

Riffaterre's Semiotic Theory in Angelika Neuwirth's Intertextual Qur'anic Studies: A Case Study of Surah al-Ikhlāṣ

Seyed Hamed Alizadeh Mousavi¹ 

Assistant Professor, Department for Comparative Studies, Research Center for Qur'anic Sciences and Culture, Islamic Sciences and Culture Academy, Tehran, Iran.

Article History: Received 19 June 2025; Accepted 17 October 2025

ABSTRACT:

Original Paper

Michael Riffaterre's semiotic theory, with its emphasis on ungrammaticality and multi-layered reading, has provided an influential model for analyzing the distinctive structure of poetic language. This study investigates the application of Riffaterre's semiotic framework to Qur'anic interpretation, with a specific focus on Angelika Neuwirth's intertextual readings of the Qur'an. Neuwirth views the Qur'an as a poetic and dialogical text that engages with earlier religious and cultural traditions. She employs Riffaterre's model to reveal the text's semantic depth and internal coherence through the notions of ungrammaticality and dual signification. Using Surah al-Ikhlāṣ as a case study, this paper critically evaluates Neuwirth's application of Riffaterre's theory by examining her treatment of the supposed "ungrammaticality" regarding the use of the word *aḥad*. The paper argues that the notion of ungrammaticality in the Qur'an can be reinterpreted not as a violation of linguistic norms, but rather as a semiotic cue that signals deeper intertextual and theological meanings. Accordingly, evaluating alleged irregularities requires a contextual analysis of lexical patterns across the entire Qur'an, where usage, frequency, and semantic range reveal a consistent theological logic. By integrating insights from classical Arabic grammar, lexicography, and tafsīr with modern semiotic theory, this study reassesses the scope and limits of applying Riffaterre's model to sacred text analysis. It concludes that while semiotic and intertextual approaches can illuminate the Qur'an's structural and semantic complexity, they must operate within a balanced hermeneutical framework that respects the text's

1. Corresponding Author. Email Address: ha.mousavi@jsca.ac.ir

<http://dx.doi.org/10.37264/JIQS.V4I2.8>

https://iqs.sbu.ac.ir/article_106983.html?lang=en

Copyright: © 2025 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).



revelatory nature and linguistic precision. Furthermore, this study demonstrates that the intentional utilization of ungrammaticality in the Qur'an effectively serves specific theological functions.

KEYWORDS: The Qur'an, Semiotic theory, Ungrammaticality, Intertextuality, Surah al-Ikhlāṣ, *aḥad*, *wāḥid*, Angelika Neuwirth, Michael Riffaterre.

1. Introduction

Michael Riffaterre's theory of semiotics is one of the most influential approaches in contemporary literary criticism. By emphasizing structuralism and the reader's active engagement with the text, Riffaterre provides a systematic framework for analysing and interpreting literary works, particularly poetry. In his view, poetic language differs essentially from ordinary language because it possesses a signifying nature. Consequently, it frequently violates the conventional grammatical and syntactic rules of everyday speech. This "ungrammaticality," defined as the deliberate breaking of linguistic norms, constitutes the foundation of poetic art and aesthetics in Riffaterre's theory (Riffaterre 1978; Allen 2000).

Riffaterre argues that poetry should be read as a multi-layered, multidimensional text due to its inherent features, such as the use of metaphor, symbol, ambiguity, and unusual syntactic structures. Under this framework, meaning emerges through internal references and semiotic networks within the poem itself. Each poem is built upon a "semantic nucleus," expressed as a word, phrase, or central statement. However, this nucleus remains implicit and cryptic due to the indirect nature of poetic language (Riffaterre 1978; Selden 2005).

According to Riffaterre, reading a text involves two main stages. The first is heuristic reading; in this stage, the reader follows the surface meaning linearly while relying on standard linguistic competence. The second is retroactive (or hermeneutic) reading, which entails a deeper exploration of the text's hidden layers, symbolic meanings, and internal sign networks. At this stage, grammatical irregularities and linguistic deviations transform into meaningful indicators that lead to a more precise and comprehensive understanding of the text (Payandeh 2019). Ungrammaticality consequently plays a central role in Riffaterre's semiotics. It represents a deliberate departure from ordinary linguistic norms, thereby producing a unique and multi-layered poetic structure that invites deeper interpretation and reflection (Riffaterre 1978; Allen 2000).

Angelika Neuwirth, a contemporary German Qur'anic scholar, has

produced extensive scholarship on the comparative and intertextual study of the Qur'an and the Bible. Her approach is fundamentally literary and structuralist, as it draws heavily on modern theories of intertextuality and semiotics. In particular, Neuwirth employs Riffaterre's concept of ungrammaticality as a key to deciphering the Qur'an's linguistic and aesthetic complexity. By viewing the Qur'an as a text with poetic dimensions and multiple semantic layers, she proposes that the sacred text contains deliberate linguistic deviations that necessitate a deep and reflective reading.

