

**Can One Lexical Item Have Two Opposite Meanings?
A Semantic Study in Arabic with Reference to English**

Muhammed Barjes Salman

ABSTRACT

Both 'Homonymy' and 'Antonymy' are well-known semantic relations in English and this research deals with another semantic relation in Arabic. This relation is Al-Adhdad, which means that one lexical item has more than one meaning and two of these meanings are opposite. The main reasons behind the appearance of Al-Adhdad are: the dialects, metaphor, social reasons, phonological development, pronunciation, borrowing and expansion.

This research deals with the level of isolated lexical items, which are related to this semantic relation. Then, this semantic relation will be studied within context by using six Ayas from the Glorious Qur'an to show how to identify the intended meaning of these lexical items. Two of these Ayas show how some of these lexical items are not agreed upon their meanings by interpreters because both meanings are possible and the determiner of the meaning is then depends on the dialect that the interpreters use. Two translations are given to check whether the translators give the equivalent translations for these lexical items or not.

1. Introduction

The title of this research combines two semantic or lexical relations. The first one is the multiplicity of meaning of one lexical item, which is related to the concept of 'homonymy' (المشترك اللفظي). The second is the oppositeness of meaning, which is studied semantically by the lexical relation of 'antonymy'.

In Arabic, these two concepts are combined in one lexical item. This means that some lexical items have more than one meaning (homonyms) and two of these meanings are opposite (antonyms). This semantic phenomenon is called (التضاد) 'Al-Tadhad' and the lexical items, which belong to this category, are called (الأضداد) 'Al-Adhdad', which is the plural of (ضد) 'Dhid'. This term means 'oppositeness', therefore it is usually translated into English by the term 'antonymy', although it includes in Arabic what is not included in the term 'antonymy' in English. Although some Arab linguists object the existence of this phenomenon in Arabic, many others confirm its existence and they give many examples of this kind in all levels of language including the rhetorical language of the Glorious Qur'an.

This research intends to shed light on this important phenomenon because it is necessary to be known by those who need to understand or interpret utterances in Arabic, especially translators. This is because if the lexical item belongs to this category and it is wrongly understood or interpreted by giving the opposite meaning, there will be a big problem. In addition, presenting this research may make other researchers apply this phenomenon on other languages like English to check whether it is universal or found in Arabic only.

The data of this research are both purely semantic by giving examples, which consist of isolated lexical items with showing both of their opposite dictionary meanings. Also, six examples from the Glorious Qur'an are given with relating these lexical items to the context or the accompanied expressions to show how to determine their intended meanings within the specific context. These Qur'anic examples are presented with two translations to check whether the translators give the equivalent translations for these lexical items or not.

2. Antonymy

Antonyms appear in the relation of negation by using A and not A. This means that the speaker can use negation or replace the original word by using its antonym. For example, to answer the question 'Is it wet?', one has a choice between 'No, it isn't wet' Or 'No, it's dry'. The word and its antonym must belong to the same field of language, which means that they refer to the same thing. So, 'wet' and 'dry' are antonyms because they are related to the same field of language, which is 'presence of moisture' (Bolinger & Sears, 1981:123-125).

Shaw (1986:492) defines antonyms as "pairs of words that have opposite or negative meanings: man-woman, man-boy, human-beast, mortal-God, holy-unholy, etc. These opposite meanings are not all-inclusive: a word may be an antonym of another only in certain restricted meaning. For example, one antonym of 'men' concerns sex; another, age".

Generally, there are three kinds of antonyms:

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- a- Gradable antonyms: such as 'big/small', 'good/bad'..etc. which permit the expression of degrees. So, we can say 'very big', 'quite small', 'bigger than' and so on.
 - b- Non-gradable antonyms: such as 'single/married', 'male/female'...etc. which do not permit degrees of contrast. It is not possible to talk of 'very male', 'quite married', 'more married than me' and so on, except in jest. Oppositeness like this are often called 'complementary terms'.
 - c- Converse terms: which are two-way contrasts that are interdependent, such as 'buy/sell' or 'parent/child'; one member presupposes the existence of the other (Crystal, 2007:196).

