

## Variation in Structure and Unity in Meaning in the Arabic Language

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Received: 11 February 2025

Accepted: 18 May 2025

Published : 30 June 2025

### Abstract:

Despite the extensive debate among Arab linguists—some supporting it and others denying it—the prevailing conclusion leaned towards its absence and lack of codification from a purely foundational perspective. This conclusion was held even though some researchers expressed reservations, arguing that they simply used one term instead of another in their writings. This perspective was evident even at the level of the Quranic text, where researchers did not find anything that confirmed the existence of this phenomenon. On the contrary, the Quran served as a definitive example of its denial and rejection of its establishment.

Those who rejected this linguistic phenomenon—or what appears to be synonymy—attributed it to various factors, such as the diversity of Arab dialects, the distinction between nouns and adjectives, and other reasons.

Nevertheless, practical and functional usage offers writers, regardless of their identities or the nature of their writings, a wide margin for varied expressions and ample opportunities to achieve communicative goals. Western linguistic studies reached similar conclusions, as reflected in the statements of prominent figures like Harris and Bloomfield, who outright denied the existence of this phenomenon. They argued that structural variation necessarily leads to a difference in meaning

**Keywords:** Debate, variation in wording with identical meaning, differences in names, plurals, patterns of exaggeration.

**Jel Classification Codes:** XN1, XN2.

**Introduction:**

If we accept Western linguistic research—like in other fields—for the breadth of its propositions, which have expanded the horizons of research and exploration in matters of language, literature, criticism, and other related domains that form the foundation of cultural and social pillars, from which societies draw in every era and place, we must also acknowledge the importance of objectivity. It is necessary not to follow their claims of precedence and uniqueness in certain areas of knowledge. Previous civilizations had a longstanding history in various intellectual pursuits. Besides the Greeks and Indians, who were not a blank page erased by time, the Arabs also had a prominent role in the study of language, with significant works in lexicons, thematic dictionaries, and various linguistic fields such as syntax, morphology, rhetoric, and their related research circles.

The Quranic text, a recent linguistic arrival, received immense attention and care, serving numerous purposes related to understanding, jurisprudence, interpretation, and the demands of the sacred text. This led to substantial linguistic outcomes that shaped the vast domains of Arabic language sciences.

This is something that must be said—not to harm anyone or to blemish any period or region—but as a way of praising the nation for its enduring place at the peaks of human glory in a civilizational shift that marked the beginning of history-making. The great scholars and knowledgeable individuals of that era left behind timeless legacies, which have become significant markers on the walls of history.

Thus, their contributions were immense, despite the harshness of life at that time, when daily sustenance was scarce, and a single person struggled to earn a living, enduring hardships that consumed their breath and sacrificed the entirety of their days. This was alongside their intense intellectual pursuit and passion for knowledge. In contrast to today's circumstances, where all avenues of knowledge are open to researchers and scholars, the difference is striking. There is no surprise in their splendid achievements; it was a civilizational transformation that resisted defeat. Blessed be their rich history and glorious passage through time.

**Topic:**

Much like many linguistic inquiries, ancient and modern Arab scholars have explored issues of polysemy, which has been widely debated. They dedicated extensive research to it, acknowledging its presence in their studies and defining its boundaries. Sibawayh stated: "Know that in their speech, there is a difference between two words that express two meanings, a difference between two words that express the same meaning, and an agreement between two words that express different meanings." (Sibawayh, 1988)

One of the primary topics of this study is synonymy, which refers to the presence of multiple words with the same meaning. Ibn Jinni describes it as "opposing forms that meet in meaning." (Ibn Jinni, 2006)

In practice, the issue of synonymy was never a problem or an obstacle for writers, researchers, and literary figures; rather, it was commonly accepted among them, appealing to their taste, pleasing their ears, and serving their diverse literary purposes. However, when it came to formally defining this phenomenon and identifying its linguistic nature, scholars differed, and their opinions varied. Some fully endorsed it, others accepted it with conditions, while a third group rejected it and objected to it.

