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Linguistic Competencies Required of Imams for Qur'ānic Recitation and Pedagogy: Theoretical Foundations and Procedural Dimensions

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Abstract

Effective Qur'ānic recitation and instruction require imams to possess an integrated set of linguistic competencies extending beyond the accurate articulation of individual sounds. This study identifies and systematizes the principal competencies required for mastering and teaching the canonical recitation of Warsh 'an Nāfi' through the transmission path of al-Azraq, the recitational tradition predominantly authorized and practised in Algeria. Employing a descriptive and analytical approach, the study examines the phonetic and phonological competencies underlying the general principles (*uṣūl*) of Warsh's recitation and considers their relationship with morphological, syntactic, lexical, semantic, and rhetorical knowledge. It further investigates how these competencies support correct performance, interpretation, grammatical and semantic justification (*tawjīh*), and effective Qur'ānic pedagogy. The analysis indicates that technically accurate recitation depends on an internalized linguistic faculty (*malakah*) through which phonological rules, grammatical structures, semantic relations, and rhetorical features operate as an interconnected system. Phonetic competence enables the imam to apply such features as assimilation, vowel transfer, lengthening, and hamzah treatment accurately, while morphological and syntactic competence facilitates the interpretation and justification of variant readings. Lexical, semantic, and rhetorical

competencies additionally strengthen contextual understanding and communicative engagement with the Qur'ānic text. The study concludes that the imam's linguistic formation should be approached as an integrated pedagogical framework combining transmitted recitational knowledge with systematic language training. Such integration enhances recitational precision, interpretive competence, instructional effectiveness, and sensitivity to the aesthetic and spiritual dimensions of Qur'ānic discourse.

Keywords: Qur'ānic recitation; linguistic competence; Warsh 'an Nāfi'; Qur'ānic pedagogy; *tawjīh*; imam training

1. Introduction

Since the dawn of Islam, Muslim societies have maintained an intrinsic bond with the mosque. The mosque serves as a core religious institution wherein communal prayers are established and youth are instructed in the Holy Quran, while simultaneously functioning as a vital social institution that guides individuals religiously, intellectually, and doctrinally, thereby shielding society from destructive ideologies and pernicious social ailments.

The primary custodian of this pivotal institution is the Imam; he represents the institutional voice of the mosque and acts as the essential channel through which its mission is materialized. Given that language constitutes the vessel in which human thought crystallizes—defined classically as 'sounds through which every community expresses its purposes'—it is incumbent upon the Imam to attain a distinguished threshold of linguistic competencies: phonological, morphological, syntactic, rhetorical, lexical, and semantic. Such proficiency is indispensable for mastering the solemn office of recitation, both in vocal communal prayers (*salat jahriyyah*) and within the pedagogy of Quranic instruction.

In this context, this study endeavors to delineate a conceptual and practical roadmap of the linguistic competencies that the Imam must master—theoretically and procedurally—in the realm of recitation. It addresses the following central problematique: How do linguistic competencies influence the Imam's performance in the recitation and teaching of the Holy Quran? What are the core linguistic competencies that enable him to acquire an internalized faculty (*malakah*) in this sacred domain?

2. Linguistic Competence: Theoretical and Procedural Foundations

The American linguist Noam Chomsky defines linguistic competence as an internalized system of generative rules that enables an individual to produce and understand an infinite number

of novel sentences in their native tongue (Al-Sayyid, 2016, p. 870). Chomsky rigorously distinguishes between two interrelated dimensions: the first is competence, a purely abstract, mental, and cognitive faculty that precedes and stimulates linguistic output; the second is performance, the procedural and articulatory enactment of language through speech, which is psychological and physical in nature. Together, they actualize linguistic proficiency both in potentiality and in actuality.

According to Chomsky, a language is 'a finite or infinite set of sentences, each finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements; all natural languages in their spoken or written forms are languages in this sense, for every language contains a finite number of phonemes, yet the number of generated sentences is infinite' (Moumen, 2007, p. 28). Linguistic competence is thus understood as the latent cognitive capacity through which language is acquired as an abstract, rule-governed system (theoretical knowledge). Performance represents its procedural realization in manifold communicative contexts, providing the observable metric for evaluating the mastery of linguistic competencies.

