

Arabic Lexicography Syntactic and Idiomatic Dictionaries

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Abstract: This paper is a research on Arabic lexicography. It provides a brief history plus the linguistic principles and subjects that are applicable in Arabic lexicography. This paper further discusses the differences between the traditional and contemporary lexicography, the group activities that are required for writing a contemporary dictionary or a glossary, and different dictionary designs based on entries and subentries. Additional subjects discussed in this paper include comparisons between dictionary types based on volume and number of entries, specialized or general applications, number of languages it covers, unidirectional or bidirectional dictionary, and types of references made to the subentries taken from old dictionaries.

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Introduction

Lexicography is one of the main subjects addressed in linguistics. This paper covers a brief history of Arabic lexicography and continues with discussions on issues pertaining to Arabic lexicography.

Methodology

The paper used library search and the author's own knowledge base for selection and classification of subjects of discussion and comparison.

Arabic Lexicography History

A language is colloquial before turning into written format. History has, perhaps, witnessed the development of many languages that disappeared before leaving any written traces. The assumption is that a language is initially understood and narrated by those who spoke it. Language is a tool for expression of thoughts and, therefore, its development is followed by the development and maturity of thoughts.

Lexicography did not exist among Arabs before Abbasi Era for several reasons including public illiteracy, conflicts and forced migrations, and low language proficiency. Arab world embraced lexicography with delay compared to other civilized nations with longer history. The motivation to collect words for lexicography may have stemmed from Arabs' need to define and interpret difficult words in Holy Quran as well as their interest to save their language and the religious book.

Notwithstanding their motivation for collecting Arabic words, Arab lexicographers looked into two aspects of words in their endeavors, namely time and place. Arab linguistics limited the time window to words left from the pagan state before Islam and the beginning of Islam up to about the second half of 2nd century AH. They limited the place

for collection of Arabic words to Bedouin Arabs instead of Arabs residing in townships across Arabian Peninsula. Arab lexicographers would travel deserts to visit Arab tribes for collecting Arabic words.

Early Arabic lexicography was based on words collected from Bedouin Arabs during 2nd century AH and perhaps the first linguistic survey in history formed in Arabian Peninsula. This interest of lexicographers for word collection from Arab tribes encouraged some Arab nomads to migrate to southern parts of Iraq (Basra and Kufa), where Arab lexicography works was underway. They would sell their word collection to any interested lexicographer.

Arabic lexicography was not limited to an extensive effort focused on recording words used by Arab tribes. Lexicographer would make a painstaking effort to locate the eloquent words and stay away from non-fluent ones. They would concentrate on tribes who spoke more fluent Arabic language and excluded the dialects that they did not judge as fluent. Most of the words collected by 2nd century lexicographers fell within the two extremes. This was how lexicography recorded Arabic vocabulary from Arab tribes living in North of Arabian Peninsula.

Lexicographers concentrated on tribes such as Qais, Tamim, Asad, and Hazil, plus some of Kanana and Tay tribes. They never used words from Arabs residing in townships or tribes who lived near non-Arabic speaking areas. For example, they did not use words from Lahm and Jozam tribes because of their proximity to Egypt and Qebt. They also avoided Ghazaha, Qasan, and Ayad for their proximity to Shammat (currently Syria).

"Mojam" Verses "Qamus"

"Mojam - معجم" (and its plural "Mojamat - معجمات") or "Qamus - قاموس" (and its plural "Qamavis - قواميس") are equivalent to "dictionary" in English.

Either one refers to a book or a set of books that contain a large collection of words in a language together with their meanings and their equivalents that are arranged in a certain order of entries. Mojam in philology and conjugation is a passive participial adjective, an infinitive, adverb of time and adverb of place made from verb and infinitive «اعجم، اعجاماً». Mojam is defined as "explaining and describing something" or "punctuating a word for removing disambiguation".

There is no accurate historical information about when Mojam was first used with its current meaning, or by whom it was first used, or which Arabic dictionary was the first one to be named by it. Perhaps, hadith scholars were the first ones to use Mojam with its current meaning. Afterward, it appeared in the title of many books written in fourth century AH. Lexicographer may have borrowed this word with its current meaning from hadith scholars.

