The concepts of *al-halal* and *al-haram* in the Arab-Muslim culture: a translational and lexicographical study

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1. Introduction

This paper[1] aims at providing sufficient definitions of the concepts of *al-Halal* and *al-Haram* in the Arab-Muslim culture, illustrating how they are treated in some bilingual Arabic-English dictionaries since they often tend to be provided with inaccurate, lacking and sometimes simply incorrect definitions. Moreover, the paper investigates how these concepts are linguistically reflected through proverbs, collocations, frequent expressions, and connotations.

These concepts are deeply rooted in the Arab-Muslim tradition and history, affecting the Arabs' way of thinking and acting. Therefore, accurate definitions of these concepts may help understand the Arab-Muslim identity that is vaguely or poorly understood by non-speakers of Arabic. Furthermore, to non-speakers of Arabic, these notions are often misunderstood, inadequately explained, and inaccurately translated into other languages.

2. Background and Methodology

The present paper is in line with the theoretical framework, emphasizing the complex relationship between language and culture, illustrating the importance of investigating linguistic data to understand the Arab-Muslim vision of the world. Linguists like Boas, Sapir and Whorf have extensively studied the multifaceted relationship between language and culture. Other examples are Hoosain (1991), Lucy (1992), Gumperz y Levinson (1996),

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Luque Durán (2007, 2006a, 2006b), Pamies (2007, 2008) and Luque Nadal (2007, 2008). They all emphasize the inseparability of language and culture, and how language offers a reflection, a manifestation, and an embodiment of culture.

Furthermore, Wierzbicka (1992, 1996, 1997) maintains that each culture has key concepts that are essential in understanding it (e.g. *amae* in Japanese). Similarly, Al-Jallad (2007) studies the concepts of *al-jihad, al-Hijab,* and *al-shahid* in the Arab-Muslim culture, showing how vital they are in understanding that particular culture. Al Jallad also illustrates how these are concepts are richly reflected in the Arabic language, emphasizing their importance (see also Al Jallad [2000]). Along the same lines, Alijo Jiménez and Al Jallad argue that the social and cultural role of Arab women can be studied via language. They investigate some women-related concepts, analyzing how they represent directly and indirectly what it means to be a woman in the Arab-Muslim culture.

Since language is an indispensable tool in investigating the specific world vision of a community, via analyzing linguistic data (e.g., collocations, proverbs, semantics associations), one can understand the world vision of different people of various cultures and languages.

The words under investigation are *al-Halal* and *al-Haram*. To propose sufficient and accurate definitions, a) the words were checked in a number of monolingual and bilingual Arabic-English dictionaries (see references), b) they were checked in Islamic encyclopedias, in particular *Brill Encyclopedia of Islam* (2003), and c) one hundred informants (native speakers of Arabic) were asked to give their definitions of these concepts. They were all fourth-year students at the University of Jordan, and their definitions were studied to see how Arabs feel about these words.

Moreover, the treatment of these concepts in Arabic-English dictionaries was critically evaluated, considering accuracy, comprehensiveness, and clarity. Then, the various linguistic forms, representing these words were listed, stressing their interaction and correlation with meaning. The linguistic expressions were gathered through asking native speakers, consulting dictionaries and references on Arabic proverbs and collocations.

3. *al-Halal* and *al-Haram*

3.1. Definition

The word *Halal*, as used by Arabs and Muslims, refers to anything that is considered permissible and lawful under religion while *Haram* is what is forbidden and punishable according to Islamic law. The word *Halal* is derived from the verb *Halla* "to be or become lawful, legal, licit, legitimate, permissible, permitted, allowable, allowed, admissible, un-prohibited, un-forbidden." It may also mean "to untie, unfasten, unbind, undo, unravel, loosen, unloose, unfix, unwind, unscrew, untangle, disentangle, disengage, free." In addition, the verb *Halla* may be used to mean "solve" or "resolve" (e.g., *Halla* the problem or the riddle). In chemistry, it means "to dissolve, melt, liquefy, break down." (Baalbaki, 1993: 484).

According to Al-Karmi (1991), some interesting related expressions to the word *Halal* are *Hallat al-mara li al-rajul* "the woman become lawful to marry" (she can be married after three months of her husband's death or of divorce) (520), *aHalla min al-yamin* "became free of a commitment to do something that he or she swore to do," (521). Additionally, the word *Halil* refers to one's husband and wife (522).

