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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Textual Cohesion in Official Pashto Language and Literature Textbooks at Afghan Universities: A Study Based on Halliday and Hasan's (1976) Theory

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ABSTRACT

Textual cohesion plays a central role in connecting linguistic elements and maintaining continuity of meaning within academic texts. Halliday and Hasan's (1976) framework provides a systematic basis for examining grammatical and lexical cohesive devices and explaining how they contribute to textual organization. Although previous studies have addressed aspects of text linguistics and lexical cohesion, the literature reviewed for the present study did not reveal a systematic comparative analysis of cohesive devices across official Pashto language and literature textbooks from multiple Afghan universities. To address this gap, the present study examines the use of grammatical and lexical cohesive devices in twenty official Pashto language and literature textbooks from nine Afghan universities. Using a mixed-methods approach, it combines quantitative frequency analysis with qualitative interpretation to investigate both the distribution of cohesive devices and their contribution to textual continuity. Three samples of (1,000) words each were selected from the first, middle, and final chapters of every textbook, yielding a corpus of (60,000) words. The findings indicate that cohesive ties ranged from (329) to (396), with a reported mean of (378). Reference was the most frequent grammatical cohesive device, accounting for (40.7%) of all identified cohesive ties, while repetition was the dominant lexical cohesive device. The mean number of cohesive ties was (381) in literary-studies textbooks and (370) in linguistics textbooks. Among the universities represented, Nangarhar had the highest reported mean number of cohesive ties (392), whereas Laghman had the lowest (352). Qualitative analysis further examined how cohesive devices establish links between linguistic elements and sustain the flow of meaning, while weaknesses in reference, substitution, ellipsis, and lexical variation may reduce cohesion in some passages. By combining quantitative patterns with qualitative interpretation, this study provides a comparative account of textual cohesion in the selected Pashto university textbooks and identifies areas in which the cohesive organization of academic texts could be improved.

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Introduction

Text is a fundamental unit of linguistic analysis. For a long time, however, linguistic research concentrated mainly on the sentence and the word, while the text received comparatively little systematic attention. The emergence of text linguistics changed this orientation by placing the text at the centre of linguistic analysis and by treating it as a meaningful linguistic unit in its own right (Beaugrande & Dressler, 1981). Beaugrande and Dressler identified seven standards of textuality: cohesion, coherence,

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intentionality, acceptability, informativity, situationality, and intertextuality. The present study is concerned specifically with cohesion. Among the influential contributions to text linguistics, Halliday and Hasan's *Cohesion in English* is particularly important. They describe cohesion as a semantic relationship in which the interpretation of one linguistic element depends on its relationship with another element in the text (Halliday & Hasan, 1976).

Halliday and Hasan (1976) distinguish between grammatical and lexical cohesion. Grammatical cohesion includes reference, substitution, ellipsis, and conjunction. Reference connects an item to another element whose interpretation identifies it; substitution replaces one linguistic item with another; ellipsis omits an element whose meaning can be recovered from the context; and conjunction marks relationships such as addition, contrast, cause, and time. Lexical cohesion consists of reiteration and collocation. Reiteration includes repetition, synonymy, meronymy, and general words, whereas collocation arises when words from related semantic fields occur together. These categories provide a practical basis for examining how academic texts maintain continuity and unity.

Although Halliday and Hasan (1976) developed their framework using English, cohesion has also been examined in broader studies of discourse and textual organisation. Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) discuss cohesion as part of the textual resources through which language creates connected discourse and continuity. Widdowson (1978) also examines cohesion and coherence in discourse, emphasizing the relationship between linguistic forms and the interpretation of connected stretches of language. These perspectives are relevant to university textbooks, in which definitions, specialised terminology, explanations, and related concepts need to be organized so that readers can follow the development of the subject matter. The present study therefore applies Halliday and Hasan's framework to examine the distribution and use of grammatical and lexical cohesive devices in official Pashto language and literature textbooks.

Previous studies provide useful evidence for the application of cohesion theory in academic and educational texts. For example, Persian studies have also examined cohesion through the Halliday and Hasan framework. Khatabi (1999) identified reference as the most frequently used cohesive device, while Safavi (2001) found that grammatical cohesion was more prominent in prose and lexical cohesion more prominent in verse.

