

# Contextual Significations of *al-birr* and *al-qist* in the Qur'an: A Semiotic Approach

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## Abstract

Drawing on Saussure's (1916/1959) semiotic approach, this paper explores the various meanings pertaining to the concepts of *al-birr* (kindness) and *al-qist* (justice) in the Qur'an. More specifically, this paper attempts to probe the extent to which Saussure's langue/parole binary can enhance our understanding of the Qur'anic language. The paper seeks to fulfil three main objectives: (i) identifying the various significations communicated by *al-birr* and *al-qist* in the Qur'an; (ii) showing the extent to which the historical and theological context helps to mark the various significations associated with each term; and (iii) highlighting the practical meanings the two terms convey within their different contexts in the Qur'an. This paper has two main findings: first, the two words of *al-birr* and *al-qist* communicate various meanings that are contextually shaped; and second, both *al-birr* and *al-qist* portray Islam as a religion of peace and tolerance and being committed to fostering societal harmony through the principles of kindness and justice. Further, the findings of this study are anticipated to contribute to cross-cultural communication by fostering intercultural dialogue amongst people from diverse cultural backgrounds and, therefore, challenge the narratives in some media that represent Islam as intolerant or harsh towards non-Muslims and narrow a cultural gap that has always been nurtured and sustained by a We-Them discourse.

**Keywords:** *al-birr*, *al-qist*, contextual significations, cross-cultural communications, langue and parole, semiotics, the Qur'an

## 1. Introduction

Based on Chandler's (2007) assumption that signs "take the form of words" and that they "have no intrinsic meaning and become signs only when we invest them with meaning" (p. 13), together with his argument that "anything can be a sign as long as someone interprets it as 'signifying' something, referring to or standing for something other than itself" (p. 13). It follows then that the meaningful use of signs "is at the heart of the concerns of semiotics" (p. 13). Semiotics, therefore, is entirely concerned with the meaning-making process. In light of this, the current study attempts to explore the various contextual significations of the two words *al-birr* and *al-qist* in the Qur'an, with a special focus on the extent to which the two words are semiotically augmented and contextually motivated to communicate various meanings in the Qur'anic text. In doing so, the study promotes intercultural communication, especially in settings, where English is the primary language. This is accomplished by providing English-speaking readers with helpful insights to see the Qur'anic ethical worldview as a coherent totality, in which devotion to God is intimately related to social justice and moral integrity. It also lessens cross-cultural misunderstandings and improves cross-cultural interactions, which, in turn, mirrors the right image of Islam and reshapes the others' perception of the various Islamic values.

The increasing complexities of interfaith relationships and the rise of misconceptions, surrounding religious doctrines, necessitate a closer examination of the ethical and moral principles that underpin sacred texts. This study explores how the Qur'an employs the terms *al-birr* (kindness, righteousness, or piety) and *al-qist* (justice) to articulate universal moral values and their situational applications, focusing on their role in fostering harmonious relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims. The research adopts Ferdinand de Saussure's (1916/1959) semiotic framework of langue and parole, a foundational concept in modern linguistics, to analyze these terms within their Qur'anic context. While langue refers to the abstract, systemic structure of language, parole captures individual instances of linguistic expression in specific contexts, providing a powerful lens for exploring the dynamic interplay between universal principles and their context-driven manifestations (Tylén et al., 2013). Crucially, by using a semiotic method to analyze the meanings of signs in the Qur'an, readers are given the flexibility to comprehend the various ways a linguistic sign may be understood in texts, which makes the process of creating meaning easier overall.

This article examines *al-birr* and *al-qist* as central moral concepts that are reflected in the Qur'anic text. By identifying the shared ethical dimensions of these terms across historical and religious traditions, the study highlights their continued relevance in addressing

contemporary interfaith prejudices. By situating *al-birr* and *al-qist* within Saussure's langue/parole framework, this study offers a unique perspective on the Qur'an's linguistic and ethical richness. It not only elucidates the terms' roles in fostering interfaith harmony but also underscores the Qur'an's ability to balance the abstract universality of its moral principles with their practical, context-sensitive applications.

### 1.1 Research Objectives

This paper seeks to fulfil three main objectives:

1. To identify the various significations communicated by *al-birr* and *al-qist* in the Qur'an.
2. To show the extent to which the historical and theological context helps to mark the various significations associated with each term.
3. To highlight the practical meanings the two terms convey within their different contextual environments in the Qur'anic discourse.

### 1.2 Research Questions

This study tries to answer three research questions:

1. What are the various significations communicated by *al-birr* and *al-qist* in the Qur'an?
2. To what extent does the historical and theological context serve to mark the various significations associated with the concepts of *al-birr* and *al-qist* in the Qur'an?
3. What are the discourse functions conveyed by *al-birr* and *al-qist* within their different contextual environments in the Qur'anic discourse?

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 provides the theoretical background and the literature relevant to the topic at hand. Section 3 presents the theoretical framework of the study, focusing on Saussure's langue and parole. Section 4 offers the methodology of the study, wherein the data collection, description, and rationale are presented. This section also shows the analytical procedures adopted in the analysis of the selected data. Section 5 is dedicated to analyzing the selected data as well as to showing the findings obtained from the analysis of data. Section 6 discusses the findings of the study by comparing and contrasting them to the results revealed in previous studies. Section 7 concludes the study and offers some recommendations for further research.

## 2. Theoretical Preliminaries and Literature

### 2.1 Semiotics

Ferdinand de Saussure's idea of language serves as the foundation for his whole semiotics approach. Saussure (1959) perceives language as a system made up of a collection of indicators that are used to create its overall meaning. These language indicators, he contends, are "numberless" (p. 73). Saussure establishes the basis of a science that studies signs and describes it as "a science that studies the life of signs within society." He refers to it as "semiology" (p. 16), which discusses "what constitutes signs" and "what laws govern them" (p. 16). Saussure concludes that "linguistics is only a part of the general science of semiology" (p. 16). According to Saussure (1916/1959), any lexeme (word) is defined as a sign having a certain form (signifier) and a specific meaning or meanings (signified). Any lexeme is semantically perceived as a distinct entity by a group of semantic features that shape its descriptive semantic proposition. These semantic features pertaining to lexemes are reshaped and/or updated over time as a result of our growing experiences and evolving worldviews. During such a process of shaping and reshaping semantic features for words, some old meanings vanish, and other new ones come to the semantic horizon of such words (Sweetser, 1990). These new meanings are produced and reproduced not only by the mere linguistic expressions but also by the contextual environment, wherein these lexemes are used in language (Khafaga, 2022; Stalnaker, 2017). Accordingly, words have no fixed meaning, and their actual reference "depends upon a variety of contextual factors" (Lyons, 1995, p. 294). Within the scope of semiotics, every word has both connotative and denotative meanings (Barthes, 1968). While the former (i.e., connotative) meaning refers to the associations, emotional suggestions, and attitudes a word carries in various contexts, the latter (i.e., denotative) meaning constitutes the fundamental, explicit referential meaning of a word as shared by all people (Lyons, 1995; Raghunath, 2022).

According to Saussure (1959), the linguistic sign combines a notion and a sound-image rather than an object and a name, and each one remembers the other. He insists that he uses the terms "signified" and "signifier" in place of "concept" and "sound-image" (Saussure, 1959, pp. 66-67). Thus, according to him, a linguistic sign has two characteristics: first, it is "arbitrary," or, as Silverman (1983) notes, the relationship between its two components is unmotivated; second, it highlights the signifier's linear structure. In the same vein, Elam (2005) argues that semiotics is a discipline that studies how meaning is produced in society. As such, he perceives signification and communication processes, the ways in which meanings are created and shared, as being equally important. Therefore, the reader, who is able to understand the various meanings that a sign conveys in a text, can also understand the text's explicit and implicit meanings as well as its intended message. The semiotically oriented meaning of signs (*al-birr* and *al-qist* in the context of this study), namely their cultural, religious, and moral issues, may be better perceived by understanding the specific significations of the two words, which are motivated by the context, wherein they are employed.

The foundation of Saussure's semiotics, therefore, is the idea of signs and their elements, nature, characteristics, and structures. Additionally, he makes the case for the significance of signs in mediating meanings. Hervey (1982, p. 2) highlights this idea when he claims that "the conveying of messages [meanings] by signals [signs] constitutes the prototype of the phenomenon of communication." Accordingly, the process of generating and conveying meanings is the core concern of semiotics, which is the study of signs from a

Saussurean perspective. Likewise, the role of semiotics in identifying the social and cultural dimensions of meaning in texts is also mentioned by Mingers and Willcocks (2017), who state that semiotics functions to uncover the underlying social and cultural structures that produce texts by looking behind or beneath their outward appearance. Therefore, the primary objective beyond the use of signs (words) is to communicate meanings.

