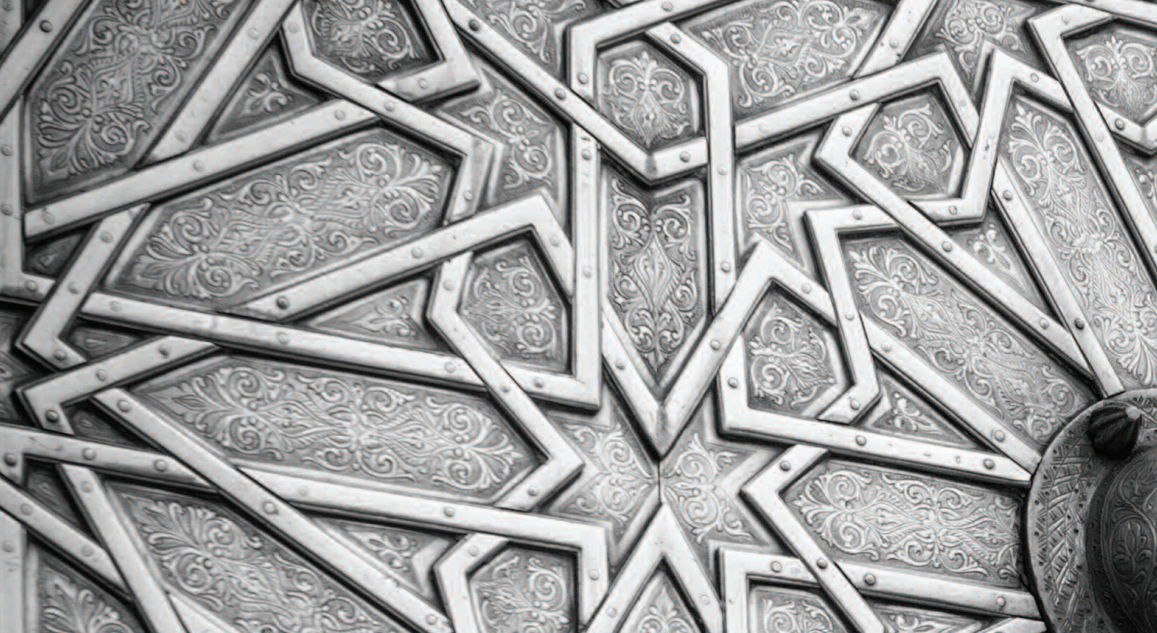
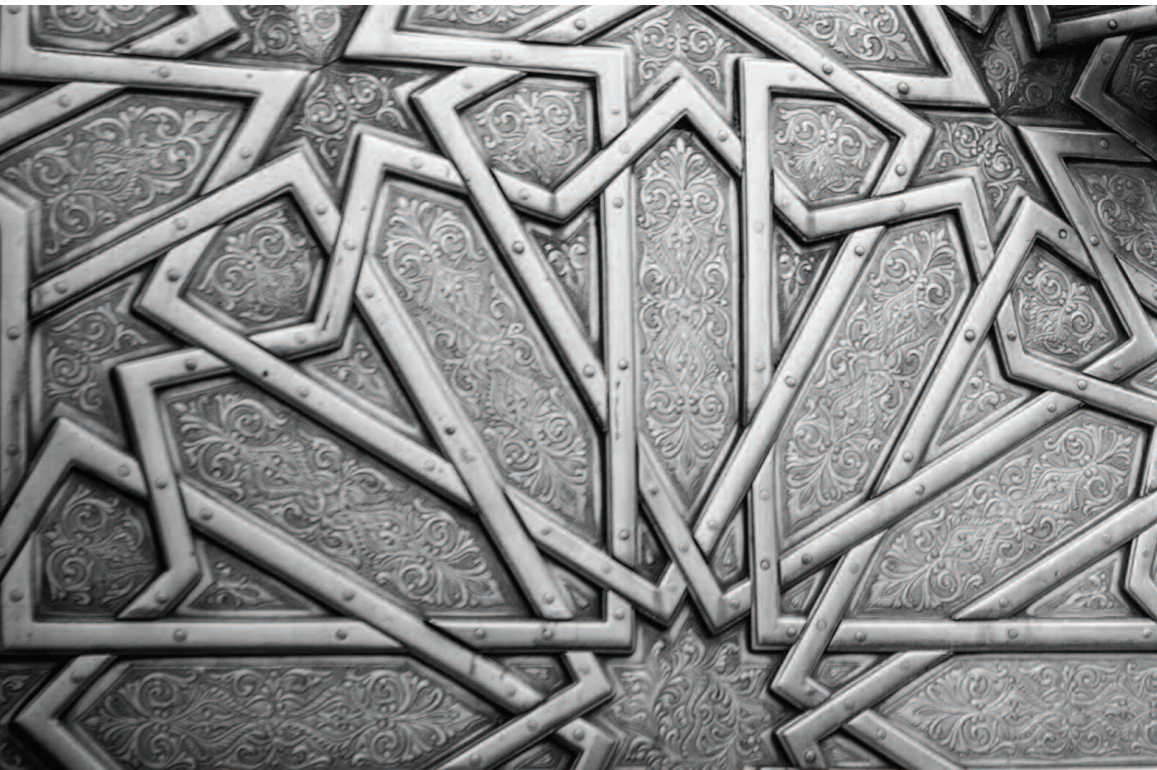




