

## EARLY ARABIC LEXICONS OF HOMOPHONIC WORDS

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The word homophony in my paper is used as a comprehensive term to cover both polysemy and homonymy. The previous one denotes the situation where one word has acquired several senses, while the latter is used to refer to a group of unconnected words which have, by sheer accident, or by change of pronunciation coincided in form (Omer 1988:165-168).

The aim of my paper is to deal with two related topics:

The first is reviewing early Arabic books dealt with this sort of words each of which has more than one meaning (*al-muštarak al-lafzi*). These include the following books:

- a) Abū ʿUbayd's book entitled: *Kitāb al-aġnās min kalām al-ʿarab, wa-mā ištabaha fī l-lafz wa-iḥṭalafa fī l-maʿnā*.
- b) Abū l-ʿAmaytal's book entitled: *Kitāb mā ittafaqa lafzuh wa-iḥṭalafa maʿnāh*.
- c) Kurāʿ's book entitled: *al-Munaġġad fīmā ittafaqa lafzuh wa-iḥṭalafa maʿnāh*.

We shall give more attention to the last one as it was the first comprehensive book of this sort and only one dealt with words of multiple meanings in detail.

The second is to throw light on Arab philologists' views on the question of multiplicity of meaning. This will include:

- a) The concept of the term *mā ittafaqa lafzuh wa-iḥṭalafa maʿnāh* or as was referred to later: *al-muštarak al-lafzi*.
- b) The causes of multiplicity whether internal or external ones. And whether multiplicity is due to change of meaning (through metaphor of figurative expression) or change of form (through substitution or transposition of letters).

*First: Early Arabic Books on Homophony:*

The competition between Arab philologists on the problem of multiple meaning was only restricted to the collection of words. They only differ in the number of words which they enumerate, or the number of meanings which they attribute to particular words. The Early Arabic Lexicons of homophonic words include the following books:

1. The oldest extant book is that of Abū ʿUbayd (died 224/838-839) which is called: *Kitāb al-aḡnās min kalām al-ʿarab, wa-mā ištābaha fi l-lafz wa-iḥṭalafa fi l-maʿnā*. It is not a comprehensive book dealing with *al-muštarak* in general, but a treatise dealing only with those words with multiple meanings which occur in the Traditions (the *Ḥadīṭ*). It contains only 151 words which are presented haphazardly, and which occupy 22 pages. The author is very concise, contenting himself with enumerating words and referring briefly to their meanings, mostly without giving illustrative phrases or citing supporting texts except a very few examples of Qurʾānic verses, and very rarely a *ḥadīṭ* (Abū ʿUbayd, *al-Aḡnās* 1, 9).

2. The second book is that of ʿAbdallāh b. Ḥulayd called Abū l-ʿAmayṭal al-Aʿrābī (died 240/854-855). He wrote several books on philology among which is *Kitāb mā ittafaqa lafzuhu wa-iḥṭalafa maʿnāhu*. It seems that Ibn an-Nadīm speaks of this book when he refers to one entitled *at-Tašābuh*, although Ibn Ḥallikān counts them as two different books.

3. The third book is that of al-Mubarrad (died 285/893) which is known as: *Kitāb mā ittafaqa lafzuhu wa-iḥṭalafa maʿnāhu min al-Qurʾān al-Maḡīd*. It is apparent from its title that it deals only with those words of this type which occur in the *Qurʾān*.

The subject of the book, in fact, restricts the field of research and firmly fetters the author. As he is determined to deal only with those words which occur twice in the *Qurʾān* with different meanings, he excludes all words with multiple meanings if they are used in the *Qurʾān* with only one meaning. From this point of view the words which might be included are indeed very few, perhaps three or four pairs, if

the author's definition of *al-muštarak* accords with the general definition. It seems that the author intentionally expands his definition to include many other categories which should not in fact be included. He, for instance, deals with what is known in rhetoric as *mušākala* as for example in the verse: *fa-man i'tadā 'alaykum fa-i'tadū 'alayhi bi-mitli mā i'tadā 'alaykum* [And one who attacketh you, attack him in like manner as he attacked you] (Q.2.194) in which the punishment is called *i'tidā'* (assault), although it is not, to achieve a resemblance. al-Mubarrad also deals with Qur'ānic phrases which seem contradictory, and which are not, in fact, a part of *al-muštarak* such as: *fa-yawma'idin lā yus'alu 'an danbihi ins wa-lā ġānn* [On that they neither man nor jinni will be questioned] (Q.55.39), beside: *wa-qifūhum innahum mas'ūlūna* [And stop them, for they must be questioned] (Q.37.24).

