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SEMANTIC DISAMBIGUATION OF ENANTIOSEMIC LEXEMES IN CLASSICAL ARABIC: EVIDENCE FROM CLASSICAL LEXICOGRAPHY AND QUR'ANIC DISCOURSE

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Abstract. Enantiosemia, traditionally known in Arabic linguistics as al-Aḍdād, refers to the phenomenon whereby a single lexical item conveys two semantically opposite meanings. Since the earliest centuries of Arabic linguistic scholarship, this phenomenon has attracted considerable attention because it appears to challenge the principle of semantic stability. Classical scholars compiled independent treatises on al-Aḍdād and proposed diverse explanations concerning its origin, legitimacy, and linguistic function. Nevertheless, most previous studies have concentrated on documenting oppositional lexical items or debating their authenticity rather than examining how opposite meanings are interpreted within authentic linguistic contexts. Consequently, the relationship between lexical structure, contextual interpretation, grammatical environment, and pragmatic inference remains insufficiently explored.

The present study investigates the contextual mechanisms responsible for semantic disambiguation of enantiosemic lexemes in Classical Arabic. Drawing upon evidence from Kitāb al-Aḍdād, Lisān al-ʿArab, Tāj al-ʿArūs, Al-Ṣiḥāḥ, Qur'anic discourse, Prophetic traditions, and representative examples from classical Arabic literature, the research adopts a qualitative analytical approach integrating lexical semantics, historical linguistics, contextual analysis, and pragmatics. Rather than treating lexical opposition as an isolated semantic anomaly, the study examines how linguistic context determines the intended interpretation of oppositional lexical items during communication.

Keywords: Classical Arabic, Enantiosemia, Al-Aḍdād, Context, Pragmatics, Lexical Semantics, Qur'anic Arabic, Arabic Lexicography

1. Introduction

Lexical ambiguity has always occupied a central position in linguistic research because it reflects the dynamic relationship between language, cognition, and communication. While traditional lexical semantics generally assumes that each lexical item possesses a relatively stable semantic core, natural languages frequently demonstrate a much more complex picture in which lexical meanings expand, contract, overlap, or even develop opposite semantic values through historical evolution and contextual usage. Among these semantic phenomena, enantiosemia represents one of the most intriguing because it allows a single lexical form to express two mutually contradictory meanings without altering its phonological structure. Such lexical units challenge conventional assumptions concerning semantic stability and require explanation beyond ordinary lexical polysemy.

Classical Arabic constitutes one of the richest linguistic traditions for investigating this phenomenon. Arabic philologists introduced the concept of al-Aḍdād to designate lexical items capable of expressing opposite meanings and devoted numerous independent treatises to documenting and explaining these expressions. Works such as Ibn al-Anbārī's Kitāb al-Aḍdād, later expanded by lexicographers including Ibn Manẓūr, al-Zabīdī, and al-Jawharī, preserve hundreds of examples collected from Qur'anic verses, Prophetic traditions, pre-Islamic poetry, tribal dialects,

and classical prose. These works demonstrate that medieval Arabic linguists were not merely interested in compiling unusual vocabulary but sought to understand the linguistic principles governing semantic contradiction.

Despite this extensive philological tradition, disagreement concerning the nature of al-Aḍdād emerged from the earliest stages of Arabic linguistic thought. Ibn al-Anbārī defended the existence of oppositional lexical units and argued that ambiguity disappears naturally once words are interpreted within their linguistic context. Conversely, Ibn Durayd questioned many examples recorded by earlier scholars, suggesting that apparent lexical opposition frequently results from dialectal variation or independent semantic developments rather than genuine contradiction. Later lexicographers attempted to reconcile these positions by explaining oppositional meanings through historical semantic change, contextual specialization, and differences in tribal usage. These discussions reveal that the central problem was never simply whether oppositional words existed, but rather how their meanings should be interpreted within authentic communication.

Modern linguistic theory provides new perspectives for revisiting this classical debate. Cognitive semantics views lexical meaning as a network of related conceptual representations rather than a collection of isolated dictionary definitions. Pragmatics argues that meaning emerges through interaction between linguistic form and communicative context, while historical semantics demonstrates that semantic opposition often develops gradually through processes of specialization, metaphorical extension, and conceptual restructuring. These theoretical approaches strongly support the intuition already expressed by classical Arabic scholars that contextual information plays a decisive role in determining lexical interpretation. Nevertheless, modern studies of Arabic enantiosemia have generally concentrated either on historical documentation or on theoretical discussion without integrating textual evidence from classical sources into a unified analytical framework.