QUR'ANIC TERMINOLOGY

A LINGUISTIC AND SEMANTIC ANALYSIS

BALIL ABD AL-KARIM



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Balil Abd al-Karim

Translated from the Arabic by
Nancy Roberts



THE INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ISLAMIC THOUGHT
LONDON • WASHINGTON

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1438AH/2017CE

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ISBN 978-1-56564-698-8 limp
ISBN 978-1-56564-651-3 cased

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Layout and Design by Shiraz Khan

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Foreword

BALIL ABD AL-KARIM'S *Qur'anic Terminology: A Linguistic and Semantic Analysis* is a detailed work aiming to provide a broad glossary of key Qur'anic terms and set forth these terms' meanings, both semantically and linguistically, within their Qur'anic context.

There is no way to understand the Qur'an properly, or elucidate as accurately as possible the meaning of its verses, without studying Qur'anic terminology and concepts. Taken together these not only sum up the universal truths of the religion (the great moral code), but also animate the text and give it incredible life, precision, and flexibility, enriching the communication of the Qur'anic message through their beautiful and comprehensive nature.

The IIIT has undertaken in recent years to produce abridged versions of its key publications, and this translation is taken from the abridged Arabic edition *Al-Mafāḥīm al-Miftāḥiyyah li Naẓariyyah al-Ma'rifah fī al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*.

We live in an age in which time is at a premium in virtually all spheres of life, including those of writing and production. Copious intellectual, cultural and informational output continues unabated as part of efforts to keep pace with changes in the public and private spheres alike, while publishing houses and websites vie to provide people with the latest, and most up-to-date information in the easiest, most effective manner. The knowledge economy that now dominates the world requires a process of 'creative adaptation' of information as one of the building blocks of the world community at large, hence the IIIT's series of abridged works. The aim is to help readers benefit from available information as easily, effectively, and efficiently as possible and to further develop their critical faculties so they become better able to contribute to the development of humanity.

The abridged texts have been written in a clear, easy to read style, and while the essential contents of the original works have been preserved, readers will note that, in the interests of space, the abridged editions contain far fewer endnotes than do the original works. The

Foreword

only notes retained are those needed for clarification or the proper establishment of an idea, since the principle aim of this endeavor is to facilitate rapid absorption of the content being conveyed. Readers who wish to go more deeply into the topics of concern or to find full documentation of quotes may refer to the original works, which contain all necessary citations.

The work is being published to widen discourse, and increase awareness of the question of Islamic artistic expression and its ultimate aims and objectives. No doubt the subject is a specialized one, but it is hoped that for the most part both general and specialist readers alike will benefit from the perspective offered and the overall issues examined.

Where dates are cited according to the Islamic calendar (hijrah) they are labelled AH. Otherwise they follow the Gregorian calendar and labelled CE where necessary. Arabic words are italicized except for those which have entered common usage. Diacritical marks have been added only to those Arabic names not considered modern. English translations taken from Arabic references are those of the translator. Qur'anic verses are quoted either in part or in their entirety.