3. Homonyms

Richards et al (1992:168) indicate that homonyms are "words which are written in the same way and sound alike but which have different meanings. For example, the English verb 'lie' in 'you have to lie down' and 'lie' in 'Don't lie tell the truth!'".

Crystal (2003:220) defines homonymy as "a term used in semantic analysis to refer to lexical items which have the same form but different in meaning. Homonyms are illustrated in the various meanings of bear (=animal, carry) or ear (of body, of corn)".

The use of one lexical item to refer to two or more different meanings is called (المشترك) 'Al-Mushtarak' (homonymy) by Arab linguists. These different meanings must appear in one language. This concept is not agreed upon. Some people reject it, but many other show that it is possible to happen. It usually appears because two speakers use one lexical item to refer to different things.

Sometimes, one speaker uses a lexical item to refer to different meanings to obscure or hide his intention. Many linguists show that 'homonymy' is necessary to happen because the lexical items are limited but the meanings or ideas are not limited. So, the need to express different meanings requires the existence of this phenomenon in language use. For example, the lexical item (عين) can be used in many meanings like 'eye', 'spring', 'spy', 'cash', 'the same' ..etc. (Al-Sayuti, 1998:292-295).

The speaker may use this lexical item differently and the context can identify the intended meaning like:

لديها عينان زرقاوان 1-

(Her eyes are blue)

شربت الماء من العين 2-

(I drank water from the spring)

قبضت الشرطة على العين 3-

(The police caught the spy)

The context can identify the meaning of this lexical items within the context of these examples. In the first example, it means 'eye' because it is clear that the speaker is talking about a part of her body, which is her eye. In the second example, It means spring because 'spring' is the source of water. In the third example, it means 'spy' because it is mentioned with the verb 'catch' and with the noun 'police' and this shows that it means 'spy'.

Ma'an (2001:42) shows that (الاشتراك) 'homonymy' is one of the sources of the semantic richness of language. Linguists define it as the one lexical item that indicates multiple meanings. This

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phenomenon is named differently before Arab linguists agreed to call it (المشترك) or (الاشتراك).

Mohammad (2007:111-112) shows that two characteristics must be available to consider the lexical item as homonym, which are:

- 1- The similarity or unity of the form of the lexical item. This means that the lexical item must be the same without any change that gives different meanings.
- 2- The difference of meaning that the same lexical item refers to.

Butris (2003:7) adds another characteristic, which is:

- 3- The multiple meanings of one lexical item must be real not metaphorical and used equally by the speakers of the language. For example, the noun (الخال) which means 'the mother's brother', 'mole in the face', 'big camel'..etc.

There are three reasons behind the appearance of homonymy in Arabic:

- a- The existence of different dialects in old Arabic. The lexical item may be used in one meaning in a dialect and in another meaning in other dialects.
- b- The phonological development which the lexical item may have. For example, the noun (نقمة) 'indignation' is changed by this process through time into the noun (نأمة). The last noun is still have the meaning of its original noun with its other meanings.
- c- The lexical item is transferred from its original meaning into its metaphorical ones. For example the noun (عين) means originally 'eye', then it is used metaphorically as 'spy'. (ibid:8)

4. Al-Adhdad (Al-Tadhad)

The concept of Al-Adhdad is usually studied by modern linguists as two different lexical items, which have two opposite meanings. In this sense, it means 'antonyms' like (قصير) 'short' versus (طويل) 'long'; (جميل) 'beautiful' versus (قبيح) 'ugly' ..etc. Originally, Arab linguists use the concept of Al-Tadhad to refer to one lexical item that can be used in two opposite meanings (Omar, 1982:192).

