

A Pragma – Syntactic Study of Reference Shift (Iltifāt) in the Glorious Qur’an with Reference to English

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Abstract

This study investigates the phenomenon of reference shift (iltifāt) in selected verses of the Glorious Qur’an from a pragma-syntactic perspective, with particular emphasis on its rendering in English translations. Reference shift refers to changes in grammatical person, number, tense, or addressee within the same discourse, and constitutes a salient rhetorical feature of Qur’anic style that serves important communicative and pragmatic functions. The study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach and analyzes purposively selected Qur’anic verses that exhibit clear and recurrent instances of reference shift.

An integrated analytical framework is employed, combining insights from syntactic theory, pragmatic analysis, and cohesion theory, with particular reference to Speech Act Theory and the grammatical model proposed by Quirk et al. (1985). The analysis focuses on identifying the main types of reference shift, explaining their syntactic realization, and interpreting their pragmatic and rhetorical effects in Qur’anic discourse, such as emphasis, cohesion, audience engagement, and thematic progression.

Four widely recognized English translations of the Qur’an—those of Abdullah Yusuf Ali, Pickthall, Hilali and Khan, and Mustafa Khattab—are examined in order to evaluate how reference shifts are represented in the target language. Selected classical Qur’anic exegeses are also consulted to support the interpretation of the pragmatic functions underlying these shifts. The study further examines the strategies adopted by translators to deal with reference shift and assesses the extent to which the original communicative and rhetorical functions are preserved in English.

The findings reveal that reference shift is a systematic and context-sensitive phenomenon rather than a stylistic irregularity. Shifts in person emerge as the most pragmatically significant type, followed by shifts in number and tense. The study concludes that reference shift constitutes a central pragma-syntactic feature of Qur’anic

discourse and poses a considerable challenge for translators, highlighting the need to move beyond formal grammatical equivalence toward a function-oriented approach in Qur'anic translation.

Key words: (Reference shift, English translations, Rhetorical features).

دراسة تداولية - نحوية لتحول المرجع في القرآن الكريم مع الإشارة الى اللغة الإنكليزية

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الملخص

تتناول هذه الدراسة ظاهرة تغيير المرجع (الالتفات) في آيات مختارة من القرآن الكريم من منظور نحوي - تداولي، مع التركيز بشكل خاص على ترجمتها إلى اللغة الإنجليزية. يشير تغيير المرجع إلى التغييرات في الشخص أو العدد أو الزمن أو المخاطب ضمن الخطاب نفسه، ويُعدّ سمة بلاغية بارزة في أسلوب القرآن الكريم، إذ يؤدي وظائف تواصلية وتداولية هامة. تتبنى الدراسة منهجًا وصفيًا نوعيًا، وتحلل آيات قرآنية مختارة بعناية تُظهر أمثلة واضحة ومتكررة لتغيير المرجع.

يُستخدم إطار تحليلي متكامل، يجمع بين رؤى من النظرية النحوية، والتحليل التداولي، ونظرية التماسك، مع الإشارة بشكل خاص إلى نظرية أفعال الكلام والنموذج النحوي الذي اقترحه كويرك وآخرون (١٩٨٥). يركز التحليل على تحديد الأنواع الرئيسية لتغيير المرجع، وشرح تجلياتها النحوية، وتفسير آثارها البراغمية والبلاغية في الخطاب القرآني، كالتأكيد والترابط وجذب انتباه الجمهور والتطور الموضوعي.

تُدرس أربع ترجمات إنجليزية للقرآن الكريم، تحظى بشهرة واسعة، وهي ترجمات عبد الله يوسف علي، وبيكنال، وهاللي وخان، ومصطفى خطاب، لتقييم كيفية تمثيل تغييرات المرجع في اللغة الهدف. كما يُستعان بمختارات من التفسيرات القرآنية الكلاسيكية لدعم تفسير الوظائف البراغمية الكامنة وراء هذه التغييرات. وتتناول الدراسة كذلك الاستراتيجيات التي اعتمدها المترجمون للتعامل مع تغيير المرجع، وتقيّم مدى الحفاظ على الوظائف التواصلية والبلاغية الأصلية في اللغة الإنجليزية.

