



Foundations of the Philosophy of Religious Language in the Thought of Allamah Tabatabai and Its Function in Quranic Exegesis

Reza Akbarian¹  | Yousof Fazilat² 

1. Department of Philosophy, Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran, Iran.

E-mail: dr.r.akbarian@gmail.com

2. Assistant Professor of Quranic and Hadith Sciences at Al Taha Institute of Higher Education, Tehran, Iran.

E-mail: dr.r.akbarian@gmail.com

Article Info

ABSTRACT

Article type:
Research Article

Article history:
Received 2026/02/13
Received in revised form
2026/03/17
Accepted 2026/03/18
Published online
2026/03/21

Keywords:

*Allamah Tabatabai,
philosophy of language,
Signification (dalālah),
conventional constructs
(i'tibāriyyāt), Tafṣīr al-
Mīzān, the language of
the Quran*

This study aims to extract and elucidate the foundational principles of the philosophy of language in the thought of Allamah Tabatabai and analyze their implications for Quranic exegesis. The research method is descriptive-analytical, with an approach that reconstructs Allamah's views in the three domains of philosophy, "conventional constructs" (i'tibāriyyāt), and exegesis. The findings indicate that by integrating two key theories—"Signification" (dalālah) as the mechanism of meaning-making and "conventional constructs" (i'tibāriyyāt) as the ontological-social foundation of language—Allamah arrived at a realist philosophy of language. In this framework, language is considered a constructed, yet reality-representing, bridge between the human mind and the objective world. The language of the Quran, utilizing the conventional-referential structure of human language and due to its divine origin, has perfected this structure to the utmost precision and efficacy, enabling it to refer to the most precise referents and existential truths. Furthermore, this philosophy of language provides the theoretical foundation for the method of "intra-Quranic exegesis" (tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi al-Qur'ān) in 'Tafsīr al-Mīzān' and serves as a criterion for mediating between the apparent and inner meanings, rejecting arbitrary allegorical interpretation (ta'wīl), and avoiding extreme relativism in understanding the Quran. According to Allamah, the outward meaning of the Qur'anic verses is authoritative, and through the principle of interpreting the Qur'ān by the Qur'ān, all verses of the Qur'ān are considered clear and unambiguous (muḥkam).

Cite this article: Akbarian, R; Fazilat, Y (2026). Foundations of the Philosophy of Religious Language in the Thought of Allamah Tabatabai and Its Function in Quranic Exegesis, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, 5(1), 5-24. <https://doi.org/10.22034/hpi.2026.575366.1198>



© The Author(s). **Publisher:** Ale-Taha Institute of Higher Education Institute.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22034/hpi.2026.575366.1198>

Introduction

The composition of Tafsīr al-Mīzān as the most profound and systematic philosophical Quranic exegesis of the contemporary era is undoubtedly based on solid theoretical foundations, one of the most important of which is Allamah Tabatabai's specific perspective on the phenomenon of "language." Although he did not author an independent treatise under this title, a coherent and novel picture of his "philosophy of language" can be reconstructed by synthesizing his views in three fields: philosophy (especially concerning Signification), practical philosophy (in the theory of conventional constructs), and exegesis (in his engagement with Quranic terms).

Four viewpoints have been proposed by Muslim thinkers regarding the formation of the Quran's words and meanings:

- The meanings of the Quran are from God, but the Prophet (PBUH) formulated these meanings into the Arabic language. (Al-Zarkashī, 1408 AH, vol. 1, pp. 290-291)

- The meanings of the Quran are from God, but its words and phrases were chosen and arranged by the Angel Gabriel. (Al-Zarkashī, 1408, vol. 1, p. 291)

- The Prophet (PBUH) authored the content and text of the Quran. Allamah Tabatabai writes in al-Mīzān: "And more foolish than that is the saying of one who claims: 'The Quran, in its wording and meaning, is among the productions of the Prophet (PBUH). He cast it from a level of his noble soul called the Trustworthy Spirit (ruh al'amin) to another level called the heart...'" (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 1391, vol. 15, p. 317).

