SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF SYNONYMS IN ARABIC: DIFFERENCES IN CLASSICAL AND MODERN TEXTS

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Abstract

This article examines the semantic analysis of synonyms in classical and modern Arabic texts. The study explores the differences in meaning, contextual usage, and semantic evolution of synonyms over time. It compares the richness of meaning in classical Arabic literature with the simplification trends observed in modern texts. The research aims to identify key differences that influence the stylistic and cultural characteristics of texts, shedding light on the linguistic evolution of synonyms. The findings contribute to understanding the dynamics of Arabic language development and its application in contemporary contexts.

Keywords: Synonyms, Semantic analysis, Classical Arabic, Modern Arabic, Linguistic evolution, Text stylistics, Cultural context.

Introduction

Arabic, with its rich lexicon, complex morphology, and semantic diversity, stands as one of the most significant languages for linguistic research. Synonyms, or words with closely related meanings, enhance the expressive, religious, and pragmatic capabilities of Arabic discourse. The use of synonyms in classical Arabic texts (e.g., the Qur'an, Jahiliyya poetry, Abbasid literature) and modern texts (e.g., literary works, mass media) reveals distinct semantic, stylistic, and socio-cultural differences. This article aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the semantic properties of synonyms in Arabic, examining their contextual and stylistic functions through examples from classical and modern texts. The primary objective is to identify the nuances of meaning, historical transformations, and processes of simplification in modern Arabic usage.

Literature Review

Research on synonyms in Arabic has a long history, beginning with classical lexicography. Al-Khalil ibn Ahmad's *Kitab al-Ayn* (8th century) systematically examines the semantic proximity and contextual distinctions of synonyms (al-Farāhīdī, 2013). Similarly, Sibawayh's *Al-Kitab* analyzes the semantic and syntactic properties of words, providing valuable insights into the grammatical use of synonyms (Sibawayh, 1977).

In modern scholarship, Holes (2004) explores the stylistic and pragmatic functions of Arabic synonyms, emphasizing their importance in literary texts (Holes, 2004). Ryding (2005) examines the lexical richness of the Qur'an and Jahiliyya poetry, highlighting the role of synonyms in religious and aesthetic contexts (Ryding, 2005). Ibrahim (2018) links the simplification and standardization of synonyms in modern media and literature to the influence of globalization (Ibrahim, 2018). Dickins et al. (2016) advocate for the use of corpus linguistics to analyze semantic nuances and contextual differences in synonyms, advancing methodologies for semantic

analysis (Dickins et al., 2016). While these studies illuminate the dynamic nature of synonyms in Arabic, comprehensive comparisons between classical and modern texts remain limited.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing text analysis as the primary method. The following texts were selected as samples:

1. **Classical Texts:**
o The Qur'an (Surah Al-Baqara, 2:255 and Surah An-Nisa, 4:171).
o Imru al-Qays's *Muallaqa* poem.
o Badi' az-Zaman al-Hamadhani's *Maqamat*, specifically "Maqama al-Baghdadiyya."

2. **Modern Texts:**
o Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (1966).
o Political articles from Al-Jazeera's website (March–April 2024 editions).

Selected synonym pairs include:
● "علم" (*'ilm*) and "معرفة" (*ma'rifa*) – knowledge and recognition.
● "قلب" (*qalb*) and "فؤاد" (*fu'ad*) – heart and inner heart.
● "حرية" (*hurriya*) and "استقلال" (*istiqlal*) – freedom and independence.

The analysis applied the following criteria:
● **Semantic Nuances:** Primary and secondary meanings of synonyms.
● **Context:** The type of text in which the word is used (religious, literary, or mass media).
● **Stylistic Function:** Artistic, pragmatic, or social purposes.
● **Historical Changes:** Semantic differences between classical and modern texts.

Texts were analyzed using corpus linguistics tools (e.g., Arabic Corpus: corpus.quran.com), supplemented by lexicographic sources such as *Lisan al-Arab*.

Analysis

1. Synonyms in Classical Texts

In classical Arabic texts, synonyms exhibit semantic subtlety and stylistic richness. The selected synonym pairs are analyzed below.

a) "علم" (*'ilm*) and "معرفة" (*ma'rifa*)

In the Qur'an, "علم" typically denotes general and divine knowledge. For instance, in Surah Al-Baqara, 2:255:

"وَهُوَ عَلِيمٌ بِذَاتِ الصُّدُورِ"

"And He is All-Knowing of what is in the hearts" (Qur'an, 2:255).

Here, "علم" emphasizes God's all-encompassing knowledge. In contrast, "معرفة" implies personal recognition or deep understanding, as seen in Surah An-Nisa, 4:171:

"فَآمِنُوا بِاللَّهِ وَرُسُلِهِ وَلَا تَقُولُوا ثَلَاثَةٌ ۚ انْتَهُوا خَيْرًا لَكُمْ"

"Believe in Allah and His messengers, and do not say 'three'" (Qur'an, 4:171).

In this context, "معرفة" suggests a profound, personal recognition of God, tied to faith (Ryding, 2005). Ibn Manzur (n.d.) in *Lisan al-Arab* defines "معرفة" as "familiarity and sustained knowledge," highlighting its emotional and personal nuance compared to "علم."

In Imru al-Qays's *Muallaqa*, "علم" is used to denote experiential knowledge:

„أَعْلَمُ أَنَّ الْمَوْتَ يَأْتِي سَرِيعًا،،

"I know that death comes swiftly" (Imru' al-Qays, 1985).