The use of one lexical item in two opposite meanings exists in all languages, but modern linguists are not interested in it. Some of them discuss this just in few lines. For example, Ulman in his book 'The Role of Word in Language' during his discussion of the multiplicity of meaning discusses this. He indicates that the opposite meanings of one word may live together for centuries without any problem. So, the Latin word 'altus' may mean 'high' or 'low', which is used according to the point of view of the speaker. Also, the word 'sacer' may mean 'sacred' or 'damned' and the English word 'blessed' can be used to refer to these two opposite meanings (sacred and damned)(Cited in Ulman, no date:119-120) (ibid).

In spite of the scarcity of Al-Adhdad in Arabic, it can be said that many lexical items which have two opposite meanings tend to be used in only one of these meanings nowadays. For example, the lexical item (المولى) was used to refer to 'master' and 'slave', but now it is used to refer to the first meaning only because the social changes that produce these semantic changes. Many Arab linguists indicate that the concept of Al-Adhdad exists in Arabic, but some others reject and refuse it. The linguists in the second trend improve their opinion by saying that the use of one lexical item in two

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opposite meanings leads to the vagueness and closure of meaning, which contradicts the nature of language (Suleiman, 2008:51).

There are three conditions to determine the lexical items that belong to Al-Adhdad, which are:

- 1- That the lexical item must have two opposite meanings in one language i.e. if the lexical item has two opposite meanings and every meaning is used in a specific language, it does not belong to Al-Adhdad. For example, the lexical item (الشَّعْبَ), which means 'separate' and 'get together' does not belong to Al-Adhdad because the first meaning is used in one language and the second in another (Al-Sayuti, 1998:311).
- 2- The same lexical item must have two opposite meanings. Therefore, if there is a change in the form of the lexical item to have the opposite meaning, it does not belong to Al-Adhdad. For example, the verb (يَذَنُّ) means 'becomes fat' and (يَذَنُّ) means 'becomes old and weak'. So, this example does not belong to Al-Adhdad because the first verb in Arabic gets some morphological differences to have the opposite meaning (Suleiman, 2008:54).
- 3- The lexical item must have two opposite meanings that refer to the same thing. For example the verb (أَلَيْتَ) means 'her back became great' if it is added to the noun (المرأة) 'woman' and it means 'its fat tail is cut' if it is added to the noun (الشاة) 'sheep'. So, although they refer to opposite meanings, they do not belong to Al-Adhdad because they refer to different things (ibid:55).

5. The Reasons Behind the Appearance of Al-Adhdad

There are many reasons behind the appearance of Al-Adhdad, which can be illustrated as follows:

1- The differences among the dialects:

According to this reason, it is said that it is impossible that Arabs produced the lexical items that each has two opposite meanings. Instead, it is indicated that one meaning is used in one district or dialect and its opposite meaning is used in another district or dialect. Then, they heard each other and they began to use the two opposite meanings for each of these lexical items. For example, the noun (الجون) means 'white' in one district and it means 'black' in another, but they took the opposite meanings from each other and both of these meanings began to be used by all of them (At-Tunji & Al-Asmar, 2001:71 and Hilal, 2002:292).

2- Metaphor:

In metaphor, the use of the lexical item is changed from its original meaning into a metaphorical one. This can be clarified by the noun (الكأس) which refers to the cap or to its content (Hilal, 2002:293 and Sulaiman, 2008:54).

3- Social reasons:

There are some social reasons behind the appearance of Al-Adhdad such as:

- a- Optimism: like calling the desert (المفازة) which means 'winning' because who can cross the desert is a winner.
- b- Pessimism: such as calling the colour (اسود) 'black' as (ابيض) 'white' because Arabs are pessimistic of black colour.

- c- Mockery: for example using the noun (عاقِل) 'wise' to refer to the ignorant as a kind of mockery.
- d- Politeness: such as calling the slave (مولى) which originally means 'master' as a kind of politeness (Omar, 1982:205-206).