- The content and text of the Quran are precisely revealed by God, and the Prophet and the angel of revelation played no role in creating its meanings or selecting its words and phrases. (Ma'rifat, 1416, vol. 1, p. 274)

The discussion of the Quran's language in Allamah's studies has primarily progressed within the framework of critiquing symbolic and

expressive theories (e.g., the article by Mohammad Rezaei et al., titled "Allamah Tabatabai and Symbolic and Expressive Language in the Quran"). However, a research gap remains. Despite addressing the outcomes and positions of Allamah regarding the aforementioned theories, no study has systematically extracted the foundations of his philosophy of language (especially the connection between Signification and conventional constructs) as the infrastructure for those positions.

The philosophy of language is not merely an abstract theory; it is a key to unlocking the central problem in engaging with the Quran: How can a discourse with human and historical words and structure carry a supra-human and eternal message? Allamah's answer to this question is rooted in a profound integration of the two theories of "Signification" and "conventional constructs." The first theory explains the mechanism of meaning transfer, and the second elucidates the ontological and social foundation of this mechanism. This article aims to represent Allamah's intellectual system concerning language by analyzing these two pillars and demonstrating their connection, and then to show how this system forms the basis of his exegetical approach in *al-Mīzān*. This transition from the philosophy of language to the method of Quranic exegesis will be the focal point and primary innovation of this research.

From Sadrian Ontological Foundations to Allamah Tabatabai's Systematic Framework

The discussion about the nature of religious language and its capacity to express transcendent truths has long been central to the attention of Islamic philosophers, theologians, and exegetes. This discourse, especially in confronting the revelatory text of the Quran, which claims to speak of the infinite with a finite tool (human language), assumes complex and challenging dimensions. In the tradition of Islamic philosophy, Mulla Sadra's Transcendent Theosophy (*al-Ḥikmah al-Mutaʿāliyah*) marks a turning point in providing a comprehensive framework for addressing this issue. By establishing a philosophical

system centered on the "Principality of Existence" (aṣālat al-wujūd), the "Graduation in the Ranks of Existence" (tashkīk fī marātib al-wujūd), and "Substantial Motion" (al-ḥarakat al-jawhariyyah), Sadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī opened a new window for understanding the relationship between language, knowledge, and existence (‘Alawī, 1393, p. 4). In the Sadrian paradigm, language is not confined to a conventional system of words; it is itself considered a type of existence and an existential sign. From this perspective, the entire universe is the very "Word" and "Speech" of God, manifesting His attributes. Existence is the true and manifest language of God, and its phenomena are symbols and signifiers pointing to transcendent signifieds. This existential semiotics provides an ontological foundation for any linguistic discussion. Consequently, understanding the religious text (the Quran) is also a process of allegorical interpretation and ascent, through which the exegete, by transcending literal appearances and relying on the three levels of existence (sensory, imaginal, intellectual), attains the inner and intelligible truths of the text. A condition for this understanding is a kind of existential affinity and unity between the knower (the exegete) and the known (the truth of the text); only one who has ascended to an intellectual rank through existential spiritual wayfaring will be able to perceive the intellectual meanings of the Quran (‘Alawī, 1393, pp. 6-7). Thus, by inseparably linking ontology, epistemology, Sadra opened a middle path between the two extreme poles of "Mu'tazilite allegorism" (which considers religious language entirely metaphorical) and "Hanbalite literalism" (which insists on the literal meaning) and presented his theory of "critical realism".

Although these grand foundations provided a solid cornerstone for the philosophy of religious language in the Islamic tradition, a more detailed explanation of meaning-making mechanisms, analysis of the structure of the signifier-signified relationship, and determination of the social and epistemological status of human language within that framework were needed. This is where the historical role of Allamah Tabatabai, as the reviver and systematizer of Islamic philosophy in the contemporary era,

gains special importance. Allamah sought to extract and present a coherent system of the philosophy of language by drawing upon the rich heritage of Islamic philosophy and with analytical precision, serving both as a theoretical support for his own exegetical method in *al-Mīzān* and as a systematic response to emerging questions about religious language.

Allamah's major innovation in this field was the integration and elaboration of two key theories which, although rooted in the works of predecessors, assumed a central and decisive role in his intellectual system: the "theory of reference" and the "theory of conventional constructs." From Allamah's perspective, "reference" is the primary mechanism of meaning transfer, through which a word first refers to a mental "concept" and then, via that concept, to an external, objective "referent" (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 1387, p. 58). This precise analysis of the referential process provides a powerful tool for explaining how the words of the Quran function in pointing to transcendent truths. On the other hand, the "theory of conventional constructs" explains the ontological-social foundation of language. Language belongs to the category of "pre-social conventional constructs" – matters that have no real external existence, but which human practical reason posits for managing life's affairs and attaining true perfections (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 1389, p. 124). This view considers language, on the one hand, as conventional and posited (not intrinsic), and on the other hand, due to its rational purposefulness, deems it a reality-representing and reliable tool for knowing the truth.