Despite all these digressions, the size of the book is very small, and if we were to isolate its pure material, it would not exceed two or three pages. The value of this book, therefore, does not lie in its material, but, to be just, in its introduction which contains, for the first time, reference to what modern philologists mention as context (*as-siyāq*) (Ullmann 1951:29, 54) when it says: "He who uses a word of a multiple meaning must give an indication to show the exact meaning he has in mind" (al-Mubarrad, *Mā ittafaqa lafzuhu*, 8).

4. The fourth and last book is that of Kurā' (died 310/922) which is entitled: *al-Munaġġad fīmā ittafaqa lafzuhu wa-ihtalafa ma'nāh*.

This book is divided into six chapters as follows:

- a) The first chapter deals with the parts of the body from head to foot. It contains 91 words.
- b) The second deals with animals, including human beings, wild animals, domesticated animals and insects. It contains 63 words.
- c) The third deals with birds, including predatory, poultry and others. It contains 40 words.
- d) The fourth deals with weapons and related matters. It contains 10 words.
- e) The fifth deals with the sky and what is beyond it. It contains 11 words.

- f) The sixth deals with the earth and what is on it. It contains 669 words.

The total number is 884 words (see Kurā<sup>c</sup>, *al-Munağğad.*).

Owing to the size of Chapter 6, it was essential for Kurā<sup>c</sup> to put words in order to ease consultation, so he classifies the words alphabetically under their initials regardless of whether they are radical or accessory. Thus he puts the two words: mağā<sup>c</sup>a (meaning poverty or shamelessness) together, although the first is derived from the root ġ-w<sup>c</sup> and the second from the root m-ğ<sup>c</sup> (Omer 1988:151-153).

Concerning Kurā<sup>c</sup>'s method of giving the meaning of words it might be profitable to make a distinction between two sorts of meaning; the more popular meaning which determines the titles of the chapters, and the less popular one or ones. Regarding the first type which we shall call henceforth "the first meaning" Kurā<sup>c</sup> neglects mentioning if it is common, relying on the fact that the general heading of the chapter will help to make it plain, otherwise he mentions it. What Kurā<sup>c</sup> considers as little known or at least, less well known than others, which we shall call "the second meaning", forms, in fact, the bulk of his book, and of course he pays especial attention to it. So, in the first chapter he enumerates the words: *ar-ra's*, *al-ğumğuma*, *al-wağh*, *al-hāğib*, etc. without giving any explanation of their first meanings as parts of the body, but he gives their second meanings; he says for instance: "*ar-ra's* is a name of Makka, and it is the head of a group of people". In words like *‘ārid al-libya* or *al-qatan* he gives both the first and second meanings because the first meaning is not obvious. He says for instance that "*‘ārid al-libya* is the hair which grows on the cheek".

It is also worth mentioning that Kurā<sup>c</sup> was keen to clarify the different meanings of a word by putting it in illustrative phrases such as: "*yuqāl hum yad ‘alā man sirwāhum: idā kāna amrubum wāhidan, wa-a taytuhu mālan ‘an zahri yad: ya‘nī tafaddulan laysa min bayf wa-lā qard wa-lā mukāfa’a, wa-hala’a yadahu min at-tā’a, wa-tawb qaşır al-yad, idā kāna yaqsur an yaltahifa bihi. wa-l-yad al-ğinā wa-l-qudra, taqūl ‘alayhi yad ay qudra, wa-lā ātihi yad ad-dabr: ya‘nī ad-dabr kulluhu, wa-laqituhu awwal dāt yadayni ay awwal aš-şay*" (see Omer & ‘Abdalbāqī 1988:19-21).

*Second: Concept and Causes*

Under this heading we shall try to disclose Kurā<sup>c</sup>'s view on the question of multiplicity of meaning, which, in fact, represents the old philologists' view. This will include two points as follows:

*a) Definition of Multiplicity.*

From the classification of Kurā<sup>c</sup>'s words, one can define homophony as that which occurs when a word has more than one meaning, regardless of whether:

1. The two meanings are cognate. For example, the word *al-bu'ṣūsa* means both a particular kind of small insect and child, as against the word *al-arḍ* which means "earth" and also "cold" (*zūkām*).
2. The two meanings are opposite. For example the expression *farrā'a fī l-ġabal*, which means either "went up" or "down".
3. The two meanings belong to more than one dialect. For example the word *as-sirḥān*, which means "wolf" in some dialects, and "lion" in some others.
4. The two words differ slightly in vowels. For example the word الأدمة which is pronounced sometimes as *adama* meaning "a dark grey colour", and sometimes as *udma* meaning "the means to an end".
5. They are not of the same part of speech. For example the word *aġamm*, which is used sometimes as a verb in a sentence much as: *aġamma l-amr* (the affair was near), and sometimes as an adjective in an expression such as: *kab' aġamm* (a ram without horns).
6. They have more than one spelling, though the only example of this is: عمرو a proper name, and عَمْر meaning "gums" (Omer 1967: 126-133; Kurā<sup>c</sup>, *al-Munaġġad*).

b) *The Causes of Multiplicity:*

With the aid of his data one may explain Kurā<sup>c</sup>'s views on this question as follows: He thinks that the causes of multiplicity should fall under the following headings:

I. The internal causes.

II. The external causes.

The first heading may be in turn divided into:

1. Alteration of meaning.

2. Alteration of pronunciation.

The alteration of meaning has two aspects:

a. Intentional alteration.

b. Spontaneous alteration.

