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# A Study in the Lexicographical Treatment of Arabic Synonyms

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**Abstract:** Recently three dictionaries of Arabic synonyms were published with the aim of helping Arabic learners, writers and translators. Though Classical Arabic lexicography distinguishes itself in the field of synonymy, Modern Standard Arabic lacks reliable dictionaries in the field and hence the importance of analysing these three dictionaries, identifying their deficiencies and suggesting remedies to help establish a sound basis for a user-friendly dictionary of Arabic synonyms.

This paper deals with certain lexicographical features closely related to synonymy, i.e. concerning corpus: selection of headwords and derivatives, arrangements of headwords, contextualization, collocations, figurative usage, equivalence, polysemy, register and style.

**Keywords:** HEADWORD SELECTION, DERIVATIVES, HEADWORD ARRANGEMENT, CONTEXTUALIZATION, COLLOCATIONS, FIGURATIVE USAGE, EQUIVALENCE, POLYSEMY, REGISTER, STYLE

**Opsomming:** 'n Studie van die leksikografiese hantering van Arabiese sinonieme. Drie woordeboeke van Arabiese sinonieme is onlangs gepubliseer met die doel om Arabiese aanleerders, skrywers en vertalers te help. Hoewel Klassieke Arabies homself op die gebied van sinonieme onderskei, is daar geen betroubare woordeboeke op hierdie gebied in Moderne Standaard-Arabies nie. Daarom is dit belangrik om hierdie drie woordeboeke te analiseer, hulle leemtes te identifiseer en oplossings aan die hand te doen om sodoende 'n stewige basis te lê vir 'n gebruikersvriendelike woordeboek van Arabiese sinonieme.

Hierdie artikel handel oor sekere leksikografiese kenmerke wat nou verwant is aan sinonimiteit, d.w.s. betreffende korpus: seleksie van soekwoorde en afleidings, rangskikking van soekwoorde, kontekstualisering, kollokasies, figuurlike gebruik, ekwivalensie, polisemie, register en styl.

**Sleutelwoorde:** SOEKWOORDSELEKSIE, AFLEIDINGS, SOEKWOORDRANGSKIKKING, KONTEKSTUALISERING, KOLLOKASIES, FIGUURLIKE GEBRUIK, EKWIVALENSIE, POLISEMIE, REGISTER, STYL

## 1. Introduction

Recently three dictionaries of Arabic synonyms have been published to fill a niche in modern Arabic lexicography. In 1993 two dictionaries came out: *Mod-*

ern Arabic Thesaurus (MAT) and A Pocket Dictionary of Synonyms and Antonyms (PDSA), to be followed by A Mini Dictionary of Arabic Synonyms (MDAS) in 1996. As a matter of fact, synonymy is a grossly neglected area, whether in Arabic linguistic research or in lexicographic investigation. The publication of these three dictionaries undoubtedly marks the beginning of attaching importance to the substitutional or paradigmatic relations in Arabic dictionaries.

A dictionary of Arabic synonyms has to address itself to students, writers and translators, and native and nonnative speakers. Moreover, it has to prove that it deals with current standard Arabic, i.e., the synonyms should be words that actually are in use. It also has to adopt a lexicographical methodology which would help the user find the sought-for Arabic synonyms easily and quickly. It should provide him/her with the means of differentiating between them and choosing the appropriate one for a particular context.

In this paper we aim to study certain lexicographical features of these dictionaries and suggest ways of treating them. Some of these features are concerned with corpus: selection of headwords and derivatives, the others with lexicographical treatment: arrangement of headwords, contextualization, collocations, figurative usage, equivalence, polysemy, register and style.

2. Selection of Headwords

The policy adopted in this respect is indicated in both the PDSA and the MDAS. According to the PDSA, the words chosen are "the most frequently used ones". The MDAS indicates that it covers "8800 synonyms arranged under main entries of the most frequently used words".

When all the words starting with the letter ب [B] were counted, it was found, as indicated below, that the number of headwords in the MDAS far exceeds that of the other two dictionaries:

PDSA	MAT	MDAS
40	52	174

However, there is no agreement as regards

- (a) the derivatives indicated, and
- (b) the number of senses treated in polysemous words,

but what the three have in common is the host of *archaic* and *obsolete* words incorporated, sometimes in the headwords, but very often in the list of synonyms.