According to Chandler (2007), we [readers/listeners] deliberately construct the meaning of signs based on a complex interaction of codes or norms that we are typically unconscious of. Therefore, the ability of readers to comprehend the nature of the codes into which signs are created, received, and arranged forms the basis for the meaning-making process of signs. Importantly, comprehending sign codes and norms is interpretive in nature; that is, it varies, depending on the interpreter's cognitive background and the contextual situation in which a sign is utilized. Chandler (2007) also mentions this flexibility in sign interpretation, when he claims that a sign's meaning emerges in its interpretation rather than being contained inside it. Here, Chandler (2007) highlights the interpretative nature of signs, which permits several readings for a single sign and emphasizes its pragmatic foundation. In this sense, Mingers and Willcocks (2017) assume that semiotics is concentrating on the representation's form and the impact it has on the creation and interpretation of the content.

As a result, signs "serve ideological functions" and are susceptible to various, perhaps conflicting, interpretations (significations) (Chandler, 2007, p. 11). Any sign can have several meanings, because of a methodical contextualization process that prepares the interpreter to accept various meanings (Eco, 1990). The contextual circumstances used in any discourse community typically provide these new meanings (Khafaga, 2022). This study argues that signs are ideologically laden because of their subjectivity, or their capacity to take on many meanings, whether religious, social, political, cultural, or otherwise. Readers, therefore, are able to invite various significations beyond the semiotic boundaries of a sign by being able to comprehend the contextual circumstances in which it is used (O'Halloran, 2003).

## 2.2 Related Studies

Much previous literature has been conducted on the semiotics of the language of the Qur'an by adopting a semantic, semiotic approach to explore the cultural and ideological underpinnings of the Qur'anic worldview, as well as examine the interconnectedness of key Qur'anic terms (Izutsu, 2002), exploring the multiple meanings and interpretations of the word *qalam* (pen) in the Qur'an beyond its literal meaning of a writing implement in terms of *langue* and *parole* (Syahputra & MZ, 2022), examining the semiotics of the emotion of fear in the story of Umm Musa in Surah Taha and Surah Al-Qasas (Alzomor, 2024), and investigating the connotative and denotative meanings of the word *haram* in the Qur'an (Makarim et al., 2023). Relevantly, Soga et al. (2021) use a semiotic approach to investigate the denotation and connotation meanings pertaining to the chapter of Maryam. This study shows the relevance of applying a semiotic model of analysis to understand the meaning of the Qur'anic language in the chapter of Maryam. Soga et al.'s (2021) study, thus, unveils layers of meaning that evolve, while maintaining coherence within a specific temporal context. This dual perspective thus reveals comprehensively how meanings in the Qur'an have been dynamically constructed and reinterpreted across historical and cultural settings. Soga et al.'s study concludes that the semiotic reading of the Qur'an places emphasis on synchronic and diachronic, denotative and connotative interpretations of the text.

Al-Fikri and Taufiq (2023) employ Roland Barthes' semiotic theory to explain the symbolic signification of some selected Qur'anic verses that deal with the phenomenal sign 'thunder', with the intention to explore the various significations related to the selected word and the role context plays in determining the meaning of the word in its various occurrences in the Qur'anic text. Also, Al-Shraideh and El-Sharif (2019) examine the meaning and connotation of colors (white, black, red, green, yellow, and blue) in the Qur'an from the standpoint of semiotic models of sign interpretation by using Peirce's triadic model and Saussure's dyadic approach. The study examines both the semantic and cultural semiotic elements of color signs in the Qur'an and concludes that the Arabic color system is consistent with color universals, particularly with regard to their classification and meanings. Furthermore, Ramadhan et al. (2024) adopt the semiotic theory of Peirce, which emphasizes the connection between the representamen (sign) and the object it stands for to analyze the eschatological verses in Surah Al-Waqi'ah. This study reveals that Peirce's semiotics is relevant to the study of signs' signification in the Qur'an, as it offers a new viewpoint on the message of the Qur'an regarding the eschatological events that will take place on the Day of Judgement. El-Hussari's (2022) study also demonstrates that, in contrast to a literal level of textual analysis, applying a semiotic approach to the Qur'anic text is likely to produce a wider range of meanings, and therefore, he provides a semiotic interpretation of Surah Al-Hujurat in an attempt to show how a semiotic analysis adds to the general interpretation communicated by the Qur'anic text.

Although previous studies have approached various semiotic meanings in the Qur'anic language, they do not discuss the concepts of *langue* and *parole* in the Qur'anic text and how they mirror various significations of the linguistic sign. Therefore, this study attempts to fulfil this research gap by applying Saussure's concepts of *langue* and *parole* to reveal the semiotic potential of *al-birr* and *al-qist* for making meaning. This study also focuses on the effective role of context in motivating the various meanings the two terms communicate in the Qur'an.

## 3. Theoretical Framework

Ferdinand de Saussure's (1916/1959) semiology is deemed appropriate for this study, as it aligns with the nature of the subject under investigation. This approach facilitates the identification of meaning by examining the dynamic relationship between the signifier and the signified, particularly through an analysis of symbols and the interplay between their generic meanings and the additional meanings attributed to them in different contexts (Saussure, 1916/1959; Bueno, 2020). Saussure's theoretical framework emerged from a fundamental concern with understanding the nature of the relationship between words and objects (Saussure, 1916/1959; Chandler, 2007;

Tyl ń et al., 2013). Chandler (2007) identified a problem of reference, which was traditionally understood in terms of mimesis, imitation, or representation. However, Saussure argued that this relationship should be conceptualized in terms of signification rather than mere reference. In Saussure's view, meaning is not inherently tied to an object but is instead constructed through the agency of individuals who attribute significance to linguistic signs.

For this purpose, Saussure created new categories, namely signifier and signified. A signifier can mean a vehicle of reference (Chandler, 2007). Richards and Ogden (1927) conceptualized reference as an act of mentioning or alluding to something that has occurred, framing meaning as a relational process rather than a direct correspondence between words and objects. Within this framework, the signified can be understood as the sound image (tenor) or the conceptual significance assigned by an agent, functioning as the referent to which the signifier, or the vehicle of signification (Richards & Ogden, 1927). However, as Derrida (1976) argues, the signified is not a fixed entity but rather part of an ongoing chain of signification. A signified in one context can assume the role of a signifier in another, leading to an infinite deferral of meaning (*diff  rance*). This recursive nature of signification challenges the notion of fixed semantic boundaries, as each iteration of meaning is subject to reinterpretation in new contexts (Derrida, 1976). For instance, the signified concept of telling the truth as an element of honesty may, in another interpretative framework, function as a signifier for the broader notion of bravery. This fluidity of meaning illustrates the dynamic interplay between *langue* and *parole*, where the established conventions of language interact with individual speech acts to generate contextually specific interpretations (Chandler, 2007). Thus, meaning is not static but emerges through a complex process of intertextual and contextual negotiation, reinforcing the semiotic principle that signs derive their significance relationally rather than in isolation (Chandler, 2007; Derrida, 1976).

This methodological approach allows for an initial determination of the core or original meanings of a sign, serving as a foundation from which contextual variations and extended significations can be explored. By recognizing the interplay between fixed linguistic structures and agent-driven interpretation, the researcher can examine how meaning evolves across different discursive contexts. In the context of the present study, this approach necessitates establishing the foundational meanings of the terms *al-birr* and *al-qist*. These primary meanings serve as normative references or semantic anchors (*langue*), from which subsequent variations and contextual interpretations (*parole*) can be analyzed. Saussure classifies this distinction as *langue* and *parole*, a conceptual framework that will be further examined in the following section.

### 3.1 *Langue and Parole*

A significant categorization in Saussure's semiotic analysis is *langue* and *parole*. These two categories provide an analytical framework for researchers to use to examine both the fundamental meaning of a sign and the evolving dynamics of its subsequent interpretations (Tyl ń et al., 2013). Saussure conceptualizes *langue* as the overarching language system, wherein a sign's fundamental meaning is established as a standard or norm (Saussure, 1916/1959; Bueno, 2020). Since the meaning attributed to a sign does not correspond directly to the original object but rather to its representation, this standardized meaning is referred to as a synchronic representation and a 'field' in Bourdieu's view. In Bourdieu's framework, the concept of 'field' represents the structured social spaces where agents interact, shaping and being shaped by linguistic and social practices (Bourdieu, 1991). Within this perspective, Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole* aligns with the dynamics of linguistic exchange in a given field; where *parole* (speech) serves as the medium through which variations in meaning emerge, contingent upon social and contextual factors (Saussure, 1916/1959).

Over time, the repeated practical use of *langue* in different social contexts (*parole*) can contribute to the development of new linguistic norms, as continuous usage reinforces and solidifies emerging meanings. This process corresponds to what Bourdieu (1991) conceptualizes as *habitus*, which refers to the structured yet evolving nature of linguistic practice shaped by historical conditions and social positioning. *Habitus* captures the ways in which language is both constrained by existing structures and actively reshaped through practice, illustrating the dynamic interaction between stability and change in linguistic meaning (Bourdieu, 1991). This interplay between *langue* and *parole* thus offers an epistemological framework for understanding the fluidity of meaning construction, as linguistic forms are not static but evolve through socially embedded processes of interpretation and use (Bourdieu, 1991; Chandler, 2007; Saussure, 1916/1959).