Since its establishment in 1981, the IIIT has served as a major center to facilitate serious scholarly efforts. Towards this end it has, over the decades, conducted numerous programs of research, seminars and conferences as well as publishing scholarly works specialising in the social sciences and areas of theology which to date number more than four hundred titles in English and Arabic, many of which have been translated into other major languages.

We would like to thank the author, translator, as well as editorial and production team at the IIIT London Office, and all those who were directly or indirectly involved in the completion of this book. May God reward them for all their efforts.

JANUARY, 2017

Introduction

PRAISE BE TO GOD, who revealed the Qur'an from on high as a balance in which to weigh truth and falsehood. He has commanded us to reflect on the Qur'an, bearing in mind that it can only be properly understood by those firmly established in knowledge, and will only be kept in remembrance by those who are endowed with insight.

The epistemological aspect of the Qur'an deals with the act of reflecting and investigating (*al-nazar*), which jurists and philosophers alike agree to be human beings' foremost duty. This process is essential in order for people to know their Creator, themselves, and the world around them. Knowledge of the Creator and of ourselves leads us to search for satisfying answers to life's pressing questions. The better we understand the sources, types and purposes of knowledge, ways of applying and benefitting from knowledge, and the ways in which knowledge is compiled, transmitted and developed, the better able we will be to test the knowledge we have and to link it to the laws and patterns of the cosmos.

The Qur'anic Revelation sets forth a set of concepts which, taken together, sum up the universal truths of the religion. However, there is no way to understand the Qur'an properly without studying its terminology, which is key to accessing the will of God. Consequently, this study contains a glossary of key terms that sets forth these terms' meanings within their Qur'anic context.

The meaning of a given Qur'anic term will vary depending on the manner and the context in which it is used, and on the issues and questions in relation to which reference is made to it. Just as a concept gives rise to a term, so also does the term and its usage act to shape the concept. As a terminological analysis of the Qur'an, this study examines terms within their respective semantic and linguistic contexts.

Sound communication can only take place when the concepts being discussed are clearly defined and understood, and when terms are used precisely. Unless terms are defined with precision, discussions and debates will revolve not around facts, but around mere words. It is not acceptable to employ terms that are ambiguous or overly general; hence, those who do use such terms should be asked to explain and clarify them in order to make dialogue constructive and genuine. Differences among debaters are often attributable to their use of words, either because various terms are being used to refer to the same entity, or because the same word is being used to refer to more than one entity. But if intended meanings are explained and ambiguities clarified, it becomes possible to distinguish true from false, and what is meant from what is not meant.

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Studying Concepts from an Epistemological Perspective

CONCEPTS CAN BE viewed from various angles and subjected to a variety of approaches. They can be studied linguistically, psychologically, philosophically, or epistemologically. In the latter case, the structures of concepts are subjected to an analysis which clarifies how relationships among concepts are formed to create integrated epistemological fields.

In this chapter we will be discussing the problem of meaning, that is, the changes that occur in a concept and its signification. In the course of this discussion we will touch upon the epistemological necessity of concepts, concept structure analysis, changes in concepts, networks of key concepts, and the method of categorizing epistemological concepts in the Qur'an. The discussion will take place on three levels of meaning: (1) lexical (*al-dilālah al-mu'jamiyyah*), (2) practical (*al-dilālah al-isti'māliyyah*), and (3) interpretative (*al-dilālah al-ta'wīliyyah*).

FIRST: THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL NECESSITY OF CONCEPTS

Any cultural system will be made up of a set of integrated epistemological fields. Such fields include, for example, the realms of religion, metaphysics, mathematics, logic, language and linguistics, society and sociology, and so on. Each of these epistemological fields in turn consists of a set of concepts that are related to each other in specific ways.

1) *The value of concepts*

Each epistemological field is set apart from others by particular features and concepts, while various epistemological fields are linked together to form an integrated epistemological system. The analysis of

an epistemological structure is based on three foundations: (1) concepts, (2) the relationships that join concepts into a semantic field, and (3) the relationships that join differing semantic fields into a larger epistemological system. Concepts are a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for the presence of an epistemological field. It is concepts that highlight the features of a given field; however, the vagueness or distortion of ideas and concepts has caused many writers to conflate or confuse different meanings. Hence, thinkers should make sure to clarify the overall concepts that make up a given field or system.