It is the integration of these two theories that shapes Allamah's "critical realist" philosophy of language: a language that has a conventional structure (*i'tibāriyyāt*) but can, through the mechanism of reference, correctly point to real referents. This theoretical framework offering a novel response to the ancient riddle of the relationship between the sacred realm and human words: The language of the Quran utilizes the general conventional-referential structure of human language, but due to its revelatory origin, it has elevated this structure to the highest level of accuracy and efficacy so that it can refer to the most precise referents and

truths of existence. Therefore, Quranic propositions are simultaneously "meaningful" because they are understood within the framework of linguistic references, "reality-representing" because they refer to objective truths, and "cognitive" because they provide true knowledge about the world.

Elucidating the Theory of Signification: From Word to Transcendent Referent

At the core of Allamah Tabatabai's understanding of language lies the theory of "reference" (*dalālah*). In his philosophical works, especially in the book *Nihāyat al-Hikmah*, he elaborates in detail on the types and manner of a word's Signification to meaning. From his perspective, verbal reference, the most common type, is a conventional and contractual relationship through which a word guides the listener to its meaning (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 1387, p. 58). However, what gives depth to this theory for understanding the Quran's language is the precise distinction Allamah makes between "concept" and "referent." A word, in the first step, refers to a mental and universal concept. This concept acts like a mental intermediary. Then, this mental concept itself indicates an objective, external "referent." This distinction is key to understanding how language refers to reality.

For example, when the word "justice" (*‘adl*) is used, it first evokes the universal mental concept of justice, and this concept points to its external, objective referents, i.e., just acts in the external world. This two-tiered structure of Signification becomes the foundation for understanding how the words of the Quran can carry transcendent meanings. The words of the Quran create concepts in the mind, and these concepts themselves refer to true referents far beyond limited worldly referents in the realms of existence. In other words, reference in the Quran does not stop at the conceptual level; it transcends the concept and refers to transcendent and existential truths. This view transforms the language of the Quran from a closed semiotic system into a window towards existential truths.

Elucidating the Theory of Conventional Constructs and Its Relation to the Philosophy of Language

If the theory of Signification explains the functional mechanism of language, the "theory of conventional constructs" explains its ontological and social foundation. In his treatise *Risālat al-I'tibāriyyāt* and also in *Tafsīr al-Mīzān*, Allamah defines "conventional constructs" as matters that have no real external existence, but which human practical reason posits for managing life's affairs and attaining true perfections (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 1389, p. 124). Language is among the first and most fundamental of these constructs – a construct of the type "pre-social conventional constructs." This means that language, although in its words and rules is a conventional and posited matter, is rooted in the real and innate human needs for communication and cooperation and is a tool for achieving true goals.

Therefore, from Allamah's perspective, language is neither completely intrinsic and identical with reality nor merely a baseless illusion or empty construct; rather, it is a posited bridge built over the gap between the limited human mind and the objective world. This view simultaneously emphasizes the conventional and contractual nature of the form of language and affirms its reality-representing and truth-disclosing function. This balanced viewpoint is the cornerstone of Allamah's critical realist philosophy of language.

"However, the key point that provides the connecting link between conventional constructs (i'tibāriyyāt) and truth is the innate (fiṭrī) origin of these constructs. From Allamah's perspective, although conventional constructs have no independent external existence, their 'source of abstraction' (mansha' al-intizā') traces back to objective realities and human innate nature (fiṭrah). In other words, linguistic conventional constructs, despite being conventional themselves, have been posited based on the real and innate human needs for communication with reality and the existential journey toward perfection. Human innate nature, as the common ground among all human beings, serves as a reliable bridge that

connects linguistic conventional constructs to trans-temporal and trans-spatial truths. This is why linguistic conventional constructs are not merely tools for facilitating everyday communication, but rather means for attaining true knowledge and humanity's ultimate perfection. The language of the Qur'an, relying on this very characteristic, employs conventional constructs in such a way that they not only do not hinder the understanding of truths, but actually become the most precise and complete instruments for pointing to those truths."