Neuwirth argues that applying Riffaterre's semiotic model to Qur'anic studies facilitates the discovery of profound layers of meaning generated by unique linguistic choices and grammatical irregularities. Due to its unparalleled rhetorical features, diverse literary devices, symbolic language, and polyvalent expressions, the Qur'an provides fertile ground for semiotic analysis. Such an approach demonstrates that a purely surface or linear reading of the verses may obscure many of the text's subtle messages and implications. In contrast, a deeper reading reveals the Qur'an's intricate semantic structure.

Nevertheless, applying literary semiotics to a sacred text raises certain methodological challenges. Chief among them is the potential neglect of the Qur'an's revelatory dimension; specifically, this approach risks treating the sacred text merely as a literary artifact. Furthermore, hypotheses regarding possible lexical changes or the presence of grammatical irregularities introduced to fit the model present significant methodological difficulties. The present paper, therefore, seeks to examine the potential insights and contributions of applying Riffaterre's semiotics to Qur'anic interpretation. Concurrently, it considers the accompanying risks and limitations inherent in such a methodological adaptation.

2. Literature Review

In recent decades, the comparative and intertextual study of the Qur'an has experienced considerable growth, especially through the scholarship of Western Islamicists. Among these figures, Angelika Neuwirth stands out as a prominent contemporary Qur'anic scholar. By adopting a literary and structuralist approach, she situates the Qur'an within the broader framework of Late Antiquity's sacred texts and cultural traditions. Her works, particularly her multi-volume studies on the Meccan Surahs, portray the Qur'an as a linguistically and aesthetically constructed text that engages in dialogue with pre-Qur'anic traditions (Neuwirth 2000; Neuwirth et al. 2010; Neuwirth 2019).

Within literary criticism, Michael Riffaterre's semiotic theory holds a distinctive position; it has been applied to the analysis of modern poetry, symbolic literature, and sacred texts. However, a direct and systematic examination of Riffaterre's theory within the context of Qur'anic analysis remains largely unexplored. Some conceptual intersections appear in Neuwirth's writings, in which she implicitly draws on semiotic and intertextual approaches to uncover the Qur'an's various layers of meaning.

Payandeh (2019) and Namvar Motlagh (2015) have discussed the application of structuralist and post-structuralist theories to religious texts; however, none have specifically addressed Riffaterre's semiotics in relation to the Qur'an. Consequently, the present study constitutes a pioneering attempt to establish a comparative framework between Riffaterre's semiotic theory and Neuwirth's intertextual approach to Qur'anic interpretation. The study aims to clarify their conceptual intersections and divergences while assessing both the potential insights and methodological limitations of employing literary semiotics in Qur'anic analysis.

3. Research Methodology

This study is qualitative and theoretical in nature, employing a descriptive–analytical and comparative research design. The data are drawn from library sources, including scholarly articles and the primary works of Michael Riffaterre and Angelika Neuwirth. The research proceeds in two main stages. First, it systematically explicates the key concepts of Riffaterre's semiotic theory, specifically ungrammaticality, heuristic reading, and retroactive (hermeneutic) reading. Second, the study examines how these concepts may be applied to Neuwirth's literary reading of the Qur'an.

In the analytical section, Surah al-Tawhīd (al-Ikhlāṣ) serves as a case study. Through a Riffaterre's lens, this study investigates the Surah's linguistic structure, its intertextual references, and its layers of signification. The aim is not only to reveal the potential of semiotic analysis for Qur'anic studies but also to critically assess its theological implications. Particular attention is given to the limitations of this approach concerning the Qur'an's sacred dimensions.

4. Riffaterre's Intertextuality: Dual Signs & Ungrammaticality

The term "intertextuality" was first introduced in the 1970s by Julia Kristeva. She argued that a text is not a closed and autonomous system that

can be understood in isolation (Frow 2005). Rather, every text functions as a point of intersection and interaction among multiple other texts. Kristeva's conception was influenced by the ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin—specifically his theory of polyphony—and Roland Barthes. Her work sought to extend Bakhtin's notion of multiple voices into the domain of textual plurality (Kristeva 1998; Namvar Motlagh 2015).

Since its inception, two major perspectives on intertextuality have emerged. One focuses on the role of intertextuality in the production of the text, whereas the other examines its impact on the reading process. Michael Riffaterre (1924–2002), a leading figure in this field, belongs to the latter category by emphasizing the reader's reception and interpretive engagement with the text. His theoretical framework, which combines structuralism, post-structuralism, semiotics, and psychoanalytic criticism, secures him a distinctive position in the study of intertextuality.

Riffaterre differentiates between two kinds of signification in language: explicit (referential) meaning, which follows a linear and transparent path typical of everyday discourse, and implicit (literary) meaning, which relies on the text's internal references or its relation to other texts. Consequently, literary meaning depends heavily on the reader's prior knowledge and interpretive competence (Allen 2000). Within this framework, Riffaterre conceives literary texts as generating meaning through coherent semiotic structures composed of keywords, symbolic phrases, and rhetorical patterns. In his model, Riffaterre identifies two levels of reading: heuristic (surface) reading and retroactive (interpretive) reading. The first level yields a linear and superficial understanding. Conversely, the second seeks to uncover deeper, concealed meanings and the complex interplay of signs within the text (Ahmadi 2005; Namvar Motlagh 2015). Retroactive reading requires revisiting the initial interpretation to reinterpret the text through a semiotic lens, thereby revealing its implicit significations.