Published research and scholarly writing in Pashto have addressed aspects of text linguistics and textual cohesion. Khkulai (2022) discusses text-linguistic concepts, including cohesion theory, and provides examples relevant to its application in Pashto. Waheedi (2023) also refers to cohesive devices that contribute to paragraph unity. In a separate journal study, Waheedi (2025) applies Halliday and Hasan's framework to a prose text by Gul Pacha Ulfat, examining its cohesive features. These contributions provide a basis for discussing textual cohesion in Pashto; however, the works reviewed in the dissertation do not present a systematic quantitative and qualitative comparison of cohesive devices across official Pashto language and literature textbooks from multiple Afghan universities. The present study addresses this research gap by examining twenty textbooks from nine Afghan universities through a combined quantitative and qualitative analysis based on Halliday and Hasan's (1976) framework.

It was therefore necessary to determine whether Pashto university textbooks demonstrate a consistent level of cohesion when examined through Halliday and Hasan's framework, which cohesive devices are motfrequently used, and whether cohesive patterns vary by university, subject area, and textbook section. The main research question was: What is the extent and nature of textual cohesion in instructional textbooks on Pashto language and literature, according to Halliday and Hasan's theory? The study also addressed five related questions: (1) Which grammatical cohesive device is used most frequently, and how is it used? (2) Which lexical cohesive device is used most frequently, and how is it used? (3) Is there a difference in cohesion between literary and linguistic textbooks? (4) Is there a difference among textbooks from different universities? and (5) Does the level of cohesion differ among the first, middle, and final chapters of a textbook?

The main objective was to examine textual cohesion in Pashto language and literature instructional textbooks through a combined qualitative and quantitative analysis based on Halliday and Hasan's (1976) framework. More specifically, the study aimed to determine the distribution of grammatical and lexical cohesive devices, compare cohesion in linguistic and literary textbooks, examine differences among universities, and identify differences among the first, middle, and final chapters of the selected books. By bringing twenty official Pashto textbooks into a single comparative analysis, the study seeks to contribute empirical evidence to the developing field of Pashto text linguistics.

Methods and Materials

The study employed a mixed-methods design because both quantitative measurement and contextual interpretation were necessary. The quantitative component involved calculating the frequency and percentage of cohesive devices, an approach consistent with frequency-based linguistic analysis (Crystal, 2010). The qualitative component examined how the devices functioned in their textual contexts and how their use related to the subject matter. This second stage was important because frequency alone cannot show whether a cohesive device is used clearly and appropriately (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). Quantitative analysis was therefore followed by qualitative interpretation for each sampled chapter.

The independent variables were the textbook subject area (linguistic or literary), the university, and the position of the sampled chapter (first, middle, or final). The dependent variables were the frequencies of grammatical cohesive devices—reference, substitution, ellipsis, and conjunction—and lexical cohesive devices, including reiteration, synonymy, meronymy, general words, and collocation. The overall number of cohesive ties for each sample was also treated as a dependent measure and calculated for both the (1,000)-word chapter samples and the combined (3,000)-word sample from each textbook.

The study population consisted of official Pashto l anguage and literature textbooks used in Afghan universit ies and written by academics holding the ranks of Pohan wal (Associate Professor) or Pohand (Professor). The books had to be approved by the relevant university and the Ministry of Higher Education and be in active use for instruction. More than forty textbooks met the general criteria. Twenty were selected purposively on the basis of official approval, relatively recent publication, active use in teaching, and representation of different areas of Pashto language and literature. The selected textbooks are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Selected Pashto language and literature textbooks

#	Book Title	Author	University	Year
1	Foundations of Linguistics	Sayed Mujtaba Nayel	Baghlan	2025
2	Pashto Grammar in the Light of Cognitive Linguistics	Ajmal khkulai	Kabul	2022
3	Literary Theory	Lal Pacha Azmoon	Kabul	2018
4	Foundations of Literary Studies	Miawali shah Miakhel	Sheikh Zayed (Khost)	2023
5	Pashto Grammar (2)	Ewazkhan Dawlatzai	Laghman	2025
6	Descriptive Linguistics	Nasir Ahmad Taheri	Baghlan	2020
7	Foundations of Linguistics	Shah Mohammad Kadwal	Laghman	2021
8	Pashto Morphology	Abdul Azim Sediqmal	Sayed Jamaluddin	2022
9	The Path of Writing	Asadullah Waheedi	Kabul	2023
10	History of Literature (Ancient Period)	Shafiqullah Rahmani	Nangarhar	2025
11	Ancient Period of Pashto Literature	Mohammad Ismail Yoon	Kabul	2017
12	History of Literature	Bryalai Bajawrai	Kabul	2020