Integration of the Two Theories and the Formation of a Philosophy of Language

Now, by combining these two theories, a more complete picture of Allamah's philosophy of language emerges. The "theory of conventional constructs" provides the context and foundation in which the "theory of reference" can function as the mechanism for the operation of this posited tool. In other words, language as a posited system consists of signifiers (words) and signifieds (meanings), and these signifiers, based on the rules of reference, guide the mind towards meanings and, ultimately, external referents.

This perspective establishes a "critical realist" philosophy of language. Language, although not directly identical with reality itself (it is posited), can accurately report on reality and lead us to truth (hence, it is realist) because it is rooted in the innate and rational needs of humanity and aims at external referents. This is the very point that Allamah emphasizes in the introduction to *Tafsīr al-Mīzān*: words refer to meanings, and these meanings, if correctly understood, guide us to the truths of the world.

This philosophical framework is the key to solving the main dilemma concerning the language of the Quran. The question is: How can a book revealed in human language (clear Arabic) carry trans-historical and supra-human meanings and truths? The answer from Allamah's perspective is that the language of the Quran, while utilizing this same conventional-referential structure of human language, has, due to its

revelatory origin, elevated this structure to the highest level of efficacy and accuracy. The words and concepts of the Quran, although comprehensible to the people of the language (the conventional, human aspect), refer to the most precise and profound referents and truths of the existential world (the truth-disclosing, sacred aspect).

For example, when the Quran speaks of "light" (nūr), it refers both to the conventional, posited concept of light understandable to humans and targets its transcendent referent, namely "Allah," as in the verse: "Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth" (24:35). This verse shows how a word with the conventional and known concept of "light" is used to refer to a transcendent truth, "Allah." Therefore, the exegetical method of "intra-Quranic exegesis," to which Allamah adhered, is essentially the discovery of a network of references within the Quranic text itself, through which the primary posited concepts are guided towards deeper meanings and ultimate truths, transcending their posited limitations.

Explaining the Impact of Allamah Tabatabai's Philosophy of Language on Resolving Hermeneutical Issues in Quranic Exegesis

The viewpoint of Allamah Tabatabai's philosophy of language, centered on the integration of the theory of Signification and the theory of conventional constructs, has fundamental impacts on resolving hermeneutical issues. These impacts can be analyzed in several key areas:

The Relationship Between Human Language and Transcendent Truths

How can the Quranic text, expressed in Arabic (vocabulary, syntax, morphology), carry trans-historical, trans-spatial, and supra-human meanings? Does this necessitate a diminishment of the Quran's sanctity or its mythologization? Allamah's answer, based on the theory of Signification and conventional constructs, is that a Quranic word refers to a mental concept, but this concept itself refers to an objective and true referent in the ranks of existence. Therefore, the linguistic reference of the Quran is not merely abstract and conventional; it has reference to reality. The language of the Quran, although in form belongs to the same

conventional and customary human language to be comprehensible to the audience, in content, due to its revelatory nature, points to the highest and most accurate referents. Thus, the conventional nature of language does not mean non-representation of reality; rather, it is a mechanism for the elevation of meaning. With this explanation, the apparent conflict between the "humanity of language" and the "divinity of content" is resolved. The Quran uses the communicative tools of humanity but guides this tool in such a way that common error and deficiency do not enter it.

Language as a Tool for Realizing Purposes of Meanings

Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabatabai provides a profound and teleological perspective on the relationship between word and meaning, which can be termed the "teleological theory of the positing of words." According to this view, words are not posited arbitrarily or merely based on formal similarity, but rather to realize spiritual and vital purposes and goals. This can be extracted and proven from his various works, especially in *Tafsīr al-Mīzān* and his marginalia on *al-Asfār al-Arba‘ah*.