### Examples

#### 1. PDSA

##### Headwords

- عَلْدِي ['alandii "crude, uncivil"]  
أَبِيل [abiil "hermit"]  
ثَجْر [thajr "breadth"]  
ثُجَّة [thujjat "orchard"]  
حَسْبَانَة [ḥusbaanat "pillow"]

##### Synonyms

- بَوَاء [buwaa'] under headword كَفُو [kuf'un "efficient"]  
جَمَّة [jummat] under headword هَامَة [haamat "fore-front"]  
مَصْدَعَة [maṣḍa'at] under headword مَخْدَة [mikhadda "pillow"]  
مَخْرَف ، لَاحِب [laahib, makhruf] under headword طَرِيق [jariiq "road"]  
حِلْس [ḥils] under headword بِسَاط [bisaaṭ "rug"]

#### 2. MAT

##### Synonyms

- مَضْرَحِي [maḍraḥiyy], هَيْثَم [haytham], قَشْعَم [qash'am],  
غُدَاف [ghudaaf] under headword نَسْر [nisr "vulture"]  
نَبْر [nabr] under headword وَقْع [waqih "rude"]  
فَدْفَد [fadfad], نَجْوَة [najwat], يَفَاع [yafaa'], نَشْر [nashaz]  
under headword نَجْد [najd "highland, plateau"]  
مَعْجَم [mu'jam], مَضْرَس [muḍḍarras], صَيْرَفِي [ṣayrafiyy]  
under headword مَجْرَب [mujarrab "experienced"]  
شَنْشَنَة [shanshana] and سَجِيحَة [sajiiḥa] under headword  
فَطْرَة [fiṭra "innate character, natural disposition"]

### 3. MDAS Synonyms

- أبلم [ablama] under headword ورم [warima "became swollen"]  
 ابن بقيق [ibn baqii'] under headword كلب [kalb "dog"]  
 شلطاء [shalṭaa'] under headword سكين [sikkiin "knife"]  
 سعراء [sa'raa'], أدماء ['admaa'] under headword سمراء [samraa' "a brunette"]

The criterion for selecting the headwords especially in a small-sized dictionary of synonyms like *PDSA* (100 pages), *MAT* (150 pages) or *MDAS* (323 pages) should be their frequency of use in the language. Instead of having these small-sized dictionaries with useless hosts of archaic words, it would be better to start with an experimental edition, choose only the ten thousand most common words in Modern Standard Arabic, omit synonyms related to animals, birds, swords etc. (cf. *MAT* and *MDAS*) which originally are either descriptive or dialectal words and by no means synonyms in Arabic and give the common terms the fullest semantic treatment.

#### 2.1 Derivatives

Arabic is a highly derivative language and the translator may have special difficulties in finding a synonym for a particular derivative whose meaning is not closely related to the root. Thus derivatives in a dictionary of Arabic synonyms should be carefully selected. The three dictionaries vary a great deal in the way they deal with derivatives. The *PDSA* includes different derivatives from the root kh.w.f (خ.و.ف) such as خاف [khaafa "was afraid"] and the noun خوف [khawf "fear"]. However, this is not systematically practised in the dictionary, e.g. خان [khaana "to betray"] is given as a verb with no other derivatives. This is also typical of the *MAT* which sometimes gives only the verb, e.g. خاف [khaafa "was afraid"], with no other derivatives, and at other times both the verb and the noun, e.g. خاصم [khaaṣama "to quarrel with"] and خصم [khaṣm "adversary"]. The *MDAS* is to some extent more systematic. As derivatives it gives the verb خاف, the noun خوف, the verb خان, the active participle خائن [khaa'in "traitor"] and the *masdar* خيانة [khiyaana "betraying, betrayal"]. As far as derivatives are concerned, it is the most comprehensive of the three. However, when one item, the verb برد [barada "be cold"] in the



Such an index is redundant and does not serve any purpose. The natural order in an Arabic alphabetical dictionary is that reference is made to the root, and not *vice versa*. There is no need for such an index, since the items in the body of the dictionary are arranged alphabetically. Moreover, many words are wrongly placed in the index, e.g.

- (a) **بلادة** (n) [balaada "dullness, lethargy"]  
 (b) **بليد** (adj) [baliid "dull, lethargic"]  
 (c) **بلد** (n) [balad "country"]

where (c), unlike (a) and (b), is not related in meaning to the verb root **ب . ل . د** [b.l.d].

In both dictionaries retrieval of any of the synonyms of a particular headword is, in many cases, impossible, e.g.

1. *PDSA*

**اضطرام** [iḏḏiraam] and **اتقاد** [ittiqaad] given as synonyms for the headword **ضرام** [ḏiraam "burning, fire"]

2. *MAT*

**إملاق** [imlaaq], **شظف** [shazaf] and **عوز** ['awaz] given as synonyms for the headword **فاقة** [faaqa "poverty"]

The *MDAS* distinguishes itself by ease of retrieval. An index (188 pages) has been incorporated. It comprises, in alphabetical order, all the words in the dictionary (135 pages), headwords and synonyms. References to headwords pinpoint the particular sense(s) of the word being sought, enabling the user to go directly to the most appropriate main entry, e.g.

**ابتز** [ibtazza]: **سلب** [salaba "steal"]

where **ابتز** in the index refers the reader to the main entry **سلب** in the body of the dictionary and *ibtazza* is one of the words given in the synonym list of *salaba*.