Accordingly, the paper examines how the Qur'an situates *al-birr* and *al-qist*, elucidating both their objective meanings and contextual interpretations within Islamic scripture. By integrating Saussurean semiotics with the study of Qur'anic semantics, this study seeks to bridge linguistic theory and theological analysis and uncover the mechanisms through which ethical concepts have been shaped in the Qur'an. This approach not only deepens our understanding of specific terms like *al-birr* and *al-qist* but also underscores their dynamic role in constructing the ethical vision of Islam.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1 *Data: Collection, Description, and Rationale*

This study employs a descriptive-analytic method, which attempts to explore the concept of *al-birr* and *al-qist* in the Qur'an using Saussure's semiotic approach, focusing on the *langue* and *parole* of these two words. The data of this study consist of 15 verses distributed to 12 chapters from the Qur'an. The Qur'an is the primary religious scripture of Islam, which is generally accepted to be a 23-year revelation from God to the Prophet Muhammad. It is often regarded as the best and most distinctive work of Classical Arabic literature. The Qur'an, which is technically a corpus of Classical Arabic, consists of 114 Meccan and Medinan chapters, each with 6236 verses totalling 77,439 words. Importantly, two square brackets are used in notation to indicate chapters and verses. For example, [Q. 2: 44] alludes to chapter 2, verse [44], which is Al-Baqarah (The Cow), whose order in the Qur'an [Q] is [2]. Also, an appendix that includes the

phonetic symbols used in the transliteration is added at the end of this study to help non-native Arabic speakers comprehend the Arabic text. Table 1 adds more clarification to the collected data.

Table 1. Data description

The word	Chapter title	Chapter No.	Verse(s) No.
<i>al-birr</i>	The Cow (Al-Baqarah)	[2]	[44, 177, 224]
	The Family of Imran (Al- 'Imrān)	[3]	[92]
	Mary (Maryam)	[19]	[14]
	The Mountain (Al-Ṭūr)	[52]	[28]
	Women Tested (Al-Mumtaḥinah)	[60]	[8]
	He Frowned ('Abasa)	[80]	[16]
	Those who Give Short Measure (Al-Muṭaffifin)	[83]	[22]
<i>al-qist</i>	Livestock (Al-An'am)	[6]	[59]
	The Heights (Al-A'rāf)	[7]	[29]
	The Night Journey (Al-Isrā')	[17]	[35]
	Iron (Al-Ḥadīd)	[57]	[25]
Total	The Jinn (Al-Jinn)	[72]	[14, 15]
Total	12		15

There are two reasons that constitute the rationale for the selection of *al-birr* and *al-qist*, in particular, to be linguistically investigated in this study: first, the two words communicate various significations that are contextually motivated, whose clarifications help understand the Qur'anic text; and second, the discourse functions these words convey and the semiotic meanings they carry function to narrow a cultural gap that has traditionally been fostered and maintained by a We-Them discourse and to challenge the narratives in the media that portray Islam as intolerant or harsh toward non-Muslims.

#### 4.2 Procedures

The analytical procedures followed in this study encompass three stages. The first stage comprises the identification and selection of the various Qur'anic verses in which the two words of *al-birr* and *al-qist* are employed. The second stage constitutes a thorough description and analysis of the various significations that are semiotically communicated by *al-birr* and *al-qist*. In this stage, an emphasis is cast on the contextual environment wherein the two words are used in the selected Qur'anic verses, and the way their semiotic potential for making meanings is highlighted. In the third stage, the focus is on demonstrating the various discourse functions *al-birr* and *al-qist* have and the extent to which their semiotic significations provide a comprehensive pragmatic interpretation for the selected verses. Building upon this theoretical foundation, the subsequent analysis seeks to examine the langue and parole of *al-birr* and *al-qist* by highlighting their primary and contextual meanings in the selected verses. This inquiry entails a semantic analysis of these terms across multiple historical and textual contexts.

It should be mentioned that the selected verses are quoted in Classical Arabic, which is their original form of production. They are also accompanied by an English translation taken from Abdel Haleem's (2005) translation and a Classical Arabic transliteration, which is a phonetic transcription of the words in the manner of production relevant to their original form. The International Phonetic Alphabet is the source of the phonetic symbols used in the Arabic transliteration, with a few modifications made to account for the phonetic characteristics of specific Arabic sounds. Additionally, an appendix listing the transliteration symbols utilized in this study is attached at the end of this paper.

### 5. Analysis and Results

#### 5.1 *al-birr* and *al-qist* in the Qur'an: Occurrences and Meanings

Before embarking on the contextual significations, the two terms communicate in the Qur'anic language, it is important to reflect on the various semantically perceived meanings the two terms convey, as well as the meanings, pertaining to the most popular derivatives; particularly the noun form and the verb form of the two terms. The term *al-birr*, on the one hand, and according to Izutsu (1959), is one of the most elusive moral terms in the Qur'an. He affirms that the translation of *al-birr* as piety, kindness, and righteousness is not enough, as it includes these and others in a complex sense, including doing good, showing kindness, piety, righteousness, etc. Table 2 shows the occurrence of the term *al-birr* and its derivatives and their meanings in the Qur'an.

Table 2. Occurrence of the term *al-birr* and its derivatives and their meanings in the Qur'an

Word form	No. of occurrence	Chapter and verse No.	Meaning
<i>al-birr</i>	6	[2:44,177, 189], [3:92] [5:2], [58:5]	piety, righteousness, righteous act and the act of charity
<i>barr</i>	3	[19:14,32] [52:28]	doing duty to one's relatives and being true to one's promise
<i>abrār</i>	6	[76:5], [3:193,198] [82:13], [83:18, 22]	being a righteous and pious person
<i>bararatun</i>	1	[80:16]	being virtuous, pious, sincere and dutiful
<i>tabarr</i>	2	[2:224], [60:8]	doing good, showing kindness and performing a charitable act

<i>al-barr</i>	12	[6:59,63,97], [5:96], [10:22] [17:67, 68,70], [27:63] [29:65], [30:41], [31:32]	land as opposed to sea
Total	30		

In the same vein, the term *al-qist* is derived from the root *q-s-ṭ* and occurs twenty-four times in the Qur'an. In all its occurrences, *al-qist* and its derivatives communicate meanings that revolve around two contradictory significations: justice and injustice. Table 3 demonstrates the occurrence of the term *al-qist* and its derivatives and their meanings in the Qur'an.

Table 3. Occurrence of the term *al-qist* and its derivatives and their meanings in the Qur'an

Word form	No. of occurrence	Chapter and verse No.	Meaning
<i>al-qist</i> (noun of <i>aqsaṭa</i> )	14	[3:18,21] [4:127,135] [5:8,42] [7:29] [10:4,47,54] [11:85] [21:47] [55:9] [57:25]	justice
<i>tuqṣiṭ</i> (imperfect of <i>aqsaṭa</i> )	3	[4:3] [60:8] [49:9]	to act justly
<i>Aqsaṭu</i> (elative of <i>qāsiṭ</i> )	2	[2:282] [33:5]	denoting most just
<i>Muqṣiṭun</i> (plural form of <i>muqṣiṭ</i> )	3	[5:42] [49:9] [60:8]	act justly or fairly
<i>qāsiṭūn</i> (plural of the active participle <i>qāsiṭ</i> )	2	[72:14, 15]	doing injustice
Total	24		

### 5.2 Interpretations of *al-birr* and *al-qist* in English Translations of the Qur'an

In the Qur'an, *al-birr* and *al-qist* stand for righteousness and justice, two essential facets of Islamic morality and social order. Although different translators have varied approaches to translating them into English, these differences show how difficult it is to convey the complexity of these ideas in another language. While *al-birr* stresses a comprehensive sense of righteousness and devotion to God, *al-qist* focuses on justice and fairness, especially in social relations. Collectively, they constitute a fundamental component of the Qur'anic ethical system, providing direction on how to lead a morally upright and equitable life. Gaining an understanding of the subtleties of these concepts promotes a deeper understanding of the moral and social teachings of Islam and allows for a more accurate and thorough interpretation of the Qur'an in English translations.

Depending on the translator's understanding, *al-birr* and *al-qist* have been translated into a variety of meanings in English translations of the Qur'an. The Arabic word *al-birr* comes from the root letters "b-r-r," which typically have connotations of dedication, piety, righteousness, and kindness. *Al-birr* is frequently linked to a comprehensive sense of moral rectitude and submission to divine directives, which includes deeds like justice, kindness, and regard for others. *Al-birr* is translated in a variety of ways; for instance, Ali (1983/1934) translates it as "righteousness" and frequently employs it to refer to a broad spectrum of moral and ethical qualities. Conversely, Abdel Haleem's (2005) translation makes "piety" more contextually relevant by emphasizing the term's social and ethical connotations. The term "righteousness" is also used by Saheeh International (2010) to refer to *al-birr*, which emphasizes the significance of upholding justice, doing good deeds, and abiding by divine law. These translations demonstrate that while *al-birr* is generally understood to mean moral goodness or justice, its complete meaning frequently necessitates explanations that go beyond straightforward language. It encompasses good works in private and public life, societal justice, and individual piety.