Riffaterre further distinguishes between “meaning” and “significance.” Meaning resides on the text's surface, while significance arises from the fusion of form and content, which is constituted by indirect linguistic markers and poetic imagery. For Riffaterre, words in a literary text do not merely refer to external objects; instead, their signification emerges through presuppositions derived from other texts. Intertextuality, therefore, necessitates an informed reader. It may appear in two forms: obligatory intertextuality, where textual references are fixed and undeniable, and optional intertextuality, which depends on the reader's experience and interpretive background (Namvar Motlagh 2015).

Riffaterre warns that if interpretation focuses solely on literal meaning, poetry risks degenerating into a mere factual report. Such a reductionist approach strips the text of its artistic and aesthetic distinctiveness (Selden 2005). Furthermore, he underscores the intrinsic ambiguity of poetic language and argues that the poet's lexical choices introduce multiple layers of meaning and generate polysemy (Ahmadi 2005). In his view, poetic semiotics resists direct communication; thus, meaning is delayed, dispersed, and mediated through figurative and formal complexity (Riffaterre 1978).

Central to Riffaterre's theory is the concept of "ungrammaticality," which refers to the deliberate violation of linguistic norms and syntactic conventions. This deviation from ordinary grammar transforms poetic language into a multi-layered, self-referential system (Allen 2000). Comprehending such complex semiotic networks requires both linguistic proficiency and literary competence. This mastery enables the reader to move beyond the surface level toward the poem's implicit and symbolic meanings (Selden 2005).

During the stage of retroactive reading, Riffaterre identifies mechanisms such as semantic expansion and descriptive structures as vehicles of poetic signification. Semantic expansion occurs when a set of lexically related words converges on a shared thematic category (Eftekhari and Barekat 2011). For instance, words like rose, lily, sunflower, and tulip collectively form an associative cluster linked by semantic affinity (Nabiloo 2011). Such clusters often develop into descriptive networks, which are systems organized around a central word and its related elements. These networks, primarily metaphorical, may intersect or extend beyond the boundaries of the poem itself (Riffaterre 1978). By identifying these accumulations and descriptive systems, the reader traces the lexical and conceptual associations that structure the text's imagery. This process leads to a deeper understanding of the text's internal organization. The structural network underlies the text's unity and coherence, even though it is not directly visible. It is inferred indirectly through narrative connections and conventional associations, serving as the framework through which the poem's holistic meaning emerges. In summary, Riffaterre's interpretive process unfolds in four main stages:

1. Reading the text to grasp its ordinary and surface meaning;
2. Identifying linguistic deviations that disrupt conventional sense;
3. Discovering lexical and thematic associations that recur throughout the text;
4. Reconstructing the structural network of meaning through these associations to enable a deeper, more unified understanding of the poem (Selden 2005).

This approach allows for a more precise examination of hidden semiotic structures in poetry, standing as a vital analytical tool within modern literary criticism.

5. Riffaterre's Semiotic Phases and Elements in Neuwirth's *Qur'anic Studies*

After reviewing Michael Riffaterre's theory of semiotics within the framework of intertextuality, it is essential to examine how this theoretical model has been applied to the Qur'anic studies of Angelika Neuwirth. To this end, this section explores the interpretive elements and stages of Riffaterre's semiotic approach as reflected in Neuwirth's analyses. The discussion begins by addressing the poetic nature of the Qur'an, which prompted Neuwirth's semiotic reading, followed by an examination of her two-level reading of the Qur'an. Finally, it provides a case-based study of her application of concepts such as ungrammaticality to the Qur'anic text.

5.1. *The Qur'an and Poetry*

One of Neuwirth's key observations regarding the Qur'an concerns its poetic and literary dimensions. She argues that the Qur'an manifests a profound dialogue with ancient Arabic poetry, as well as with the Jewish, Christian, and pagan poetic-philosophical traditions that shaped the intellectual milieu of Late Antiquity. In her influential work, *Scripture, Poetry and the Making of a Community*, the inclusion of the term "poetry" in the title underscores its central importance in her thought. The word signifies not only the Qur'an's poetic texture but also its interconnection with the late pre-Islamic Arabic poetic corpus (Neuwirth 2002; Neuwirth 2004).

Understanding Neuwirth's notion of the Qur'an as "poetic" requires a careful distinction. On the one hand, Muslims have traditionally regarded the Qur'an as transcending poetry. They emphasize that one of the polemical accusations made by early opponents was precisely that Muhammad was a poet. On the other hand, the rhetorical and aesthetic qualities of the Qur'an have long been recognized as integral to its miraculous nature (*al-i'jāz*), especially in terms of its eloquence (*al-balāghah*) and stylistic inimitability (*al-faṣāḥah*). For Neuwirth, describing the Qur'an as "poetic" does not imply that it is poetry in the conventional sense; rather, it suggests that the text engages with the poetic knowledge of its earliest audiences. In her view, this poetic awareness formed part of the common cultural literacy of Late Antique Arabs, and the Qur'an interacts dynamically with that shared

repertoire. Moreover, she identifies the rhythmic and musical features of Qur'anic recitation, including its rhyme, cadence, and repetition, as elements that create a distinctly poetic experience. For instance, she considers Surah al-Rahmān highly lyrical due to its rhythmic and sonorous qualities (Neuwirth 2002; Neuwirth 2004).