Qamus is an equivalent and is used as extensively as Mojam. Qamus has the same rhyme as «فاعول» meaning "sea, a large sea, mid-sea, the main part of a sea, or the deepest part of a sea". Studies show that Firooz Abadi (730-817 AH) was the first person who used this word in the title of his dictionary «القاموس المحيط». This dictionary which was first published in 19th century AD has achieved a special position among Arab linguistics, lexicographers, and Arabic language student for its brevity, completeness, and accuracy. This dictionary has turned into a trusted reference book and its high reputation created a new meaning for Qamus in public mind.

Presently, Qamus is used more often than Mojam. Most of lexicographers especially those who write bilingual dictionaries use Qamus in their book titles. Firooz Abadi defined Qamus as vast sea equivalent to Greek word "oceanos" and Latin word "oceanus" meaning ocean. Firooz Abadi introduced Qamus with the same meaning to his mother language, Farsi.

Mojam and Qamus are difficult to distinguish. For example, Ahmad Shafiqh Khatib dictionary «قاموس مصطلحات العلوم الزراعيه» and Mostafa Shahavi (1893-1968 AD) dictionary «معجم الالفاظ الزراعيه» have the same subject, audience, and applications. Both of them have similar stand as specialized dictionaries

Mojam is a general reference book with primarily lexical objective. Users who use Mojam to look up words find them easily in correct dictation and conjugation along with their derivatives. Users also find word roots, history, meanings, and combinations.

The First Arabic Dictionary

Researchers have concluded based on the available information that Khalil Ahmad Farahidi (died around 786 AD) wrote the first dictionary,

named al-Eyn, in the way we define Mojam today, regardless of the word collection steps involved. Al-Eyn defined lexicography for Arab linguistics. Researchers disagree on the amount of contribution made by Laith Ibn Mozaffar, a Khalil assistant, in writing this dictionary.

Khalil arranged words in his Qamus by the main particles. His arrangement differentiated between words' main and supplemental particles. This was a conjugation principle that its application was not possible before sign clarification and symbol research in Arabic lexical construction. Khalil introduced this principle in al-Eyn and it has been used ever since in Arabic dictionaries. Only a few newly published learners' dictionaries did comply with that principle.

Arabic Lexicography Terminology

There are two words of interest in Arabic lexicography. The first one is Mojam with its plural form Ma'ajem which means lexicography and includes scientific aspects of writing a dictionary. The second one is «علم المعجم» which means lexicology and includes scientific research and study of simple and compound word construction. Lexicography and lexicology make preparation of new dictionaries subject to linguistics principles and rules explained in the following section.

- «علم الدلالة» or semantics is the study of lexical meaning. It focuses on the meaning of words, terms, and derivations plus the lexical relations between them.
- «علم التركيب» or syntax is the study of the grammar and sentence structures that describes the lexical relationships between words conforming to a certain linguistic system.
- «علم الاصوات يا أو اشناسي» or phonology is a branch of linguistics which is concerned with the development of sounds, speech, and dialect.
- «علم التأصيل» or etymology is the study of word roots through comparing and examining words.
- «علم الصرف» or morphology describes how words are constructed. It also studies word origins and derivations.
- «علم المصطلح» or terminology is the study of structure and definition of terms, prefixes and postfixes.
- «علم الاشتقاق» or derivation is the study of word derivatives and their roots. Some equates علم الاشتقاق to morphology, but it's better to study derivatives as a separate subject.

Old versus New Lexicography

Arabic lexicography remained a single person endeavor up to the end of 19th century. There is no old dictionary with more than one author,

because team work was not common at that time. Old Arabic lexicography was dependent on the personal capability, mental faculty, and thinking capacity of lexicographer. Meaning differentiation, multiple meanings, and work completion were subject to the personal experiences and knowledge of lexicographer and did not strictly follow grammatical rules of the language. Old dictionaries were rarely revised after author's death and most remained with the original shortcomings and limitations.

Contemporary lexicography uses many linguistic rules and principles including context and structure principle, multiple meaning, application scopes, linguistic level or layer, and the like. All of these make lexicography a huge task that requires the involvement of many experts from different scientific fields; a group which can provide a huge reservoir of knowledge toward compilation of a dictionary.

Contemporary lexicography has turned into a group or institutional work which follows a predetermined framework. This framework takes into account the needs and desires of the target users and audiences of a planned dictionary. Contemporary lexicography is a continued and dynamic endeavor which produces a revisable work¹. A lexicographic institution becomes the owner of the intellectual property of a dictionary for planning, investing, and paying for its writing and publication.