Similarly, originating from the root "q-s-ṭ," the Arabic term *al-qist* often denotes justice, equity, or balance. Often translated as "justice" or "equity," *al-qist* denotes a feeling of equilibrium in both moral and legal circumstances. It places a strong emphasis on justice, striking the correct balance between people, society, and divine law. *Al-qist* is typically translated as "justice" or "equity." However, the word choice may vary depending on the particular context. For instance, Saheeh International (2010) has translated *al-qist* as "justice" with an emphasis on moral and legal aspects, while Ali (1983/1934), who is most often associated with Abdel Haleem (2005), emphasizes the concept of fairness in the Qur'anic worldview and frequently links it to the divine idea of justice and the social need for balance. Significantly, capturing the complete nuances of the two terms in English is one of the biggest problems translators encounter. As previously stated, the terms "righteousness" or "piety" for *al-birr* and "justice" or "equity" for *al-qist* are frequently employed, but these translations may fall short of capturing the complexity and connections between the ideas. For instance, "righteousness" may not always adequately convey the ethical aspects of *al-birr*, which go beyond legal or ceremonial righteousness to encompass more extensive social and moral obligations. In the same vein, despite being commonly translated as "justice," *al-qist's* concept of balance and fairness may have connotations of equity and impartiality that are not necessarily evident in the English word.

### 5.3 The Langue and Parole of *al-birr* in the Qur'an

[Q. 3: 92] (لَنْ تَنَالُوا الْبِرَّ حَتَّى تُنْفِقُوا مِمَّا تُحِبُّونَ وَمَا تُنْفِقُوا مِنْ شَيْءٍ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ بِهِ عَلِيمٌ)

Lan tanālū al-birr ḥattā tunfiqū mim mā tuḥibbūn wamā tunfiqū min shay'in fa'inna Allah bihi 'ālīm

“None of you [believers] will attain **true piety** unless you give out of what you cherish”

In verse [Q. 3: 92], *al-birr*, or true piety and righteousness, is presented as a virtue, requiring an act of giving out of what one holds dear. Here, *al-birr* is directly connected to personal sacrifice and generosity. The verse establishes a conditional relationship between attaining (*tanālū*) *al-birr* and spending (*infāq*), suggesting that true piety is but an active process of detachment from material possessions. At the langue level, *al-birr* in this verse represents a fundamental principle of ethical and spiritual excellence in the Qur'anic moral system, one that transcends mere belief and requires action. Also, *al-birr* is one of the highest moral virtues and is associated with financial sacrifice. At the parole level, *al-birr* takes the form of the tangible act of spending, specifically from one's possessions, rather than from surplus wealth. This dynamic interaction between the primary and contextual meanings of *al birr* in [Q.3: 92] underscores its role as an ethical ideal that is attained not through passive adherence to faith but through deliberate and meaningful acts of generosity.

[Q. 2: 44] (أَتَأْمُرُونَ النَّاسَ بِالْبِرِّ وَتَنْسَوْنَ أَنْفُسَكُمْ)

Ata'murūn al-nāsa bilbirri wa tansawn Anfusakum

“How can you tell people to do **what is right** and forget to do it yourselves”

The above verse discusses *al-birr* as a measure of integrity, highlighting the ethical contradiction between preaching righteousness and not practicing it. It stresses the importance of matching actions to words. The rhetorical question in the verse exposes a fundamental ethical contradiction: commanding others to act righteously while neglecting to practice *al-birr* oneself. This critique suggests that true righteousness is not only about promoting ethical behavior in society but also about personal adherence to the same values one advocates.

Semiotically, the relationship between langue and parole in this verse reveals *al-birr* as both an overarching principle and a practical obligation. At the langue level, *al-birr* represents a universal standard of moral and ethical conduct. However, at the parole level, the verse highlights a failure in the practical realization of *al-birr*, as it critiques those who instruct others in righteousness but do not practice it in their own lives. The credibility of people who profess to respect ethical ideals is damaged by this contradiction between theory and practice. Therefore, harmony between langue and parole is crucial in this situation.

[Q. 2: 177] (لَيْسَ الْبِرُّ أَنْ تُولُوا وَجُوهَكُمْ قِبَلَ الْمَشْرِقِ وَالْمَغْرِبِ وَلَكِنَّ الْبِرَّ مَنْ آمَنَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ وَالْمَلَائِكَةِ وَالْكِتَابِ وَالنَّبِيِّينَ...)

Laysa al-birr an tūwallū wūjuhakum qibala al-mishriq wal-maghrib walakinna al-birr man āmana billahi wal-yawm al-ākhir wal-malā'ikati wal-kitāb wal-nabyīn

“**Goodness** does not consist in turning your face towards East or West. The truly **good** are those who believe in God and the Last Day, in the angels, the Scripture, and the prophets...”

In verse [Q. 2: 177], *al-birr* is articulated as a comprehensive moral and spiritual ideal that transcends ritualistic formalism, emphasizing faith, ethical conduct, and social responsibility. Unlike verse [Q. 2: 224], where *al-birr* is linked to interpersonal ethics and reconciliation, or Q. 3:92, where it is associated with selfless generosity, this verse presents *al-birr* as an integrative concept encompassing both belief and action. The negation at the beginning (*laysa al-birr*) challenges a superficial understanding of righteousness, redirecting it from mere physical gestures, such as facing a particular direction in prayer, toward a deeper, more holistic embodiment of faith, moral conviction, and compassionate engagement with society.

From a semiotic standpoint, the langue of *al-birr* depicts righteousness and goodness as an inner belief, moral commitment, and social engagement rather than just visible actions. The verse defines *al-birr* as a concept that combines faith in God, the Last Day, angels, Scripture, and prophets with practical ethical obligations, such as helping others, keeping promises, and being patient through hardships. At the parole level, *al-birr* in verse [Q. 2: 177] is manifested through tangible acts of piety and justice, emphasizing that true righteousness requires action, not just intention or symbolic gestures. The verse emphasizes that faith and good deeds should go hand in hand, showing that belief must be reflected in how we treat others. This dynamic interaction between belief and practice, between langue as a theoretical structure and parole as its lived application, affirms the Qur'anic discourse on righteousness as both an internal disposition and an external reality.

[Q. 2: 224] (وَلَا تَجْعَلُوا اللَّهَ عُرْضَةً لِأَيْمَانِكُمْ أَنْ تَبَرُّوا وَتَتَّقُوا وَتُصْلِحُوا بَيْنَ النَّاسِ)

Wala taj'alū Allah 'urḍatan li aymānikum an tabarrū wa tattaqū wa tuṣliḥū bayn al-nās

“[Believers], do not allow your oaths in God's name to hinder you from **doing good**, being mindful of God and making peace between people”

The above verse warns believers against neglecting their moral duties by using divine oaths. The concepts of *taqwā* (piety) and *iṣlāḥ* (reconciliation) are mentioned, showing that *al-birr* involves both personal and community responsibilities aimed at promoting peace. The verse encourages believers to practice goodness, be mindful of God, and work to resolve conflicts, illustrating how Qur'anic ethics can connect theory with real-life actions to build harmonious societies.

As part of the langue of the Qur'an, *al-birr*, in verse [Q. 2: 224], represents a system of moral values guiding Muslim behavior, focusing on righteousness, social responsibility, and harmony. This structural framework establishes the expectation that believers act with integrity and avoid using divine oaths as a pretext for inaction. The parole of *al-birr* manifests itself in its practical application, encouraging believers to embody these ethical commitments in daily life through acts of goodness, mindfulness of God, and efforts to reconcile social disputes. By linking *al-birr* with *taqwā* (piety) and *islāh* (reconciliation), the verse illustrates the dynamic interaction between the theoretical structure of Qur'anic ethics and its tangible expression in human relationships.

[Q. 19: 14] (وَبِرًّا بِالَّذِيهِ وَلَمْ يَكُنْ جَبَّارًا عَصِيًّا)

Wa barran biwalidayhi wa lam yakun jabbāran ‘aṣiyyah

“He was **devout**, **kind** to his parents, not domineering or rebellious”

In verse [Q. 19: 14], the concept of *al-birr* focuses on being kind, humble, and obedient to one's parents, displaying its importance in family and personal character. The verse describes Prophet Yaḥyā (John the Baptist) as *barran biwalidayhi*—righteous and devoted to his parents. Contrasting this virtue of *al-birr* with traits of arrogance (*jabbār*) and defiance (‘*aṣiyy*’) stresses the notion that true righteousness is inseparable from humility and dutiful care for one's closest relationships.