4- Phonological development:

If some sounds in the lexical item are changed, deleted or added and the lexical item becomes like another one, which has an opposite meaning, this lexical item is then belongs to Al-Adhdad. For example, the verb (صار) which means 'scatter' and 'gather'. One of these meanings resulted from the process of phonological development by which the original form is changed to become like its opposite lexical item (Omar, 1982: 211 and Hilal, 2002:293).

4- The similarity in pronunciation and difference in their morphological classification:

This reason is related to the morphological rules. For example, the noun (مختار) can be considered in Arabic as past or present participle because its original verb (اختار) is transformed into this form for both past or present participle. So, the verb (اختار) means 'select' while the noun (مختار) means 'selected' or 'selector' (Hilal, 2002:293).

5- Borrowing:

One of the meanings of the lexical item may be borrowed from other languages. Therefore, if the same lexical item is used in another language but as opposite to the original meaning in Arabic, both of these meanings begin to be used in Arabic. For example, the noun (بسل) means 'legal' and 'illegal'. This noun is used in Hebrew as 'illegal'. So, it is said that this noun was used as 'legal' in Arabic then

Arabs borrowed the meaning 'illegal' from Hebrew (Omar, 1982:204-205).

6- Expansion:

It is said that the lexical item, which is used in two opposite meanings, originally has one meaning then it is expanded into two opposite meanings. For example, the noun (الطَّرْب) means 'happiness' and 'sadness' because both of them are followed by 'levity' (ibid).

Below is a table, which includes some examples of Al-Ahdad showing whether the lexical item is a noun or a verb:

N	The lexical item in Arabic	Word Class	The two opposite meanings	
			1 st	2 nd
1-	بَيْع	Noun	sale	buying
2-	حَمِيم	Noun	hot	cold
3-	بَلَاء	Noun	grace	disaster
4-	الرَّس	Noun	righteousness	corruption
5-	صَارِخ	Noun	caller for help	helper
6-	الطَّاعِم	Noun	who gives food	who takes food
7-	الْحَوْن	Noun	white	black
8-	الْمَنَّة	Noun	weakness	strength
9-	الْقَنِيص	Noun	the hunter	the hunted
10-	الْمُتَظَلِّم	Noun	oppressor	oppressed
11-	الْمَسْجُور	Noun	full	empty
12-	النَّد	Noun	the similar	the opposite

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N	The lexical item in Arabic	Word Class	The two opposite meanings	
			1 st	2 nd
13-	كَتَمَ	Verb	hid	revealed
14-	تَأْتَمَّ	Verb	made sin	avoided sin
15-	ثَرَبَ	Verb	became rich	became poor
16-	سَامَ	Verb	offer to buy	offer to sell
17-	عَزَرَ	Verb	dignify	blame
18-	أَوْدَعَ	Verb	I deposited him	He deposited me
19-	شَرَى	Verb	sell	buy
20-	أَبَّنَ	Verb	praise	blame

(For more see: Al-Sukait, 1998 and Butris, 2003)

6. Al-Adhdad in the Glorious Qur'an

Arab linguists were firstly interested in the concept of Al-Adhdad for the ease of studying it. This is because the lexical items that are related to this semantic phenomenon are limited and can be collected in one book as many of these linguists indicated. Then, this reason was changed into a religious one. The reason behind this is that the linguists began to study Al-Adhdad in the Glorious Qur'an and they found that a number of lexical items are used in two opposite meanings. For example, the noun (اليقين) refers to 'certainty' and 'doubt' (Nassar, 2003:65).