**The First Group:** This group, as conveyed by Ahmad Ibn Faris, argued that "if each word had a meaning different from any other, it would be impossible to express an idea with alternative phrasing. For example, when we say 'there is no doubt about it,' we can also say 'there is no suspicion about it,' and if suspicion (rayb) were different from doubt (shakk), the phrase would be incorrect." In his book *The Synonymous Words*, Al-Rumani discusses synonymy, stating: "happiness, joy, glee, and delight," while in *Al-Muntakhab*, Karra' al-Naml asserts synonymy by saying: "a woman's partner is her husband, her spouse, and her companion." (ibn Faris, 1993)

**The Second Group:** Scholars such as Al-Razi restricted synonymy to words that are entirely identical in meaning, without any subtle difference. For him, "sword" (saif) and "sharp" (sarim) are not synonymous because the latter includes an added layer of meaning. Al-Asfahani, meanwhile, links synonymy to a single dialect, excluding words that originate from different dialects. (Ibrahim Anis,)

**The Third Group:** They claimed that "the term itself is 'sword,' and subsequent labels are merely descriptions, as with verbs like 'to go,' 'to leave,' and 'to depart,' or 'to sit' and 'to settle,' or 'to sleep' and 'to lie down.' Each has a nuance not found in the others." (Al-Suyuti, 2004) In refuting synonymy, the author of *Linguistic Differences* argues that different expressions and names indicate different meanings. The name is a word that denotes meaning in the manner of a gesture. If something is pointed to once and understood, pointing to it again and again is pointless. The language's creator, being wise, would not include anything superfluous. Thus, if two words are used to refer to a concept or object, each must imply something distinct, or else the second term would be redundant and unnecessary. Just as a single word cannot indicate two meanings, two words cannot convey a single meaning, as this would only bloat the language without adding value. (Abu Hilal)

**To explore this issue and the nature of the debate surrounding it, this study utilizes models representing different linguistic units, focusing on distinguishing individual nouns, then plural forms, and finally forms of exaggeration. These distinctions are as follows:**

**First Example: The Terms "Ab" (Father) and "Walid" (Parent)** The words "Ab" (father) and "Walid" (parent) might appear synonymous in usage. Proponents of synonymy argue: "A person's 'Ab' is their 'Walid,' and their 'Walid' is their 'Ab!'" However, these terms are not exact synonyms; they are close in meaning but carry subtle differences and do not appear interchangeably in the Quran.

### Definitions:

1. **Ab (Father):** Derived from the root "أ ب و" ("A B W"). Ibn Faris explains, "The root 'A B W' implies nurturing and growth. To 'Aba' something means to nurture it, which is why a father is called 'Ab,' and the attribution form is 'Abawi.'" (ibn Faris,1993) Al-Raghib also defines "Ab" as the father and refers to anyone who contributes to the existence, improvement, or emergence of something as a "father." (Al-Isfahani,2009) Thus, the term "Ab" suggests nurturing, care, guidance, and instruction—qualities that align with the nurturing role of a father.
2. **Walid (Parent):** Derived from the root "و ل د" ("W L D"). Ibn Faris notes that "W L D" is a root indicating birth and offspring. Al-Raghib defines "Walid" as the parent and explains that both the father and mother can be referred to as "Walid," indicating a connection through lineage and birth. (Al-Isfahani,2009) This term implies procreation, lineage, and the emergence of offspring, highlighting the biological and genealogical aspects of parenthood.

