

Unraveling the Linguistic Thought of ‘alī Ibn Ḥamzah Al-Kisā’ī: The Journey from Kufan Grammar to Qur’ānic Qirā’āt

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the linguistic thought of ‘Alī ibn Ḥamzah al-Kisā’ī, a prominent figure of the Kufan school of grammar and one of the canonical imams of the mutawātir Qur’anic qirā’āt, with the aim of reconstructing his conceptual and methodological approach to classical Arabic. The focus of the study lies in the interaction between the grammatical principles of the Kufan school developed by al-Kisā’ī and their application in the Qur’anic qirā’āt, including phonological, syntactic, and morphological dimensions. Through an analysis of classical texts, grammatical manuscripts, and contemporary studies, this research finds that al-Kisā’ī’s approach emphasizes the use of spoken Arabic, tribal dialects, and authentic transmissions from Bedouin Arabs as foundational sources for the formulation of grammatical rules and variations in Qur’anic recitation. The study demonstrates that al-Kisā’ī’s intellectual contribution was not merely the systematic development of grammatical theory, but also the construction of an integrative model that bridges linguistics and qirā’āt, which remains relevant for modern Arabic linguistic studies. In conclusion, the reconstruction of al-Kisā’ī’s thought provides new insights into the relationship between Kufan grammatical theory and the practice of qirā’āt, while reaffirming his significant contribution to the Islamic linguistic tradition.

Keywords: ‘Alī ibn Ḥamzah al-Kisā’ī; Kufan Grammar; Qur’anic Qirā’āt; Arabic Linguistics; Grammatical Tradition; Integrative Thought.

INTRODUCTION

The development of classical Arabic linguistics cannot be separated from the early efforts of Muslim scholars to understand and analyze the linguistic structure of the Qur’an and the Arab tradition. Historically, the discipline of *naḥw* (Arabic grammar) emerged as a systematic field aimed at defining the grammatical rules and structural features of the Arabic language; it became foundational for the comprehension of revealed texts and communication within early Muslim society. The methodological differences between the major grammatical schools—particularly Kufah and Basrah—reflect the intellectual diversity of early Islamic linguistic inquiry, in which ‘Alī ibn Ḥamzah al-Kisā’ī is regarded as a pioneering figure who made significant contributions to this tradition (Rafif Irfan et al., 2024).

‘Alī ibn Ḥamzah al-Kisā’ī, born in Kufah around 119 AH and who passed away in 189 AH, is recognized as one of the leading imams of the mutawātir Qur’anic qirā’āt as well as a central authority in the Kufan grammatical school. He was not only a reference in the study of Qur’anic recitation, but also acknowledged as a grammarian proficient in applying linguistic principles within his own recitation. His position as an integrator between grammar and qirā’āt highlights his unique role in the history of Islamic linguistics (QiraatHub, 2025).

Al-Kisā’ī’s grammatical approach demonstrates a particular emphasis on spoken Arabic and Bedouin dialects, alongside authentic transmitted reports, as foundational sources for the construction of grammatical rules. This approach contrasts with that of the Basran school, which tended to be more theoretical and deductive, especially in its reliance on *qiyās* (analogical reasoning) as a principal explanatory framework in grammar. Comparative studies of grammatical concepts indicate that these methodological differences reflect distinct forms of linguistic logic that are essential for understanding the structure of classical Arabic (Rafif Irfan et al., 2024).

Within the discipline of *qirā'āt*, al-Kisā'ī's recitation was transmitted through two primary narrators and exhibits specific phonetic characteristics and recitational variations influenced by grammatical structure and sociolinguistic dialects. Contemporary research on the features of al-Kisā'ī's recitation demonstrates that elements such as *imālah*, *rawm*, and orthographic variation may be analyzed not merely as recitational differences, but also as manifestations of underlying linguistic principles embedded within the Qur'anic tradition (Rahmi Damis, 2025).

Accordingly, this study seeks to reconstruct al-Kisā'ī's linguistic thought comprehensively by linking the principles of Kufan grammar he developed with the practice of Qur'anic *qirā'āt* that he transmitted. This analytical approach is expected to provide a clearer understanding of the relationship between linguistic theory and practice in the early Islamic scholarly tradition, while also offering new perspectives relevant to contemporary studies in Arabic linguistics and *qirā'āt* (Āzād, Iravany, & Asadi, 2016).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies on the methodological differences in the grammatical thought of Imam al-Kisā'ī indicate that the Kufan grammatical tradition differs conceptually from the Basran school. The comparative study conducted by Rafif Irfan et al. (2024) examining the differences between Imam al-Kisā'ī and other grammarians found that these distinctions encompass various grammatical issues, including the function of *na'am* and *bi'sa*, the status of verbs in particular expressive forms, and the parameters of diverse syntactic structures. These findings affirm that al-Kisā'ī did not merely follow an established tradition but introduced his own grammatical perspective, thereby enriching the corpus of Arabic grammar (Rafif Irfan et al., 2024).

