The Effectiveness of Reference in Achieving Discourse Cohesion:
A Study of Sūrat Qāf as a Model

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Abstract:

This study examines **reference** as one of the most significant mechanisms of textual cohesion in text linguistics, through an applied analysis of *Sūrat Qāf* as a case study. It proceeds from the hypothesis that reference plays a fundamental role in ensuring the cohesion and semantic continuity of Qurʾānic discourse by linking its minimal linguistic units within a coherent referential network. The study adopts a descriptive–analytical approach, drawing on the concepts of textual reference (anaphoric and cataphoric) and situational (exophoric) reference, with particular attention to their primary tools, such as pronouns and demonstratives. The analysis of the first passage of the sūrah shows that pronouns especially attached third-person pronouns constitute the most frequently used referential devices, predominantly referring to the disbelievers as the central focus of the discourse, alongside other references directed toward the Divine Self and the concepts of resurrection and recompense. The study concludes that reference in *Sūrat Qāf* is not merely a formal cohesive device, but a semantic mechanism that contributes to meaning construction, intensifies argumentative force, and ensures the unity and coherence of Qurʾānic discourse.

Keywords: reference, textual cohesion, text linguistics, Qurʾānic discourse, Sūrat Qāf

Introduction:

Textual cohesion occupies a central position in modern linguistic studies, particularly within the framework of text linguistics, as it constitutes one of the fundamental criteria that confer textuality and ensure a text's intelligibility and interpretability. Alongside coherence, cohesion functions as a structural mechanism that organizes discourse, transcending the boundaries of the individual sentence to link the components of a text into an integrated semantic and communicative whole. Among the mechanisms of cohesion, **reference** stands out as a linguistic device with a high capacity to establish

internal textual connectivity by linking linguistic elements to one another and relating utterances to their textual or situational contexts.

Qurʾānic discourse acquires particular significance in this respect, given its semantic density, structural coherence, and multiplicity of referential levels, which render it a fertile field for textual-linguistic investigation. *Sūrat Qāf* offers a salient model of such cohesion, as its discursive structure revolves around a central doctrinal theme resurrection and revival and its meanings are constructed through a precise referential network that guides the discourse and deepens its argumentative and affective impact on the recipient.

This study is grounded in the following central research question: **How does reference, as a textual-linguistic mechanism, contribute to achieving cohesion in Qurʾānic discourse in *Sūrat Qāf*?**

From this main question emerge several subsidiary questions, most notably:

- What types of reference (textual and situational) are employed in *Sūrat Qāf*, and to what extent does each type occur?
- What are the most frequently used referential tools in the sūrah, and what is the nature of their referents?
- How does reference contribute to the construction of doctrinal and argumentative meaning related to resurrection and revival?
- To what extent does reference transcend its formal function to perform a semantic and communicative role within Qurʾānic discourse?

The elements of cohesion and coherence are among the most important textual standards upon which text linguistics is founded, as they relate directly to the text/discourse itself. They are two fundamental components in the formation of a text and in the ability to interpret it. As has been stated: "Cohesion is a formal, technical process that studies structures in order to arrive at meanings, whereas coherence is an aesthetic, cognitive process that reveals the beauty and literary qualities of the text". [1]

Reference

Reference is considered one of the most important mechanisms of cohesion and the most frequently employed in texts/discourses, due to its effectiveness in ensuring textual unity and interconnectedness. This is because it operates between parts of the text namely, the smaller linguistic units. As noted, "a text contains internal and external relations connected to context, and both contribute to achieving textual cohesion" [2]

The Concept of Reference

The linguistic root (ḫ-w-l) denotes transformation, change, and movement. *Iḫāla* (reference) is a verbal noun derived from the augmented triliteral verb *aḫāla*. In *Tāj al-ʿArūs* it is stated: "*Aḫāla* the thing: it transformed from one state to another. *Aḫāla* the man: he moved from one thing to another… the house *aḫālat*: it changed…"[3]

Terminologically, reference is defined as "a process that links sentences, expressions, and texts; it refers to the operation by which a linguistic item refers to a preceding or following item. Greimas considered it a partial identifying relation established within a discourse on the syntagmatic axis between two expressions, used to connect two utterances or two paragraphs" [4] It has also been defined as "the relationship between a linguistic element called the 'relational element' and pronouns referred to as 'referential forms,' where nominal components function as relational elements, antecedents, or referents" [5]. Al-Azhar al-Zinād maintains that referential elements do not possess independent meaning in themselves; rather, they refer back to another element or elements mentioned elsewhere in the discourse.[6]

Types of Reference

Text linguists classify reference into two main types:

1. **Situational (External) Reference**: This type of reference involves the situational context as a contributor to textual cohesion. It depends on the recipient's awareness of the circumstances surrounding the production of the text/discourse, enabling the listener or reader to understand it.