### Distinctions between "Ab" and "Walid" in Quranic Usage:

1. The Quran uses "Ab" to mean "father" in various verses, such as in Surah Yusuf 12:4, where Joseph says to his "Ab." "Ab" is also used for ancestors, as in Surah Al-Hajj 22:78, where Ibrahim (Abraham) is referred to as the "father" of his people. However, "Walid" is not used in the Quran for grandfathers or ancestors; it is only applied to direct parents, the father and mother.
2. In the Quran, "Ab" appears in singular, dual, and plural forms (Ab, Abawan, Aba'). In contrast, "Walid" is used in singular and dual forms only, referring to the father or both parents together as "Walidan" (parents). It does not appear in plural form ("Walidun") because it is not used for anyone beyond the immediate parents. (al-Khalidi,2000)
3. When the Quran addresses lineage, it uses "Ab" instead of "Walid," suggesting that "Ab" has connotations related to heritage, as in Surah Al-Ahzab 33:5, where it instructs believers to call others by the names of their fathers.
4. The term "Ab" is often associated with nurturing, guidance, and discipline, as the father plays a nurturing and instructive role. "Walid," on the other hand, is used in contexts that highlight the emotional, nurturing connection of parenthood, indicating the bond of love, mercy, and kindness.
5. When the Quran instructs on honoring one's parents, it uses "Walid" or "Walidan," as this term emphasizes the deep spiritual connection between parents and children. Thus, the Quran advises honoring the "Walidan" (parents) rather than the "Abawan" (fathers).
6. In discussing inheritance and financial matters, the Quran uses both "Ab" and "Walid" interchangeably to indicate both terms' relevance in matters of rights and inheritance, which include both nurturing and lineage-related aspects.

**In summary,** "Ab" refers to the intellectual and instructional role of the father, influencing upbringing and behavior, whereas "Walid" is associated with the emotional and spiritual aspect of parenthood, highlighting the natural bond between parents and children.

**Allah Almighty says:**

*"For men is a share of what the parents and close relatives leave, and for women is a share of what the parents and close relatives leave..."* (Surah An-Nisa, 4:7).

And He also says: *"And for his parents, to each one of them is a sixth of what he left if he has a child. But if he had no child and his parents inherit from him, then for his mother is one-third..."* (Surah An-Nisa, 4:11).

**These distinctions between "Ab" (Father) and "Walid" (Parent) illustrate that the two terms are not synonymous.** (al-Khalidi,2000)

**Second Example: The Terms "Dha'eef" (Weak) and "Dhu'afaa'" (Weak Ones):** "Dhu'afaa'" is the plural of "Dha'eef," following the pattern of *fu'ala*, similar to "kareem" (generous) becoming "kuramaa'" (generous ones), "zhareef" (graceful) becoming "zhuurafaa'" (graceful ones), and so on. This plural form appears in the Quran four times, referring to either:

1. **Weakness in the abstract sense**, as in intellectual, emotional, or situational weakness.
2. **Weakness in the physical sense**, such as bodily frailty.

**Detailed Analysis:**

**1. Abstract Weakness:**

Allah says, *"And they will all come forth before Allah, and the weak ones will say to those who were arrogant, 'Indeed, we were your followers, so can you avert from us anything of the punishment of Allah?'"* (Surah Ibrahim, 14:21). Here, "the weak ones" refers to ordinary people and followers (ibn Ashur,1977) who lack the strength to oppose their leaders, rendering them submissive and oppressed. Similarly, *"And [they] will argue in the Fire, and the weak will say to those who had been arrogant, 'Indeed, we were your followers, so will you relieve us of a portion of the Fire?'"* (Surah Ghafir, 40:47).

**2. Physical Weakness:**

Allah says, *"Would any of you wish to have a garden of palm trees and grapevines with rivers flowing beneath it, in which he has from every fruit? But then he is stricken by old age, and he has weak offspring, and it is hit by a whirlwind containing fire and is burned..."* (Surah Al-Baqarah, 2:266).

Although many scholars interpret “weak offspring” as referring to young children who have not reached maturity, the word "dhu‘afaa'" here signifies physical weakness for several reasons:

- Excluding "dha‘eef" (weak) as a synonym for "dhu‘afaa'," since there is no synonymy in the Quran.
- The phrase “*stricken by old age*” suggests the offspring are adults, as it would be rare for someone over seventy or eighty to have children not yet mature, thus indicating physical frailty like thinness. (Anas, 2012)
- Al-Tahir ibn Ashur further clarifies the distinction between "weakness" and "illness," stating that "weakness" refers to frailty or reduced physical strength without illness, while "illness" refers to a specific disruption in the body, like blindness or chronic ailments. (ibn Ashur,1977)

He also explains that weakness signifies an inability to perform strenuous or demanding tasks, affecting the entire body or parts of it.