13	History of Pashto Literature (Roshanites)	Subhanullah Shahab	Sheikh Zayed (Khost)	2025
14	Khushal Studies	Shahwali Khan	Nangarhar	2021
15	Epic Literature	Sayed Asghar Hashemi	Sayed Jamaluddin	2025
16	Epic Literature	Jamshid Rashidi	Kabul Education Univ.	2025
17	Mystical Literature	Alkozai Tayyeb	Kabul Education Univ.	2025
18	Rhyme Studies	Sayed Kazim Shahidkhel	Takhar	2022
19	Lexicology	Khan Mohammad Azizi	Takhar	2023
20	Selected Contemporary Verse Texts	Ghulam Nabi Karimi	Balkh	2024

Sampling within each textbook followed a stratified procedure based on chapter position. Three chapters were selected from each book: the first chapter, the middle chapter, and the final chapter. The first and final chapters were identified by their positions in the book, while the middle chapter was determined by the total number of chapters. For example, in a textbook containing five chapters, the third chapter was selected as the middle chapter. From each selected chapter, the first (1,000) words were selected for analysis. Chapter headings and subheadings were included in the word samples, whereas direct quotations and tables were excluded. This procedure yielded three (1,000)-word samples per textbook, resulting in (3,000) words per book and a total corpus of (60,000) words from the twenty textbooks. The same sampling procedure was applied consistently across all selected textbooks. Cohesive devices in the selected samples were identified and recorded using a Cohesion Analysis Sheet based on Halliday and Hasan's (1976) framework. Frequencies and percentages were calculated using Microsoft Excel.

The analysis was conducted in four stages. First, descriptive statistics were used to calculate the frequency counts and percentages of each cohesive device, as well as the overall frequency of cohesive items in the selected texts. The analysis also included calculating average cohesion frequencies for the sampled textbooks and comparing these averages across universities, between linguistic and literary textbooks, and among the first, middle, and final chapters. These calculations were performed using Microsoft Excel and basic statistical procedures; no inferential statistical tests were conducted. Second, comparative analysis was used to identify differences in the frequency and distribution of cohesive devices across the selected groups. Third, selected examples from the original textbooks were examined qualitatively to explain how cohesive devices functioned in their textual contexts. Finally, thematic analysis was used to identify broader patterns and recurring tendencies in the use of cohesive devices and to interpret these patterns in relation to the subject matter of the texts. The same analytical framework was applied across all textbooks to maintain consistency.

The study had several limitations, including the unavailability of some textbooks, the challenges of applying a framework originally developed for English to Pashto, and potential overlap among certain linguistic categories. All coding and analysis were conducted by the author. No second coder was involved, and no formal inter-coder reliability assessment was performed. Therefore, the possibility of subjective judgment in identifying and classifying cohesive devices cannot be ruled out and should be considered when interpreting the findings.

Results

Across the twenty textbooks, the total number of grammatical and lexical cohesive ties identified in each (3,000)-word sample ranged from (329) to (396), with a reported mean of (378) ties per sample. These figures represent raw frequency counts of cohesive ties rather than standardized scores. The analysis included both grammatical cohesive devices—reference, substitution, ellipsis, and conjunction—and lexical cohesive ties.

Cohesion levels were classified according to the criteria established in the dissertation: samples containing more than (380) cohesive ties were classified as having high cohesion; those containing between (370) and (380) ties, inclusive, as having medium-to-high cohesion; those containing between (360) and (369) ties, inclusive, as having medium cohesion; and those containing fewer than (360) ties as having low cohesion. Thus, a sample with exactly (380) ties falls into the medium-to-high category, whereas a sample must contain at least (381) ties to be classified as having high cohesion. These categories provide a frequency-based framework for describing and comparing the occurrence of cohesive ties across the sampled textbooks. They should not be interpreted as standardized measures of overall textual quality, since they reflect the number of identified cohesive ties within a fixed (3,000)-word sample.