2. **Textual (Internal) Reference**: This type occurs between two linguistic elements within the text itself. It is subdivided into:

a. **Anaphoric Reference (Backward Reference)**: This is the most common type in discourse, where the referential item refers back to a previously mentioned antecedent. In this case, the antecedent is substituted by a pronominal or implicit form.

b. **Cataphoric Reference (Forward Reference)**: This is the opposite of anaphoric reference, whereby the referent appears after the referring element; it is also known as forward reference.[7]

Elements of Reference

Reference consists of four elements, as follows:

1. **The Speaker or Writer (Text Producer)**: Through their intentional meaning, reference is directed toward the intended referent.
2. **The Referring Expression**: This referential form may be explicit or implicit, such as a pronoun or a deictic expression, guiding the reader either within the text or beyond it.
3. **The Referent**: This may exist either inside or outside the text in the form of words, phrases, or meanings. Comprehension of the text enables the recipient to identify the referent.
4. **The Relationship between the Referring Expression and the Referent**: Ideally, there should be congruence between the referring element and the referent. [8]

The Importance of Reference

Reference plays an effective role in achieving textual cohesion, as it contributes to the integration of textual elements. It "takes into account the relationships between parts of the text by embodying them and creating semantic relations through referential elements". [9] It connects elements of the text, whether linguistic or otherwise. Its importance is manifested in the following aspects:

1. **Economy and Semantic Stability**: By structurally linking expressions without compromising the coherence of underlying information.
2. **Semantic Precision**: By linking distant parts of the text while avoiding repetition that may lead to ambiguity or confusion. [10]
3. "Along with other devices, reference contributes to creating discourse cohesion and ensuring its continuity, by linking the discourse to a single, coherent mental model from beginning to end.
4. Reference also contributes to ensuring the communicative process itself, as successful communication requires that interlocutors explicitly or implicitly agree on a shared domain of discourse". [11]

Accordingly, reference is a crucial mechanism in achieving textual cohesion through linking the components of the text.

The Theme of the Sūrah

The sūrah under discussion is Sūrat Qāf, a Meccan sūrah consisting of forty-five verses. It addresses core aspects of Islamic belief monotheism, prophethood, resurrection, and recompense and revolves primarily around the theme of resurrection and rebirth, to the extent that this theme constitutes its distinctive character. The Qur'an

addresses this issue through decisive proof and compelling argumentation. This sūrah powerfully impacts human perception, shaking the heart and evoking awe and fear of God through its elements of exhortation and warning.

1. The sūrah opens with the central issue that the disbelievers of Quraysh denied and found astonishing: life after death and resurrection after decay. God says: Sūrat {قٓ وَالْقُرْءَانِ اِلْمَجِيدِ ١ بَلْ عَجِبُوٓا أَن جَآءَهُم مُّنذِرٌ مِّنْهُمْ فَقَالَ اَلْكَٰفِرُونَ هَٰذَا شَىْءٌ عَجِيبٌ ٢} Qāf:1–2

up to His saying:

Sūrat Qāf:5 {بَلْ كَذَّبُوا بِالْحَقِّ لَمَّا جَآءَهُمْ فَهُمْ فِى أَمْرٍ مَّرِيجٍ ٥}

2. It then draws the attention of the polytheists who denied resurrection to the immense power of God manifested in the observable universe heaven, earth, water, vegetation, fruits, palm trees, crops all serving as clear proofs of His ability, from His saying:

Sūrat Qāf:6 {أَفَلَمْ يَنظُرُوٓا إِلَى اَلسَّمَآءِ فَوْقَهُمْ كَيْفَ بَنَيْنَٰهَا وَزَيَّنَّٰهَا وَمَا لَهَا مِن فُرُوجٍ ٦} to His saying:

Sūrat Qāf:11 {رِّزْقًا لِّلْعِبَادِ وَأَحْيَيْنَا بِهِ بَلْدَةً مَّيْتًا كَذَٰلِكَ اَلْخُرُوجُ ١١}