This conceptualization intersects significantly with Ferdinand de Saussure's dichotomy of *langue* and *parole*. Saussure, however, approached this dichotomy from a strictly social perspective. To him, *langue* is a social institution—a structured system of linguistic signs stored in the collective consciousness of a speech community. It is an autonomous, abstract reservoir from which speakers draw, governed by social convention rather than individual creation. Consequently, *langue* persists independently of individual speakers. Saussure insisted that the scientific study of language must isolate this system from external contingencies, viewing it as 'a system wherein linguistic signs derive their value solely from the structural relationships among them' (Qaddour, 1987, p. 15). *Langue* constitutes the theoretical foundation of language acquisition.

Conversely, *parole* represents the individual, procedural execution of language—a volitional act through which a speaker selects words and structures to convey thoughts in specific communicative situations (Obada, 1988, p. 11). Because *parole* is individual, heterogeneous, and contingent upon psycho-physiological variables, Saussure considered it beyond the scope of standardized structural linguistics.

Long before modern linguistic formulations, Ibn Khaldun masterfully expounded upon the concept of linguistic faculty (*al-malakah al-lisaniyyah*), preempting contemporary distinctions between theoretical knowledge and procedural execution. Ibn Khaldun wrote: 'Know that language, by conventional definition, is the speaker's verbal expression of their intent. That expression is a linguistic act arising from the intention to convey meaning; hence, it must

become an established faculty residing in the active organ designated for it, which is the tongue, varying across nations according to their respective conventions' (Ibn Khaldun, 1981, Vol. 1, p. 753).

In this formulation, language exists cognitively as conscious communicative intent, realized procedurally through the physical organ of articulation (the tongue). The faculty resides in the vocal apparatus, which operates in accordance with internalized linguistic systems to generate expressive structures. This profound insight echoes Ibn Jinni's assertion in *Al-Khasa'is* regarding grammatical operators (*'awamil*): 'In truth and upon final analysis, grammatical governance—nominative, accusative, genitive, and jussive—is exerted by the speaker himself, and by nothing else. Grammarians termed it literal or abstract only when the effects of the speaker's vocal act became manifest through the juxtaposition of words or semantic inclusion' (Ibn Jinni, n.d., Vol. 1, p. 111). Meaning is deliberately produced by the speaker's vocal act, governed by internalized mental structures and deciphered by an interlocutor who shares the same communicative code.

Furthermore, Ibn Khaldun characterized linguistic competence as a craft-like faculty (*malakah sina'iyyah*) rooted in habituation: 'Know that all languages are akin to crafts; they are faculties situated in the tongue for expressing meanings. Their excellence or defectiveness corresponds to the completeness or deficiency of the faculty—not in isolated vocabulary, but in syntactic construction (*tarkib*)... When a complete faculty is attained in composing individual words to convey intended meanings while observing the requirements of the context (*muqtada al-hal*), the speaker achieves the ultimate communicative objective, which constitutes the very essence of rhetoric (*balaghah*)' (Ibn Khaldun, 1981, Vol. 1, p. 764).

Achieving this faculty requires dynamic habituation through three progressive stages of repetitive practice: the first iteration renders linguistic competence an intentional act of the self (targeting lexical meanings); the second elevates it into a transient disposition (*hal*, targeting syntactic structures); and the final iteration crystallizes it into an enduring, deeply ingrained faculty (*malakah*, targeting discourse styles and rhetorical conventions) (Ibn Khaldun, 1981, Vol. 1, p. 765). In sum, linguistic competence cannot be attained merely by studying abstract grammatical treatises; it demands rigorous oral exercise to unite theoretical rules with procedural habituation.

3. The Linguistic Competencies of the Imam

The professional vocation of the Imam encompasses multiple ceremonial and pedagogical roles, the most prominent being Quranic instruction and leading communal prayers—

especially vocal prayers (al-salawat al-jahriyyah). This elevated status requires an exhaustive grasp of linguistic levels and dedicated mastery over core linguistic skills, particularly listening and reading.

3.1. Phonological Competence in Recitation and Pedagogy

The Holy Quran is the uncreated Word of Allah revealed to Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) via the Archangel Gabriel for divine guidance and inimitability (i'jaz). It is defined as 'that which has been transmitted to us between the two covers of the Mushaf across the well-known seven modes (ahruf) via mutawatir (mass-transmitted) transmission' (Al-Amidi, 1400 AH, p. 20). It begins with Surat Al-Fatihah and concludes with Surat An-Nas, recited through authentic variant readings (qira'at) defined as 'the science of the modes of articulating Quranic words and their differences attributed to their transmission authorities' (Ibn Al-Jazari, n.d., Vol. 1, p. 12).