Critiquing a purely conventional view of language, Allamah explicitly states that although the element of convention is primary in determining the signifier for the signified, this convention is based on a natural suitability and proportionality between word and meaning. He writes in his marginalia on the first volume of Mulla Sadra's *al-Asfār al-Arba‘ah*: "The positing of words for meanings is not mere agreement and convention; rather, it is based on a natural suitability between word and meaning. The ultimate matter is that this suitability sometimes remains hidden from us. So, when man posited the word 'sun' (shams), he posited it for the meaning of brightness, light, and life; these meanings are the very purpose of the positing." (*Hāshiyat al-‘Allāmah al-Ṭabāṭabā’ī ‘alā al-Asfār al-Arba‘ah*, vol. 1, p. 230)

In *Tafsīr al-Mīzān*, while analyzing verses related to the Divine Names and Attributes, Allamah expands this theory philosophically. Commenting on the verse "And He taught Adam all the names" (2:31), he

explains: "Verily, linguistic positing follows meaning, and meaning follows the benefit and purpose whose realization in the external world is intended. So, those names that God taught Adam were not mere inert names; they were living meanings that referred to the realities of things and their functions in the system of creation. Therefore, knowledge of them was knowledge of divine realities and purposes." (Al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī, al-Mīzān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān, vol. 1, p. 117) Allamah clearly delineates the hierarchy of "word ← meaning ← purpose/benefit" and shows that the purpose and function of a thing in existence shape its meaning, and then the appropriate word is posited for that meaning.

Allamah extends this general principle specifically to the language of the Quran. From his view, the words of the Quran are chosen with divine precision to realize specific guidance-related and creational purposes. For example, in analyzing the difference between the words "fear" (al-khawf) and "awe" (al-khashyah) in the context of verse 2 of Surah Al-Baqarah, he says: "The difference between *khawf* and *khashyah* in Quranic usage is not a purely lexical difference; rather, each word is posited for a specific meaning appropriate to the educational and divine purpose. Thus, '*khawf*' is used where the purpose is submission and desisting from harm, and '*khashyah*' where the purpose is reverence and glorification for God, the Exalted. Thus, positing follows the educational purpose." (Al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī, al-Mīzān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān, vol. 2, p. 245)

From synthesizing Allamah's views in this area, the key conclusion can be reached that from his perspective, language is an existential and teleological phenomenon. Words are not merely separate labels; they are tools in the service of human evolutionary journey and the realization of divine purposes in the system of creation. Based on the authoritative texts of Allamah Tabatabai, it can be claimed that his view on language is "teleological realism." In this view, the positing of words follows meaning, and meaning follows the purpose and existential function of the thing. The language of the Quran is the highest manifestation of this teleological system, in which every word is chosen with divine wisdom

for realizing a specific purpose in guiding humanity. This analysis elevates language from the realm of mere convention to the arena of wisdom and existential meaningfulness and provides a solid basis for understanding the exegetical and semantic subtleties of the Quran.

Providing a Foundation for (Intra-Quranic Exegesis) and Rejecting Arbitrary Interpretation (Tafsīr bi al-Ra'y)

What is the criterion for the correctness of interpretation? How can whimsical, arbitrary interpretations or those influenced by foreign presuppositions (Isrā'iliyyāt, imported philosophies) be prevented? ****Allamah's answer based on the internal coherence of references:**** Since the words of the Quran refer to objective and coherent referents within the network of existence, the meanings of the verses must also be consistent with and complementary to each other. Therefore, the Quran itself is its own best interpreter, because the network of its internal references forms an interconnected semantic system.

If the language of the Quran were merely "symbolic" or "emotive" and lacked definite reference, any interpretation could claim validity. But since its reference is reality-representing and corresponds to existential truths, interpretation must also follow the discovery of these coherent references. The method of "intra-Quranic exegesis," which Allamah innovated and pursued in al-Mīzān, directly stems from this philosophy of language. Understanding any verse occurs in the light of other verses and with attention to the totality of the Quranic system, not based on imposed preconceptions/

Explaining the Relationship Between the "Apparent" and "Inner" Meanings of the Quran Without Sliding into Extreme Allegorism

Does the Quran possess inner meanings beyond its apparent meanings? If yes, is this inner meaning symbolic and separate from the apparent? How can one avoid excess in allegorical interpretation (which leads to the dissolution of the text) or deficiency in literalism (which leads to

rigidity?)