In addition, Neuwirth highlights the rhetorical sophistication of the Qur'an and regards its eloquence as evidence of its textual authenticity and divine uniqueness (Neuwirth 2010b; Neuwirth 2013). Thus, in her analysis, the Qur'an's poeticity points both to its "Sitz im Leben," its social and performative context at the time of revelation, and to its formal rhythmic structure, which facilitates layered interpretation. However, this "poetic reflection" is acceptable only insofar as it does not imply the derivation or imitation of pre-Islamic poetry. Instead, it reflects the Qur'an's dialogical engagement with the linguistic and poetic conventions familiar to its original audience. From this perspective, the Qur'an's allusive use of poetic expression served as an effective communicative strategy by employing familiar cultural forms to convey transcendent meanings.

This dialogical approach aligns with early Islamic hermeneutical practices. Arabic lexicography and philology, essential to Qur'anic exegesis from the earliest centuries, often relied on ancient Arabic poetry to elucidate obscure Qur'anic vocabulary. As Ibn 'Abbās famously stated, "When you seek the meaning of a rare word in the Qur'an, look for it in poetry, for poetry is the repository of Arab knowledge" (al-Suyūfī n.d., 2: 302). Similarly, al-Suyūfī emphasized that preserving ancient poetry was vital for understanding Qur'anic and prophetic language.

Accordingly, Neuwirth regards the Qur'an as a living oral discourse that interacts with two primary domains of Late Antique knowledge: biblical-literary traditions and poetic culture. The Qur'an engages these knowledge systems through dialogue, questioning, and reinterpretation. Its rhythmic and poetic form renders it multi-layered, thereby requiring interpretive strategies that move beyond the surface level, specifically the kind of semiotic depth that Riffaterre's theory seeks to uncover. In this sense, Neuwirth's identification of the Qur'an's poeticity directly aligns her with Riffaterre's semiotic model, enabling her to explore the Qur'an's deeper and hidden layers of meaning.

5.2. The Two-Level Reading of the Qur'an: Qur'an and Muṣḥaf

In articulating her theory of Qur'anic reading, Neuwirth (2010) distinguishes between two dimensions of the text: the Qur'an and the

Muṣḥaf. The Qur'an, she argues, represents the oral process of divine communication, whereas the *Muṣḥaf*, the written codex, reflects the stage of textual compilation and inscription. Neuwirth interprets the oral Qur'an as a performative event comparable to a dramatic enactment, while she views the written *Muṣḥaf* as a retrospective narrative or a sacred monologic account. Drawing from theories of drama and performance, she explains that, much like in a play, there exist two levels: an internal level (the actors and their interactions) and an external level (the author, the written script, and its readers).

When applying this framework to the Qur'an, the internal level comprises the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and his audience, whose interaction constitutes a dialogical exchange. The external level, conversely, corresponds to the written *Muṣḥaf* and its later readers. Within this performative model, the dramatis personae include the Prophet and a heavenly voice that continually addresses him. This divine voice functions as a hidden but active interlocutor at the internal level; however, at the external level, it becomes fused with the Prophet's own voice, thereby creating a unified textual persona (Neuwirth 2010a).

Consequently, Neuwirth effectively applies Riffaterre's two-level reading model, comprising surface and deeper interpretive layers, to Qur'anic hermeneutics. The internal level corresponds to Riffaterre's heuristic reading by capturing the immediate communicative event. Meanwhile, the external, reflective level parallels the retroactive reading, in which the text is reinterpreted through accumulated intertexts and semiotic associations. Therefore, understanding the inner level of the Qur'an requires, according to Neuwirth, the recognition of its intertextual web. This web constitutes a network of echoes, allusions, and semiotic deviations that collectively sustain its poetic and revelatory character.

5.3. *The Qur'an and Ungrammaticality*

After identifying the Qur'an as poetic and recognizing its two levels of reading, Neuwirth proceeds to interpret the text through Riffaterre's semiotic and intertextual theory to uncover its deeper layers of meaning. Within this framework, she focuses on detecting "ungrammaticalities" in the Qur'an, linguistic irregularities that, according to Riffaterre, point symbolically toward other texts. Through these irregularities, Neuwirth seeks to access the Qur'an's intertexts, thereby enabling a more profound understanding of its discourse.

One of the surahs analysed by Neuwirth through Riffaterre's semiotic model is Surah al-Ikhlās. Following Riffaterre's four-stage interpretive path, she first performs a surface (heuristic) reading to grasp the apparent meaning of the text. From her perspective, this surah was revealed in a cultural milieu shaped by oral religious traditions. The Qur'anic community appropriated these pre-existing ideas and rearticulated them in a new form; however, as Neuwirth notes, echoes of pre-Qur'anic oral formulae remain audible within the Qur'an.