By incorporating the index the *MDAS* managed to avoid the awkwardness of and waste of time spent on using the cross-references in the body of the dictionary, a defect also present in the otherwise excellent English dictionary of synonyms *Roget's II, the New Thesaurus* (1997) and another Arabic dictionary of synonyms, *Mu'jam al-Ma'aanii* (1971).

#### 4. Contextualization

The three dictionaries group undifferentiated synonyms together with undefined entry words. It is our belief that unless the user, both native and non-native speaker, can him-/herself distinguish correctly between the many semi-equivalents given, he/she can hardly make use of them (see Arnold's (1979) experiment). Though dictionaries of synonyms are restricted by the projected size of the dictionary, words cannot exist in a vacuum, completely divorced from context. Unfortunately, this is often the case in English college-level dictionaries of synonyms, even the most recent ones (see *Chambers English Thesaurus*, 1995 and the *21st Century Synonym and Antonym Finder*, 1993).

In order to write an adequate lexical entry in a dictionary of synonyms, the lexicographer must give a thorough treatment of four components:

- (1) A concise, carefully-worded denotation of the sense shared by the head-word and its synonyms should be provided (see *Roget's II* 1988 and 1997).
- (2) This should be supplemented by at least one illustrative example showing a typical usage context (see *The Oxford Concise Thesaurus* and *Random House Webster's College Thesaurus*).
- (3) In addition to denotation, a word may have a connotation, the suggestive or associative implications beyond its literal sense. To deal with the connotation problem, status labels should be used, e.g. *derogatory, disapproving, euphemistic, jocular, etc.*)
- (4) In the vast majority of cases, descriptive synonyms are given, i.e. the synonyms that can be substituted for one another in all declarative sentences without affecting their truth-conditions. However, synonyms differ in their expressive or evocative meaning, e.g. قتل [qatala] which could be translated as *killed*, and ذبح [dhabaha] which indicates killing people rather violently or in large numbers and which could be translated as *slaughtered* or *butchered*. Synonyms have different conditions of appropriateness and the lexicographer should shed light on this feature, otherwise the dictionary will be a lethal instrument in the hands of a translator and a foreign learner.

In the majority of cases, a lexical item is in some respects different from its cognitive synonyms or the items with which it shares certain properties. This difference is reflected in:

- (a) The semantic or propositional mode, i.e. the content of the message. Hence the importance of a definition and an illustrative example, e.g. **جناية** [Jinaaya "crime"], **جنحة** [junḥa "misdemeanour"] and **مخالفة** [mukhaalafa "fine"].
- (b) The expressive mode. Without it communication would be impossible. According to Cruse (1986: 274) "every communicative utterance must transmit as part of its meaning an indication of intended propositional attitude". Hence the need for indicating the expressive differences between the synonyms incorporated in the dictionary.

## 5. Collocations

Apart from the interface between a speaker's intentions and language, there are interactions among linguistic items constituting discourse (Cruse 1986: 277) which are unpredictable and a source of difficulty for the translator, both native and nonnative speaker, of the language into which he/she is translating. These are collocations. Synonyms may be of the same semantic field, but may differ a great deal in their collocational range or the set of contexts in which they occur. Related to the field of "destruction", for example, we may have **كسر** [kasara], **هدم** [hadama], **صدع** [ṣada'a], **حطم** [ḥaṭṭama] and **دك** [dakka], for each of which a special collocate is used:

- كسر** [kasara]/ door, leg, bread, plate  
**هدم** [hadama]/ building  
**صدع** [ṣada'a]/ wall, plate, glass  
**حطم** [ḥaṭṭama]/ (technical) the atom  
**دك** [dakka]/ wall, castle, enemy positions.

The fact that the three dictionaries do not indicate the collocates, detracts from their value (cf. *The Oxford Concise Thesaurus*). A collocate is an essential part of the meaning of the whole cohesive unit known as collocation and hence it should be included.

## 6. Figurative Usage

When the three dictionaries were used for finding synonyms for the lexical item **هد** [hadda "destroy"] used figuratively in the sense of "ruin one's health", they

proved to be inadequate. Figurative usage is an area that has been neglected even in monolingual Arabic dictionaries. Items used to indicate "destruction" in Arabic could easily be used figuratively, in which case they need a special lexicographical treatment in a dictionary of synonyms. The following are illustrative Arabic verbs, first in their literal and then in their figurative sense, translated into English with the subject or object indicated:

Verb	Literal sense	Figurative sense
حطم [ḥaṭṭama]	destroy	wreck/ruin (one's hopes)
هد [hadda]	pull down, raze	(disease) ruined or weakened him
خرّب [kharaba]	destroy	(a) ruin, bankrupt (economy) (b) sabotage (factory, machinery)

One of the dictionaries which attach importance to this aspect, is *Harrap's English Synonyms* (1989) where a clear distinction is made between literal and figurative meanings (see for example the verb *black out*).