وتُظهر النتائج أن تغيير المرجع ظاهرة منهجية وحساسة للسياق، وليست مجرد شذوذ أسلوبية. ويبرز تغيير الشخص كأكثر أنواع تغيير المرجع أهمية من الناحية البراغمية، يليه تغيير العدد والزمن. تخلص الدراسة إلى أن

تحول المرجع يشكل سمة نحوية-تداولية مركزية في الخطاب القرآني، ويطرح تحديًا كبيرًا أمام المترجمين، مما يُبرز الحاجة إلى تجاوز التكافؤ النحوي الشكلي نحو منهج وظيفي في ترجمة القرآن. الكلمات المفتاحية: (تحول المرجع، الترجمات الإنجليزية، السمات البلاغية).

1.Introduction

The Qur'an is widely recognized not only as a religious scripture but also as a linguistic and rhetorical masterpiece whose stylistic features have attracted the attention of both Muslim and Western scholars. Among these features, one of the most distinctive and frequently discussed is *iltifāt*, or reference shift, which refers to sudden changes in person (first, second, third), number (singular, plural), and sometimes tense within a single passage. These shifts are not grammatical mistakes but deliberate rhetorical devices that enhance the emotional impact, clarify the addressee, and reinforce the divine authority of the text. The present study aims to conduct a pragmatic–syntactic analysis of *iltifāt* in selected Qur'anic verses and to examine how four prominent English translators Abdullah Yusuf Ali, Muhammad Muhsin Hilālī and Muhammad Tāhir al-Khān, Marmaduke Pickthall, and Mustafa Khattab—render these shifts into English.

The significance of this study lies in its attempt to bridge the gap between classical Arabic rhetoric (*balāgha*) and modern translation studies. While many scholars have analyzed *iltifāt* from a purely rhetorical or grammatical perspective, relatively few have systematically explored how such shifts are translated into English and how different translation strategies affect the pragmatic force of the original text. By focusing on person, number, and tense shifts, this research seeks to contribute to the fields of Qur'anic stylistics, discourse analysis, and Bible–Qur'an translation comparison. The study is structured as follows: after a brief theoretical background on *iltifāt*, it presents a syntactic and pragmatic analysis of selected examples, followed by a discussion of tense shifts and their translation, a comparative analysis of the four translators' strategies, and finally a conclusion that summarizes the findings and suggests directions for future research.

2. Theoretical Background: Iltifāt in Qur’anic Rhetoric

2.1 Definition and Types of Iltifāt

Iltifāt is a term borrowed from classical Arabic rhetoric that denotes a shift in grammatical reference within a single discourse. In the Qur’an, this typically involves shifts in person (from first to second or third person, or vice versa), number (from singular to plural or plural to singular), and occasionally tense (from past to present or future). These shifts are not random but serve specific rhetorical purposes, such as intensifying emotion, highlighting divine authority, or reorienting the audience’s attention. Scholars have identified several types of iltifāt in the Qur’an, including shifts from third person to first person (e.g., God speaking about Himself in the third person and then switching to “We”), from first person to third person, and from third person to second person (direct address to the audience).

2.2 Pragmatic Functions of Iltifāt

From a pragmatic perspective, iltifāt serves several functions. First, it intensifies divine majesty by using the plural “We” (majestic plural) to refer to God, thereby emphasizing His omnipotence and sovereignty. Second, it creates immediacy and personal engagement when the text shifts from third-person description to second-person address, making the audience feel directly addressed and accountable. Third, it objectifies listeners when shifting from second to third person, allowing them to see themselves from God’s perspective and reflect on their actions.

These functions are not mutually exclusive and often overlap, contributing to the overall rhetorical richness of the Qur’an.

3. Syntactic and Pragmatic Analysis of Selected Examples

Text 1: Person Shift (2nd→3rd) in Quran (108:1–2)

(إِنَّا أَعْطَيْنَاكَ الْكَوْثَرَ (١) فَصَلِّ لِرَبِّكَ وَأَنْحَرْ (٢)) سورة الكوثر ١ - ٢

1. Translations

To thee have We Granted the Fount (of Abundance). Therefore, to thy Lord Turn in Prayer and Sacrifice. [Yusuf Ali,1946/2025].