Furthermore, many contemporary investigations continue to classify oppositional lexical items solely according to dictionary definitions, overlooking the linguistic environments in which these meanings become operational. A lexical item recorded as possessing two opposite meanings in a dictionary does not necessarily produce ambiguity in actual communication. Native speakers interpret meaning through syntactic structure, collocational patterns, discourse coherence, rhetorical intention, and shared cultural knowledge. Consequently, the true object of investigation should not merely be lexical opposition itself but the contextual mechanisms that activate one semantic value while suppressing another.

2. Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in lexical semantics, historical linguistics, and discourse analysis to investigate the contextual interpretation of enantiosemic lexemes in Classical Arabic. Rather than measuring the frequency of lexical items, the study seeks to explain the semantic mechanisms through which opposite meanings emerge and become interpretable within authentic linguistic contexts.

The research corpus consists of lexical units traditionally classified as al-Aḍdād in major classical Arabic lexicographical works. The principal sources include Kitāb al-Aḍdād by Ibn al-Anbārī, Al-Ṣiḥāḥ by al-Jawharī, Lisān al-ʿArab by Ibn Manẓūr, Tāj al-ʿArūs by al-Zabīdī, and Tahdhīb al-Lugha by al-Azharī. These works were selected because they represent the most authoritative stages in the historical development of Arabic lexicography and preserve extensive discussions of oppositional lexical meanings. In addition to lexicographical evidence, examples

were collected from Qur'anic verses, Prophetic traditions, and classical Arabic literary texts in order to examine the actual contextual realization of enantiosemic meanings.

The selection of lexical items was guided by three criteria. First, each lexical unit had to be explicitly identified as an instance of al-Aḍdād by at least one classical lexicographer. Second, authentic textual evidence illustrating both opposite meanings had to be available in either the Qur'an, Hadith, or classical Arabic literature. Third, the semantic contrast had to occur within the same lexical form without phonological or orthographic modification. These criteria ensured that the analysis focused exclusively on genuine cases of lexical opposition while excluding ordinary homonymy and unrelated derivational processes.

Data were analysed through an integrated qualitative framework combining four complementary methods. The descriptive method was employed to document the lexical meanings recorded in classical dictionaries. The comparative method was used to examine similarities and differences among lexicographical interpretations. Semantic analysis was applied to reconstruct the conceptual relationships connecting opposite meanings within individual lexical items. Finally, pragmatic and discourse analysis were employed to investigate the influence of grammatical structure, lexical collocation, communicative context, and speaker intention on semantic interpretation.

Special attention was given to contextual disambiguation. Every lexical item was examined within its immediate syntactic environment, broader discourse context, and historical usage. Rather than relying solely on dictionary definitions, the analysis considered how grammatical constructions, prepositions, collocational patterns, and rhetorical functions contribute to selecting one semantic interpretation over another. This approach reflects the methodological assumption that lexical meaning is dynamically constructed during communication rather than statically preserved within dictionary entries.

2. Results

The Lexeme قسط: Morphological Alternation and Semantic Reversal

Among the lexical items discussed in classical Arabic lexicography, the root ق س ط presents a remarkable case where semantic opposition is closely associated with morphological variation. Classical dictionaries distinguish between the triliteral verb قَسَطَ and the quadriliteral form أَقْسَطَ, assigning them opposite evaluative meanings. The former generally denotes injustice or deviation from equity, whereas the latter signifies justice, fairness, and equitable conduct.

The Qur'an illustrates this distinction clearly:

وَأَمَّا الْقَاسِطُونَ فَكَانُوا لِجَهَنَّمَ حَطَبًا

As for the unjust (al-qāsiṭūn), they will be fuel for Hell. (Qur'an 72:15)

Here القاسطون derives from قسط and denotes those who act unjustly.

Conversely:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ الْمُقْسِطِينَ

Indeed, Allah loves those who act justly. (Qur'an 5:42)

In this verse المقسطين, derived from أقسط, expresses justice and impartiality.

Classical grammarians did not classify this pair as ordinary enantiosemia because the opposite meanings are distinguished morphologically. Nevertheless, several lexicographers discussed the root within broader debates concerning semantic opposition since both meanings originate from one lexical base.

From a semantic perspective, the opposition demonstrates that Arabic morphology functions not merely as a grammatical device but also as a semantic operator capable of reversing evaluative

orientation. The addition of the hamzah in Form IV (afʿala) transforms the conceptual direction of the root from deviation to restoration of balance.

This observation confirms that not every semantic opposition recorded in Arabic lexicography should be regarded as lexical enantiosemia. Some oppositions are products of morphological derivation rather than contextual activation.