New dictionaries are easily comparable and revisable. They apply linguistic rules of a language and include current applications of words. Grammatical entries of each word are determined after studying and introducing equivalents. The volume of the words that is included in new dictionaries is not comparable with the old ones

An Arabic dictionary based on contemporary lexicography principles is still something to hope for. There are several new lexicography works underway in Arab world but they are incomplete and far from perfection. They require much more extensive work to reach the ideal level. Examples of contemporary dictionaries are:

- «المنجد في اللغة العربية المعاصرة» written by four persons, and supervised and revised by another four.
- «المعجم الوسيط» written by four persons.
- «المعجم الاساسي» with ten persons contributing for its writing, coordination, editing, and revising.

¹ Fahmi Hejazi, M. *Madkhal ali Elem Loghat*, Dar Ghoba lel Taba'ateh va Nasher, pp. 181-184

- «المعجم الوسيط المدرسي» written by a group of linguists under supervision of Sala al-Din Havari.

Dictionary Types

The twentieth century dictionaries published around the world come in many types including: historical, synonym, etymology, learners', illustrated, and specialized dictionaries. Some dictionaries are written for introducing certain geographical terms, government officials, luminaries, poets, and writers. These are also non-lexicon index books (e.g., al-Ealam written by Zarkali).

Dictionaries can be classified into several general categories:

- Small, medium, or large in terms of volume and number of entries;
- General (e.g. al-Monjad) or specialized (e.g. biology, medicine) in terms of usage;
- Mono or multi-lingual in terms of number of languages it covers (e.g. قاموس و التجاربه المصطلحات الماليه written in French, English, and Arabic).
- Etymology or morphology in terms of ordering.
- Unidirectional (most of Arabic dictionaries) or bidirectional in terms of access (e.g. «الموردالمزوج» which is both English-Arabic and Arabic-English).

Dictionary Design and Evaluation

Linguists rely on many criterions for designing and analyzing a dictionary; the most important ones are:

- **Intended Users:** For whom a dictionary is produced or is supposed to be produced? Is it for scholars of certain specialization or for university students or for literate general public or for children?
- **Skill Level:** Is a dictionary produced or is supposed to be produced for understanding a colloquial language? Or is it to help the development of a perfect language?
- **Volume and Number of Entries:** How the dictionary is classified in terms of volume (small, medium, or large)? What is the total number of entries?
- **Number of Contributors and Their Specialties:** How many individuals are involved as writer or consultant? What are their specialties, capabilities, and abilities?
- **References:** Dictionaries are different in terms of how they relied on former dictionaries, or the

approach they use for collection of words, or the types of definition they provide.

- **Word Components:** What type of words, phrases, and combinations are included in the dictionary? What level of morphology is used? Does it provide proofs, examples, and history for words?
- **Entries and Ordering:** Are entries ordered alphabetically or based on their meanings? Are words ordered based on all particles, or only on main particles, or on word roots, or on their main phoneme?
- **Equivalent and Explanation of Word/Entry:** To what extent a dictionary uses different approaches for explanation and finding equivalents? For example, are equivalents selected based on similar meanings, or on simple phrases, or on scientific equivalency, or on illustration, or on documented and proven examples?
- **Lexical Information:** including transcription, conjugation, dictation, and etymology, hypotaxis information.
- **Encyclopedic and Specialty Information:** including certain personality names, geographical names, important events, governments, international organizations.
- **Writing Style:** including division of entries, order of main components, writing style within entries, punctuation symbols and dotting signs, explanation style, equivalent proposition approach, and abbreviations.
- **Methodical Preface:** including objectives and materials of a dictionary, language history, lexical history, and dictionary usage.
- **Appendixes:** including alphabet and transcription tables, maps, descriptive pictures and illustrations, resource inventory, and evidences of a dictionary.
- **Lithography, Binding, Designing Standards:** including cover type, cover design, name of contributors including technical committee, consultants, writers, and the like, fonts, page arrangement, alphabet entries, pictures, illustrations, and small maps².

Dictionary Contents and Entries

A dictionary lists simple and compound words in a certain order, and then offers their

² Fahmi Hejazi, M. *Madkhal ali Elem Loghat*, Dar Ghoba lel Taba'ateh va Nasher, pp. 185-187

meanings and equivalents. These simple and compound words are called "entries". General dictionaries provide simple words in the forms of verbs, prepositions, pronouns, adverbs, sounds, and the like.

As languages mature, simple and main words become subject to revisions and alterations by different levels of users. Dictionaries provide the revisions and alterations made to a language in form of subentries. General dictionaries usually place subentries in between main entries without following any systematic pattern. Some contemporary dictionaries provide subentries as a separate volume, i.e. subentries become the subject of writing another dictionary.