The frequency of reference ties in the corpus is su mmarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Reference Ties in the Corpus

Statistical measure	Value
Total number of textbooks	20
Total corpus size (words)	60,000
Total number of cohesive ties	7,559
Number of reference ties	3,079
Statistical method	Frequency count and pooled percentage
Calculation	(3,079 ÷ 7,559) × 100
Percentage of reference ties	40.7%

Note. The percentage was calculated by dividing the total number of reference ties by the total number of cohesive ties in the combined corpus and multiplying the result by 100. It represents a pooled percentage, not the arithmetic mean of the percentages calculated separately for individual textbooks.

Reference was the most frequent cohesive category in the corpus, accounting for (3,079) of the (7,559) cohesive ties identified in the (60,000)-word sample drawn from twenty Pashto textbooks (40.7%). It is therefore a pooled proportion rather than the arithmetic mean of the book-level percentages. Personal and demonstrative reference were commonly used to refer to previously mentioned people, concepts, and propositions. These devices helped maintain textual continuity and avoid unnecessary repetition. However, when several scholars, theories, or sources were discussed in close succession, some pronouns could have ambiguous referents, requiring readers to consult preceding sentences to establish the intended meaning. This suggests that, although reference was the most frequent cohesive category, its frequency alone did not necessarily ensure referential clarity. The effectiveness of reference therefore depended not only on its use but also on how clearly the intended referents could be identified within the surrounding text.

Lexical cohesion was dominated by reiteration, particularly the direct repetition of key technical terms. This pattern is understandable in instructional textbooks, where consistent terminology is important for presenting and reinforcing specialised concepts. Terms such as “language,” “word,” “lexeme,” and “morpheme” recur throughout linguistics textbooks, while “poetry,” “literature,” “rhyme,” and “poet” recur frequently in literary texts. Synonymy, general words, and collocation occurred less often. Substitution and ellipsis were the least frequently used cohesive devices across the corpus. The preference for repeating technical terminology helps maintain conceptual precision, although it also reduces lexical variation and stylistic flexibility.

The fourteen literature-related textbooks had an observed mean number of cohesive ties of (381), compared with (370) for the six linguistics textbooks, a descriptive difference of (11) cohesive ties. However, this difference was not consistent across individual books. Some

linguistics textbooks, including those by Taheri and Khkulai, recorded cohesion scores of (392) and (388), respectively, exceeding the scores of many literature-related textbooks. These figures describe the observed group means in the sample; no inferential statistical test was conducted to determine whether the difference was statistically significant. The variation across individual books suggests that subject area alone may not fully explain differences in cohesion. Authorial style, academic experience, and the ways in which concepts are developed within a textbook may also contribute to cohesive organisation, although these possible influences require further investigation.

Differences were also observed among universities. Nangarhar University recorded the highest mean cohesion score (392), based on two textbooks with scores of (396) and (388). Laghman University recorded the lowest mean score (351.5, rounded to 352), based on two textbooks with scores of (329) and (374). The comparison covered nine universities and twenty textbooks, with the number of books per university ranging from one to five. These findings represent descriptive differences within the sampled textbooks and should not be interpreted as evidence that institutional context alone determines textual cohesion. The variation between textbooks within the same university, particularly the difference between the two Laghman textbooks, also suggests that individual authors' writing practices and approaches to organizing ideas may contribute to the observed differences.

Cohesion was examined across the first, middle, and final chapters of the twenty textbooks, with each sample comprising (1,000) words. The first-chapter samples contained (2,517) cohesive ties, with a mean of (125.85) per sample; the middle-chapter samples contained (2,520) ties, with a mean of (126.00); and the final-chapter samples contained (2,522) ties, with a mean of (126.10). These figures indicate that the frequency of cohesive ties was broadly similar across the three-chapter positions, with only marginal differences. Contrary to the initial interpretation, the middle chapters did not have the highest mean; the final chapters had a slightly higher mean. In the final-chapter samples, the fourteen literature-related textbooks contained (174) instances of repetition and (622) conjunctions, while the six linguistics textbooks contained (70) instances of repetition and (263) conjunctions. Relative to the total cohesive ties in each group, repetition accounted for (9.87%) in the literature-related textbooks and (9.22%) in the linguistics textbooks, while conjunction accounted for (35.28%) and (34.65%), respectively. Thus, the data do not support the claim that conjunction was more prominent in the final chapters of linguistics textbooks. Although the observed distributions may be related to differences in subject matter or chapter function, the present descriptive analysis does not establish such a relationship. Similarly, the general progression from definitions to characteristics, types, examples, and summary or evaluation may describe a recurring organisational pattern in the textbooks, but further qualitative evidence and relevant literature would be needed to explain how this structure contributes to textual cohesion.