The Lexeme باع and اشترى: Reciprocal Semantics Rather Than Absolute Opposition

Commercial vocabulary provides another important category of apparent lexical opposition. Classical lexicographers frequently discussed the relationship between باع (to sell) and اشترى (to buy), especially in Qur'anic discourse where commercial terminology is employed metaphorically.

One representative example appears in Sūrat al-Baqarah:

اشْتَرَوُا الضَّلَالَةَ بِالْهُدَى

Rather than describing a simple commercial transaction, the verse presents an exchange in which guidance is abandoned in favour of misguidance. Classical exegetes explain that the expression simultaneously implies the abandonment (or "sale") of guidance and the acquisition (or "purchase") of error.

Ibn Manẓūr remarks that commercial exchange necessarily involves two complementary perspectives. Every act of buying presupposes an act of selling, and vice versa. Consequently, semantic interpretation depends upon which participant becomes the conceptual focus of discourse.

Modern cognitive linguistics describes this phenomenon as frame reversal. The commercial frame contains two obligatory participants and two complementary actions. The lexical meaning therefore changes according to the perspective selected by the speaker rather than through independent semantic contradiction.

Accordingly, these examples should be interpreted as reciprocal semantic structures rather than genuine lexical opposites.

The Lexeme ظن: Contextual Evaluation of Epistemic Certainty

Another important example concerns the verb ظن, which classical dictionaries define as both certainty and doubt. At first glance this appears to represent direct semantic contradiction because certainty and uncertainty occupy opposite epistemic positions.

The Qur'an, however, demonstrates that these meanings are distributed systematically according to discourse context.

In Sūrat al-Baqarah:

الَّذِينَ يَظُنُّونَ أَنَّهُم مُّلَاقُو رَبِّهِمْ

Many classical commentators interpret يظنون here not as "they suppose" but as "they are certain."

Conversely, in ordinary discourse:

ظننت أنه سيأتي

the verb usually indicates assumption or probability rather than certainty.

Ibn al-Anbārī explains that the semantic value depends upon evidential strength. When the surrounding discourse concerns divine promise or religious certainty, ظن approaches certainty. In everyday communication it normally expresses conjecture.

This semantic flexibility illustrates an important pragmatic principle: lexical meaning changes according to the epistemic status assigned by discourse rather than according to dictionary definition alone.

Modern pragmatics explains this through contextual strengthening. Certain communicative environments reinforce inferential certainty until an originally probabilistic expression becomes functionally equivalent to certainty.

The analyses presented above reveal that Arabic enantiosemia cannot be explained through one universal semantic principle. Instead, opposite meanings emerge through several distinct linguistic mechanisms.

First, grammatical constructions determine semantic orientation, as demonstrated by رغب. The lexical meaning changes through the accompanying preposition rather than through the lexical form itself.

Second, reciprocal conceptual structures produce apparent semantic opposition in commercial vocabulary such as اشترى. Here the opposition reflects perspective rather than contradiction.

Third, dialectal diversity contributes to lexical opposition, as illustrated by الجون. Different tribal usages become unified within the lexicographical tradition while preserving their original semantic distinctions.

Fourth, spatial perspective governs interpretation in expressions such as وراء, where conceptual orientation determines semantic value.

Finally, relational concepts such as مولى demonstrate that one lexical item may encode an entire social relationship instead of identifying a single participant. The resulting semantic duality reflects reciprocal social organization rather than lexical inconsistency.

Taken together, these findings indicate that context functions as the primary regulator of enantiosemic interpretation. Lexical form alone rarely determines meaning. Instead, syntactic structure, collocational patterns, discourse organization, historical development, and communicative intention interact to activate one semantic value while suppressing alternative interpretations.

4. Discussion

The analyses presented in the previous section demonstrate that the phenomenon traditionally referred to as al-Aḍdād cannot be interpreted as a homogeneous semantic category. Classical Arabic lexicographers grouped together lexical items exhibiting opposite meanings under a single label; however, detailed contextual examination reveals that these lexical units arise through different linguistic mechanisms. Consequently, the concept of Arabic enantiosemia should be reconsidered as a multidimensional semantic phenomenon rather than a single lexical category.

One of the most significant findings of the present study concerns the decisive role of context in semantic interpretation. Throughout the analysed examples, lexical form alone never proved sufficient for identifying the intended meaning. Instead, interpretation depended upon the interaction of syntactic structure, lexical collocation, discourse organization, historical usage, and pragmatic inference. This observation confirms the repeated assertion of classical Arabic scholars that siyāq functions as the primary determinant of lexical meaning. Although medieval linguists did not formulate their arguments using modern semantic terminology, their analyses anticipated contemporary pragmatic theories that regard context as an integral component of meaning construction rather than an external interpretative aid.