The validity of any canonical recitation rests upon three indispensable criteria:

- **Syntactic Conformity:** Conformity with the rules of Classical Arabic grammar, even through a single valid grammatical construction;
- **Orthographic Conformity:** Conformity with the orthography of one of the Uthmanic codices, even if probabilistically;
- **Authentic Transmission (Tawatur):** An unbroken, mass-transmitted chain of transmission (isnad) reaching the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).

The Quran serves as the ultimate normative criterion for Arabic grammar, representing the pinnacle of eloquent speech. As Al-Suyuti noted: 'Scholars unanimously agree that whenever a linguistic form occurs in the Quran, it represents the highest degree of eloquence beyond any dispute' (Al-Suyuti, 1998, Vol. 1, p. 168). Quranic recitation is inherently acoustic and phonological, obliging the Imam to cultivate a rigorous vocal faculty through exact phoneme articulation and mastery of both silent and audible reading. This mastery is fundamentally rooted in attentive listening and thorough knowledge of the canonical recitation prevailing in Algeria: the recitation of Imam Nafi' al-Madani according to the transmission of Warsh via the Tariq of Al-Azraq.

Phonological Rules of Warsh 'an Nafi' (Tariq Al-Azraq)

Nafi' ibn 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Abi Nu'aym al-Madani (d. 169 AH) was one of the seven canonical reciters and the leading authority of Medina. His recitation reflects established Prophetic practice (sunnah muttaba'ah), having studied under seventy of the Tabi'in (Successors).

Eminent scholars studied under him, including Imam Malik ibn Anas (d. 179 AH), Abu 'Amr ibn al-'Ala (d. 154 AH), 'Uthman ibn Sa'id al-Misri (Warsh) (d. 197 AH), and 'Isa ibn Mina (Qalun) (d. 220 AH) (Al-Qasim, 1447 AH, pp. 17–18). Warsh's transmission has two primary routes: Yusuf ibn 'Amr al-Azraq (d. 240 AH) and Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Rahim al-Asbahani (d. 292 AH) (Al-Qasim, 1447 AH, p. 36).

The science of recitation is structured upon two main pillars: Usul (comprehensive, systematic phonological rules applied universally to analogous structures) and Farsh al-Huruf (isolated, non-systemic lexical variants specific to individual passages). The Imam must systematically implement the Usul while memorizing the Farsh variants as transmitted orally.

The foundational phonological Usul in Warsh include the following:

- **Al-Isti'adhah (Seeking Refuge):** Its structural positioning, legal status, audible versus silent recitation, formulation, and junction (wasl) or disjunction (qat') with the Basmalah.
- **Al-Basmalah:** Its rulings at the beginning and middle of Surahs, and the transitional modes between consecutive Surahs (junction, pause, or silent breath-pause/sakt).
- **Mim al-Jam' (Plural Mim):** 'The augmentative Mim suffixed to a word denoting a plural masculine entity, whether literal or figurative' (Al-Qasim, 1447 AH, p. 53). Rulings govern its sukun, vocalization with dammah, and lengthening (ishba'/silah) when preceding a connecting hamzah.
- **Al-Idgham (Assimilation):** 'Merging a letter into the subsequent letter to produce a single doubled letter (mushaddad)' (Al-Qasim, 1447 AH, p. 55). Categorized into major (kabir) and minor (saghir), and classified by phonetic proximity into identical (mutamathil), homogeneous (mutajanis), and proximate (mutaqarib).
- **Ha' al-Kinayah (Pronominal Ha':** 'The augmentative Ha' indicating a third-person singular masculine referent' (Al-Qasim, 1447 AH, p. 58). Governed by dammah, kasrah, sukun, prolongation (silah), or shortening (qasr).
- **Al-Madd wa al-Qasr (Prolongation and Shortening):** 'Madd is the elongation of a prolongation letter beyond its natural measure (madd tabi'i); Qasr is the retention of its natural duration' (Al-Qasim, 1447 AH, p. 60). Governs madd muttasil, munfasil, and Warsh's distinctive prolongation of madd al-badal (substitute madd).
- **Two Consecutive Hamzahs in a Single Word:** Contiguous hamzahs where the first is vowelised with fathah and the second is vowelised with fathah, dammah, or kasrah (including interrogative hamzahs). Rules dictate Tashil (softening bayna bayn), Idkhal (insertion of an alif separator), and Ibdal (substitution into a pure long vowel) (Al-Qasim, 1447 AH, p. 64).