From a semiotic perspective, the langue of *al-birr* denotes an ethical attitude in relationships with parents. It emphasizes that *al-birr* involves more than just kind actions; it requires a genuine sense of respect and gratitude. The juxtaposition of *barran* with its opposites of *jabbār* (defiant) and ‘*aṣiyya*’ (rebellious) further suggests that *al-birr* is not merely about fulfilling duties toward parents but also about embodying a character that is free from arrogance and disobedience. At the parole level, *al-birr* in verse [Q. 19: 14] finds its expression in tangible actions of care, respect, and dutifulness, illustrating how righteousness is lived and demonstrated in one's closest human relationships. Here *al-birr* is embodied in the everyday practice of honoring and serving one's parents.

[Q. 52: 28] (إِنَّا كُنَّا مِنْ قَبْلُ نَدْعُوهُ إِنَّهُ هُوَ الْبَرُّ الرَّحِيمُ)

Innā kunnā min qablu nad‘ūhu innahu hūa al-barr al-raḥīm

“We used to pray to Him: He is **the Good**, the Merciful One”

In verse [Q. 52: 28], *al-birr* is attributed directly to God (*al-barr*), marking a significant shift in its application from human ethical conduct to divine nature. Here it is elevated to a divine attribute, emphasizing God's absolute goodness, beneficence, and mercy. The pairing of *al-barr* with *al-raḥīm* (the Merciful) strengthens the idea that God's righteousness is not merely about justice or morality but is deeply rooted in compassion, generosity, and grace.

At the langue level, *al-birr* in this verse is identified as an ultimate source of goodness, shifting its meaning from a human virtue to a divine attribute. In human contexts, *al-birr* represents an ethical standard, requiring effort, sacrifice, and consistency; however, when ascribed to God, it signifies an inherent, boundless benevolence. The use of *al-barr* in this verse indicates that God is not only just but also the source of all righteousness, extending His kindness beyond mere obligation and into the realm of true grace. Equally, at the parole level, this verse embodies the practical experience of faith, as the speakers admit their previous dedication and supplications (*nad‘ūhu*, we used to pray to Him) and recognize God's *barr* as the ultimate reason for their salvation. This interaction between human supplication and divine response exemplifies *al-birr* as a lively, mutual relationship between God and His servants, i.e., believers engage in prayer and trust, while God, in His absolute *barr*, responds with mercy and fulfilment of their needs. Thus, the interplay between langue and parole in this verse reveals *al-birr* as an expansive concept that operates on both the human and divine levels. While in previous verses, *al-birr* required human action through generosity, ethical conduct, and humility. Here it is presented as an intrinsic divine quality that underpins the believers' relationship with God. This perspective strengthens the Qur'anic interpretation of righteousness as both a moral principle and a divine truth, influencing human perception of God's role as the supreme provider of goodness and compassion.

[Q. 83: 22] (إِنَّ الْأَبْرَارَ لَفِي نَعِيمٍ)

Inna al-abrār lafi na‘īm

“The **truly good** will live in bliss”

In verse [Q. 83: 22], *al-abrār*, the plural of *al-barr*, denotes a community defined by righteousness and piety. Unlike previous references to *al-birr* as an individual virtue or divine trait, here it emphasizes collective identity. The verse highlights that righteousness earns ultimate reward and divine favor, leading to bliss.

From a semiotic perspective, the langue of *al-abrār* places it within the Qur'anic framework of moral classification, where individuals are often evaluated based on their ethical and spiritual attributes. The term *al-abrār* personifies the lived application of *al-birr*, as these individuals embody the Qur'anic tenets of faith, justice, generosity, and sincerity in all aspects of life. Their designation as *al-abrār* suggests not merely occasional acts of goodness but a lifelong commitment to *al-birr*. At the parole level, the verse expresses a promise of divine reward, contrasting the fate of *al-abrār* with that of the *fajjār* (the wicked), mentioned earlier in the same chapter [Q. 83: 7-18]. This juxtaposition reinforces the Qur'anic theme of moral duality and personal accountability. The reference to *na‘īm* (bliss) suggests not just material reward but a state of spiritual fulfilment, highlighting that *al-birr* is not merely an earthly virtue but one with eternal significance as a transformative quality that defines a group's ultimate fate.



[Q. 80: 16] (كِرَامٍ بَرَرَةٍ)

Kirāmin bararatun

“By the hands of noble and **virtuous** scribes”

In verse [Q. 80: 16], *bararatun* is the plural of *barr* but differs from *abrār* in its specific application. While *abrār* in verse [Q.83: 22] refers to righteous human beings who attain divine reward, *bararatun* here describes the noble and virtuous scribes, widely interpreted as angels entrusted with recording divine revelation and human deeds. The phrase *kirāmin bararah* (noble and virtuous) highlights their esteemed status and complete devotion to divine commands.

From a semiotic perspective, the langue of *bararatun* situates it in the wider Qur'anic discourse on righteousness, yet with a clear focus on a heavenly, non-human realm. In contrast to *al-abrār*, whose goodness is shown through ethical decisions and moral honesty in a worldly context, *bararatun* conveys an intrinsic, steadfast virtue linked to divine realm. This distinction implies that human righteousness (*barr*, *abrār*) is to be developed and examined, whereas angelic righteousness (*bararatun*) is intrinsic and immutable, reflecting absolute submission to God's will. At the parole level, the verse emphasizes the role of these scribes in preserving and transmitting divine knowledge, representing their position as intermediaries between the divine and human worlds. The combination of *kirām* (noble) with *bararah* (pure, virtuous) suggests that their righteousness is not just moral but also linked to their esteemed function in the cosmic order. Their virtue lies in their perfect execution of divine commands. Thus, the interplay between langue and parole in this verse illustrates a distinction between two forms of righteousness: the striving of humans and the innate purity of angels. While *al-abrār* achieves righteousness through faith and deeds, *bararatun* represents an idealized, unquestioned model of purity and obedience.

[Q. 60: 8] (لَا يَنْهَاكُمُ اللَّهُ عَنِ الَّذِينَ لَمْ يُقَاتِلُوكُمْ فِي الدِّينِ وَلَمْ يُخْرِجُوكُمْ مِنْ دِيَارِكُمْ أَنْ تَبَرُّوهُمْ وَتُقْسِطُوا إِلَيْهِمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ الْمُقْسِطِينَ)

lā yanhākumu Allāh ‘an alladhīna lam yuqātilūkum fī al-dīn wa-lam yuhrijūkum min diyārikum an tabarrūhum wa-tuqṣiṭū ilayhim inna Allāh yuḥibbu al-muqṣiṭīn

“He does not forbid you to **deal kindly and justly** with anyone who has not fought you for your faith or driven you out of your homes: God loves the just”

Using Saussure's semiotics framework to analyze *al-birr* and *al-qist* in verse [Q. 60: 8] highlights the interaction between abstract principles (langue) and their practical applications (parole), demonstrating the Qur'an's adaptability in addressing diverse social contexts. The langue represents the overarching ethical framework of kindness and justice that governs the relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims. These universal principles promote harmony and respect for all, provided the individuals in question are peaceful. This nuanced balance between caution and justice in verse [Q. 60: 8] aligns with the broader framework of the Qur'anic language, which integrates foundational principles with contextual applications. An analysis of *al-birr* in verse [Q. 60: 8] can be connected to Saussure's semiotics framework through the concepts of langue and parole. In this context, the langue represents the overarching system of meaning and values within the Qur'anic language, encompassing the universal principles of kindness, justice, and respect for others, regardless of their faith. Verse [Q. 60: 8] further illustrates how the langue of the Qur'an promotes a tolerant and inclusive framework, while the parole manifests itself in the practical application of these values in real-life social and interfaith relationships, showcasing the dynamic interaction between the theoretical structure and its lived expression.

Within the scope of cross-cultural communication, the use of the terms *al-birr* and *al-qist* in the above verse also suggests that Islam respects religious freedom and encourages Muslims to be kind to people of different beliefs. The term *al-birr*, located at the end of this verse, is a continuation of the message from the beginning of the verse, namely that one of the most important implications of respecting religious freedom is to do good to others regardless of the religion they adhere to. Furthermore, the phrase *an tabarrūhum* means 'to deal kindly with them', as the root of the verb *tabarrūhum* is the word *al-birr*, 'kindness', which is a comprehensive term, implying all aspects of goodness such as piety, obedience, good relationships, and honesty (Umar, 2008). It denotes more than the justice mentioned in the following part of the verse, i.e., *tuqṣiṭū*. It is the same word that was used to show the duty of a Muslim towards his parents, *bir al-wālidayn*, or kindness to one's parents. This means that Muslims are allowed and encouraged to have kind relationships with non-Muslims, like their relationships with their parents. (Al-Qaradawi, 1995).