### Summary:

The language of the Quran rejects equating "dha‘eef" (weak) and "dhu‘afaa'" (weak ones) and, upon close examination, reveals the following:

1. "Dha‘eef" (weak) follows the pattern *f‘aal*, used exclusively in the Quran for young children not yet mature, thus applying only to abstract concepts.
2. "Dhu‘afaa'," following the pattern *fu‘alaa*, refers to both intellectual or emotional weakness (such as lack of opinion or character) and physical frailty, including old age. (al-Khalidi,2000)

## Third: Patterns of Intensification

### A. Patterns of Intensification Have Various Meanings

The meanings of different intensification patterns differ, such as *fa‘aal* versus *fa‘ool*, and both differ from *mif‘aal*, and so forth.( Ibn Sīda, 2000) Among the most common forms are:

#### 1. Fa‘aal:

This form generally implies the repetition of an action, as in *darraab* (a person who strikes often) or *qattaal* (one who kills frequently). Similarly, terms like *khayyaat* (tailor) indicate a frequent engagement in the activity. This form was adapted for professions that involve constant activity, even when no action is being performed, as seen in *bazzaaz* (cloth merchant) and *‘attaar* (perfumer). (Al-Mubarrad, 2010)

According to the book *Al-Furooq*, if an action is performed repeatedly, the form *fa‘aal* is used, like *‘allam* (knower) or *sabbaar* (patient). (Abu Hilal,) This is due to a shift from occupational to intensified meaning, enhancing the sense of emphasis.( al-Samarrai, 2007)

In *Tafsir Al-Razi*, regarding the verse “*And I do not swear by the reproaching soul*” (Surah Al-Qiyamah, 75:2), it is noted that the word *lawwaamah* (reproaching) implies repeated self-reproach, as with terms like *lawwaam*, *ghaddaar*, and *darraar*. (Al-Razi, 2000) Similarly, *Al-Kashshaaf* explains that *al-awwaab* (penitent) indicates one who frequently turns to Allah in

repentance, maintaining the continuous practice of glorifying and praising Him. (Al-Zamakhshari,)

Thus, the form *fa'aal* implies a profession or trade and suggests continuity, repetition, renewal, and persistence. As in “*Nay! Indeed, it is a blazing fire, snatching away the scalp!*” (Surah Al-Ma’aarij, 70:15-16), *nazzaa’ah* (snatching away) was used in the intensified form to convey the continuous, recurring nature of the action.

## 2. Mif’aal and Mif’eel:

Linguists note that *mif’aal* denotes habitual action, as stated in *Al-Furooq*: “*mif’aal* is used for someone who has this as a habit,” (Abu Hilal,) and likewise, *mif’eel* applies to continuous actions. *Al-Kashshaaf* mentions *miskeen* as one who is constantly dependent on others due to poverty, similar to *miskir* (one who is frequently intoxicated). ((Al-Zamakhshari,)

The origin of *mif’aal* is to denote tools, like *miftaah* (key), *minshaar* (saw), and *mihrath* (plow). When used for intensification, it suggests that a person is metaphorically like a tool of the described action. So, saying *muhdhaar* (talkative) implies that the person is akin to a tool for talk, or *mi’taar* (fragrant) implies being a source of fragrance.

These forms resist feminine endings or pluralizing in the masculine sound plural, aligning with their original tool-like usage. Therefore, just as one would not say *miftaahah* (female key) or *minshaara* (female saw), neither would one say *mu’taarah* or *muhdhaarah*. Instead, they follow the plural forms for tools, like *mu’taareer* and *muhdhaareer*, similar to *mafateeh* and *manaasheer*.