The alteration of pronunciation has also two aspects:

a. Transposition of letters.

b. Substitution.

- (1) The external causes apply only to any word which is used in two different meanings among two different groups of speakers; one for each. If we were to look at the word in its own dialect there would not be any multiplicity of meaning at all, but if we looked at it within the whole vocabulary, as Kurā<sup>c</sup> did, considering all dialects as one unit, multiplicity occurs.

The examples for this class are many among which is the word *ad-danā* which commonly means "illness", and was used in the Ṭayyī' dialect meaning "a child".

- (2) The transposition of letters means change of the position of some sounds in a word, an action which may cause coincidence with an old word.

From Kurā<sup>c</sup>'s examples we mention the word *istadāma*. In Arabic we have the two stems *dāma* (to continue) and *damiya* (to bleed). The form *istafala* from *dāma* is *istadāma*, and from *damiya* is *istadmā*, but Kurā<sup>c</sup> cites that the verb *istadāma* is also used in the meaning of *istadmā*. Here we have the verb *istadāma* which is a

converted form of *istadmā* and coincides with the old word forming homophony.

- (3) The substitution of letters seems responsible for a good number of words becoming identical in form with some others. After this coincidence, the two words with their two meanings became one word of multiple meaning.

From the examples mentioned by Kurā<sup>c</sup> we refer to the word *ḥanak* which means "palate", and the word *ḥalak* which means "blackness". Here we have two words slightly different in form, but completely different in meaning. With the replacement of *lām* by *nūn*, the word *ḥalak* became *ḥanak*, coinciding with the old word *ḥanak*. Owing to this alteration in sound, the word *ḥanak* became homophonic.

- (4) The intentional alteration of meaning takes place when a word enters a professional language and becomes a technical term.

We refer to the following example: The word *al-iğāra* is used in the common language meaning "hiring out", but it became a technical term in prosody. It is, in al-Ḥalil's terminology, the case of two successive rhymes which are not identical but are similar such as *tā'* and *dāl*.

- (5) The spontaneous alteration of meaning forms perhaps the main causes of multiplicity. It happens frequently that a word gains a new meaning related to its original one and becomes homophonic. This category has two subdivisions, according to the kind of relationship between the two senses. If the relationship is similarity it is called *isti'āra*, otherwise *mağāz mursal*.

1. From the first category we refer to the following example:

The word *bašara* which literally means "skin", and figuratively "plant". The similarity between the two meanings is obvious.

2. The second category has many subdivisions among which are:

(i) Widening of meaning such as the verb *sāqa* in the expression: *sāqa r-rağul ilā l-mar'a mahrabā*. It was literally used when the "bridal gift" (*mahr*) used to be animals like sheep or camels. Later when the custom changed and the "bridal gift" became

coins either silver or gold, the verb was given a wider meaning and is still in use.

(ii) Narrowing of meaning, such as the word *al-me'tam* which originally means: a meeting of men or women for sad or merry occasions, but later the meaning was restricted to the sad occasions.

(iii) Giving a whole thing the name of its significant part, such as the word *lisān* (tongue) which was later used to mean the spokesman (*Kurā<sup>c</sup>*, *al-Munağğad*; Omer 1967:126-131).

*Comment:*

Our comment could be summarized in the following points:

1. That *Kurā<sup>c</sup>* as all old Arab philologists did not distinguish between what are called by modern linguists homonymy and polysemy.
2. That *Kurā<sup>c</sup>* and old Arab Philologists neglected many aspects of the problem which now occupy a prominent position in semantics. We refer in particular to the conflict between meanings, the confusion caused by this multiplicity, the role of context in curing this pathological situation (Williams 1944:4-15; Ullmann 1951:29, 54, 55; Menner 1945:60), etc.
3. That *Kurā<sup>c</sup>* in his study of this phenomenon mixed the synchronic and diachronic methods. An excuse for *Kurā<sup>c</sup>* may be found in the fact that such a distinction has been only recently made, and it is de Saussure who opposed the two methods to one another (Ullmann 1964: 50).
4. That *Kurā<sup>c</sup>* widens the meaning of homophony to include words whose multiplicity is due to the difference of time or place or pronunciation. Modern linguists disagree with this view and their condition for homophony is the unity of time, place and pronunciation (Omer 1988: 184, 185).

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