Verily, we have granted you (O Muhammad((ﷺ Al-kawthar (a river in paradise), Therefore, turn in Prayer to your Lord and sacrifice (to Him only)” [Hilali & Khan,1997].

Lo! We have given the Abundance; So pray unto thy Lord, and sacrifice. [pickthall,1930].

Indeed, we have granted you, O Prophet, abundant goodness. So pray and sacrifice to your Lord alone’. [Khattab,2015].

2. Explanation of the Reference Shift (Iltifat) in Quran 108:1-2

A clear and rhetorically significant example of reference shift (iltifat) is found in Surat al-Kawthar (108:1-2), where the grammatical person is changed from first-person plural divine reference to second-person singular address. This change is essential for defining the relationship between heavenly benefaction and human response, as well as the surah's pragmatic power. "Indeed, We have granted you al-Kawthar," according to verse

1. The verse uses the first-person plural reference ("We"), which is frequently recognized as the plural of majesty in Qur'anic discourse. This form emphasizes divine source, authority, and charity rather than numerical plurality, according to current linguistic analysis and classical rhetoric. The syntactic decision highlights the divine source of blessing and increases its importance. The addressee ("you") is the Prophet Muhammad, but the speaker remains prominently divine and authoritative. In verse 2, the discourse shifts: "So pray to your Lord and sacrifice".

Here, the syntax moves to a second-person singular imperative. The addressee becomes syntactically central, and the divine speaker recedes grammatically. Iltifat in person is this change from divine self-reference to direct command. The particle fa- ("so"), which creates a causal and practical connection between the divine act of giving and the human duty of devotion, strengthens the transition.

All things considered, Qur'an 108:1-2 serves as an example of how iltifat functions as a primary discourse method as opposed to a decorative stylistic element. By connecting divine benefaction to human obligation, the transition from first-person plural divine reference to second-person singular imperatives improves pragmatic meaning. This syntactic device strengthens the surah's devotional and persuasive power while using grammatical form to reinforce its theological content

Text 2: number Shift in Qur'an 23:99

قال تعالى (حتى إذا جاء احدهم الموت قال رب ارجعون) سورة المؤمنون (٩٩)

1. Translations

(In Falsehood will they be) Until, when death comes to one of them, he says: "O my Lord! Send me back (to life) — [Yusuf Ali,1946/2025].

"Until, when death comes to one of them (those who join partners with Allah), he says, My lord send me back" [Hilali & Khan, 1997].

Until, when death cometh unto one of them, he saith: My Lord! Send me back, [pickthall,1930].

When death approaches any of them, they cry, "My Lord! Let me go back. [Khatab,2015].

2. Explanation of the Reference Shift (Iltifat) in Qur'an 23:99

Here, the speaker uses the single form of address "Rabbi" (My Lord) before suddenly shifting to the plural imperative "irji'uni" (send me back [plural]). This is a blatant example of iltifat—that is, a change from singular to plural addressee in the same sentence. This verse's reference shift, which is used for pragmatic and rhetorical impact, is best understood as a change in the addressee number from singular to plural. It enhances the verse's communication impact, communicates emotional urgency, and reaffirms divine majesty. This instance of iltifat is an

example of the Qur'an's clever use of syntax to express meaning beyond propositional content, not a grammatical irregularity.

Text 3: Addressee Shift in Qur'an 65:1

قال تعالى (يا أيها النبي إذا طلقتم النساء)

سورة الطلاق (١)

1. Translations

O Prophet! When ye Do divorce women, Divorce them at their Prescribed periods, [Yusuf Ali ,1946/2025].

O Prophet ﷺ! When you divorce women, divorce them at their 'Iddah (prescribed period [Hilali & Khan,1997].

O Prophet! When ye (men) put away women, put them away for their (legal) period. [pickthall,1930].

O Prophet! 'Instruct the believers:' When you intend to' divorce women, then divorce them with concern for their waiting period, [Khattab,2015].