The following section covers discussions of lexical subentries. Differentiating subentries from main entries together with their comparative study in this paper were intended to set their application scope. Subentries that could become the focal point of writing a separate dictionary are:

1. **Idiomatic Expressions:** Idiomatic expressions include metonymic, metaphoric, and allegoric phrases. English lexicography also calls them contextual expression³. Arab linguists call them by many names including: «تعبير اصطلاحی» or «تركيب و عبارات اصطلاحی» or «عبارت سیاقی» or «تركيب سیاقی». Idiomatic expression is referred to a set of words which collectively provide a new meaning that is different than the meaning of its individual words. For example, «انتقل الى» «رحمه ربه تعالى» means «مات» in Arabic meaning died or passed away in English⁴.
2. **Syntactic Expressions:** Syntactic expression is a set of words whose collective meaning depends on the sentence context and/or structure. A syntactic expression may provide a succinct and precise meaning based on its application in a given scientific field⁵. It may contain two or several particles making an expression that provides a meaning that is different from its apparent meaning or implication. A syntactic expression may go beyond its apparent meaning that is represented by the meaning of its individual words and, instead, provide another

³ Eghabli, A., *Comparative Arabic-Farsi Metonyms*, Jamal Publishing, p. 7

⁴ Nema, A., Modavar, A., Ajil, L., Shamas, M. (2001) *Monjad fel Loghat Arabia al Moaser*, 2nd Edition, Bairut, Dar al Mashregh Publishing p. 99

⁵ Soltan Mirza, H (1385/2006) *Moshkelat Zaban Alam*, 1st Edition, Payvand Publishing, p. 34

meaning that is rhetoric, colloquial, and non-apparent through metonym, metaphor, or allegory⁶.

Literary use of idiomatic and syntactic expressions has two reasons. First, writers may use them to test the effect of their statement or to enrich their statement for more influence. Second, they may use them to soften their statement, or add elegance to their statement, or make their statement more courteous, or genially refer to obscenity or inadmissible acts⁷.

Examples of idiomatic expressions can be found in old Arabic lexical and literary books including «ادب الكاتب» by Ibn Sakit, «اصطلاح المنطق» by Ibn Ghatibeh, «عقد الفريد» by Ibn Abdariah, «امالي» by Abu Ali Ghali, «لسان العرب» by Johari, «صحاح» by Ibn Manzoor, «امثال العرب» by Khafaji, «شفاء الغليل» by Mafzal al-Zabi, «مجمع الامثال» by Meidani, «امثال» by Sadoosi, «اساس» by Sharif Razi, «المجازات النويه» by Zamakhshari, «ثمار القلوب» by Thaalebi, «المرصع» by Majd al-Din Ibn Athir, and «الكنايه و الكنايه» by Thaalebi⁸.

Contemporary Arabic dictionaries include idiomatic expressions with the exception of the new wave dictionaries. Examples of contemporary dictionaries with idiomatic expressions are: *Al Qamus al Asri*, *Farhang Moaser*, *Al Qamus Asri Ghofrani*, *Al Mojam al Arabi al Asasi*, *Al Mojam al Vasit*, *Al Mojam al Vasit al Modarsi Havari*, and *Farhang Farzan*. Idiomatic expressions have become subjects of new dictionaries in the new wave Arabic Lexicography.

3. **Scientific and Technical Terms.** Specific terms used in different disciplines including, religion, religious studies, hadith, prosody, and medicine have no synonyms. For example, one cannot use a synonym for «واجب - vajeb» in religion or philosophy. Specific terminologies are basic to every discipline. An old example is «الحدود» written by ibn Sina on philosophy terminology. Another example is «القاموس الطبي» written by Abdolaziz al Mobdi for medical terminology. Arabic dictionaries that

contain specific terms of a given field are called «معجم التخصص»⁹.

4. **Maxims and Proverbs**¹⁰. Maxims are literary statements in the form of prose or poem that were made or used for certain occasions and used afterward for similar occasions without change or alteration. Examples in form of a poem like: «ماكل ما يتمنى المرء يدركه / تجرى الرياح بما» «في» and in form of prose like «الصيف ضيعت اللين».

Proverbs are statements or phrases that ordinary people use in a given period of time with either general or special implications. The person who first introduced or uttered the proverb remains, in most cases, unknown.