- **Two Consecutive Hamzahs in Two Words:** Where the first hamzah ends a word and the second begins the next; categorised into identical vowels (fathatan, dammatan, kasratan) or differing vowels (Al-Qasim, 1447 AH, p. 69), resolved through Tahqiq, Tashil, or Ibdal.
- **Isolated Hamzah (Al-Hamz al-Mufrad):** Governs singular vowelised or unvowelised hamzahs occurring as fa', 'ayn, or lam of the root. Rules include Tahqiq, Tashil, Ibdal, deletion (hadhf), and Naql (transferring the vowel of the hamzah to the preceding unvowelised consonant).
- **Nun Sakinah and Tanwin:** The classical four rules: Izhar (clear articulation), Idgham (assimilation with/without ghunnah), Qalb/Iqlab (inversion into mim), and Ikhfa' (concealment with nasalization).
- **Al-Fath wa al-Imalah (Aperture and Deflection):** 'Fath is the opening of the mouth when uttering a vowel, especially before alif (also termed tafkhim); Imalah is inclining the fathah toward kasrah and the alif toward ya'' (Al-Qasim, 1447 AH, p. 83). Warsh specializes in Imalah Sughra (taqlil/minor deflection).
- **Rulings on Ra' and Lam:** Specific phonological rules governing the thinning (tarqiq) or thickening (tafkhim) of the letter Ra', and the thickening (taghlidh) of the letter Lam under defined phonetic conditions.
- **Waqf on Word Endings:** Permissible modes of pausing: Sukun mahd (pure quiescence), Rawm (partial vocalization audible to close listeners), and Ishmam (silent lip-rounding indicating dammah).
- **Waqf according to Uthmanic Orthography (Marsum al-Khatt):** 'The depiction of a word by its letters reflecting the potentiality of initiation and pausing, based on the codices transcribed during Uthman's caliphate' (Al-Qasim, 1447 AH, p. 99), governing elision, addition, connection, and separation.
- **Ya'at al-Idafah (Pronominal Ya'):** First-person singular possessive Ya'; governed by vocalization with fathah or quiescence (sukun) in junction.
- **Ya'at al-Zawa'id (Augmentative Ya'):** Terminal radical Ya' letters omitted in the Uthmanic script but preserved in oral recitation, governed by retention (ithbat) or omission (hadhf).

Core Acoustic Skills: Listening and Reading

Theoretical mastery of these phonological principles remains insufficient unless reinforced by systematic auditory habituation and oral drill. Two core interdependent skills must be refined:

1. The Skill of Listening (Maharat al-Istima'): Listening is the primary gateway to language acquisition and performance. An Imam must cultivate active, structured listening across three developmental phases:

- **Preliminary Phase (Al-Tawr al-Irha'i):** A preparatory, receptive stage wherein the Imam establishes a tranquil, focused auditory environment free from cognitive noise, mentally preparing to absorb recitation from an authoritative Sheikh or master recording.
- **Immersive Phase (Al-Tawr al-Inghimasi):** Intensive auditory engagement wherein the Imam concentrates fully on acoustic nuances, mirroring the articulatory apparatus silently without vocalizing, bridging theoretical rules with procedural execution.
- **Critical-Apperceptive Phase (Al-Tawr al-Isti'abi al-Fahis):** The pinnacle of auditory maturity wherein the Imam instinctively discerns exquisite recitation from flawed articulation, develops aesthetic sensibility (khushu'), and internalizes critical listening to evaluate and correct his own recordings.

2. The Skill of Reading (Maharat al-Qira'ah): In this context, reading refers specifically to sacred Quranic recitation. Unlike secular reading, Quranic recitation is strictly tawqifi (bound by authentic oral transmission), requiring exact replication of the Prophet's acoustic model regardless of whether it matches prevailing standard grammatical rules.

Pedagogically, reading evolves from an initial mechanical stage focused on visual recognition and decoding of orthographic symbols (Fadlallah, 1998, p. 64) to an advanced interpretive and expressive stage. At this higher stage, the Imam integrates theoretical tajwid rules (madd, ghunnah, rawm, taqlil) with emotional resonance, employing appropriate intonation, cadence, and pitch variation (tartil) that reflect the semantic majesty of the verses and transport their spiritual meanings to the congregation.