2. Explanation of the Reference Shift (Iltifat) in Qur'an 65:1 This type of Iltifat is from singular to plural address. A well-known and significant instance of iltifat (reference shift) can be found in this verse, where the addressee changes from singular to plural. The verse's first singular addressee is "O Prophet!"It immediately changes to a plural addressee when you (plural) divorce ladies. The second-person plural has taken the place of the second-person singular. This change has significant grammatical and rhetorical benefits, such as:

1. An honorific introduction. The Prophet's stature, authority, and function as the messenger of divine law are initially highlighted by calling him صلى الله عليه وسلم.

2. Transition from private to public law: Although the Prophet is named, the decision itself is not exclusive to him. It is meant for every Muslim. "O Prophet"

4. Tense Shift

i. From present to past

Text 4: present to past

(يقدم قومه يوم القيامة فأوردهم النار وبئس الورد المورود) سورة هود ٩٨

1. Translations

He *will go before* his people on the Day of Judgment, *and lead* them into the Fire [as cattle are led to water]: [Yusuf Ali ,1946/2025]

He *will go ahead* of his people on the Day of Resurrection, *and will lead* them into the Fire, [Al-Hilali& Khan,1997]

He *will go before* his people on the Day of Resurrection *and will lead* them to the Fire for watering-place. [Pickthall ,1930]

He will be before his people on the Day of Judgment and will lead them into the Fire. What an evil place to be led into! [Khattab,2015]

2. Explanation of the Tense Shift in Qur'an 11:98 Syntactically, the verse exhibits a shift in tense within an eschatological context, moving between present/future reference and past tense. Despite appearing in the present tense, the verb "يقدم" "he leads" refers to a future Event Pharaoh leading his people on the Day of Resurrection. Similar to English grammar, Arabic grammar allows the present tense to be employed with future reference, particularly in specific or vivid forecasts. Even if the verb "and he brought them" refers to the same future eschatological occurrence, it is formally in the past tense. This is an obvious example of tense shift, in which the discourse shifts from present-form prediction to past-form portrayal. ii. From past to present
Text 5: past to present`p0;

قال تعالى (ولقد آتينا موسى الكتاب وقفيناً من بعده بالرسول وآتينا عيسى ابن مريم البينات وايدناه بروح القدس افكلما جاءكم رسول بما لاتهوى أنفسكم استكبرتم ففرقاً كذبتم وفرقاً تقتلون) البقرة ٨٧

1. Translations

We gave Moses the Book and followed him up with a succession of Apostles; We gave Jesus, the son of Mary, clear (Signs) and strengthened him with the holy spirit. Is it that whenever there comes to you an Apostle with what ye yourselves desire not ye are puffed up with pride? Some ye called impostors and others ye slay! [Yusuf Ali ,1946/2025] And indeed,

we gave Musa (Moses) the Book and followed him up with a succession of Messengers. And We gave 'Isa (Jesus), the son of Maryam (Mary), clear signs and supported him with *Ruh-ul-Qudus* [Jibrail (Gabriel) عليه السلام]. Is it that whenever there came to you a Messenger with what you yourselves desired not, you grew arrogant? Some you disbelieved and some you killed. [Al-Hilali &Khan ,1997].

And verily We gave unto Moses the Scripture and We caused a train of messengers to follow after him, and We gave unto Jesus, son of Mary, clear proofs (of Allah's sovereignty), and We supported him with the holy Spirit is it ever so, that, when there cometh unto you a messenger (from Allah) with that which ye yourselves desire not, ye grow arrogant, and some ye disbelieve and some ye slay? [Pickthall,1930] .

Indeed, We gave Moses the Book and sent after him successive messengers. And We gave Jesus, son of Mary, clear proofs and supported him with the holy spirit Why is it that every time a messenger comes to you "Israelites" with something you do not like, you become arrogant, rejecting some and killing others? [Khattab,2015].

2.Explanation of reference shift in Quran 2: 87

“ And We certainly gave Moses the Book and followed him up with messengers. And We gave Jesus, the son of Mary, clear proofs and supported him with the Holy Spirit. Is it that whenever a messenger came to you with what your souls did not desire, you became arrogant, and a group you denied and another group you killed?” (2:87)

From a syntactic perspective, the verse shifts from the past tense to the present tense.