## B. Patterns for Attributes - ‘Aalim, ‘Aleem, and ‘Allaam:

Certainly, ‘*aalim* (knower), as an active participle, lacks intensification since it retains its original form. For intensified description, *fa’eel* forms like ‘*aleem* (All-Knowing), *raheem* (Merciful), and *samee’* (Hearing) are used. The term ‘*aalim* for Allah signifies that everything is known to Him, indicating an attribute of His actions. Allah says, “*Knower of the unseen, and He does not disclose His unseen to anyone*” (Surah Al-Jinn, 72:26).

On the other hand, ‘*aleem* in His attribute is not active, as *fa’eel* does not function as a verb but denotes His essential and perpetual state. The form *fa’eel* in Allah’s names indicates the completeness of the attribute, as in *samee’* (All-Hearing), ‘*aleem* (All-Knowing), *baseer* (All-Seeing), *qadeer* (All-Powerful), and *raheem* (Merciful), where *fa’eel* reflects enduring essence. Allah states, “*Indeed, Allah is ever Knowing and Wise*” (Surah An-Nisa, 4:24) and “*Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Competent*” (Surah An-Nahl, 16:70).

Regarding His attribute *'allaam*, it is an intensified active participle, indicating His extensive knowledge, yet it also implies abundance, as Allah says, "*They said, 'We have no knowledge; indeed, You are the Knower of the unseen'*" (Surah Al-Ma'idah, 5:109).

## Conclusion:

In truth, anyone who examines the series of debates and the linguistic arguments surrounding the issue of synonymy, both from early and later scholars in Arabic linguistic studies, and who observes the vast number of applied studies exploring various aspects of this phenomenon, will arrive at the following conclusions:

**First:** What is often described as a disagreement between proponents and opponents of synonymy is, in reality, not a true disagreement, as it lacks justification. Both sides of this debate essentially share the same stance on this linguistic phenomenon. Those who deny synonymy did so based on foundational concerns, such as distinguishing between nouns and adjectives or considering only one dialect, among other principles they upheld. However, they did not deny it in practical usage, and their writings contain many examples of it. Conversely, those who acknowledged synonymy did so from a pragmatic perspective, without rejecting the principles set forth by their opponents, which refute the concept of true synonymy in language. Their silence on these principles, in fact, implies agreement with them.

Thus, there is no real disagreement between the two groups, as those who deny synonymy focused on its foundational aspects without rejecting its practical usage, while the other group addressed its prevalence in the representations of language. Disagreement would arise only if they had approached it from the same perspective with the same viewpoint.

**Second:** Given all the ink spilled on this issue, the diverse perspectives of eminent language scholars, and the numerous applied studies conducted, especially on the Qur'anic text, which is the optimal field of linguistic use, it becomes clear that absolute synonymy does not exist.

**Third:** The use of synonymous terms is a linguistic inevitability, especially considering the expressive opportunities it provides to writers, particularly in poetry, which has its own necessities, as well as the musical aspects that may be an end in themselves in both prose and poetry among Arab writers.

The Arabic linguistic study of this phenomenon is not unique; similar conclusions are found among most Western linguists. Notable figures like Zellig Harris and Leonard Bloomfield have rejected the concept of synonymy. Harris stated: "In the context of a single language, there is no true synonymy; phonetic differences must entail differences in meaning." Bloomfield added, "We claim that every word in a synonymous pair conveys a distinct and specific meaning from the other, and as long as the words differ phonetically, their meanings must differ as well. Thus, we conclude that true synonymy does not exist."

This conclusion aligns with Western linguistic research, where the majority of Western linguists also deny synonymy, as evidenced by the above statements.

May blessings and peace be upon the Seal of the Prophets, the leader of the righteous, the model for the pious and their followers, and upon all who follow him with goodness until the Day of Judgment. Peace upon the messengers, and praise be to Allah, the Lord of all worlds.

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