3. The sūrah then turns to the fate of earlier nations who denied the truth and the calamities and punishments that befell them, as a warning to the disbelievers of Mecca. It subsequently addresses the agonies of death, the terror of resurrection, and the horrors of reckoning, culminating in the casting of the criminals into Hellfire, from His saying:

Sūrat Qāf:12 {كَذَّبَتْ قَبْلَهُمْ قَوْمُ نُوحٍ وَأَصْحَٰبُ اُلرَّسِّ وَثَمُودُ ١٢}

to His saying:

Sūrat Qāf:30 {يَوْمَ يَقُولُ لِجَهَنَّمَ هَلِ اِمْتَلَأْتِ وَتَقُولُ هَلْ مِن مَّزِيدٍ ٣٠}

4. It then moves on to describe the state of the righteous believers in the gardens of bliss and concludes with the description of the divine call by which people will emerge from their graves as if they were scattered locusts, driven toward recompense. This serves as confirmation of resurrection and rebirth, which the polytheists denied, [12] from His saying:

Sūrat Qāf:31 {وَأُزْلِفَتِ الْجَنَّةُ لِلْمُتَّقِينَ غَيْرَ بَعِيدٍ ۞ ٣١}

to His saying:

Sūrat Qāf:45 {نَحْنُ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا يَقُولُونَ ۖ وَمَا أَنتَ عَلَيْهِم بِجَبَّارٍ ۖ فَذَكِّرْ بِالْقُرْآنِ مَن يَخَافُ وَعِيدِ ۞ ٤٥}

Referential Devices in the First Passage of Sūrat Qāf

Referent	Referring Expression	Referred Item	Referential Form	Type of Reference	Verse
The disbelievers of Mecca	ʿajibū (they wondered) – jāʾahum (came to them) – minhum (from among them)	—	Attached pronoun (–ū / –hum)	Textual reference (cataphoric)	02
The Messenger ﷺ	—	—	Attached pronoun (–hu)	Textual reference (cataphoric)	02
Resurrection and rebirth	hādhā (this)	—	Demonstrative pronoun (hādhā)	Textual reference (anaphoric) / Situational reference	02
The disbelievers of Mecca	mitnā (we died) – kunnā (we were)	—	Attached pronoun (–nā)	Textual reference (anaphoric)	03
Resurrection and rebirth	dhālika (that)	—	Demonstrative pronoun (dhālika)	Situational reference	03
God Almighty	ʿalimnā (We know)	—	Attached pronoun (–nā)	Situational reference	04

	– *ʿindanā* (with Us)				
The disbelievers	*minhum* (from among them)	—	Attached pronoun (–hum)	Textual reference (anaphoric)	04
The disbelievers	*kadhdhabū* (they denied) – *jāʾahum* (came to them) – *fahum* (so they are)	—	Attached pronoun (–ū / –hum)	Textual reference (anaphoric)	05

Through the first passage of Sūrat Qāf, it becomes evident that referential devices recur in the form of pronouns, demonstrative nouns, and relative nouns. What is particularly noticeable in this passage is the predominance of pronominal reference, as pronouns function as substitutes for explicit nouns. In this passage, attached pronouns are employed extensively: nine of them refer to a single element, namely the disbelievers. This indicates that this element constitutes the primary focus of the discourse, since "the most important element in a text is the one to which the greatest number of referential devices are linked; this phenomenon is known as 'referential hierarchy'" [13]

Two of these pronouns refer to God Almighty (U), manifested through the referring element (the attached pronoun *–nā*). This constitutes an external, contextual reference, as the referent God Almighty is not explicitly mentioned in the text but is inferred from context. Through this referential device, the discourse presents a divine response to the disbelievers' claim in their denial of resurrection and rebirth. God is the Originator and the Restorer, who brings creation into existence from nothingness and brings it back again.