5. **Proper Nouns.** Proper noun «علم» or its plural «اعلام» include personality, geographic, historic, incident, event names. Examples of personality names are «متنبي» and «سعدى». Examples of geographic names are «اصفهان» and «قاهره». In some dictionaries, proper nouns are interspersed in between lexical entries. An example is «المعجم العربي الاساسي» which compiled and written by a group of contemporary Arab lexicographers and published by funding provided by «المنظمة العربية للتربيه و الثقافه و العلوم». In other dictionaries, proper nouns are separated from lexical entries and presented in a separate section. Example of the latter type is «المنجد في اللغة و الاعلام».

6. **Slang Words and Expressions.** This group represents the colloquial part of a language used by ordinary citizens in everyday life. They form a part of the common culture or folklore. Old dictionaries rarely included slangs. Contemporary dictionaries include slangs as part of the main content or arrange them in a separate cover. Examples are «معجم» «الالفاظ العاميه» written by Anis Gharihe or «معجم» «الالفاظ العاميه» compiled by Ahmad Taymore.

Terms versus Idiomatic Expressions

Terms are mostly single words specific to a given field of science or arts. Idiomatic expressions may be used in verbal or written form by anyone who speaks a given language. They are not specific to a certain group or a given social strata. Idiomatic

⁶ Nema, A., Modavar, A., Ajil, L., Shamas, M. (2001) *Monjad fel Loghat Arabia al Moaser*, 2nd Edition, Bairut, Dar al Mashregh Publishing pp. 7-8

⁷ Nema, A., Modavar, A., Ajil, L., Shamas, M. (2001) *Monjad fel Loghat Arabia al Moaser*, 2nd Edition, Bairut, Dar al Mashregh Publishing pp. 8-9

⁸ Abosa'eid, A., *Mojam al Trakib val Ebarat al Estelahia Arabi*

⁹ Assi, M., Badi Yaghob, E. (1987) *Almojam al mofasal fe l Logha va al adab*, 1st Edition, Dar ol elm lel malabin Publishing V. 2, p. 1164

¹⁰ Assi, M., Badi Yaghob, E. (1987) *Almojam al mofasal fe l Logha va al adab*, 1st Edition, Dar ol elm lel malabin Publishing V. 2, p. 1115

expressions may depart from the main original meaning and provide a new meaning through metonym, metaphor, or allegory. The specific terms used by a given science or technique do not provide meaning transposition.

Idiomatic Expressions versus Proverbs

The main difference between idiomatic expression and proverb is that the latter one is not subject to change and is used the same way by anyone speaking a given language. Idiomatic expressions are subject to change and alteration according to possible usage. For example, Arabs say «عض بنان الندم» meaning to repent for a male and say «عضت بنان الندم» meaning to repent for a female. Proverbs are usually used to provide guidance or make people to think or learn about an ethical issue. Proverbs are complete statements that provide a conclusive meaning. A Proverb is usually associated to a given story, reminiscence, justification, or pertinence. Idiomatic expressions do not have such qualifications.

Single Main Entries versus Idiomatic Expressions

Single main entries and idiomatic expressions have common lexical features. For Example, they both have synonyms, antonyms, and verbal association. They may only differ in meanings¹¹. It means that the main entry has a single meaning but the idiomatic expression comes with at least two meanings, one is the explicit and evident meaning and the other is metonymic and non-evident meaning.

Proper Nouns versus Common Words

Proper nouns and common words clearly differ with each other and with other non-singular lexical divisions that they never get confused or mingled.

Findings

Old Arab lexicographers or word collectors concentrated their efforts on identifying fluent Arabic words from tribes who spoke Arabic language flawlessly. Their focus kept them from paying attention to other lexical issues.

New idiomatic and compound dictionaries have been published in Arab speaking countries during last few decades. Most of these dictionaries are imitation works mere translation of European thematic dictionaries.

Mojam and Qamus are the two names used by Arabs as equivalents for dictionary. Qamus was

selected specifically to denote dictionary and, therefore, is more often used and is more common.

Dictionaries are classified in terms of volume and the number of entries, in terms of usage as general or specialized, in terms of the number of languages it covers, in terms of lexical ordering of entries, and in terms of being unidirectional or bidirectional. With the advancement of Arab linguistic and lexicography, new and separate dictionaries have been published or are under development.

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¹¹ Abosad, A. (1978) *Mojam al Tarakib va al Ebarat al Estelahi Arabia*, Translated by Eghbali, A., Jamal Publishing, pp. 11,12