In the second stage, the retroactive or hermeneutic reading, Neuwirth explores the surah's grammatical irregularities. She argues that, at first glance, Surah al-Ikhlās appears entirely consistent with the stylistic structure of early Meccan surahs, which are characterized by short, rhythmic, and semantically dense verses. However, she identifies one major distinction: the surah begins with the imperative "*qul*" (say). This feature is more typical of later argumentative surahs (Neuwirth 2010a). Neuwirth maintains that, despite its apparent simplicity, the text of this surah is not stylistically uniform. She interprets the opening phrase "*qul huwa Allāhu aḥad*" as a deliberate echo of the Jewish prayer Shema Yisrael: "*Shema' Yisra'el, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Eḥad*": "*Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One*" (Deuteronomy 6:4).

According to Neuwirth, the Jewish text remains audible within the Qur'anic version, which suggests an intentional intertextual resonance. She argues that the Qur'an deliberately employs *aḥad* instead of the more grammatically expected *wāḥid* to maintain its rhyme and rhythm. This choice, she claims, constitutes an "ungrammaticality." This term refers to a deliberate deviation that functions semiotically as a "dual sign" in the sense defined by Michael Riffaterre.

In Riffaterre's semiotic theory, the concept of the dual sign designates the twofold operation of meaning within poetic language. Each linguistic unit in a poem functions simultaneously on two semiotic levels. The first is the referential or surface sign, which conveys a literal meaning accessible through conventional grammar. The second is the hypogrammatic or underlying sign, which emerges from the interrelations among words, textual structures, and intertextual echoes within the poem itself.

Consequently, meaning in poetry is not fixed at the lexical level. Instead, it is generated through a network of internal correspondences that transform ordinary linguistic signs into symbolic and interpretive ones. This dual functioning of the sign becomes particularly evident through ungrammaticality, the deliberate deviation from linguistic norms that forces the reader to move beyond the surface level toward deeper layers of

interpretation. In this process, the reader decodes the latent or “second” sign embedded within the text to uncover its hidden intertextual and semantic dimensions. Thus, the dual sign encapsulates Riffaterre’s broader view of poetry as a self-referential system in which meaning is produced through the tension between grammatical disruption and interpretive reconstruction. Angelika Neuwirth has adapted this specific mechanism in her analyses of the Qur’an’s poetic and multi-layered structure (Riffaterre 1978, 92).

Neuwirth thus identifies Surah al-Ikhlāṣ as containing a specific type of grammatical irregularity that can be recognized through Riffaterre’s dual sign. This sign functions much like a pun or paronomasia; although it initially appears to be a linguistic irregularity, it becomes intelligible when viewed in light of an external textual source. The form of the sign is crucial, as it gestures toward the structure of another text and invites an interpretive comparison. Neuwirth then poses the question: why does the Jewish text remain audible within the Qur’anic version? She contends that such intertextual echoing is strategic rather than accidental. The Qur’an, she argues, deliberately engages in translingual quotation as part of its dialogical strategy. By universalizing the Jewish creed of divine unity, the Qur’an reframes it for a non-Jewish audience. It replaces the address to “Israel” with a universal call to “believers,” thereby recontextualizing the monotheistic formula to render it both familiar and distinctive. This form of interpretive correction—or hermeneutic adaptation—is, according to Neuwirth, one of the Qur’an’s characteristic modes of engagement with earlier traditions.

Furthermore, she interprets this audible resonance as a rhetorical address to Jewish listeners. She suggests that the Qur’an sought to bridge the gap between the Qur’anic and Jewish communities through intertextual familiarity and shared sacred vocabulary. To support her thesis regarding the orality of the Qur’an, Neuwirth also compares the surah with the Nicene Creed and the Book of Deuteronomy. She concludes that the Qur’an, as an oral discourse, incorporates the religious knowledge of its audience, particularly their awareness of biblical and creedal formulations. She connects this view with Riffaterre’s theory of ungrammaticality, arguing that the Qur’an intentionally presents a structural irregularity to guide its audience toward these prior intertexts. In this reading, the word *aḥad* evokes the Hebrew *ehad* from Deuteronomy 6:4, which reinforces the intertextual link (Neuwirth 2010a).

6. Evaluation of Neuwirth's Application of Riffaterre's Theory in *Surah al-Ikhlās*

Neuwirth's application of Riffaterre's semiotic theory serves two primary purposes. First, she utilizes it to support her thesis on the Qur'an's orality, treating its intertexts as evidence of its oral, dialogical nature. However, as critics have noted (Alizadeh Mousavi 2020), the use of familiar concepts or audience knowledge does not necessarily imply orality. Written discourse can also employ shared cultural references to enhance communication. Therefore, the Qur'an's engagement with the intellectual world of its audience does not logically entail a purely oral character; rather, it demonstrates the text's rhetorical awareness and communicative adaptability.

Second, Neuwirth employs Riffaterre's model to uncover the Qur'an's deeper semantic layers by identifying its supposed grammatical irregularities and inferring meaning from them. Specifically, she argues that *aḥad* is less grammatically fitting than *wāḥid*, contending that this choice represents a deliberate semiotic deviation. However, this view is contestable. None of the classical Arabic linguists or exegetes regarded the verse as grammatically irregular; on the contrary, most have argued that *aḥad* is not only appropriate, but also theologically more precise in this context.