2) *Concepts in the logical sense*

A concept is a set of specific characteristics and features that distinguish one entity from another. In the context of this discussion, however, we will be adopting the view that the vast majority of concepts are marked by unlimited flexibility. Hence, their meanings broaden at some times and narrow at others, while at the same time preserving their own semantic field. Concepts are to be viewed as a type of universal or abstraction, salient examples of which include: freedom and tyranny, justice and injustice, truth and falsehood, good and evil, beauty and ugliness.

3) *Concept formation*

A concept embodies a meaning or set of meanings which we express by means of either a single word, such as “knowledge,” or an expression such as, “divine knowledge.” When a particular word is used to communicate a particular meaning, the result is a term which is agreed upon by specialists in a particular field. Such a term may continue to be used exclusively by those who have agreed upon it. However, a problem arises when a particular word comes to be used to communicate several different meanings without the aid of linguistic contexts that make it possible to distinguish which particular meaning of the word is intended. This situation differs from that in which a single word is used to convey two or more different meanings but in which we can deduce which meaning of the word is intended based on the linguistic context.

This difficulty does not arise in relation to concepts with clearly specified meanings. An example of such a situation involves the concept

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of “democracy,” whose lexical definition – ‘the rule of the people’ – is agreed upon, but whose meaning in actual usage is the subject of debate.

When the order of concepts is disturbed, relationships among members of the Muslim community are affected such that their ties based on doctrine become secondary rather than primary. This sort of reordering might take place due to influences from atheistic and existentialist philosophies which place the individual front and center, and that may even go so far as to make the individual the source of legislation and the measure of what is good and bad, true and false.

SECOND: CONCEPT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

In order to define a concept, we need to deconstruct its elements and identify their hierarchical arrangement.

1) Identifying a concept's structure

A concept's structure consists of numerous elements, some of which are fundamental and others of which are complementary. The fundamental elements enjoy logical priority in the structure, given that they are not derived from anything else. In this respect they resemble the axioms in mathematical and logical systems. Semanticists draw a distinction between basic meanings and additional meanings. The basic meaning performs the most important function of language, which is communication and the transfer of ideas. Therefore, the precise understanding of a concept requires us to analyze its structure and identify its component elements.

2) The importance of concept structure analysis

To illustrate the importance of the analytical process for a precise and correct understanding of concepts, let us take as an example the concept of *al-ʿaql*, translated generally as “mind” or “reason.” Concepts may be divided into three different types: (1) epistemological concepts such as knowledge (*ʿilm*), understanding (*fahm*), thought (*tafakkur*) and realization or perception (*idrāk*); (2) volitional concepts such as determination (*ʿazm*), choice (*ikhtiyār*), intention (*qaṣd*), and will

(*irādah*); and (3) sensation- or feeling-related concepts, such as anger (*ghaḍab*), fear (*khawf*), pleasure (*ladhdhah*) and pain (*alam*). When we analyze the structure of the concept of *‘aql* in this manner, we impact the nature of the dialogue that takes place around it, as well as the way in which the dialogue proceeds and the conclusions to which it leads. Scholars have long recognized that there is a link between the structure of language, the structure of mind, and the structure of reality. Analyzing a concept’s structure enables us to see further concepts that underlie it, and which evolve over time as their content and range of application expand. It is thus important to observe the meanings acquired by concepts in specific historical phases.

In order to understand a word’s precise meaning, you will also need to understand the constellation of words that are semantically related to it. This involves studying the relationships among individual terms within a single semantic field or subfield, since a word’s meaning is the outcome of its relationships with other words. Similarly, the aim behind semantic field analysis is to compile all words that belong to a particular semantic field, identify the relationships among them, and clarify their links to the overall concept that ties them together.

THIRD: CONCEPTS AND THE PROBLEM OF MEANING

On what basis can we judge a concept to be clear, vague, or meaningless? We use speech to communicate about things such as doctrine, human affairs, literature, nature, and mathematics, among others. Consequently, the attention Arab scholars down the ages have devoted to the issue of meaning in the linguistic sciences and the philology has been with a view to avoiding what has been termed “semantic maladies” which afflict concepts in various epistemological fields. This concern can be observed particularly in the disciplines of philosophy, linguistics, and the fundamentals of jurisprudence.