For a non-speaker of Arabic, the word *Halal* usually refers to food that is permissible according to Islam. However, in Arabic, it refers to permissible behavior, speech, dress, conduct, manner and dietary. In western countries, the term is usually used in the context of just Muslim food laws, especially where meat and poultry are concerned. In a Muslim's life, every aspect of life is regulated by Islamic law; therefore, the *Halal-Haram* dichotomy almost always applies to everything, and Muslims make sure they understand what is what since saying or doing *al-Halal* will lead to Paradise and *al-Haram* to "Hell."

The following are some *Halal* categories: milk (from cows, sheep, camels, and goats), honey , fish, plants which are not intoxicant, fresh or naturally frozen vegetables, fresh or dried fruits, legumes and nuts like peanuts, cashew nuts, hazel nuts, walnuts, etc., and grains such as wheat, rice, rye, barley, oat, etc. Moreover, animals such as cows, sheep, goats, deer, moose, chickens, ducks, game birds, etc., are *Halal*, but they must be *dabiHah* (slaughtered according to Islamic Rites) in order to be suitable for

consumption. The procedure is as follows: the animal must be slaughtered by a Muslim, and it should be put down on the ground (or held it if it is small) and its throat should be slit with a very sharp knife to make sure that the three main blood vessels are cut. While cutting the throat of the animal, the person must pronounce the name of God or recite a blessing which contains the name of God, such as "*bismillah, allah-u-akbar"*.

The word *Haram* is the opposite of *Halal*. According to Baalbaki (1993), the word *Haram* means "taboo, inviolable, sacred, holy, ill-gotten, sin, wrongdoing, offense." (460). It is derived from the verb *Harrama* "to forbid, prohibit, interdict, proscribe, ban, bar, outlaw, declare unlawful, to taboo, make illegal." It also means "to declare sacred, holy, and inviolable." Some related forms are the word *Haram* "sanctuary, sacred place, wife, spouse," *Haram al-jami?ah* "university campus," *al-Haram al-aqsa* "Jerusalem," *al-Haraman* "Mecca and Medina." In addition, the noun *Hirman* is frequently used, meaning "deprivation, privation, stripping, refusal, debarment, preclusion, exclusion, shutting out, keeping out, barring" or "lack, want, need, deprivation, poverty, indigence, penury, beggary, misery, distress, suffering" (465). We also have *al-balad al-Haram* "Mecca," *al-beyt al-Haram* "the Kaaba." (460).

Al-Masri (1997) lists further derivations and expressions related to the word *Haram*. For example, common expressions are *maHaram al-leil* "sins of the night" (66), *Huramu al-rajul* is "what a man protects: family, kids and wives" (67), and *istaHramat al-shah* "said of animals when ready to mate" (68). Moreover, the word *Harim* "apartments for women" is also morphologically and semantically related to *Haram* like all of the examples above.

In contrast to *Halal*, *Haram* refers to any forbidden pattern of behavior, speech, dress, conduct, and manner under Islamic law. Of course, it also includes what is unlawful to consume of food or beverage. Some examples of *Haram* are meat from pork (ham, gammon, bacon), pork-based products and by-products (sausages), animals improperly slaughtered, or already dead before slaughtering, animals killed in the name of anyone other than Allah, and intoxicants.

To sum up, *al-Halal* and *al-Haram* represent the Islamic laws that govern every aspect of a person's life (speech, behavior, dress, dietary, etc.), rendering it as either lawful and permissible or taboo and forbidden, and

everything *Halal* is rewarded by God while the *Haram* is punishable. Put simply, it is the Islamic dichotomy of rights and wrongs and dos and don'ts, forming the regulating collective consciousness of the Islamic community.

3.2. Dictionaries

Dictionaries, in particular English monolingual ones, highlight the dietary-based meaning of *Halal* and *Haram*, narrowing the context of the words; thus undermining their comprehensiveness and vital regulating role that touches every aspect of a Muslim's life. For example, *The American Heritage Dictionary* (1997) lists the first sense of the word *Halal* as "meat that has been slaughtered in the manner prescribed by the Shari'a" (612). Similarly, the *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* (http://www.m-w.com/) provides two senses for the word *Halal* "sanctioned by Islamic law especially ritually fit for use (*halal* food)" and "selling or serving food ritually fit according to Islamic law." Obviously, the two senses emphasize "food."