The verb رغب provides perhaps the clearest illustration of this principle. The semantic opposition between desire and avoidance does not originate from the lexical root itself but from the accompanying preposition. Consequently, the lexical item should not be interpreted as inherently contradictory. Instead, grammatical construction functions as a semantic operator that redirects the conceptual orientation of the verb. This finding supports construction-based approaches to lexical semantics, according to which meaning emerges from the interaction between lexical items and grammatical patterns rather than from lexical forms in isolation.

A similar conclusion emerges from the analysis of اشترى. Classical lexicographers classified this verb among the examples of al-Aḍdād because Qur'anic discourse occasionally allows it to express both acquisition and relinquishment. However, detailed semantic analysis indicates that this apparent contradiction reflects reciprocal commercial relations rather than genuine lexical opposition. Every act of purchasing simultaneously presupposes an act of selling. The semantic difference therefore results from a change in conceptual perspective instead of lexical ambiguity. This interpretation corresponds closely with frame semantics, where lexical meaning depends upon the participant selected as the conceptual reference point within an event structure.

The examples of وراء and الجون demonstrate two additional mechanisms through which apparent lexical opposition develops. In the case of وراء, opposite meanings emerge because spatial orientation is inherently relative. Expressions describing location cannot be interpreted independently of the observer's position, direction of movement, and discourse perspective. Classical Qur'anic commentators repeatedly recognized this principle when explaining verses in which وراء appears to denote what lies ahead rather than behind. Modern cognitive linguistics explains this phenomenon through the concept of perspectivization, whereby identical spatial expressions generate different meanings according to the conceptual viewpoint adopted by the speaker.

The noun الجون, by contrast, illustrates the importance of historical dialectology. The evidence preserved in classical dictionaries suggests that its opposite meanings originated in different tribal dialects before being incorporated into the unified lexicographical tradition. Consequently, the semantic opposition associated with this lexical item should be interpreted as the product of dialectal convergence rather than semantic development. This distinction has important implications for Arabic lexicography because it demonstrates that not every oppositional lexical item belongs to the same semantic category. Historical origin must therefore be considered alongside contextual interpretation when classifying instances of al-Aḍdād.

Another important contribution of the present study concerns the distinction between enantiosemia and related semantic phenomena. Classical dictionaries frequently present opposite meanings without explicitly identifying the mechanisms responsible for their coexistence. As a result, lexical opposition, contextual polysemy, reciprocal semantics, dialectal variation, and metaphorical extension often appear within the same lexical entry. The present analysis demonstrates that these phenomena should be separated analytically because they represent different processes of semantic organization.

Based on the analysed material, Arabic oppositional lexical items may be divided into five interpretative categories. The first includes lexemes whose meanings are determined primarily by grammatical construction, such as رغب. The second consists of reciprocal lexical structures represented by اشترى and باع, where semantic interpretation depends upon participant perspective. The third comprises dialectal oppositions exemplified by الجون. The fourth involves contextually oriented spatial expressions such as وراء, while the fifth includes relational concepts represented by مولى, whose semantic value depends upon the social relationship encoded within the lexical item itself. These categories indicate that al-Aḍdād is best understood as a descriptive umbrella term rather than a single semantic mechanism.

Finally, the present findings contribute to computational linguistics. Contemporary Arabic natural language processing systems frequently encounter difficulties when processing enantiosemic lexical items because lexical databases typically record multiple meanings without specifying contextual activation mechanisms. The analytical model proposed here suggests that semantic disambiguation should incorporate grammatical patterns, collocational preferences,

discourse context, and pragmatic information alongside dictionary definitions. Integrating these parameters into computational lexicons may substantially improve automatic word-sense disambiguation, machine translation, and semantic annotation of Classical Arabic texts.

Overall, the study demonstrates that the richness of Arabic lexical semantics lies not in the existence of contradictory dictionary meanings but in the sophisticated interaction between lexical structure and communicative context. What classical scholars described under the general heading of al-Aḍdād represents a complex network of semantic processes whose interpretation depends upon historical development, grammatical organization, discourse structure, and pragmatic reasoning. This perspective not only reconciles many classical disagreements but also provides a unified framework capable of explaining Arabic enantiosemia within contemporary linguistic theory.