Conclusion

The findings indicate that Halliday and Hasan's (1976) theory of textual cohesion provides a useful analytical framework for examining textual cohesion in the twenty sampled Pashto university textbooks. The analysis covered four grammatical cohesive devices—reference, substitution, ellipsis, and conjunction—as well as lexical cohesion, providing a systematic basis for investigating cohesive relationships within the selected texts. Reference and lexical cohesion, particularly repetition, emerged as prominent features in maintaining semantic continuity and terminological consistency. The analysis also identified areas warranting further investigation, including the relatively limited use of substitution and ellipsis, the frequent repetition of technical terminology, the use of long explanatory sentences, and the range of transitional devices employed in some texts. However, these findings should be interpreted within the limits of the study. Because the corpus consisted of twenty textbooks selected from nine universities, the results cannot be generalized to all Pashto academic and literary texts. Moreover, the descriptive design identifies patterns in the sampled material but does not establish that these patterns characterize Pashto texts more broadly or that particular cohesive features necessarily improve textual quality. Further research involving larger and more diverse corpora, including other genres and types of Pashto writing, would be needed to assess the wider applicability of Halliday and Hasan's framework and to determine whether the patterns observed here recur across different contexts.

The differences observed among universities and between linguistic and literary textbooks indicate that cohesion is influenced not only by subject matter but also by authorial style and academic experience. For Pashto academic writing, greater attention to precise reference, a wider but controlled range of conjunctions, and appropriate use of synonymy could improve textual

flexibility without weakening terminological accuracy. The findings also suggest a need for clearer linguistic criteria in textbook evaluation. Universities and relevant educational authorities could incorporate cohesion into textbook review standards and develop a Pashto academic style guide. Future studies may extend the analysis to journalistic writing, spoken discourse, fiction, and other forms of Pashto prose, and may also explore computational methods for the automatic analysis of cohesion.

Overall, the study demonstrates that Halliday and Hasan's (1976) framework provides a useful basis for evaluating textual cohesion in Pashto academic writing. The twenty textbooks show a medium-to-high level of cohesion, with reference and repetition emerging as the most prominent cohesive resources. Nevertheless, the limited use of substitution, ellipsis, and some forms of lexical variation indicates that there is room for further development in the organisation and stylistic flexibility of Pashto academic prose. The study therefore provides an initial empirical basis for more systematic research on cohesion and for efforts to strengthen the standards of academic writing in Pashto.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Table 3. Frequency of cohesive devices

Cohesive Device	Type	Percentage
Reference	Grammatical	40.7%
Conjunction	Grammatical	35%
Ellipsis	Grammatical	8.08%
Substitution	Grammatical	3.02%
Repetition (Reiteration)	Lexical	9.54%
Synonymy	Lexical	1.62%
General Word	Lexical	1.49%
Collocation	Lexical	0.55%

Table 4. Cohesion scores by university

University	Mean Cohesion Score	Mean Reference %	Mean Conjunction %	Cohesion Level
Nangarhar	392	41.9%	35.4%	High
Sayed Jamaluddin	383	39.9–40.6%	35.4–36.7%	High
Balkh	383	42.3%	35.5%	High
Baghlan	378	39.1–41.3%	29.2–35.5%	Medium–High

Sheikh Zayed (Khost)	378	40.7–42.2%	33.7–36.1%	Medium–High
Kabul	379	35.8–42.5%	29.8–38.3%	Medium–High
Kabul Education Univ.	379	40.7–41.3%	36.0–36.5%	Medium–High
Takhar	375	38.7–41.1%	35.7–38.7%	Medium–High
Laghman	352	37.7–38.0%	32.8–38.0%	Low

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