Arabic lexicographers and exegetes, such as al-Fīrūzābādī (1983), al-Zabīdī (1994), and al-Ālūsī (1997), note that *aḥad* and *wāḥid* share the same root *w-ḥ-d*, meaning "one" or "unique," yet differ semantically and theologically. While *wāḥid* may denote numerical singularity, *aḥad* conveys absolute oneness by denying both multiplicity and divisibility. Some scholars, like al-ʿAskarī (1985, 565), hold that *aḥad* derives from *awḥad*, with the initial *al-wāw* elided to distinguish it as a divine attribute. Early authorities also report variant readings, such as Ibn Masʿūd's recitation of "*Qul huwa Allāhu wāḥid*" (Maybudī 1982, 10: 662), nevertheless, even these were interpreted as semantically equivalent.

Exegetes further distinguish *aḥad* from *wāḥid* in several ways:

- *Wāḥid* is used in numerical enumeration (e.g., *wāḥid, ithnān*), whereas *aḥad* is not.
- *Wāḥid* often affirms existence (e.g., *ra'aytu rajulan wāḥidan*), while *aḥad* is used in negation (e.g., *mā ra'aytu aḥadan*).
- *Aḥad* implies universal negation, meaning "none whatsoever," while *wāḥid* negates only one instance.

- *Aḥad* is a more general and absolute form that encompasses *wāḥid* within its meaning.
- *Aḥad* functions as an attribute exclusively for God in affirmative statements, whereas *wāḥid* can describe other entities (al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī 2009; al-Rāzī 1993; al-Zabīdī 1994).

Tabataba'i (1995) devotes a detailed section to this distinction, in *al-Mīzān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, explaining that *aḥad* refers to that which is utterly indivisible and does not admit multiplicity either in mind or in reality. Unlike *wāḥid*, which implies the possibility of plurality (such as a sequence of one, two, or three), *aḥad* signifies absolute unity beyond enumeration or composition. He explains that the word *aḥad* is an adjective derived from the notion of unity (*al-waḥdah*), just as *wāḥid* is; however, there is a distinction between the two. *Aḥad* refers to something that is not susceptible to plurality or multiplicity, neither externally nor conceptually. It cannot be counted, whereas *wāḥid* denotes something that can, at least in theory, be followed by a second or third, whether in reality, imagination, or abstraction. Hence, when one says 'no one from the people came to me' (*lam ya'tīnī aḥadun*), this denies not only one person but all possible persons, whereas 'no single one of the people came' (*lam ya'tīnī wāḥidun*) negates only one individual, but not necessarily all. For this reason, *aḥad* is never used in affirmative speech about anything other than God, while *wāḥid* may describe any singular entity.

Hence, the use of *aḥad* in Surah al-Ikhlāṣ perfectly expresses the doctrine of divine simplicity and incomparability by rejecting any form of multiplicity or composition. In this sense, the term *aḥad* aligns not only with theological precision but also with Neuwirth's broader hermeneutic framework. If, as she suggests, the surah engages with creedal discourse such as the Nicene Creed, its subsequent verses can be read as a rejection of the Trinitarian plurality affirmed in that creed. Thus, the Qur'anic use of *aḥad*, rather than representing a grammatical irregularity, is semantically and theologically deliberate, as it negates all forms of multiplicity and composition within the divine essence (al-Rāzī 1993, 32: 180; al-Ālūsī 1997, 30: 488).

A closer lexical and exegetical examination of the term *aḥad* in Surah al-Ikhlāṣ provides critical insight into the applicability of Riffaterre's semiotic theory to the Qur'an. The study of "ungrammaticality" in a revealed text like the Qur'an must consider the broader linguistic and semantic network of the entire corpus instead of isolating a single word within one surah. If Riffaterre's semiotic model aims to uncover secondary layers of meaning through linguistic deviations, then in the Qur'an, such meanings emerge

only through the coherence and interdependence of its internal textual system.

A comparative analysis of Qur'anic usage reveals that *aḥad* is used only once as a descriptive attribute of God, occurring precisely in this surah. Far from being an instance of grammatical irregularity, this singular use reveals deliberate linguistic precision. By virtue of its semantic connotation of denying any form of composition or duality, the term *aḥad* perfectly accords with the thematic and theological core of a surah devoted to *al-Tawḥīd* (divine unity) and *al-Ikhlāṣ* (pure devotion). Thus, what Neuwirth interprets as an "ungrammaticality" may, in fact, represent a purposeful semiotic marker that intensifies the surah's assertion of God's absolute oneness.

Accordingly, the productive application of literary semiotic theories like Riffaterre's in Qur'anic studies depends on their integration with Arabic linguistic principles, intra-Qur'anic analysis, and the insights of classical Islamic exegesis. This integrative approach avoids oversimplifying the Qur'anic text and enriches scholarly understanding of its subtle linguistic architecture and multi-layered meaning. Such a synthesis opens a valuable space for dialogue between modern literary criticism and traditional Qur'anic hermeneutics, thereby fostering a deeper appreciation of the Qur'an as both a sacred and a linguistically intricate text.