5. Conclusion

The present study examined the contextual interpretation of enantiosemic lexical units in Classical Arabic by integrating evidence from classical Arabic lexicography, Qur'anic discourse, and contemporary semantic theory. Unlike many previous investigations that concentrated primarily on cataloguing oppositional lexical items, the research focused on explaining the linguistic mechanisms through which opposite meanings become activated during actual language use. This shift from lexical description to contextual interpretation has provided a more comprehensive understanding of Arabic al-Aḍdād and has demonstrated that lexical opposition represents a dynamic interaction between lexical structure and communicative context rather than an inherent contradiction within the lexical system.

The analyses of representative lexical items—including مولى, وراء, الجون, اشترى, رغب, and قسط—show that no single mechanism accounts for the emergence of opposite meanings in Arabic. Instead, different lexical items reflect different processes of semantic organization. In some cases, semantic interpretation depends primarily on grammatical construction, as illustrated by رغب, whose meaning changes according to the accompanying preposition. In other instances, apparent lexical opposition originates from reciprocal conceptual structures, as observed in commercial vocabulary such as اشترى. Other lexical items, including الجون, preserve semantic differences inherited from regional dialects, whereas expressions such as وراء demonstrate the importance of spatial perspective and conceptual orientation. Relational nouns such as مولى further illustrate that apparent semantic contradiction frequently reflects reciprocal social relationships rather than genuine lexical ambiguity.

These findings indicate that the traditional category of al-Aḍdād encompasses several independent semantic phenomena that classical lexicographers described collectively because they shared a common surface characteristic—the coexistence of opposite meanings within a single lexical form. However, contextual analysis demonstrates that these meanings emerge through different grammatical, historical, pragmatic, cognitive, and sociolinguistic mechanisms. Consequently, Arabic enantiosemia should not be regarded as a uniform lexical category but rather as a multidimensional semantic phenomenon requiring contextual interpretation.

The study also confirms the continuing relevance of classical Arabic linguistic scholarship for contemporary semantic research. Medieval lexicographers repeatedly emphasized the decisive role of siyāq (context) in determining lexical meaning, and the present analysis demonstrates that this insight remains fully compatible with modern theories of pragmatics, cognitive semantics, and discourse analysis. Although contemporary linguistics employs different theoretical terminology, both traditions recognize that lexical meaning cannot be separated from the communicative

environment in which language is used. This convergence illustrates the intellectual sophistication of the Arabic linguistic tradition and highlights its potential contribution to current semantic theory.

From a theoretical perspective, the research proposes that Arabic enantiosemia should be interpreted through a contextual activation model in which lexical meaning results from the interaction of five principal components: lexical semantics, grammatical construction, discourse organization, pragmatic inference, and historical semantic development. Rather than competing with one another, these components operate simultaneously during interpretation, allowing speakers to identify the intended meaning with little or no communicative ambiguity. This model provides a more precise analytical framework than traditional dictionary-based classifications and explains why many examples of al-Aḍdād have generated disagreement among classical scholars.

The findings also possess important practical implications. For Arabic lexicography, dictionaries would benefit from distinguishing between different types of semantic opposition instead of presenting all contradictory meanings under a single lexical entry without explanation. Such classification would improve dictionary usability and reduce semantic ambiguity for both native speakers and learners of Arabic. In Qur'anic interpretation, greater attention to contextual activation may contribute to more accurate semantic analysis of lexically ambiguous expressions and reduce reliance on isolated dictionary definitions. For translation studies, the contextual model proposed in this research highlights the importance of reconstructing discourse relations before selecting lexical equivalents in the target language. Finally, the study provides useful insights for computational linguistics, particularly in the development of Arabic lexical databases, semantic annotation systems, and automatic word-sense disambiguation.

Despite these contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. The present investigation has focused primarily on evidence preserved in classical lexicographical works and selected examples from Qur'anic discourse and classical Arabic literature. A broader corpus including medieval prose, later literary traditions, and contemporary Arabic usage may reveal additional mechanisms of semantic development. Furthermore, the qualitative nature of the analysis emphasizes interpretative depth rather than quantitative distribution. Future research may therefore combine contextual semantic analysis with corpus-based methods to investigate the frequency, historical evolution, and genre-specific distribution of enantiosemic lexical units across different stages of Arabic language history.

In conclusion, Arabic al-Aḍdād should not be understood merely as a collection of unusual lexical curiosities but as evidence of the remarkable flexibility and sophistication of Arabic semantic organization. The phenomenon reflects the interaction of linguistic structure, historical development, and communicative practice, demonstrating that lexical meaning is fundamentally dynamic rather than static. By integrating classical Arabic philology with contemporary semantic and pragmatic theories, this study offers a more comprehensive explanation of enantiosemia and establishes a theoretical foundation for future interdisciplinary research in Arabic lexical semantics, historical linguistics, translation studies, and computational language processing.

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