The verse's opening uses past-tense verbs to describe completed historical events related to divine revelation and prophetic succession, such as "We gave," "We followed," and "We gave." These past-tense constructions serve a narrative purpose by firmly placing the occurrences in historical context. The verse then shifts to present-tense verbs, such as "you kill." Syntactically, this is a significant departure from the expected continuance in the past tense. Such a shift is not accidental, but rather deliberate and

stylistically motivated, according to classic Arabic rhetoric. In terms of syntax, the present tense is employed here with a generic and habitual value, as described by Quirk et al., enabling it to convey recurring, distinctive, or timeless behavior even when referring to past actions. Pragmatically, the tense shift has a potent rhetorical purpose; the speech eliminates the temporal gap between the past and present by shifting from past narration to present tense accusation. Historical wrongdoing is transformed into current, ever-relevant activity in the present tense. Instead of hearing only about what their ancestors did, the audience is now directly presented with those acts as if they were happening right now. This intensifies the illocutionary force of censure and produces what pragmatics calls discourse immediacy. From a speech-act perspective, the verse transitions from a representative act (telling historical facts) to an expressive and directing act that enacts moral conflict, reprimand, and blame. Thus, the tense shift eliminates the audience's attempt to disassociate oneself from past mistakes and strengthens accountability.

4. Findings

Text	Quranic Expression	Meaning	Type of Referene Shift	Syntactic Shift	Pragmatic Function
1	inna a'ṭaynaka (إنا أعطيناك)	We indeed gave you	Person shift	from 1st person plural → 2nd singular	Divine-Prophetic Relation
	fa-ṣalli li rabbika (فصل لربك)	so pray (you singular to your Lord)	Person shift	from 1st person plural → 2nd singular	Direct obligation of worship
2	(رب) Rabbi	My Lord	Number shift	singular addressee	reaffirms divine majesty
	(ارجعون) irji'un	send me back (you plural).	Number shift	from singular addressee → plural Addressee	sign of reverence and exaltation

3	ya ayyuha al nabi (يا أيها النبي)	O Prophet	Addressee shift	vocative 2nd person singular	Authoritative Initiation
	tallaqtum (طلقتم)	you (pl.) divorce	Addressee shift	from 2nd singular → 2nd plural	Legal generalization
4	yaqdumu (يقدم)	he leads / goes before	Tense shift	Present /future	Vivid future portrayal
	fa awradahum (فأوردهم)	then he led them into	Tense shift	Present/futu re → past	potent moral warning
5	Atayna (أتينا)	We gave Past tense (perfect verb)	tense shift	Past tense perfect verb	Historical grounding
	qaffayna (قفينا)	We sent in in succession	Tense shift	Past tense perfect verb	Continuity of messengers
	Atayn (أتينا)	We gave	Tense shift	Past tense perfect verb	Repetitio
	taqtuluna (تقتلون)	you kill	Tense shift	Past to Present tense	Habitual accusation

5. Discussion of Findings

The current study aims to explore and examine the phenomenon of reference shift (Iltifāt) in the Glorious Qur'an from a pragma-syntactic perspective, with specific regard to how this phenomenon is addressed in some English translations of the text. The discussion of the findings will lead to some significant insights concerning the relationship between syntax and pragmatics.

Some of the most significant findings of this research are related to how this phenomenon acts as an important pragmatic device in Qur'anic discourse. It can be noted that this phenomenon is closely related to contextual and pragmatic factors rather than grammatical factors. This can be seen as an indication of how dynamic and pragmatic Qur'anic syntax is. From a pragmatic viewpoint, the reference shift has considerable effects

on the relationship between the speaker and the addressee. To exemplify, the shifts from third-person reference to first-person plural tend to increase the sense of divine authority, power, and immediacy, while the shifts from first-person singular/plural to third-person singular/plural tend to create distance, warning, objectivity, etc. All these shifts function as guidance for the reader's interpretation and emotional response, thereby supporting the claim that the meaning in the Qur'an is not only contained in the word choices, but also in the structural choices.