Here, "علم" reflects knowledge grounded in experience, while "معرفة" is rarely used in poetic contexts due to its philosophical or religious connotations.

b) "قلب" (*qalb*) and "فؤاد" (*fu'ad*)

In the Qur'an, "قلب" and "فؤاد" both refer to the heart as a center of emotion and perception but carry distinct nuances. For example, in Surah Al-Baqara, 2:97:

„قُلْ مَنْ كَانَ عَدُوًّا لِجِبْرِيلَ فَإِنَّهُ نَزَّلَهُ عَلَىٰ قَلْبِكَ،،

"Say: Whoever is an enemy to Gabriel, it is he who brought it [the Qur'an] down upon your heart" (Qur'an, 2:97).

Here, "قلب" denotes the heart as the recipient of divine revelation. In contrast, "فؤاد" is associated with intense emotions, as in Surah Al-Qasas, 28:10:

„وَأَصْبَحَ فُؤَادُ أُمِّ مُوسَىٰ فَارِغًا،،

"The heart of Moses' mother became empty" (Qur'an, 28:10).

In this verse, "فؤاد" underscores the mother's profound anxiety and emotional state (Holes, 2004).

In Al-Hamadhani's "Maqama al-Baghdadiyya," "قلب" is used more generally:

„وَكَانَ قَلْبِي مَشْغُولًا بِحُبِّهَا،،

"My heart was occupied with her love" (Al-Hamadhānī, 1982).

Here, "فؤاد" is less common, as maqamat prioritize narrative and pragmatic styles over emotional depth.

c) "حرية" (*hurriya*) and "استقلال" (*istiqlal*)

In classical texts, "حرية" is used to denote personal freedom or liberty, while "استقلال" is rare. In Al-Hamadhani's maqamat, "حرية" appears in the context of travel and personal choice:

„وَاخْتَرْتُ الْحُرِّيَّةَ عَلَى الْعُبُودِيَّةِ،،

"I chose freedom over servitude" (Al-Hamadhānī, 1982).

"استقلال" is virtually absent in classical texts, as it emerged later in political contexts.

2. Synonyms in Modern Texts

In modern texts, synonyms are simplified and oriented toward social and pragmatic purposes.

a) "علم" (*'ilm*) and "معرفة" (*ma'rifa*)

In Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*, "علم" and "معرفة" are used interchangeably, with "معرفة" emphasizing personal experience:

„كَانَتْ مَعْرِفَتِي بِالْغَرْبِ نَاقِصَةً،،

"My knowledge of the West was incomplete" (Salih, 1966, p. 45).

In Al-Jazeera articles, "علم" is prevalent in scientific and technical contexts:

„العلم هو مفتاح التقدم،،

"Knowledge is the key to progress" (Al-Jazeera, 2024).

Here, "معرفة" is rarely used, reflecting the preference for precise and general terms in media language (Ibrahim, 2018).

b) "قلب" (*qalb*) and "فؤاد" (*fu'ad*)

In Salih's novel, "قلب" is used broadly, while "فؤاد" is nearly absent:

„كَانَ قَلْبِي يَخْفِقُ بِشِدَّةٍ،،

"My heart was beating fiercely" (Salih, 1966, p. 72).

In Al-Jazeera articles, "قلب" appears in social and emotional contexts, but "فؤاد" is not used, indicating the simplification of modern Arabic (Ibrahim, 2018).

c) "حرية" (*hurriya*) and "استقلال" (*istiqlal*)

In modern texts, "حرية" and "استقلال" are often used interchangeably in political contexts. An Al-Jazeera article states:

"الشعب يطالب بالحرية والاستقلال"

"The people demand freedom and independence" (Al-Jazeera, 2024).

Here, "حرية" refers to personal and social freedom, while "استقلال" denotes national independence, though the distinction is subtle and often overlooked (Dickins et al., 2016).

3. Comparative Analysis

● **Semantic Nuances:** In classical texts, synonyms exhibit clear semantic distinctions. For example, "علم" denotes general knowledge, "معرفة" personal recognition; "قلب" refers to the heart generally, "فؤاد" to deep emotions; "حرية" implies personal liberty, and "استقلال" political independence. In modern texts, these distinctions fade, with synonyms used more generically.

● **Context:** In classical texts, synonyms serve religious (Qur'an), artistic (poetry), and narrative (maqamat) purposes. In modern texts, they appear in literary (novels) and socio-political (media) contexts.

● **Stylistic Function:** In classical texts, synonyms enhance the rhythmic, aesthetic, and spiritual richness of the text. In modern texts, they prioritize pragmatic communication and clarity.

● **Historical Changes:** The simplification of synonyms is linked to globalization, the standardization of media language, and shifts in literary style. The nuanced semantic shades of classical Arabic are diminishing in modern usage.

Conclusion

This study compared the semantic properties of synonyms in classical and modern Arabic texts, identifying differences in their nuances, contextual usage, and stylistic functions. Classical texts demonstrate profound semantic subtlety and artistic richness, while modern texts show simplification and a focus on pragmatic purposes. These changes reflect the socio-cultural evolution of Arabic, influenced by globalization and media standardization. Future research could explore synonyms in dialectal contexts, their usage in digital texts, or semantic challenges in translating Arabic into other languages.

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