On the other hand, it may be argued that the notion of "ungrammaticality" in Riffaterre's theory does not necessarily imply an actual grammatical deviation in the Qur'an. Instead, it can be understood as a semiotic signal pointing toward a hidden intertext or subtext. In Riffaterre's framework, ungrammaticality functions as an intentional disruption that alerts the reader to a deeper level of meaning, serving as an interpretive gap through which the text gestures beyond itself. When applied to the Qur'an, this concept can be reinterpreted as a marker of intertextual resonance rather than a linguistic irregularity.

From this perspective, the use of *aḥad* in Surah al-Ikhlāṣ does not represent a grammatical anomaly, but rather a deliberate semantic intensification that invites reflection on the concept of divine oneness. Its rarity and exclusivity in reference to God operate as a semiotic device that guides the reader toward the surah's deeper theological focus. The apparent "irregularity" thus functions as a rhetorical strategy by signalling the presence of a broader discursive context, potentially the theological debates of Late Antiquity, such as the Trinitarian formulations of the Nicene Creed. In this sense, Qur'anic ungrammaticality, when viewed through Riffaterre's lens, becomes not a departure from linguistic norms but a sophisticated intertextual mechanism through which meaning is both concealed and revealed.

While it is true that classical Muslim exegetes devoted considerable attention to explaining the exceptional use of *aḥad*, this interpretive effort does not imply that they perceived the term as a linguistic anomaly or a breach of Arabic grammatical norms. Rather, the exegetical and lexicographical traditions consistently treat the distinction between *aḥad* and *wāḥid* as a semantically grounded differentiation within the internal logic of classical Arabic.

Lexicographers such as al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (2009, 24) explicitly state that *wāḥid* denotes numerical oneness, whereas *aḥad* conveys an intensified form of unity that excludes compositionality, resemblance, or multiplicity in any form. Similarly, Ibn Manẓūr (1993, 3:24–26) emphasizes that *aḥad* in affirmative usage is almost exclusively applied to God because of its unique semantic force in denoting absolute incomparability. This lexical basis is directly reflected in major exegetical works. Al-Ṭabarī (1969, 30:223–224) glosses *aḥad* as “He who has no peer, likeness, or equal,” thereby highlighting its positive semantic role rather than any grammatical irregularity. Al-Zamakhsharī (2009, 4:805–806) likewise interprets *aḥad* as denoting complete indivisibility and the negation of any possible partner, a meaning he considers intrinsic to the term itself. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (1993, 32: 180) advances this semantic hierarchy explicitly by arguing that *aḥad* signifies a stronger and more exclusive form of unity than *wāḥid*, since it negates even the theoretical possibility of multiplicity.

Consequently, classical exegetes did not treat the Qur'anic use of *aḥad* as a syntactic deviation necessitating ad hoc theological justification. Their interpretive attention reflects a recognition of the term's rhetorical prominence and theological precision within Arabic usage, rather than an assumption of “ungrammaticality” in the technical sense employed by Neuwirth or Riffaterre. Thus, while a semiotic reading may legitimately interpret the verse's stylistic markedness as a cue for deeper hermeneutical engagement, the premodern Arabic tradition consistently situates the distinction between *aḥad* and *wāḥid* within the semantic and rhetorical resources of the language, rather than outside its normative patterns.

7. Conclusion

This study has explored Michael Riffaterre's semiotic theory and its application in Qur'anic scholarship, particularly within the intertextual studies of Angelika Neuwirth. It has demonstrated how Riffaterre's structuralist model, which focuses on the notions of “ungrammaticality,” dual signification, and two-level reading, illuminates the Qur'an's semantic and rhetorical depth. Neuwirth's utilization of this framework to interpret

the Qur'an as a poetic and dialogical text opens significant possibilities for understanding its engagement with the intellectual and religious milieu of Late Antiquity.

The analysis of Surah al-Ikhlāṣ shows how these theoretical tools may be used to examine Qur'anic diction and structure in detail. By focusing on the term *aḥad* and its contrast with *wāḥid*, the study reveals that what might appear to be a "grammatical irregularity" is, in fact, a deliberate semantic intensification. This choice conveys the surah's theological focus on divine unity and incomparability. When *aḥad* is viewed through Riffaterre's lens, its singularity and exclusive usage in reference to God function as a semiotic marker that invites readers to engage in a deeper interpretive process. In this sense, the so-called "ungrammaticality" does not reflect a deviation from linguistic norms but instead operates as a rhetorical and intertextual signal pointing toward hidden layers of meaning.

Moreover, reinterpreting Riffaterre's notion of ungrammaticality as an indicator of intertextual resonance rather than a structural anomaly allows for a more nuanced and theologically coherent reading of the Qur'an. It acknowledges the text's engagement with the conceptual and linguistic frameworks of its audience while affirming its unique mode of revelation and discourse. This perspective suggests that the Qur'an's distinctive linguistic expressions, such as *aḥad*, should not be analysed in isolation. Rather, they should be examined across their full Qur'anic context to enable scholars to discern deliberate semantic patterns that reinforce the text's theological unity.