Modern scholarship on the history of Arabic grammar has emphasized the methodological diversity that existed among early grammarians. Versteegh (1997) notes that the development of Arabic linguistics was shaped by intellectual debates concerning the sources of linguistic evidence and the appropriate methods for formulating grammatical rules. These debates became particularly visible in the methodological differences between the Basran and Kufan schools.

Owens (1988) argues that the Kufan grammatical tradition demonstrates a more descriptive orientation toward linguistic data. Kufan grammarians were generally more willing to accept dialectal variation and poetic usage as legitimate linguistic evidence. In contrast, Basran grammarians tended to restrict their grammatical reasoning to more standardized forms of linguistic evidence.

In addition to grammatical scholarship, studies on Qur'anic recitation highlight the linguistic significance of *qirā'āt* in understanding early Arabic phonology and morphology. Weiss (2002) emphasizes that the variant readings of the Qur'ān preserve important linguistic features of early Arabic dialects, while Larcher (2012) demonstrates how these variants contribute to the study of syntactic variation within the Qur'anic text.

Although these studies provide important insights into Arabic grammatical traditions and Qur'anic linguistics, relatively few works examine the integrative relationship between the science of grammar and the discipline of *qirā'āt*. Therefore, analysing the linguistic methodology of al-Kisā'ī offers an important opportunity to bridge these two fields and contribute to contemporary discussions in Arabic linguistic studies.

In the context of Qur'anic *qirā'āt*, contemporary research on al-Kisā'ī's recitation demonstrates that his readings were shaped by the principle of *athar*—that is, adherence to transmitted recitational traditions—while also considering other authenticated readings. Redwan Albakri (2025), employing a critical approach to evaluate al-Kisā'ī's recitation based on traditional sources, shows that his recitational choices frequently align with transmitted textual evidence and, in some instances, correspond with or differ from other recognized canonical readings. These findings provide evidence that al-Kisā'ī's *qirā'āt* were not merely independent interpretations, but were firmly rooted in a sustained textual and traditional methodology (Redwan Albakri, 2025).

Other literature on the principles of al-Kisā'ī's recitation further contributes to understanding the relationship between *qirā'āt* and linguistic structure. In her study on al-Kisā'ī's recitational rules, Rahmi Damis (2025)

highlights phonetic and morphological aspects of his recitation as essential elements integrated with grammatical structure. The study demonstrates that variations such as *imālah*, *idghām*, and *izhār* function not merely as phonetic alternatives but also reflect underlying grammatical structures within different qirā'āt contexts (Rahmi Damis, 2025).

Classical and historical studies must also be situated within this literature review to provide contrast to al-Kisā'ī's linguistic thought. Although works comparing him directly with figures such as Sibawayh of the Basran school do not always focus explicitly on al-Kisā'ī, foundational grammatical literature such as *al-Kitāb* by Sibawayh offers essential context regarding methodological debates between the Basran and Kufan schools. These differences in approach constitute a critical foundation for studies that trace al-Kisā'ī's linguistic innovations within the broader history of early Islamic linguistics (Versteegh, 1997; Sibawayh, 8th c.).

Contemporary studies in the field of qirā'āt more generally, even when not exclusively centered on al-Kisā'ī, indicate that Qur'anic recitation and its variations have significant implications for linguistic, grammatical, and phonological interpretations of the Qur'anic text. For example, Abdul Majid et al. (2009) discuss the impact of recitational variation on semantic dimensions and phonetic structure, underscoring the importance of analyzing qirā'āt as a linguistic component in Qur'anic studies. This supports the framework of the present study, which views al-Kisā'ī's recitation not merely as a recitational phenomenon, but as an integrated object of linguistic inquiry (Abdul Majid et al., 2009).

Overall, recent scholarship suggests that the study of al-Kisā'ī requires not only historical comparison but also an integrative approach that bridges grammar and qirā'āt. A comprehensive analysis combining classical grammatical studies, traditional recitational variations, and contemporary evidence forms an essential basis for reconstructing al-Kisā'ī's linguistic thought in this research.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in an integrative framework of classical Arabic linguistics that conceptualizes the relationship between Arabic grammar (*naḥw*) and Qur'anic recitation (*qirā'āt*). Historically, Arabic grammatical theory developed through the interaction between linguistic analysis and the need to preserve the linguistic accuracy of the Qur'ān. As a result, the sciences of grammar and *qirā'āt* evolved in close intellectual proximity.