Furthermore, another part of verse [Q. 60: 8], which says "*wa-tuqṣiṭū ilayhim inna Allāh yuḥibbu al-muqṣiṭīn*", or "to deal kindly and justly with anyone who has not fought you for your faith or driven you out of your homes: God loves the just" shows another dimension of the respect for freedom of religion, an expression of the important value of *al-birr*. The word *tuqṣiṭū* comes from the root *q-s-ṭ*, which has two contradictory meanings. The derivatives *Qasaṭ*, *yuqṣiṭu*, and *quṣūṭan* mean to do injustice, as in verse [Q. 72: 15], whereas *al-qist*, *aqṣaṭa*, and *muqṣiṭ* mean to do justice, as in verse [Q. 5: 42]. The word *al-qist* may also mean a portion. The derivative *iqṭisāṭ* means equal division, as in the saying *taqassatū al-shay' baynahum*, which means they divided a thing equally among themselves (Al-Fairuzabadi, 2005). Hence, *tuqṣiṭū ilayhim* was interpreted by many exegetes as doing justice to non-Muslims.

[Q. 6: 59] (وَعِنْدَهُ مَفَاتِيحُ الْغَيْبِ لَا يَعْلَمُهَا إِلَّا هُوَ ۚ وَيَعْلَمُ مَا فِي الْغَيْبِ وَالْبَحْرِ...)

Wa ‘indahu mafāṭiḥ al-ghayb la ya‘lamuhā illā hū waya‘lamu māfī al-barr wal-baḥr

“He has the keys to the unseen: no one knows them but Him. He knows all that is in **the land** and sea...”

The form *al-barr* was used in verse [Q. 52: 28], indicating a divine attribute, emphasizing God's absolute goodness, beneficence, and mercy. However, the same form, *al-barr*, is used here in verse [Q. 6: 59], in the sense of land (as opposed to sea). From a semiotic perspective, the langue of *al-barr* and *al-baḥr* situates them within the Qur'anic lexicon of divine omniscience and cosmic order. These terms frequently appear in the Qur'an as symbolic markers of human experience, encompassing certainty and uncertainty, control and surrender, stability and vastness. Their mention in this verse reinforces the idea that Allah's knowledge extends across both structured domains (land) and fluid, unpredictable realms (sea). At the parole level, verse [Q. 6: 59] functions as a declaration of divine authority, affirming that no knowledge, especially concerning the unseen (*al-ghayb*), exists beyond Allah's reach. The phrase *maḥāṭiḥ al-ghayb* (keys to the unseen) metaphorically denotes exclusive access to knowledge, reinforcing the Qur'anic distinction between human limitation and divine omniscience. By juxtaposing *al-barr* and *al-baḥr*, the verse conveys the totality of divine awareness, symbolizing all domains of existence, the stable and the volatile, the known and the hidden.

Table 4. Langue and parole of *al-birr* and its derivatives

Verse No.	Context	Langue (Primary meaning)	Parole (Contextual signification)
[Q. 3: 92]	<i>al-birr</i> as selfless generosity; righteousness requires giving from what one cherishes.	<i>al-birr</i> as an aspirational standard requiring tangible self-sacrifice.	Practicing righteousness through acts of generosity and detachment from materialism.
[Q. 2: 44]	Moral integrity; warning against hypocrisy in preaching righteousness without practice.	<i>al-birr</i> as a universal principle of sincerity and ethical consistency.	Aligning personal actions with moral teachings to avoid hypocrisy.
[Q. 2: 177]	Holistic righteousness; faith, ethical conduct, and social responsibility beyond rituals.	<i>al-birr</i> as a comprehensive ethical construct integrating belief and social engagement.	Emphasizing righteousness as lived faith through social justice and ethical action.
[Q. 2: 224]	Moral and social responsibility; avoiding misuse of oaths to hinder ethical obligations.	<i>al-birr</i> as an ethical framework encompassing social responsibility and moral integrity.	Demonstrating righteousness through ethical speech, good conduct, and reconciliation.
[Q. 19: 14]	Filial piety; righteousness expressed through devotion and humility toward parents.	<i>al-birr</i> as an essential virtue shaping personal character and relationships.	Expressing righteousness through humility, kindness, and honouring parents.
[Q. 52: 28]	Divine attribute; <i>al-barr</i> as God's absolute goodness and mercy.	<i>al-birr</i> as an intrinsic divine quality of boundless goodness and mercy.	Manifesting <i>al-barr</i> through divine mercy and responsiveness to supplication.
[Q. 83: 22]	Collective identity; <i>al-abrār</i> as righteous individuals rewarded with eternal bliss.	<i>al-abrār</i> as those who internalize <i>al-birr</i> , forming a collective of righteous individuals.	Realizing righteousness in life leading to divine reward in the hereafter.
[Q. 80: 16]	Angelic virtue; <i>bararātun</i> referring to noble angelic scribes who perfectly obey divine commands.	<i>bararātun</i> as a unique category of beings who inherently embody righteousness.	Angelic obedience as a perfect, unchallenged form of righteousness.
[Q. 60: 8]	Ethical interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims; balancing kindness ( <i>al-birr</i> ) and justice ( <i>al-qist</i> ) with caution.	<i>al-birr</i> and <i>al-qist</i> as universal principles of kindness, justice, and respect, forming a structural framework for ethical conduct in interfaith relations.	Demonstrating tolerance and fairness in real-life social interactions, ensuring justice while maintaining peace and harmony in a pluralistic society.
[Q. 6: 59]	Allah's absolute knowledge; exclusive access to the unseen ( <i>al-ghayb</i> ); awareness of all that exists on land ( <i>al-barr</i> ) and sea ( <i>al-baḥr</i> ).	<i>al-barr</i> (land) and <i>al-baḥr</i> (sea) as representations of structured knowledge vs. uncertainty; <i>maḥāṭiḥ al-ghayb</i> as divine control over hidden knowledge.	Affirming the totality of divine knowledge, contrasting human limitations; representing cosmic duality of stability (land) and fluidity (sea).

#### 5.4 The Langue and Parole of *al-qist* in the Qur'an

Just as Saussure's langue and parole framework is analytically applied to the concept of *al-birr*, we can similarly analyze the term *al-qist* (justice) as it appears in the Qur'an. The Qur'an uses the term in various forms, adapting to different contexts that convey unique ethical principles. The term *al-qist* is sometimes applied in specific situations to reflect context-sensitive interpretations of justice and equity. Consider the following:

[Q. 57: 25] لَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا رُسُلَنَا بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ وَأَنْزَلْنَا مَعَهُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْمِيزَانَ لِيَقُومَ النَّاسُ بِالْقِسْطِ

Laqad arsalnā rusulanā bilbayināt wa anzalna ma'ahum alkitāb wa almiẓān liyaqūm alnāsu bilqisṭ

"We sent Our messengers with clear signs, the Scripture and the Balance, so that people could uphold **justice**"

In verse [Q. 57: 25], messengers were sent with clear signs, scripture, and the balance (*mīzān*) to ensure that justice (*al-qisṭ*) is upheld. Justice is portrayed not just as personal virtue but as a societal necessity rooted in divine guidance. The mention of balance (*al-mīzān*) points out that justice involves not only fairness in relations but also impartial measures. The phrase "*liyaqūm al-nāsu bil-qisṭ*" (so that people uphold justice) stresses that maintaining justice is a collective societal responsibility.

In the langue-parole framework, *al-qisṭ* in Qur'anic langue represents a fundamental principle of justice essential to Islamic moral and

legal doctrines. This concept ensures social stability and moral order. The parole of *al-qist* in verse [Q. 57: 25] manifests itself in its practical application through divine revelation, where scripture and prophetic teachings serve as the instruments through which justice is upheld. This illustrates that justice in the Qur'an is not arbitrary but deeply embedded in divine law, establishing a moral framework that mandates justice as a human duty and divine expectation. In another context, the Qur'an uses *al-qist* in a legal framework:

[Q. 17: 35] (وَأَوْفُوا الْكَيْلَ إِذَا كُلْتُمْ وَزِنُوا بِالْقِسْطَاسِ الْمُسْتَقِيمِ)

Wa aufū alkayl idhā kiltim wazinū bilqisṭās al-mustaḡīm

"Give full measure when you measure, and weigh with **accurate scales**"

The above verse emphasizes the necessity for believers to ensure justice in commerce through accurate measurements and scales. The phrase "*wa aufū al-kayl idhā kiltum*" (give full measure when you measure) mandates adherence to equity, indicating that justice is an obligatory legal and ethical principle. Additionally, "*wazinū bil-qisṭās al-mustaḡīm*" (weigh with accurate scales) stresses the significance of measurable and uniform justice, aligning with legal standards. This context establishes *al-qist* as a regulatory norm, ensuring fairness in transactions, and highlighting the Qur'anic insistence on precision for unbiased and regulated economic dealings. Within the langue-parole framework, *al-qist* in Qur'anic langue represents a universal legal and ethical principle of justice. In the parole of verse [Q. 17: 35], this principle is applied specifically to commerce and trade. This transforms abstract justice into concrete, enforceable legal obligations, highlighting that violating fair trade constitutes injustice, which results in social and moral consequences.