## 7. Equivalence

As a rule, the three dictionaries adopt the wrong principle of taking the word as a lexicographic unit. For instance, the headwords are, except in a few cases, confined to single verbs without prepositions, though the preposition in Arabic prepositional verbs (see Heliel 1992) determines and distinguishes the meaning of the verb, e.g.

أقبل (إلى) [aqbala (ilaa) "come to (a place or person)"]  
أقبل (علي) [aqbala ('alaa) "to take interest in"]

Although prepositional verbs are sparingly given as synonyms in the *PDSA* and *MAT*, they cannot unfortunately be retrieved. The proper prepositional particle normally accompanying the Arabic verb and determining its sense should be provided in dictionaries of synonyms, whether as headwords or in synonym lists. There should also be a means of retrieving them.

On the whole, the three dictionaries adopt the narrower classical sense which limits itself to the identification of meaning between words only. In this respect, a comparison should be made between Arabic and recent college-level English dictionaries of synonyms. The *Merriam-Webster Concise School and Office Thesaurus* (1991) and *The Oxford Concise Thesaurus* (1995) are sources that could

be utilized. The *MAT*, it has to be noted, sparingly gives construct phrases and idioms in the synonym lists, which is a step forward in Arabic lexicography, e.g. **فريد** [fariid "unique"], **منقطع النظر** [munqaṭi'u al-naẓiir] and **نسيج وحده** [nasiiju waḥdihi] which are construct phrases of noun plus noun.

Synonymity relations in natural languages, it is true, not only characterize single words, but also larger linguistic units. Examples of these units in Arabic are *construct phrases* (idaafa), *binomials*, *collocations*, *prepositional verbs* and *idioms*. These units have to be incorporated in an Arabic dictionary of synonyms.

## 8. Polysemy

A worthwhile attempt at dealing with different senses of Arabic lexemes and their synonyms, especially the basic ones, has been made by the *MDSA*. Though it is restricted by the size limitations, it surpasses the other two dictionaries, e.g.

- عدل ['adala "to act justly"]  
 عدل (عن) ['adala 'an "change one's mind"]  
 عدل [adala "put right"]  
 عدل ['adala "deviate"]

The *PDSA* and the *MAT* give only one sense of the verb "to act justly", though the prepositional structure **عدل عن** ['adala 'an] in the sense of "change one's mind" and the verb **عدل** ['adala] in the sense of "put right" are frequently used. Thus a semantically carefully designed plan for selecting, dividing senses and distinguishing between them should be drawn up before compiling an Arabic dictionary of synonyms.

## 9. Register and Style

One of the basic differences between synonyms which has not been indicated in the three dictionaries, is register, i.e. a variety of language used by a single speaker which is considered appropriate to different occasions and situations of use (Cruse 1986: 283). Here we stress the importance of field which refers to the topic of discourse (*legal, scientific, medical, political, etc.*) and style (*derogatory, euphemistic, poetic, appreciative, formal, informal, etc.*). It is inadequate to list a

number of indiscriminate synonyms, one after the other without indication of register or style.

"The multiplication of synonyms," as Cruse (1986: 284) says, "is most marked in the case of referring to areas of experience which have a high emotive referring significance such as death, sex, excretory functions, money, religion, power relations and so on." From these areas of experience the following example of synonyms related to sex has been chosen. It could serve as an illustration of an entry with suggested labels of field and style, e.g. جماع [jimaa' "sexual intercourse"]: رفث [rafath], مباشرة [mubaashara], وطء [wat'], نكاح [nikaah], اتصال جنسي [iittiṣaal jinsii], مضاجعة [muḍaaja'a], مباحضة [mubaada'a], where جماع could be indicated as (*neutral*), رفث as (*Islamic law, Koranic language*), مباشرة as (*euphemistic*), وطء as (*derogatory*), derived from the verb وطأ [wata'a "to tread or trample underfoot, to step or walk over, to mount"], اتصال جنسي as (*neutral*), مضاجعة as (*euphemistic* "sleeping with"), مباحضة as (*derogatory*), derived from بضع [bud' "female sexual organ"].

## 10. Conclusions

Through an analysis of the lexicographical treatment of synonymy in three recently published Arabic dictionaries, the deficiencies have been identified and remedies suggested. Most important among these deficiencies is the decontextualization of the lexical items which depreciates their lexicographical value. The MDAS which is the most recent of the three, breaks new ground in certain respects. However, much has to be done about linguistic multiword units, derivatives, item selection, denotation, connotation, equivalence, polysemy, collocations, figurative usage, register and style which would pave the way for a reliable dictionary of Arabic synonyms.

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