Moreover, the research findings also support the claim that the realization of the syntactic reference shift cannot be detached from the pragmatic effects. Firstly, the research findings suggest that the grammatical changes in person/number tend to align systematically with the changes in discourse function. This supports the claim that the proposed pragma-syntactic analysis is particularly appropriate for the analysis of the language of the Qur'an, as it integrates form and function within one analytical framework.

In terms of practical takeaways, what this means is that there is a built-in tension between getting linguistic accuracy right and getting pragmatic meaning right. For instance, in terms of English translations of the Qur'an, there is a tendency for the reference shift to be lost as a result of maintaining consistent pronouns throughout a verse. This makes the translation easier for readers to understand, but in so doing, they lose the reference shift. What this means is that while they are able to communicate the message of the verse in their translation, they are not able to communicate the same level of rhetorical punch as is present in the Arabic version.

In terms of comparing translators' approaches, what this means is that there are different philosophies at work in different translators' approaches. For instance, translators that are more literal in their approach tend to maintain the formal features of reference shift in their translation. This makes their translation more difficult for readers not familiar with Islamic discourse to understand. By contrast, translators that are more meaning-oriented in their approach tend to make the intended message of the verse clearer but lose

some of the stylistic and pragmatic punch of the reference shift. What this means is that there is no single approach that is able to fully capture the complex nature of reference shift.

What this study also shows is that reference shift is not disruptive of Qur'anic discourse but rather helps to create a sense of coherence within that discourse. For instance, what this means is that while there is a certain level of abruptness in terms of the reference shift in certain verses of the Qur'an, this is not disruptive of the discourse as a whole. Rather, this helps to create a sense of coherence within that discourse as a whole. What this means is that there is a certain level of communicative intent that is being signaled by this shift in reference. What this means is that *Iltifāt* is not a grammatical oddity but rather a meaningful discourse strategy. What this means is that reference shift is a very important part of Qur'anic rhetoric and has very important implications for linguistic analysis. What this means is that there is a need for pragmatic awareness in terms of Qur'anic analysis and translation. Without such awareness, the deeper communicative purposes encoded in syntactic structures risk being overlooked or misunderstood.

6. Conclusion

This research examines the phenomenon of reference shift (*Iltifāt*) in the Glorious Qur'an from a pragma-syntactic perspective, particularly with regard to certain English translations of the Qur'an. The results highlight a number of linguistic, pragmatic, and translation-related issues associated with this phenomenon.

This study illustrates three important aspects regarding reference shift in Qur'anic discourse. Firstly, reference shift is not haphazard or arbitrary; it is a deliberate and intentional process, a useful tool that influences pragmatics, determining where the reader or listener's attention should be, heightening emotions, and enhancing the impact of the message. Secondly, reference shift, such as a change from first to third person, or from singular to plural, or from addresser to addressee, reworks the interplay between speaker, audience, and message. Such a shift may involve nuances like

glorification, warning, intimacy, blame, reassurance, or authority, based on contextual considerations. Thirdly, as a result of the pragma-syntactic analysis, it is clear that syntax and pragmatic meaning go hand in hand in Qur'anic discourse. A change in reference through grammar results in a corresponding change in pragmatics, thus it is necessary to consider both syntax and pragmatics to interpret meaning correctly . It is also seen from the study that the English translations of the Qur'an do not necessarily convey the full pragmatic force of reference shift. Indeed, the translators often seek to smooth out the pronominal reference in order to facilitate better understanding and readability, but in doing so, they may lose the full force and style of the original text, the *Iltifāt* included.

As a whole, the comparative analysis conducted in the study reveals the differences between the translators in their approach to the use of the *Iltifāt*. While some translators stick to the literal approach and maintain the grammatical shift, others seek a more explanatory approach, which, again, loses the full force and style of the *Iltifāt* itself. The study, therefore, concludes that the use of the *Iltifāt* is a unique hallmark of the Qur'anic discourse and a dimension of the linguistic inimitability of the Qur'an. To understand this phenomenon, one has to take a holistic approach, which encompasses various aspects of the Qur'anic text, its syntax, and its pragmatics. The subject is not only of interest to the linguistic scholarship of the Qur'an; it is also significant from the point of view of the improvement of the quality of the English translation.

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