While Riffaterre's semiotic model offers valuable insights into the multi-layered structure and interpretive depth of the Qur'an, its application must remain sensitive to the text's revelatory and sacred nature. Treating the Qur'an merely as a literary artifact risks obscuring its theological purpose and spiritual function. Therefore, a balanced methodology—one that integrates semiotic, linguistic, and hermeneutical approaches within the framework of traditional Arabic grammar and *tafsīr*, provides the most fruitful path forward.

In conclusion, the semiotic theory of Riffaterre, when critically adapted, serves as a powerful analytical tool for exploring the Qur'an's rhetorical complexity, intertextual depth, and semantic coherence. It enables a richer understanding of how linguistic form and theological content intertwine within the Qur'anic text. However, such inquiry must proceed with philological rigor and theological awareness to ensure that literary interpretation complements, rather than competes with, the Qur'an's revealed nature.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Research Center for Culture and Knowledge of the Qur'an at the Islamic Sciences and Culture Academy for its valuable and continuous support throughout this research project.

Declarations

Funding: No funding was received for conducting this study.

Conflict of Interest: The author declares no competing interests.

References

The Holy Qur'an

The Holy Bible

Ahmadi, B. (2005). *Structure and Interpretation of Text* (in Persian). Tehran: Markaz Publications.

Al-Ālūsī, M. (1997). *Rūḥ al-ma'ānī fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'aẓīm wa-al-sab' al-mathānī*. Beirut: Dār al-Fikr.

Al-'Askarī, A. H. (1985). *Al-Furūq al-lughawiyah*. Riyadh: Dār al-Fikr.

Al-Fīrūzābādī, M. (1983). *Al-Qāmūs al-muḥīṭ*. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah.

Alizadeh Mousavi, S. H. (2020). *The Relationship between the Qur'an and the Bible: A Study of Angelika Neuwirth's Perspective*. Qom: Islamic Research Institute for Culture and Thought.

Allen, G. (2000). *Intertextuality*. Tehran: Markaz Publications.

Al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, 'A. (2009). *Al-Mufradāt fī gharīb al-Qur'ān*. Damascus: Dār al-Qalam.

Al-Rāzī, F. (1993). *Al-Tafsīr al-kabīr (Maḥāṭib al-ghayb)*. Qom: Daftar Tablighāte Islāmī.

Al-Suyūṭī, J. (n.d.). *Al-Muḥḥir fī 'ulūm al-lughah wa al-adab*. Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Kutub al-'Arabiyyah.

Al-Ṭabarī, M. (1969). *Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta'wīl āy al-Qur'ān*. Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif.

Al-Zabīdī, M. (1994). *Tāj al-'arūs min jawāhir al-qāmūs*. Beirut: Dār al-Fikr.

Al-Zamakhsharī, M. (2009). *Al-Kashshāf 'an ḥaqā'iq ghawāmiḍ al-tanzīl*. Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifa.

Eftekhari, T. and Barekat, B. (2011). Semiotics of Poetry: Applying Michael Riffaterre's Theory to a Poem by Forough Farrokhzad. *Comparative Literature and Language Research Quarterly*, 4, 109-130.

- Frow, J. (2005). *Genre*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Ibn Manzūr, M. (1993). *Lisān al-‘Arab*. Beirut: Dār Ṣādir.
- Kristeva, J. (1998). *New maladies of the soul*. Columbia U. P.
- Maybudī, A. R. (1982). *Kashf al-asrār wa ‘uddah al-abrār*. Tehran: Amirkabir.
- Nabiloo, A. (2011). Application of Michael Riffaterre's Semiotic Theory in Analyzing Nima's "Phoenix". *Journal of Foreign Language Research*, 1(2), 81-94.
- Namvar Motlagh, B. (2015). *An Introduction to Intertextuality* (in Persian). Tehran: Sokhan.
- Neuwirth, A. (2002). Form and Structure of the Qur’an. In *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’an* (Vol. 2). Leiden: Brill.
- Neuwirth, A. (2004). Rhetoric and the Qur’an. In *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’an* (Vol. 4). Leiden: Brill.
- Neuwirth, A. (2010a). Two Faces of the Qur’an: Qur’an and Muṣḥaf. *Oral Tradition*, 25(1), 141–156.
- Neuwirth, A. (2010b). *Scripture, Poetry and the Making of a Community: Reading the Qur’an as a Literary Text*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Neuwirth, A. (2013). Locating the Qur’an in the Epistemic Space of Late Antiquity. *Ankara Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi*, 54(2), 189–208.
- Neuwirth, A., Sinai, N., & Marx, M. (Eds.). (2010). *The Qur’an in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur’anic Milieu*. Leiden: Brill.
- Payandeh, H. (2019). *Critical Theory: An Interdisciplinary Coursebook* (in Persian). Tehran: Samt Publications.
- Riffaterre, M. (1978). *Semiotics of Poetry*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Selden, R. (2005). *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* (Trans. A. Mokhber). Tehran: Tarhe No.
- Tabataba’i, M. H. (1995). *Al-Mizān fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān* (Trans. S. M. B. Mousavī). Qom: Islamic Seminary Publications.