Within this framework, the distinction between the Basran and Kufan grammatical schools plays a significant role. Basran grammarians tended to emphasize *qiyās* (analogical reasoning) and systematic theoretical structures, whereas Kufan grammarians relied more heavily on *simā'* (attested linguistic usage), including Bedouin dialects, poetic language, and transmitted recitational traditions.

The present study adopts this theoretical perspective in order to analyse the linguistic thought of 'Alī ibn Ḥamzah al-Kisā'ī. By examining the interaction between Kufan grammatical methodology and the linguistic features reflected in Qur'anic recitation, the study seeks to reconstruct al-Kisā'ī's intellectual contribution to the development of classical Arabic linguistics.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are formulated to provide a clear focus for investigating the linguistic thought of 'Alī ibn Ḥamzah al-Kisā'ī within the historical and theoretical framework of Arabic linguistics. The primary objectives are as follows:

1. To examine the biographical background and intellectual formation of 'Alī ibn Ḥamzah al-Kisā'ī, including the influence of his teachers and scholarly traditions that shaped his methodology in grammar and qirā'āt.
2. To reconstruct al-Kisā'ī's linguistic approach and principles within the Kufan grammatical tradition, including his strategic use of spoken Arabic, Bedouin dialects, and authentic transmitted reports in formulating grammatical rules.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative approach using library research and historical-textual analysis. The objective of this approach is to reconstruct the linguistic thought of al-Kisā'ī through a systematic examination of classical and contemporary sources related to Arabic grammar and Qur'ānic recitation.

The selection of primary sources was based on their historical relevance to the development of early Arabic linguistic scholarship. Classical biographical and linguistic works—such as those attributed to al-Dhahabī and al-Suyūfī—were selected because they document the intellectual environment in which al-Kisā'ī lived and provide important information regarding the transmission of grammatical and recitational traditions.

Secondary sources consist of modern academic studies on Arabic grammatical traditions, Kufan linguistic methodology, and Qur'ānic recitation. These studies were selected based on their relevance to the research objectives and their contribution to contemporary academic discussions in Arabic linguistics.

The analytical procedure involved three stages. First, content analysis was conducted to identify key linguistic principles and methodological approaches attributed to al-Kisā'ī in the available sources. Second, comparative analysis was applied to examine the differences between Kufan and Basran grammatical methodologies. Finally, an interpretative synthesis was developed in order to reconstruct the relationship between grammatical theory and Qur'ānic recitation in al-Kisā'ī's intellectual framework.

Biographical Background of 'Alī ibn Ḥamzah al-Kisā'ī

'Alī ibn Ḥamzah al-Kisā'ī was born around 119 AH / 737 CE in Kufah, one of the major intellectual centers of the Islamic world in the eighth century. He is recognized as a leading grammarian of the Kufan school and as one of the renowned imams of the seven canonical qirā'āt (*al-qirā'āt al-sab'*). His epithet "al-Kisā'ī" is traditionally linked to a report that he once wore a distinctive *kisā'* (cloak) during an act of worship, a designation that subsequently became associated with his name.

Al-Kisā'ī's scholarly life extended beyond his teaching activities in Kufah. He is reported to have traveled to Rayy (in present-day Iran) and Baghdad in pursuit and dissemination of knowledge, and he notably served as a teacher of qirā'āt to the Abbasid caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd. He is believed to have passed away in 189 AH / 809 CE while on a journey, leaving behind a rich intellectual legacy, particularly in the fields of grammar and Qur'anic qirā'āt (Safitri & Ulya, 2023).

Education and Intellectual Formation

Al-Kisā'ī's early education took place in Kufah, which at that time was a major intellectual center with a flourishing tradition of Arabic linguistics and Qur'anic exegesis. He studied under leading Kufan grammarians who emphasized the use of empirical linguistic data—such as classical Arabic poetry and spoken variants—as grammatical evidence.

In addition, al-Kisā'ī devoted himself intensively to the study of Qur'anic qirā'āt, eventually mastering one of the seven widely recognized canonical recitations (*al-qirā'āt al-sab'*). This educational background shaped him into an integrative linguist capable of systematically linking grammatical principles with variations in Qur'anic recitation. His approach highlights his ability to balance grammatical theory with oral recitational practice, which later became a defining characteristic of the Kufan tradition (Rafif Irfan et al., 2024).

Al-Kisā'ī's Linguistic Approach and Principles in Kufan Grammar

Imam al-Kisā'ī is one of the principal figures associated with the Kufan school of grammar in the history of Arabic linguistics. The Kufan school emerged as a significant current in the development of *naḥw* following the early Basran works, evolving in parallel with the Basran tradition and contributing substantially to classical Arabic linguistics. The Kufan approach is known for its descriptive orientation in recording authentic linguistic forms used by native Arab speakers. Historical studies demonstrate that the Kufan school developed as an independent grammatical tradition with its own distinctive methodological features (Tazkiyatun, 2024).