4. Morphological, Syntactic, and Rhetorical Competencies and Linguistic Justification (Tawjih)

Because recitation is an authoritative transmitted tradition (Ibn Taymiyyah, 2011, Vol. 13, p. 218), the required threshold of morphological, syntactic, and rhetorical competency involves mastering structural paradigms and their exegetical significance. This encompasses morphological patterns, nominal and verbal derivations, vocalic shifts, and phonological adjustments (hadhf, i'la, ibdal), as well as syntactic parsing (i'rab vs. bina', sarf vs. man' min al-sarf) and rhetorical devices (taqdim wa ta'khir, hadhf, iltifat, qasr, istifham, haqiqah vs. majaz).

When standard grammatical norms formulated by classical grammarians occasionally clashed with the literal phrasing of canonical readings, scholars developed the science of Linguistic

Justification of Quranic Readings (Tawjih al-Qira'at). This discipline harmonizes canonical variants with the rich diversity of Classical Arabic dialects without undermining the inviolability of the sacred text. Makki ibn Abi Talib al-Qaysi (d. 437 AH) pioneered this field in his seminal work 'Al-Kashf 'an Wujuh al-Qira'at al-Sab' wa 'Ilaliha wa Hujajiha', categorizing tawjih into three interconnected domains:

- **Morphological Justification (Al-Tawjih al-Sarfi):** Addresses verbal forms and measures (awzan), nominal derivation patterns, singular versus plural concord (Al-Asmar, 1997, pp. 200, 392), and morphological ambiguity (such as shared forms between nouns of place and mim-infinitives). Morphological variation across readings represents semantic richness and multiplicity of meaning rather than contradiction.
- **Syntactic Justification (Al-Tawjih al-Nahwi):** Examines case endings and syntactic dependencies across nouns, verbs, and particles. Classical scholars dedicated landmark treatises to defend variant readings, notably Ibn Jinni's 'Al-Muhtasab', Ibn Khalawayh's 'Al-Hujjah fi al-Qira'at al-Sab'', and Abu 'Ali al-Farisi's 'Al-Hujjah'. When rigid grammarians occasionally questioned certain readings, leading authorities resolved the discrepancies through dialectal attribution, contextual ellipsis, or semantic redirection.
- **Rhetorical Justification (Al-Tawjih al-Balaghi):** Investigates the profound communicative implications arising from morphological and syntactic choices—such as topicalization, ellipsis, emphasis, and metaphorical framing (Muhammad, 2009). The Imam must reflect upon these aesthetic nuances to project the linguistic inimitability of the Quran.

5. Lexical and Semantic Competencies in Recitation and Prayer

Reciting and listening to the Holy Quran constitute supreme acts of worship. To achieve complete performance, the Imam must be equipped with profound lexical and semantic competencies:

Lexical Competencies (Al-Kafayat al-Mu'jamiyyah): Constitute the Imam's linguistic lexicon, enabling him to comprehend archaic and rare Quranic vocabulary (Gharib al-Quran)—such as Dizi, 'As'as, Al-Sakhkhah, Al-'Adiyat, Al-Samad, Al-Falaq, and Ghasiq. He must master subtle semantic nuances between near-synonyms (e.g., ja'a vs. ata; shuhh vs. bukhli; 'am vs. sanah), homonyms, antonyms, and etymological roots, ensuring rigorous exegesis.

Semantic Competencies (Al-Kafayat al-Dalaliyyah): Empower the Imam to assimilate the overarching objectives (maqasid) and contextual themes of Quranic discourse, including occasions of revelation (asbab al-nuzul) and juridical deductions (ahkam fihiyyah). Crucially,

this requires exhaustive mastery of the Science of Pausing and Initiating (Waqf and Ibtida'), ensuring that the Imam avoids reprehensible pauses (waqf qabih) that distort theological meaning or sever interdependent syntactic structures (such as conditional clauses or exception particles).

This deep semantic internalization directly informs the acoustic modulation of the voice—lowering the pitch during supplicatory and submissive passages, elevating resonance during warnings and eschatological proclamations, and employing purposeful cadence to instill divine meanings into the hearts of the congregation.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the solemn station of recitation and Quranic pedagogy requires the Imam to receive the Quran through rigorous oral transmission (talaqqi) under an authorized Sheikh, perfecting memorization and acoustic performance. He must systematically master the universal phonological rules (usul) of his regional transmission (Warsh 'an Nafi' via Al-Azraq), distinguish them from isolated variants (farsh), and comprehend their grammatical, morphological, and rhetorical justifications (tawjih). By integrating theoretical knowledge with disciplined auditory and articulatory habituation, the Imam acquires a deeply rooted linguistic faculty (malakah), enabling him to lead prayers and instruct students with utmost scholarly competence, spiritual reverence, and communicative mastery.

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