Six Ayas will be studied as examples for showing the lexical items that belong to Al-Adhdad in the Glorious with the analysis of two translations of these Ayas:

SL Text: (1)

((وَ الْمُطَّلَقَاتُ يَرْبِصْنَ بِأَنْفُسِهِنَّ ثَلَاثَةَ قُرُوءٍ...)) (البقرة: ٢٢٨)

TL Texts:

((Divorced women shall wait concerning themselves for three monthly periods)) (Ali, 2001:92)

((And divorced women shall wait (as regards their marriage) for three menstrual periods)) (Al-Hilali and Khan, 2007:60)

Discussion:

The noun (قروء), which is the plural of (قراء), means in Iraqi dialect 'menstruation' and in Al-Hijaz dialect, it means 'being clean after menstruation'. So, this noun is an example of Al-Adhdad because these two meanings are opposite. This made the specialists in Jurisprudence interpret this noun differently according to its meaning in their cultures and this made them have different rules concerning this Ayah (At-Tunji, 2003:385-386).

This example shows that the context cannot always clarify the exact or intended meaning of the lexical items that belong to Al-Adhdad. This is because both of the opposite meanings of the lexical item (قراء) may be intended in this Ayah. So, the dialect of the interpreter or even his knowledge or education may make the translator select the meaning that he considers more accurate.

The noun (قروء) is not agreed upon by the interpreters of the Glorious Qur'an because it has two opposite meanings in their dialects, but it can be seen that Ali translates the noun (قروء) in this Ayah as 'monthly period' and he does not refer to the other possible meaning and the difference among the interpreters in interpreting this noun. This may make a confusion to the reader if another

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translator uses the other possible meaning. On the other hand, Al-Hilali and Khan use the expression 'menstrual periods', which also refers to only one of the possible meanings of the noun in the SL text.

SL Text: (2)

((وَاللَّيْلِ إِذَا عَسْعَسَ)) (التكوير: ١٧)

TL Texts:

((And the night as it dissipates)) (Ali, 2001:1608)\

((And by the night as it departs)) (Al-Hilali and Khan, 2007:807)

Discussion:

The verb (عَسْعَسَ) has two opposite meanings in Arabic. It means the coming or the ending of night. So, it may be interpreted by any of these two meanings. Some linguists objected this interpretation and they said that this verb has only one meaning, which is the coming of night (Omar, 1982:202).

This is another example of Al-Adhdad that the exact meaning cannot be identified by the context because both meanings are possible and there are no determiner to the intended meaning. It may be said that both meanings are intended to be conveyed by using one lexical item.

Ali uses the verb 'dissipate' to translate the verb (عَسْعَسَ) in the Ayah. The verb 'dissipate' means the ending or scattering. So, he refers to only one of the two opposite meanings that the verb (عَسْعَسَ) may mean. Al-Hilali and Khan use the verb 'departs', which represents only one meaning of the verb in the SL text. The verb

'departs' presents the same meaning that is represented by the verb 'dissipate', which is used by Ali.

SL Text: (3 A)

((وَ أَسْرَوْا النَّدَامَةَ لَمَّا رَأَوْا الْعَذَابَ)) (يونس: ٥٤)

TL Texts:

((They would declare (their) repentance when they see the penalty))

(Ali, 2001:494)

((And they would feel in their hearts regret when they see the torment))

(Al-Hilali and Khan, 2007:289)

SL Text: (3 B)

((سَوَاءٌ مِنْكُمْ مَنْ أَسْرَ الْقَوْلَ وَمَنْ جَهَرَ بِهِ)) (الرعد: ١٠)

TL Texts:

((It is the same (to Him) whether any of you conceal his speech or declare it openly))

(Ali, 2001:589)

((It is the same (to Him) whether any of you conceals his speech or declares it openly)) (Al-Hilali and Khan, 2007:331)

Discussion:

The verb (أَسْرَ) is used in two opposite meanings in these two Ayas. It means 'declare' in the first Ayah whereas it means 'conceal' in the second Ayah (Omar, 1981:202).