In the methodology of the Kufan school, represented by al-Kisā'ī and figures such as al-Ruwāsī, emphasis was placed on oral transmission (*simā'ī*) and empirical language usage as the foundation for grammatical rule formation. This differed from the Basran school, which tended to prioritize *qiyās* (analogy) and adopt a more theoretical approach in formulating grammatical principles. The Kufan reliance on transmitted linguistic evidence enabled the preservation of authentic linguistic forms actually used in classical Arab society, rather than relying solely on abstract logical reasoning (Mahdi, 2025).

One of the central principles in al-Kisā'ī's approach was his emphasis on authentic spoken Arabic, including classical Arabic poetry and Qur'anic recitation (*qirā'āt*), as primary evidence in establishing grammatical rules. The Kufan school incorporated various *qirā'āt* traditions and textual sources as authoritative proof in determining grammatical principles, drawing on both written documentation and orally transmitted usage. This demonstrates a strong commitment to real linguistic data rather than purely abstract regulations (Rahmi Damis, 2025).

Regarding Bedouin dialects, Kufan grammarians recognized the linguistic varieties of Bedouin communities as valid and authoritative sources of evidence. These dialects were considered authentic forms of Arabic due to their close association with pre-Islamic oral tradition and everyday tribal life, thereby reflecting natural linguistic variation. The Kufan school was generally more inclusive toward such dialectal diversity compared to the Basran tradition, which tended to be more restrictive toward forms considered rare or anomalous.

Al-Kisā'ī's linguistic strategy also included the use of authenticated Qur'anic recitations and classical poetry as foundational proof for grammatical rules. Within the Kufan tradition, the recitations of renowned *qurrā'* such as al-Kisā'ī himself served as strong evidence for validating correct linguistic structures in the text. Consequently, grammatical principles were formulated on the basis of forms demonstrably used in recitational and linguistic practice. This illustrates the close interrelationship between the sciences of *qirā'āt* and *naḥw* within Kufan linguistic methodology (Rahmi Damis, 2025).

Overall, al-Kisā'ī's linguistic approach within Kufan grammar reflects a methodology grounded in authentic linguistic evidence, including oral transmission, classical Arabic poetry, Qur'anic recitations, and Bedouin dialectal variation in the formulation of grammatical rules. This approach highlights a clear methodological distinction between the Kufan and Basran schools: Kufan adopted a more descriptive and empirical orientation, whereas Basran tended to be more theoretical and analogical in deriving grammatical laws.

ANALYTICAL DISCUSSION

A critical analysis of al-Kisā'ī's linguistic methodology indicates that his approach represents a distinctive empirical orientation within the development of Arabic grammar. While Basran grammarians tended to prioritize analogical reasoning in the formulation of grammatical rules, al-Kisā'ī and other Kufan scholars placed greater emphasis on attested linguistic usage.

This methodological orientation allowed Kufan grammarians to incorporate a broader range of linguistic data, including Bedouin dialects, classical poetry, and Qur'anic recitation. Such an approach reflects an early descriptive model of linguistic analysis in which grammatical rules are derived from authentic language usage rather than purely theoretical constructs.

From the perspective of contemporary linguistics, this empirical orientation offers valuable insights into the historical development of Arabic grammar. Modern linguistic theories emphasize the importance of analysing language based on naturally occurring data. In this sense, al-Kisā'ī's methodology can be interpreted as an early precursor to descriptive linguistic approaches.

Moreover, the integration of *qirā'āt* within grammatical reasoning highlights the linguistic significance of Qur'anic recitation. Recitational variants often preserve phonological and morphological features that contribute to a deeper understanding of early Arabic linguistic diversity. Therefore, al-Kisā'ī's intellectual contribution lies not only in his role as a grammarian but also in his ability to connect grammatical theory with the linguistic realities preserved in the tradition of Qur'anic recitation.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the linguistic thought of ‘Alī ibn Ḥamzah al-Kisā’ī by analysing the interaction between Kufan grammatical principles and the practice of Qur’ānic recitation. The findings demonstrate that al-Kisā’ī developed a linguistic methodology grounded in empirical linguistic evidence, including spoken Arabic, Bedouin dialects, classical poetry, and transmitted recitational traditions. His approach reflects the distinctive characteristics of the Kufan grammatical tradition, which emphasized authentic linguistic usage in the formulation of grammatical rules. At the same time, his role as one of the canonical reciters of the Qur’ān illustrates how the science of *qirā’āt* contributed to the development of Arabic grammatical thought. Overall, the study highlights the importance of examining the relationship between grammar and Qur’ānic recitation in order to better understand the intellectual history of Arabic linguistics. Future research may further explore the linguistic implications of other canonical recitations and their role in shaping the development of classical Arabic grammar.

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