****Allamah's answer based on longitudinal hierarchies of meaning:****
Based on the graduation in the ranks of existence (a principle adopted from Sadra), the Signification of Quranic words can also have longitudinal hierarchies. A single word can simultaneously refer to a limited worldly referent (apparent) and a transcendent intellectual or mystical referent (inner), without these two being in contradiction or one being metaphorical. These meanings are in a longitudinal relationship with each other, not a lateral one. The inner meaning of the Quran is not an imaginary, purely symbolic, or subjective matter; rather, it is an objective truth at a higher level of existence to which the words, with their specific reference, point. With this view, both the apparent is valid, as it is the primary and necessary reference for general understanding, and the inner is valid, as it points to a deeper truth. Both arbitrary allegorical interpretation (which replaces the apparent with the inner) and rigid literalism (which denies any inner meaning) are rejected.

Responding to the Challenge of "Plurality of Readings" and Relativism in Understanding

Is understanding of the Quran non-plural and absolute, or plural and relative? If plural, are all understandings equally valid?

Unity in the Text, Plurality in the Levels of Reception: The truth of the Quran is one (referring to the coherent system of existence), but the reception of this single truth by exegetes is plural, corresponding to their own existential and cognitive ranks. This plurality is not the relativity of truth, but rather a difference in the intensity and weakness of connection to the truth. Reasonable pluralism is accepted (differences in degrees of understanding), but extreme relativism (equality of all readings) and rigid fundamentalism (exclusivity of understanding in one reading) are both rejected.

With the foundations of his philosophy of language, Allamah Tabatabai essentially presents a novel hermeneutical paradigm which can

be termed "Critical Realist Hermeneutics." This framework not only answers classical hermeneutical issues of the Quran but also provides an Islamic and rational response to the challenges of modern hermeneutics (relativity, plurality, the role of the interpreter), leaving Tafsīr al-Mīzān as a concrete and magnificent example of the application of this hermeneutics.

Hermeneutical Implications: The Transition from Philosophy of Language to Exegetical Method

This philosophical framework, as a theoretical foundation, shaped the hermeneutical paradigm of al-Mīzān and elevated it from a merely literary or narrative exegesis to a systematic understanding system. The most important results of this transition are:

Justifying the Method of Intra-Quranic Exegesis: The internal coherence of the network of Quranic references became the strongest reason that the Quran itself is its first and most reliable interpreter.

Allamah Tabatabai, by establishing a philosophy of language arising from the integration of "reference" and "conventional constructs," not only provided a robust and rational answer to the ancient problem of the relationship between the sacred realm and human words but also presented a living model of dialogue between the deep Islamic philosophical tradition and the issues of religious modern thought. Tafsīr al-Mīzān, as the concrete embodiment of this intellectual framework, bears witness that a profound and systematic understanding of the Quran is possible not by severance from philosophical rationality, but through its evolution and employment. Therefore, rereading Allamah's thoughts in this field is not merely a historical inquiry; it is opening a treasure for a scholarly and renewed engagement with the Quran in an era where the question of religious language remains among the most fundamental intellectual challenges of contemporary humanity.

The Function of Allamah Tabatabai's Theory of Signification in Tafsīr al-Mīzān

Allamah Tabatabai's theory of reference, which is based on the precise distinction between word, mental concept, and objective referent, forms the methodological backbone of the invaluable exegesis *al-Mīzān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*. This theory is not merely an abstract philosophical discussion; rather, it concretely and systematically determines the exegete's framework for engaging with the Quranic text. The foundational effects of this theory can be traced with reference to the text of *al-Mīzān* itself in the following areas:

Establishing the Concrete Method of Intra-Quranic Exegesis

Allamah explicitly states in the introduction to *al-Mīzān* that the fundamental method in exegesis is reliance on the Quran itself, because "the Quran is itself an exposition and clarifier of all things" (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *al-Mīzān*, vol. 1, Introduction, p. 7). This claim is only possible by relying on the theory of reference. Based on this, the words of the Quran form a coherent network of references, and the best evidence for understanding any word is the usage of that same word or its derivatives in other verses. In interpreting the key word "kingdom" (*mulk*) in the verse "Say, 'O Allah, Owner of Sovereignty' (3:26)," Allamah, to determine its precise referent, cites other verses such as "To whom belongs the sovereignty this Day?" (40:16) and "And He is Allah; there is no deity except Him. To Him is [all] praise in the first [life] and the Hereafter. And His is the command" (28:70), showing that true dominion and absolute sovereignty belong exclusively to God (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *al-Mīzān*, vol. 3, pp. 230-232). This cross-referencing of verses directly results from the belief in the coherence of the Quran's referential system.

