur'anic interpretation requires greater sensitivity to the way language, rhetoric, and theology interact in the production of meaning. Future research may expand this model by examining a larger corpus of Qur'anic figurative expressions, comparing different types of *majāz* across thematic clusters, or investigating how

classical *tafsīr* traditions employ *majāz* in theological, legal, and ethical interpretation.

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