[Q. 7: 29] (قُلْ أَمَرَ رَبِّي بِالْقِسْطِ)

Qul amara rabbī bil-qisṭ

"Say, 'My Lord has commanded **justice**'"

In light of semiotics, *al-qist* in Qur'anic langue represents a comprehensive concept of justice and balance, embodying fairness, neutrality, and virtue within Islamic morality. In this specific parole of verse [Q. 7: 29], *al-qist* manifests itself as a divine command, underscoring justice as a God-established moral duty rather than a human construct. This framing positions *al-qist* as both a societal necessity and a spiritual obligation, urging believers to uphold justice in all aspects of life.

Proceeding with the semiotic significations conveyed by the sign *al-qist* and its derivatives, the term appears in the Qur'anic text in two distinct noun forms: *al-qāsiṭūn* (wrongdoers, disbelievers) and *al-qisṭās* (scale, measure of justice). While *al-qisṭās* emphasizes the idea of accuracy and equity in judgment, *al-qāsiṭūn* offers a stark contrast, indicating those who stray from justice and honesty. This dual representation mirrors the Qur'anic concept of justice, where *al-qist* signifies both a defined, quantifiable standard and a moral limit that, when transgressed, leads to corruption and divine punishment. Consider the following two verses:

[Q. 72: 14-15] (وَأَنَّا مِنَّا الْمُسْلِمُونَ وَمِنَّا الْقَاسِطُونَ فَمَنْ أَسْلَمَ فَأُولَئِكَ تَحَرَّوْا رَشَدًا وَأَمَّا الْقَاسِطُونَ فَكَانُوا لِجَهَنَّمَ حَطَبًا)

Wa anna minnā al-muslimūn wa minnā al-qāsiṭūn faman aslama fa'ulā'ika taḥarraw rashadā wa amma al-qāsiṭūn fakānū lijahannama ḥaṭaba

"Some of us submit to Him and others **go the wrong way**: those who submit to God have found wise guidance, but **those who go wrong** will be fuel for Hellfire"

In verse [Q. 72: 14-15], the form *al-qāsiṭūn* gives an opposite meaning to justice, i.e. "those who commit injustice." This semantic shift is significant, as it highlights the Qur'anic distinction between *qisṭ* (justice) and its negation (injustice, corruption, or deviation from the right path). Here, the verse [Q. 72: 14-15] contrasts two groups: those who submit to God and are rightly guided (*al-muslimūn*), and those who turn away from justice and truth, becoming fuel for Hellfire (*al-qāsiṭūn*). In contrast to other verses where *al-qist* refers to justice and balance, in this context the form "*al-qāsiṭūn*" refers to oppression, deviation, and moral corruption. This change shows that justice is not just a theoretical concept but a divine criterion, and straying from it leads to serious spiritual and eschatological repercussions. In the wider Qur'anic langue, *al-qist* signifies a core tenet of divine justice, equity, and equilibrium. Nevertheless, in this particular parole, *al-qāsiṭūn* pertains to individuals who behave unjustly, either in belief (by dismissing divine instruction) or in their interactions with others. The Qur'anic discussion of justice and injustice therefore goes beyond human interactions to encompass a wider theological and eschatological context, wherein justice is closely linked to an individual's final destiny. This verse reinforces that those who reject justice (*al-qāsiṭūn*) are seen as being against truth, leading to their condemnation in the afterlife.

Table 5. Langue and parole of *al-qist* and its derivatives

Verse No.	Context	Langue (Primary meaning)	Parole (Contextual signification)
[Q. 57: 25]	Justice as a divinely mandated principle, emphasizing the role of revelation in establishing a just social order.	<i>al-qist</i> as a structural, divinely ordained concept of justice ensuring societal and ethical balance.	The practical implementation of justice through divine guidance, scripture, and prophetic teachings.
[Q. 17: 35]	Justice applied within legal and economic contexts, ensuring fairness in trade and transactions.	<i>al-qist</i> as a measurable and enforceable principle, regulating fair transactions and legal practices.	Ensuring honesty in trade and daily dealings, maintaining social and economic integrity.
[Q. 7: 29]	Justice as a divine command, extending beyond legal and social applications to a core theological principle.	<i>al-qist</i> as an overarching divine principle, mandating justice as a moral and spiritual duty.	Internalising justice as a moral compass, guiding human behaviour in accordance with divine expectations.
[Q. 72: 14-15]	Justice and its negation: contrasting those who uphold justice ( <i>qist</i> ) and those who deviate from it ( <i>qāsiṭūn</i> ).	<i>al-qist</i> as a binary concept, where justice aligns with divine will and injustice leads to moral and eschatological consequences.	The lived consequences of justice and injustice—those who deviate from justice are condemned, reinforcing the necessity of upholding ethical and spiritual integrity.

## 6. Discussion

The current study points out a procedural distinction in Qur'anic discourse between langue and parole and adduces the instances of the use of *al-birr* and *al-qist* in the Qur'an that exemplify the individual use of language (parole) within the framework of a common shared language (langue). This study then investigates the significance and representation of the langue/parole dichotomy in the Qur'an from a Saussurean structuralist perspective and reveals through semiotic analysis that the ancient Arabic text lends itself to a contemporary scientific reading. In the context of Qur'anic semantics, the recognition of semantic fields enhances the analysis of key ethical concepts such as *al-birr* and *al-qist*. As langue, *al-birr* operates as an abstract system of ethical values shared among Muslims. The overarching concept of *al-birr* encompasses ideals of kindness, piety, and righteousness, forming a framework of moral guidance that resonates universally across the Qur'an. Through the lens of Saussure's semiotics, *al-birr* as parole encompasses a range of actions, relationships, and moral commitments. For instance, *al-birr* implies duty and charity when directed toward others, self-purification when applied internally, and responsibility when referenced in a familial context. These applications reveal the Qur'an's flexibility in addressing specific ethical scenarios while reinforcing its overarching moral teachings. In this way, *al-birr* exemplifies how the Qur'an's language serves as both a universal guide and a personal touchstone, resonating with the lives of believers in a dynamic, context-sensitive manner.

The Qur'an presents a comprehensive and layered understanding of *al-birr*, while also offering a distinct yet interconnected treatment of *al-qist*. Although the Qur'an differentiates *al-qist* as a separate concept, it simultaneously frames it as an essential dimension of *al-birr*, reinforcing the idea that justice is a necessary component of righteousness. As a result, the Qur'an not only establishes the normative framework of *al-birr* as a multi-dimensional ethical system (langue), but it also provides a practical, theologically grounded application of justice (parole). In doing so, the Qur'an builds upon and refines the moral principles found in earlier revelations and pre-Islamic societal practices, anchoring goodness and justice within a deep, established field of meaning. At the same time, the Qur'an elevates and redefines this theological relationship, positioning justice as an active, lived expression of ultimate goodness, thereby integrating moral, social, and legal dimensions into a singular divine mandate.

The parole of *al-birr* and *al-qist* in verse [Q. 60: 8] is also reflected in the specific interpretations and historical applications documented by classical and modern exegetes. For instance, Al-Ṭabarī (1994) interprets *al-birr* and *al-qist* as kindness and justice toward peaceful non-Muslims. At the same time, Al-Qurṭubī (2006) extends the concept of *tuṣṣiṭū* to include granting non-Muslims portions of wealth as a gesture of friendship and goodwill. Al-Rāzī (1981) differentiates between justice, which is permissible toward non-Muslims, and loyalty, which is prohibited for those who oppose Islam. Al-Sha'rawī (1999) further emphasizes the importance of proactive generosity, encouraging Muslims to seek out and support those in need, regardless of faith, while distinguishing between material kindness and internal loyalty. Similarly, Quṭb (1999) underscores the Qur'an's directive to establish lasting peace and treat those who respect Islam with kindness. These interpretations demonstrate how the langue of universal principles is dynamically enacted through parole, adapting to specific contexts and maintaining the balance between theoretical ethics and their practical application. This interplay between langue and parole in the Qur'an reinforces its enduring relevance and capacity to guide harmonious relationships in a pluralistic society.

Moreover, the langue of *al-birr* and *al-qist* in verse [Q. 60: 8] hints at a fundamental message that asks the Islamic Ummah to do goodness and justice to all human beings as long as non-Muslims also behave and do so. The normative message of this verse also places justice as the ultimate expression of goodness, where classical interpreters such as Al-Qurṭubī (2006) and Al-Rāzī (1981) confirm the expression of goodness to non-Muslims as long as they do not antagonize, fight against, or harm Muslims. Meanwhile, interpreters in the modern era, such as al-Sha'rawī chose the langue of these two verses with caution in attitude, speech, and partnering with non-Muslims. All good and just actions can be permitted as long as the non-Muslims themselves do so. Furthermore, al-Sha'rawī has a more progressive individual parole, namely encouraging Muslims to maintain the dignity of all humans, including non-Muslims, by doing good and fair things to them; even Muslims are encouraged to help others before they ask Muslims for help. The reason behind this choice of individual meaning (parole) could

be because al-Sha'rawi sees that human civilization today is much better than, for example, civilization during the time of revelation, in the 7th century AD, where people today live more peacefully with better social security and facilities.