Regulating the Concept of "Literal" and "Metaphorical" and Delimiting the Scope of Allegorical Interpretation

Relying on the principle of "taking speech according to its literal meaning" in the theory of reference, Allamah makes any departure to the

metaphorical or allegorical conditional upon the existence of decisive evidence. He writes in interpreting the verse "the hand of Allah is over their hands": "The principle in speech is the literal meaning, and deviation from it requires evidence... and the evidence must be such that it negates the probability of the literal meaning" (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, al-Mīzān, vol. 8, p. 250). In confronting the verse "The Most Merciful [who is] above the Throne established" (20:5), Allamah first examines all aspects of the literal meaning of "istawā" in Arabic, then, by citing verses like "There is nothing like unto Him" (42:11) as decisive rational-textual evidence, shows that a sensory meaning of physical settling or occupation is impossible. Then, by referring to the context of other verses, he selects the non-material literal meaning of "compelling domination and wise sovereignty" as the referent of the verse, not a metaphorical meaning (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, al-Mīzān, vol. 14, pp. 265-270). This process is a perfect example of applying the theory of reference.

Allamah Tabatabai's theory of Signification is a practical and guiding theory in Tafsīr al-Mīzān. By transforming exegesis from a whimsical and inflexible activity into a rational and systematic process, this theory imparts discipline to the exegete and provides an objective criterion for evaluating the correctness of interpretations. It is only by relying on this theory that al-Mīzān can claim to pursue the discovery of the true intent of the Quranic words, not merely the presentation of literary or historical possibilities. Therefore, a deep understanding of al-Mīzān depends on understanding the governing theory of Signification within it.

The Application of Allamah Tabatabai's Theory of Conventional Constructs in Tafsīr al-Mīzān

The theory of conventional constructs, which in Allamah's practical philosophy considers language one of the most fundamental pre-social conventional constructs, functions as a communicative bridge between the human mind and the transcendent truths of the Quran in Tafsīr al-Mīzān. This theory provides a philosophical foundation for explaining how

conventional language is used to express revelatory knowledge, and its effects in al-Mīzān are deep and structural.

Explaining the Possibility of Universal Understanding of the Quran (Address to the Public)

If the Quran contains transcendent truths, how is the general public, with varying levels of understanding, addressed by it?

Answer based on conventional constructs: Allamah states in discussing the Quran's method: "The Quran has spoken in the language of common convention (‘urf), because its audience is the general public. The language of convention is a posited language based on sensory concepts and commonalities of life so that all can comprehend the meanings and apply them." (Ṭabāṭabā’ī, al-Mīzān, vol. 2, p. 15) This means the Quran utilizes the existing posited structure of language to communicate with the human mind. Concepts such as "reward," "punishment," "Paradise," "Hell" – although referring to supra-material realities – are expressed in the form of rational conventional constructs related to the system of reward and punishment to be comprehensible to all. (Ṭabāṭabā’ī, al-Mīzān, vol. 1, p. 53)

Distinguishing Between "Posited Concepts" and "Objective Truths" and Avoiding Mistaking the Form of Expression for the Truth

Are the Quran's ethical and social concepts (such as justice, oppression, benevolence) merely social conventions, or do they have objective reality?

Answer based on conventional constructs: Using this theory, Allamah shows that the form of expression of these concepts is posited, but they refer to objective and real truths in the system of existence. "Justice" in language is a posited concept, but its objective referent is "granting everyone their due right" in the divine creational order (Ṭabāṭabā’ī, al-Mīzān, vol. 12, p. 328). Or, in analyzing Quranic narratives, in interpreting the story of Prophet Moses, Allamah emphasizes that the

format and form of the narrative are suited to conventional understanding and linguistic constructs, but the content and truth of the event are real and objective. This view avoids both extreme allegorism, which considers the stories entirely symbolic, and naive literalism (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, al-Mīzān, vol. 10, p. 112).