1) *The issue of language as approached by linguists*

In his book, *Al-Khaṣā’iṣ*, Ibn Jinnī stated:

The Arabs have concerned themselves with the vocabulary of their language, refining it, studying words’ particular contexts, and observing

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grammatical structures and rules, whether in poetry, oratory, or the rhymed prose which they have taken such care to perpetuate and preserve. Consequently, the meanings conveyed by their language have a powerful, profound impact on their souls. The words of a language are thus the vessels that convey its meanings and the path along which its ends and purposes are revealed.

Linguists' interest in semantics has manifested itself in their study of lexicology, in compilations of Qur'anic terms that recur with differing facets of meaning (*al-naẓā'ir*), and in the study of metaphors. It should be remembered that the vocalization of the text of the Qur'an was an exercise in semantics. Indeed, the science of grammar and syntax arose in part due to the fact that when reading *Sūrah al-Tawbah*, 9:3, a certain Qur'an reciter had mispronounced the phrase *rasūluhu* ("His Apostle" in the nominative case) as *rasūlihi* ("His Apostle" in the genitive case), which drastically changed the meaning of the verse from "God disavows all who ascribe divinity to aught beside Him, and [so does] His Apostle (*wa rasūluhu*)," to "God disavows all who ascribe divinity to aught beside Him, and [He likewise disavows] His Apostle (*wa rasūlihi*)."

2) The issue of meaning as approached by rhetoricians

Rhetoricians have taken a special interest in the semantic aspects of language, such as literal meaning vs. metaphor, sentence structure, and the study of linguistic modes, such as the imperative mode (commands and prohibitions), the interrogative mode (questions), exclamations and others. Al-Jurjānī (d. 474 AH/1078 CE), for example, proposed the notion of *al-naẓm* (meaning order, arrangement, poetic verse), which he developed into a sophisticated literary theory. According to al-Jurjānī:

The term *al-naẓm* refers to the process of ordering speech in the manner required by the rules of grammar and syntax, and of familiarizing yourself with and adhering to prevailing linguistic norms.

3) The issue of meaning as approached by philosophers

The issue of words and meaning has been investigated by a number of

Muslim philosophers, including al-Kindī (259 AH/873 CE), al-Fārābī (339 AH/951 CE), Ibn Sīnā, or Avicenna (428 AH/1037 CE), Ibn Rushd, or Averroes (594 AH/1198 CE), Ibn Ḥazm (456 AH/1064 CE), and al-Ghazālī (504 AH/1111 CE), most of whose treatises on logic and language addressed this topic. Most of these scholars held that words indicate meaning in three different ways, which came to be known as: (1) correspondence (*dilālat al-muṭābaqah*), (2) inclusion (*dilālat al-taḍmīn*), and (3) association (*dilālat al-iltizām*), the last of which refers to the way in which a word or expression points to something beyond what has been named. According to al-Ghazālī:

Based on the manner in which they are related to meanings, words may be divided into four categories: (1) homonyms (*al-mushtarakah*), (2) generic nouns (*al-mutawāṭi'ah*), (3) synonyms (*al-mutarādifah*) and (4) dissimilar terms (*al-mutazāyilah*). The first type, the homonym, is a single word which is used to refer to several different entities with distinct definitions. The second type, the generic noun, includes a whole group or class and, as such, refers to several different entities that share a feature, or features, in common. The third type, the synonym (*al-mutarādifah*), is a set of different words that refer to the same entity and share the same definition. And the fourth and last type, dissimilar terms (*al-mutazāyilah*), applies to words which have none of these features in common.

4) *The issue of meaning as addressed by scholars of the fundamentals of jurisprudence*

Scholars of the fundamentals of Islamic jurisprudence have concerned themselves with both language and meaning due to the intimate link that exists between the understanding of language and the understanding of the Divine Law revealed in the Arabic tongue.