The analysis demonstrates that *al-birr* (kindness) and *al-qist* (justice) serve as focal points for applying Saussure's langue/parole framework to Qur'anic language. As universal values, *al-birr* and *al-qist* function as langue, representing the foundational principles of moral integrity and fairness that underpin Islamic ethics. Within specific Qur'anic verses, these concepts take on contextually tailored expressions (parole) that address the diverse ethical and social needs of the community. For instance, *al-birr* as langue encapsulates the ideals of kindness, righteousness, and piety, while its varied uses in parole emphasize charity, familial responsibility, and moral steadfastness. Similarly, *al-qist* as langue reflects the Qur'an's commitment to justice as a guiding principle, while individual expressions of *al-qist* in parole illustrate its application in contexts like fair judgment, honesty in transactions, and adherence to divine justice. Together, these analyses show how the Qur'an uses structured ethical frameworks that remain adaptable to specific life situations, reinforcing its role as a practical moral guide.

It is analytically highlighted that understanding the meanings of *al-birr* and *al-qist* demonstrates how this study contributes to cross-cultural communication, particularly in English-speaking contexts. This is conducted by offering useful insights to English-speaking readers to view the Qur'anic ethical worldview as a cohesive whole, where social justice and moral integrity are inextricably linked to devotion to God. Significantly, emphasizing the value of righteousness, piety, compassion, justice, and good actions that are communicated by *al-birr* and *al-qist* provides a universal foundation for moral behavior that is relevant outside of Islamic culture. The intended message then appeals to the universal human principles of social duty, fairness, and benevolence. As such, analyzing the contextual significations of the two terms and their semiotic potential for making meanings serves to promote intercultural communication and mutual respect among peoples, particularly in pluralistic, multicultural societies. The findings revealed in this study, therefore, can serve as a common ground for dialogue and discussion, encouraging cooperation, empathy, and respect for one another. This correlates with many previous studies, such as Heyward's (2002), Thomas's (2010), and Ibrahim's (2014) arguments that understanding the language and behavior of different cultures, comprehending the intercultural communication principles, and putting them into practice while speaking with others can all help to lessen cross-cultural misunderstandings and improve cross-cultural interactions. People and communities can cooperate to create a more fair, compassionate, and just society by appropriately understanding the right interpretations of the Qur'anic terms and incorporating these meanings into current deliberations about morality, justice, and social responsibility. This, in turn, functions to mirror the right image of Islam and to reshape the others' perception of Islamic values.

Within the scope of education, the findings of this study significantly contribute to the teaching and learning of Arabic-Islamic concepts in English-speaking educational settings. Exposing the various meanings and interpretations of the Qur'anic terms, specifically those that carry diverse literal and contextual meanings, as is the case with *al-birr* and *al-qist*, functions to remove ambiguities and/or misunderstandings that may encounter learners in English-speaking educational environments, when they deal with the different Qur'anic terms. Approaching the semiotic significations of the Qur'anic terms in general and of *al-birr* and *al-qist* in particular helps students to recognize the Qur'an's depth and its applicability in both historical and modern settings, provides them with a more comprehensive engagement with Islamic ideas, fosters interfaith and cross-cultural dialogue, stimulates their critical thinking, and improves their translation accuracy of the Qur'anic text. As such, the current study emphasizes its interdisciplinary nature, as it intersects with areas such as semiotics, Islamic studies, translation studies, applied linguistics, and discourse analysis.

To recap, the concepts of *al-birr* and *al-qist* exemplify how Saussure's langue/parole binary deepens our understanding of the Qur'anic language. As langue, these terms embody universal values central to Islamic ethics, kindness and justice. As parole, they manifest themselves in specific forms, adapting to the needs of believers in varied contexts, such as al-Sha'rawi's advice to do kindness and justice even before others ask for help. This adaptability showcases the Qur'an's capacity to be both a universal guide and a contextually relevant text, affirming its role as a spiritual and ethical authority that integrates divine principles with human experiences. Through this multi-dimensional approach, the Qur'an communicates structured ethical principles while flexibly applying them to real-life situations, resonating across generations. By focusing on *al-birr* and *al-qist*, this analysis illustrates how religious language conveys abstract values through diverse, concrete expressions that maintain relevance to believers across times and contexts.

## 7. Conclusion

This study presented a semiotic analysis to explore the various contextual significations pertaining to *al-birr* and *al-qist* in the Qur'an. This was conducted by employing Saussure's concepts of langue and parole to reveal the meanings the two words have and the complex moral ideas they carry, particularly when they are used within different contexts in the Qur'anic text. In the Qur'an, *al-birr* emerges as a central moral value, enriched by multifaceted meanings that adapt to various contexts. Manifesting itself in forms such as *tabarr* (kindness), *barr* (duty to relatives), and *abrār* (the righteous), *al-birr* demonstrates the dynamic interplay between langue, the universal concept of moral goodness, and parole, with its specific expressions tailored to individual contexts. Conversely, the term *abrār*, as found in verses [76:5] and [3:193], describes individuals committed to righteous living, illustrating how the Qur'an translates this broad concept into specific qualities attributed to believers. These variations highlight the Qur'an's ability to articulate universal principles of morality while addressing the diverse dimensions of ethical behavior.

It was analytically evidenced that the interplay of langue and parole yields significant findings. First, the study revealed that the normative framework (langue) and linguistic usage (parole) of the selected verses of *al-birr* and *al-qist* consistently emphasize the values of righteousness (*al-birr*) and justice (*al-qist*) as being fundamental in relation to relationships between different religious communities.

Second, the study highlighted that the Qur'an, supported by exegetical works, portrays Islam as a religion of peace and tolerance, committed to maintaining societal harmony through the simultaneous implementation of kindness and justice. This depiction stands in stark contrast to certain contemporary narratives that misrepresent Islam as intolerant or unjust toward non-Muslims. By examining *al-birr* and *al-qist* through the lens of *langue* and *parole*, this study underscored the Qur'an's enduring capacity to provide a cohesive moral framework that is adaptable to diverse historical and social contexts, fostering principles of coexistence and mutual respect.

Finally, for future research, this study recommends further intensive studies on the semiotics and semantics of other Qur'anic concepts that serve to mirror how the same Qur'anic term can be semiotically and/or semantically augmented to communicate further meanings beyond their ordinary perceived ones. These studies might yield findings similar to and/or different from those revealed in this paper. In the EFL and Islamic studies settings, particularly in English-speaking contexts, it is recommended to incorporate the various literal and contextual meanings of the Qur'anic terms into students' textbooks so as to enable them to perceive the right interpretation of these terms and produce an accurate translation for them. This, in turn, contributes to cross-cultural communication and helps bridge gaps between different cultural perspectives and promotes mutual respect and coexistence. Also recommended is the study of the incompatible meanings of some terms in the language of the Qur'an, such as *al-khayr* (good) versus *al-shar* (evil), *al-thawāb* (reward) versus *al-'iqāb* (punishment), *al-'izzah* (pride) versus *al-dhul* (humiliation), etc. The semiotic and semantic investigation of these terms is anticipated to uncover various meanings that contribute to understanding the Qur'anic text.

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### Authors' contributions

The authors contributed equally to writing, editing, and proofreading the manuscript. They also approved the final version of this manuscript.

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## Appendix 1.

List of the transliteration symbols and their phonetic description

### a. Consonants

Arabic letter	Transliteration symbol	Phonetic description
ء	'	voiceless glottal stop
ب	b	voiced bilabial stop
ت	t	voiceless dental stop
ث	th	voiceless dental fricative
ج	j	voiced post-alveolar fricative
ح	h	voiceless pharyngeal fricative
خ	kh	voiceless uvular fricative
د	d	voiced dental stop
ذ	dh	voiced dental fricative
ر	r	voiced alveolar trill
ز	z	voiced dental fricative
س	s	voiceless dental fricative
ش	sh	voiceless palatal fricative
ص	ṣ	voiceless (emphatic) dental fricative
ض	ḍ	voiced (emphatic) dental stop
ط	ṭ	voiceless (emphatic) dental stop
ظ	ẓ	voiced (emphatic) dental fricative
ع	'	voiced pharyngeal fricative
غ	gh	voiced velar fricative
ف	f	voiceless labiodentals fricative
ق	q	voiceless uvular stop
ك	k	voiceless velar stop
ل	l	voiced alveolar lateral
م	m	voiced bilabial nasal
ن	n	voiced alveolar nasal
هـ	h	voiceless glottal fricative
و	w	voiced bilabial glide
ي	y	voiced palatal glide



**b. Vowels**

Arabic symbol	Transliteration symbol	Phonetic description
ي	á	front-open long slightly rounded vowel
و	u	half-close back short rounded vowel
ي	i	close-front short unrounded vowel
ا	a	half-front open short unrounded vowel
و	ū	close-back long rounded vowel
ي	ī	close-front long unrounded vowel
ا	ā	back-open long unrounded vowel