This example shows how the context can clarify the exact meaning of the lexical items that belong to Al-Adhdad. The verb (أَسْرَ) in the first Ayah means 'declare' because it shows how the

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sinner will declare their regret when they see the torment and when they know that they will be punished in the Hell. In the second Ayah, this verb means 'conceal' because it differentiate between those who declare and those who conceal.

Ali gives equivalent translations for the verb (أَسْرَ) in both of these Ayas because he translates the first as 'declare' and the second as 'conceal'. Al-Hilali and Khan give an equivalent translation for the verb (أَسْرَ) in the second Ayah, but they use the expression 'feel in their hearts' to translate this verb in the first Ayah, which is not so accurate because the verb (أَسْرَ) means declare whereas this expression means 'conceal'.

SL Text: (4 A)

((وَرَأَى الْمَجْرِمُونَ النَّارَ فَظَنُوا أَنَّهُمْ مُوَاقِعُهَا)) (الكهف: ٥٣)

TL Texts:

((And the Sinful shall see the fire and apprehend that they have to fall therein) (Ali, 2001:723)

((And the Mujrimun (criminals, polytheists, sinners) shall see the Fire and apprehend that they have to fall therein)) (Al-Hilali and Khan, 2007:400)

SL Text: (4 B)

((يَوْمَ يَدْعُوكُمْ فَتَسْتَجِيبُونَ بِحَمْدِهِ وَتَظُنُّونَ إِن لَّبِثْتُمْ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا)) (الإسراء: ٥٢)

TL Texts:

((It will be on a Day when He will call you, and ye will answer (His calls) with (words of) His Praise, and ye will think that ye tarred but a little while!))

(Ali, 2001:688)

((On the Day when He will call you, and you will answer (His calls) with (words of) His praise and obedience and you will think that you have stayed (in this world) but a little while!)) (Al-Hilali and Khan, 2007:383)

Discussion:

The Verb (ظن) In the first Ayah means that they know without any doubt i.e. they are sure (Butris, 2003:215). In the second Ayah, it means that when they see the torment, they think that they stayed for a little while in life (Al-Zamakhshari, 2005:599).

The contexts of these two Ayas show the intended meanings of the verb (ظن). In the first Ayah, it means 'apprehend' because it refers to the feeling of the sinners when they see the torment and the become sure that they will be punished there without any doubt. In the second Ayah, this verb means 'think' because it refers to the feeling of the people in the Judgment Day when they think that they stayed only for a little while in life if it is compared with the Judgment Day.

The translators give equivalent translations for the two Ayas because they translate the verb (ظن) as 'apprehend' in the first Ayah and as 'think' in the second Ayah.

7. Conclusions

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In this research, it is concluded that:

- 1- The concept of 'homonymy' is studied in both Arabic and English; and it seems to be the same in both i.e. in both Arabic and English, there are lexical items that give more than one meaning.
- 2- Al-Adhdad in Arabic combines two semantic relations, which are homonymy and antonymy. This is because Al-Adhdad means that the lexical item has more than one meaning (homonymy) and that two of these meanings are opposite (antonymy). This semantic relation also exists in English but it is not studied widely.
- 3- Although the concept of Al-Adhdad is not agreed upon by Arab linguists, it cannot be denied that many lexical items are used in two opposite meanings during the history of Arabic until now.
- 4- The translators of the Glorious Qur'an need to be careful in dealing with the lexical items that belong to Al-Adhdad because they may translate them incorrectly by giving the opposite meaning where the other meaning is needed in a specific position or context.
- 5- Determining which meaning is intended for Al-Adhdad is impossible if we depend on the lexical item itself only. So, the lexical item that belong to this category must be studied in the contexts in which they are used and with the collocations. These two factors may help in showing which meaning is intended in a specific context and what collocations may appear in this meaning or another i.e. this concept must be studied grammatically and pragmatically.

- 6- Al-Adhdad may be a general phenomenon that exists in all languages. So, the rules of determining this concept in Arabic can be applied on other languages to show whether they share Arabic in this phenomenon or not.

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