The science of the fundamentals of jurisprudence aims to deduce legal rulings from specific texts, a process that requires an understanding of the words of the texts from which the rulings are being deduced. Legal scholars divide words into four categories – synonyms (*mutarādifah*), homonyms (*mushtarakah*), unrestricted (*muṭlaqah*) and restricted (*muqayyadah*). Such scholars take a clear interest, of course, in commands and prohibitions given the fact that it is commands and prohibitions which constitute the focal point of all speech addressed to morally responsible agents.

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They also concern themselves with context, which determines the meanings of the legal categories into which actions are classified, such as permissibility (*al-ibāḥah*), obligation (*wujūb*), impossibility (*taʿjīz*),¹ and advisement (*irshād*),² which are based on the Qur'an's consideration for meaning and structure.

FOURTH: CHANGE IN CONCEPTS

Concepts are embedded in specific environmental and cultural frameworks. Hence, the general, everyday use of terms associated with philosophy, science and literature can cause confusion because, rather than being mere signs pointing to an external reality, the words and expressions we use become bound to a certain mental conceptualization. We should thus be aware of certain words' association with the epistemological content of philosophy and the system of thought to which it gave rise. At the same time, we should take care to distinguish between the phenomenon of conceptual change, and that of conceptual distortion.

1) *Reasons for conceptual change*

Cultural concepts change due to a variety of causes, including the emergence of new needs and psychological and social factors such as bans and taboos. For although the concepts we express through words are abstractions, they are nevertheless shaped by concrete situations.

2) *Conceptual distortion*

The process of semantic change is a natural one. The meaning of a word may pass through various stages of evolution. At each stage, the modification in the concept will then meet with acceptance by speakers of the language concerned, including their academic institutions. However, this process is to be distinguished from semantic distortion, which occurs when the significance a word develops over time is inconsistent with its original meaning.

An example of this phenomenon may be seen in relation to the concept of the mind, or reason (*ʿaql*). At one stage, methods of researching the mind consisted in demonstrating the way in which mind had

emerged out of matter. The conclusion that some researchers drew from this was that the mind is nothing but a physical organ. However, this materialistic theory of mind was eventually demolished based on irrefutable scientific evidence.

Materialistic trends in science and philosophy distorted the concept of ‘mind’ or ‘reason’ based on their exclusive focus on physical function. The fallacy of materialism lies in confusing the part with the whole, that is, in concluding that because the mind functions via matter, the mind itself consists of matter and nothing more. The Islamic conception of knowledge, by contrast, holds that the human mind is a spiritual entity created by God Almighty in association with the body.

3) Steps to be followed in the treatments of concepts

There are specific steps which need to be followed if we are to approach concepts in a proper and precise manner. The first step is to acknowledge the distinguishing features of the language and cultural context in which a concept has been formulated. The second step is to determine whatever lexical and technical meanings are associated with the terms in which the concept is expressed. The third is to identify the semantic process through which the concept has passed by distinguishing between the meanings with which it was linked upon its initial formulation, and the meanings which it has acquired during its historical evolution. And the fourth is to analyze the concept’s semantic structure, which involves the identification of its fundamental and complementary elements. This process will help us to distinguish between a concept’s natural semantic evolution and its distortion, be it in the form of narrowing, broadening, or whatever else.

FIFTH: THE NETWORK OF KEY CONCEPTS IN THE QUR’AN

Given that for Muslims, the Qur’an is the primary source of knowledge, it will be necessary to enumerate the Qur’anic terms which describe the act of knowing, the means by which knowledge is acquired, and the value of knowledge. We must then translate these terms into concepts. Some Qur’anic terms have clearly defined, relatively self-contained meanings, while others are bound up with

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additional terms that relate to a given concept. Some terms occur frequently in the Qur'an, and others only rarely. Consequently, we have organized them into thematic groups. Under the category of 'mind', for example, we list all terms having to do with mental processes, such as thought (*tafakkur*), reflection (*tadabbur*), investigation (*naẓar*), hearing (*ṣamʿ*) and sight (*baṣar*), while under the concept of revelation we list terms connected with prophecy (*nubuwwah*), 'the book' (*al-kitāb*), and 'the message' (*al-risālah*).

SIXTH: THE METHOD OF CLASSIFYING EPISTEMOLOGICAL TERMS IN THE QUR'AN

There is a set of Qur'anic terms whose meanings are bound to the concepts of *ʿilm* and *maʿrifah*, and which have been derived through a reading of Qur'anic commentaries.