As for demonstrative nouns, they are used twice in this passage as referential elements. A demonstrative noun is defined as "an element that performs two functions in language: (1) it points to and identifies the referent within the deictic situation, independent of anything outside its functional scope, and the listener relies on it in interpretation; (2) it substitutes for the referent, referring back to it and establishing a

connection with it, where comprehension depends on recalling that referent, whether through prior knowledge, sensory perception, or otherwise". [14]

In the first instance, the demonstrative noun is used with two referential orientations. In the first orientation, it functions as an internal, anaphoric textual reference, as the demonstrative refers back to a previously mentioned element, namely the Prophet peace be upon him, in the verse:

Sūrat Qāf:2 {بَلْ عَجِبُوٓا۟ أَن جَآءَهُم مُّنذِرٌ مِّنْهُمْ فَقَالَ ٱلْكَٰفِرُونَ هَٰذَا شَىْءٌ عَجِيبٌ ٢}

That is, their amazement at the coming of a man from among themselves as a warner. The demonstrative thus refers to a warner among them. This "amazing thing" is explained in other Qur'anic verses, such as: {أَكَانَ لِلنَّاسِ عَجَبًا أَنْ أَوْحَيْنَآ إِلَىٰ رَجُلٍ مِّنْهُمْ أَنْ أَنذِرِ ٱلنَّاسَ وَبَشِّرِ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ أَنَّ لَهُمْ قَدَمَ صِدْقٍ عِندَ رَبِّهِمْ قَالَ ٱلْكَٰفِرُونَ إِنَّ هَٰذَا لَسَٰحِرٌ مُّبِينٌ ٢} (Sūrat Yunus:2)

and likewise in His saying:

Sūrat Al–) {وَمَا مَنَعَ ٱلنَّاسَ أَن يُؤْمِنُوٓا۟ إِذْ جَآءَهُمُ ٱلْهُدَىٰٓ إِلَّآ أَن قَالُوٓا۟ أَبَعَثَ ٱللَّهُ بَشَرًا رَّسُولًا ٩٤} Isra:94)

In this orientation, the demonstrative reference is identifiable through the linguistic context, as it constitutes a short-range internal anaphoric reference.

In the second orientation, the reference is external, as the demonstrative refers to an element not explicitly stated in the verse, namely resurrection and rebirth. This referent is inferred from context. As noted, it is "a coordination of their amazement at resurrection with their amazement at prophethood, where *this* refers to an ambiguous element clarified by what follows in the interrogative sentence" [15] This is evident in their statement:

Sūrat Qāf:3 {أَءِذَا مِتْنَا وَكُنَّا تُرَابًا ذَٰلِكَ رَجْعٌ بَعِيدٌ ٣}

Thus, their amazement in this orientation is directed toward resurrection and rebirth. The demonstrative (*hādhā*) therefore refers to an implicit element clarified by the subsequent discourse.

Accordingly, the demonstrative (*hādhā*) in this verse functions along two referential paths:

1. An internal, short-range textual reference.
2. An external, contextual reference.

In the second instance, the demonstrative (*dhālika*) is used in the verse: Sūrat Qāf:3 ﴿اَءِذَا مِتْنَا وَكُنَّا تُرَابًا ۚ ذَٰلِكَ رَجْعٌ بَعِيدٌ ۝ ٣﴾

Here, the demonstrative (*dhālika*) refers to an omitted element whose (implicit reconstruction) is (*buʿithnā* – "we are resurrected"). The use of (*dhālika*), which denotes distance, reflects the disbelievers' perception of resurrection as impossible and far-fetched. Hence, they employ a demonstrative indicating remoteness. As explained: "The original form (*dhā*) denotes proximity; the *kāf* is added for address, and the *lām* is added to indicate distance. It is kasrated to avoid the meeting of two consonants and not fathated to avoid confusion with the possessive *lām*. When *dhā* appears without such markers, it denotes proximity by default, since deixis inherently points to what is present. When indicating distance, the Arabs add the *kāf* (*dhāk*), and when the distance is greater, they add the *lām* as well (*dhālika*), whereby the strength of the form signals the strength of the meaning". [16]

Through this passage of Sūrat Qāf, it becomes clear that the referential devices employed vary between internal and external reference, although internal references predominate. The referents themselves are multiple, including God Almighty, the disbelievers, the Messenger peace be upon him, and the Day of Resurrection and Rebirth. Likewise, the referential forms vary, with attached pronouns predominant in this passage and demonstrative nouns.

Conclusion

*   Reference constitutes one of the most significant mechanisms of textual cohesion, as it contributes to textual integration and interconnection.
*   Referential devices are numerous in Sūrat Qāf and play a major role in the cohesion of the Qur'anic text.
*   In the analyzed passage of Sūrat Qāf, most references are realized through pronouns, particularly attached third-person pronouns referring to the disbelievers, around whom the discourse revolves due to their denial of prophethood, the oneness of God, and resurrection and rebirth

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