The Theory of Conventional Constructs as the Key to Understanding "Descent" (Tanzīl)

In Tafsīr al-Mīzān, the theory of conventional constructs plays the vital role of explaining the gap between the transcendent truth of the "Revealed" (al-munzal) and the limited mind of the "one upon whom it is revealed" (al-munzal 'alayh). This theory enables Allamah to explain the comprehensibility of the Quran to all, avoid rigidity regarding appearances, reject arbitrary allegorical interpretation, and preserve the truth-representation of Quranic propositions. In other words, the theory of conventional constructs is the philosophy of descent (tanzīl) in Allamah's thought; a rational explanation of how the Divine Word is revealed in a human, comprehensible form without compromising its intrinsic truth. This theory elevates al-Mīzān from a merely literary or historical exegesis to a profoundly philosophical hermeneutical system.

Conclusion

This research was conducted with the aim of extracting and elucidating the system of philosophy of language in the thought of Allamah Tabatabai and investigating its implications for the exegesis and understanding of the Quran. A systematic examination of his philosophical, exegetical, and mystical works confirms the hypothesis that a coherent and novel system concerning the philosophy of language can be reconstructed from Allamah's views; a system that serves as a key to unlocking fundamental problems in the exegesis and understanding of the Holy Quran.

Allamah's primary innovation in this field was the integration of two key theories, "Signification" and "conventional constructs," through

which the philosophical system of the Quran's language can be extracted. The theory of Signification, by precisely distinguishing between word, concept, and referent, explained the objective mechanism of language's reference to reality. This theory showed that the words of the Quran are not merely directors of the mind to concepts, but through those concepts, they refer to true referents and objective ranks of existence.

The theory of conventional constructs revealed the ontological-social foundation of human language. According to this, language, as a "rational pre-social posited construct," is a necessary bridge between the limited human mind and the unlimited world of meaning. This posited nature does not mean non-representation of reality, but rather the conventionality of the tool for attaining truth.

The connection of these two theories provides a definitive answer to the question of how human language relates to supra-human truths. The language of the Quran utilizes the general posited-referential structure of human language, but due to its revelatory source, it has purified this structure from any error and deficiency and elevated it to the peak of efficacy so that it can refer to the most precise referents and deepest truths of existence.

Language is an existential and teleological phenomenon. Words are not merely separate labels; they are tools in the service of human evolutionary journey and the realization of divine purposes in the system of creation. Based on the authoritative texts of Allamah Tabatabai, it can be claimed that his view on language is "teleological realism." In this view, the positing of words follows meaning, and meaning follows the purpose and existential function of the thing. The language of the Quran is the highest manifestation of this teleological system, in which every word is chosen with divine wisdom for realizing a specific purpose in guiding humanity. This analysis elevates language from the realm of mere convention to the arena of wisdom and existential meaningfulness and provides a solid basis for understanding the exegetical and semantic subtleties of the Quran.

References

* The Holy Quran

1. Al-Zarkashī, Badr al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd Allāh. (1408 AH). *Al-Burhān fī ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān*. Beirut: Dār al-Fikr.
2. Ṭabāṭabā’ī, Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn. (1387 AH). *Nihāyat al-Ḥikmah*. Qom: Mu’assasat al-Nashr al-Islāmī.
3. Ṭabāṭabā’ī, Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn. (1389 AH). *Uṣūl-i Falsafah wa Rawish-i Ri’ālism* (Principles of Philosophy and the Method of Realism). Tehran: Intishārāt-i Ṣadrā.
4. Ṭabāṭabā’ī, Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn. (1391 AH). *Al-Mīzān fī Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*. Qom: Daftar-i Intishārāt-i Islāmī.
5. Ṭabāṭabā’ī, Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn. (n.d.). *Risālat al-I’tibāriyyāt*. In: *Majmū‘at Rasā’il*. Qom: Intishārāt-i Bīdār.
6. Al-Ṭabāṭabā’ī, Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn. (n.d.). *Al-Ḥāshiyah ‘alā al-Asfār al-Arba‘ah*. Qom: Mu’assasat al-Nashr al-Islāmī.
7. Muḥammad Riḍā’ī, Muḥammad, et al. (1393 AH). "‘Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā’ī va Zabān-i Namādī va Inshā’ī dar Qur’ān" (Allamah Tabatabai and Symbolic and Expressive Language in the Quran). *Pazhūhishnāmah-i Tafsīr va Zabān-i Qur’ān*, No. 4. Isfahan: Payām-e Nūr University.
8. Ma’rifat, Muḥammad Hādī. (1416 AH). *Al-Tamhīd fī ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān*. Qom: Mu’assasat al-Nashr al-Islāmī.