The bilingual dictionaries checked in this study provide a long list of equivalents for the words *Halal* and *Haram*. However, the definitions do not capture the powerful regulating dimension of these words and how influential they are in the Arab-Muslim culture. For example, although a dictionary of Islamic terms, Al-Maliki and Ibrahim (1997) do not provide more than the following equivalents for *Halal* "lawful; legal, legitimate, permissible" and *Haram* "forbidden; prohibited, unlawful; illegal; illicit; taboo," which can be said to be accurate at one level, but it is not sufficient.

3.3. Linguistic Representation

Not surprisingly, the collocations and linguistic expressions related to *Halal* and *Haram* are varied and colorful, reflecting how important these concepts are in everyday life and for everyday Muslims. Some frequent collocations are

1) *ibin al-Halal* "legitimate son, respectable, decent man"

This may mean literally a legitimate son; however, it is often used to praise someone who is well mannered and decent, embodying the positive feelings

associated with the word *Halal*. This expression is also used when some people are talking about a person, and all of a sudden, he shows up, so they tell him "we were just talking about you...*ibin Halal."*

2) *ibin al-Haram* "bastard; indecent man"

Similar to *ibin al-Halal*, the meaning can be literal, yet the frequent use is to mean "indecent" or "ill-mannered." This expression stands for a tough insult, dramatizing the negative feelings associated with *al-Haram*.

3) *al-mal al-Haram* or *al-mal al-Halal* "lawful money/gain or ill-gotten one"

The word *al-mal* "money" almost always collocates with *Halal* and *Haram* since one aspect of life where the *Halal* and *Haram* are so vital is how people earn their livings. Any money that is ill-gotten is shunned. Muslims are willing to live poor but never use illegal money. It is believed that unlawful money will bring its owner nothing but disaster.

Moreover, there are many proverbs about *Halal* and *Haram*, echoing again how Muslims feel about these concepts. The following are taken from Abu Hamda (1984):

4) *ibin al-Halal biftaH il-baab*
   The lawful son opens the door (8).

This proverb shows that people who are doing *al-Halal* will have more and better opportunities in life.

5) *mal al-Haram buqa? fi mawazin iblis*
   Unlawful money is of Satan (39).

The strong association between ill-gotten money and evil is dramatized here through the involvement of Satan, the symbol of all evil.

6) *maal al-Haram ma bigel*
   Bad money does not grow (39).

This is another proverb discouraging Muslims to use unlawful money since it will never last.

   7) *ibin al-Haram la binam wala bixali Hada ynam*
      The unlawful son does not sleep, and he does not let anybody else sleep (37).

This proverb shows how dangerous and troublesome *ibin al-Haram* can be since associating with *Haram* will cause trouble for him or herself and for others as well.

Al-Amad (1978) lists more proverbs related to *Halal* and *Haram*. Some of these are

   8) *ibin al-Haram biftaHha wa ibin al-Halal buga? Fiha*
      The son of *Haram* digs a hole, and the son of *Halal* falls in it (19).

This proverb shows how some people are naïve that they are easily deceived by evil people.

   9) *mal al-Halal la bisharrq walla bigreb*
      Lawful money does not cause trouble (19).

Aaraf and Aatallah (1996) provide some more of *Halal* and *Haram* proverbs:

   10) *illi ma bi?ref abu ibin Haraam*
      If you do not know your father, then you are unlawful (144).

This proverb equates between *Haram* and ignoring or maltreating one's parents since respecting parents and the elderly in general is a principal value in Islam.

   11) *ibin al-Haram la tzuqo buqa? la Halu*
      Do not push son of *Haram* because he will fall by himself (144).

This proverb means people who commit unlawful actions will meet their just punishment sooner or later. Similarly, Arabs say

12) *illi fuloosa Haraam bi?raf baba al-maHkama*
   The one whose money is ill-gotten knows the court so well (479).
   (One who deals with unlawful money knows the consequences)
13) *la biHalil wala biHaram*
   He does not distinguish between lawful and unlawful (479)

This is said in describing a person who is lost and confused, and he or she cannot tell good from evil.

4. Conclusion

The concepts discussed here are essential in understanding the Arab and Islamic way of thinking and acting, as well as their identity. The job of the translator as well as the lexicographer is quite challenging, attempting to provide definitions or equivalents to such concepts since they are semantically and culturally complex. Ignoring the importance of understanding these concepts would lead to further misunderstandings and stereotypical misconceptions about Arabs and Muslims. This paper is yet another attempt to define some of these concepts that will help better understand the Arab-Islamic culture.

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