The meanings of such terms may be classified into three types: (1) lexical, (2) practical, and (3) interpretative.

1) *Lexical meaning (al-dalālah al-muʿjamiyyah)*

The term "lexical meaning" is used to refer to what scholars of the fundamentals of jurisprudence have judged to be a word's original denotation. The original denotation of a term can only be modified based on valid evidence. A term's lexical meaning is based on its relative placement in a semantic field vis-à-vis other related words. Relationships among these different terms needs to be clarified due to the existence of homonyms, synonyms, and antonyms, as well as subtle distinctions among terms. A lexical definition embodies the mental conceptualization that is triggered by the term being defined outside its usual context of social customs and religious beliefs. Apart from a more specific context, however, a word bears numerous possible interpretations. Hence, the linguistic content that precedes and follows a term is the most important factor for determining its meaning and the semantic field to which it belongs.

2) *Practical signification (al-dalālah al-istiʿmāliyyah)*

The term "practical signification" refers to the meaning that a word

conveys in actual use or to its metaphorical meanings in a particular context, since individual words are only used to convey their meanings in conjunction with other words. In order to understand particular words in the Qur'an, we need to ascertain what meaning the word in question conveyed during the time when the Qur'an was revealed. There are words which took on precise, heretofore unfamiliar meanings and features based on the way in which they were used in their Qur'anic context or in the overall religious milieu.

3) *Interpretative signification (al-dalālah al-ta'wīliyyah)*

Interpretation (*ta'wīl*) is a means of determining what a speaker intended to say by the words he or she uttered or wrote. However, this aim cannot be attained without adhering to the rules of the language being used. Hence, if one claims that the meaning of something someone has said or written is different from what it appears to be on the surface, one must back up this claim with evidence. Otherwise, we may lose confidence in language and its ability to perform its communicative function. Interpretation involves affirming that a word or set of words conveys a metaphorical rather than a literal meaning. Such an affirmation, in turn, involves understanding the word or words within their surrounding context, and if the affirmation is well-founded, it enables us to arrive at a sounder grasp of the truth being conveyed by the words.

Well-founded interpretation requires that we study the way words were or are actually used in their respective contexts; it requires that we appreciate the link between literal meaning and metaphor, that we be on the lookout for the use of homonyms, and that we be well-versed in scholastic theological thought given the way it has shaped the evolution of certain words' meanings. Al-Shāṭibī stipulated that in order for the interpretation of a word in the Qur'an to be correct, it must be consistent with the word's original lexical meaning, with the meaning it bore in commonly accepted usage at the time the Qur'an was revealed, with its legal definition, and with its metaphorical sense. It must also be consistent with the rules and structure of the language, the semantic context, and what we know about what occasioned the revelation of the verse in question.

There is no way to understand the Qur'an properly, or to elucidate as accurately as possible the meaning of its verses, without studying Qur'anic terminology and concepts. Taken together these sum up the universal truths of the Faith (the great moral code), not only animating the text and giving it incredible life, precision, and flexibility, but also enriching the communication of the Qur'anic message through their beautiful and comprehensive nature.

This study aims to provide a broad glossary of key Qur'anic terms and set forth these terms' meanings, both semantically and linguistically, within their Qur'anic context. The format is organised in such a way as to facilitate ease of understanding, guiding the lay reader carefully and logically through the various nuances of usage and meaning. The meaning of a given Qur'anic term will vary depending on the manner and the context in which it is used, and on the issues and questions in relation to which reference is made to it, and just as a concept gives rise to a term, so also does the term and its usage act to shape the concept. These and other aspects of the Divine communication are mapped and explored, leaving us with a greater appreciation of the Qur'an's depth and what makes it a linguistic and literary miracle.

Balil Abd al-Karim has a PhD in Doctrine and Comparative Religion from the Faculty of Usul al-Din, Emir Abd Al Kader University of Islamic Sciences, Algeria. He has published a number of articles in The Journal of Emir Abd Al Kader University, and Al-Mi'yâr, and more than forty articles on the website: www.alukah.net.



ISBN 978-1-56564-698-8



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