

Mechanisms of the Historical Method in Arabic Dictionaries

"Lisan al-Arab as a Model"

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Abstract:

Sanskrit language in Europe served as a starting point for researchers in establishing several linguistic methods, including the historical method, which represents a significant phase in the history of linguistic research in the 19th century. As a result, several dictionaries emerged incorporating the mechanisms of this method, which attempts to trace language through successive time periods. Among the most notable is the Oxford English Dictionary, a landmark in the history of Western dictionaries, as it is considered the first historical dictionary compiled according to its mechanisms. Among Arabs, despite the urgent need for such dictionaries, none has yet been fully realized for various reasons. Nevertheless, Arab efforts toward compiling a historical dictionary cannot be denied. Evidence of this is the German orientalist Fischer, who was the first to think of compiling one, but circumstances delayed it. Later, the *Al-Mu'jam al-Kabir* appeared, though still incomplete. Returning to our heritage, we ask: Can *Lisan al-Arab* be considered a historical dictionary?

Keywords: Historical method, Oxford Dictionary, Al-Mu'jam al-Kabir, Lisan al-Arab

First – The Historical Method:

The historical method is considered one of the important approaches in linguistic studies. It is defined as: *"tracing any linguistic phenomenon in a language to its earliest documented periods for which we have records or texts; in other words, it is the study of linguistic development in a language across centuries. Studying the sounds of Classical Arabic historically begins with the descriptions of early scholars such as Al-Khalil ibn Ahmad and Sibawayh, tracing its history from that time to the present."* This includes studying the

evolution of certain sounds, morphological structures, meanings of words, sentence structure, etc. The historical method studies a linguistic phenomenon over successive periods to understand the developments affecting the language over time.

1. Basis of the Historical Method:

Linguistic methodologies have varied depending on the theories and discoveries of the modern era, especially the 19th century, which witnessed a major shift in linguistic studies with the discovery of Sanskrit and its relationship to Latin, Greek, and others. Since then, three main methods emerged: descriptive, historical, and comparative. Among these, the historical method is of interest, generally founded on Darwinian evolutionary theory because of its significant impact on science and thought, especially linguistics. Linguists applied this theory to human sciences, considering language a living entity that originates simply, then evolves, changes, and eventually may disappear over time. German linguists played the largest role in advancing historical, comparative, and linguistic change studies, including Franz Bopp (1791–1867), Jacob (1785–1887), Pott, Rask, Schlicher, and Max Müller.

2. Field of the Historical Method:

The historical method *“studies a specific language historically by tracing its vocabulary, organizational rules, and stylistic tendencies across historical stages, following the language from its infancy.”* It examines developments phonologically, morphologically, grammatically, and semantically, relying on prior descriptive studies of the language. Thus, the historical method traces language over time, whereas the descriptive method examines it at a specific point. Bloomfield notes: *“The emergence of the comparative-historical trend and the descriptive-philosophical trend in late 19th-century linguistic studies shows that the accuracy of historical study depends on the precision of descriptive study.”* Despite differing opinions on the superiority of linguistic methods, the historical method is crucial for linguistics, especially dictionaries, as it is the only method to trace developments and changes in vocabulary over time.

Second – Overview of Historical Dictionaries:

1. Definition of Historical Dictionaries:

Before examining historical dictionaries, we must clarify the concept of a historical linguistic dictionary, particularly highlighted when Saussure distinguished between historical and synchronic linguistic studies. Accordingly, lexicographers distinguish two types of dictionaries: evolutionary-historical and descriptive. Most Arabic dictionaries are descriptive because they

adhere to a specific time and place; however, due to the breadth of space and duration of time, their material often resembles historical dictionaries more than purely descriptive ones. Evolutionary (Diachronic) dictionaries emerged from historical-comparative studies, focusing on word history at structural or semantic levels across successive periods. Lexicographers further distinguish two types of evolutionary dictionaries:

a) Historical Dictionaries:

Historical dictionaries *“focus on changes in lexical units’ structure and meaning over certain periods. A dictionary may be historical even if it adheres to a single period, as long as the compiler intended to record changes in structure and meaning. Naturally, longer periods or successive stages in the language provide a deeper historical perspective.”* For example, in Arabic, the word "قهوة" referred to wine in pre-Islamic times but denotes coffee in the present day.

b) Etymological Dictionaries:

These trace words back to their origins, whether Arabic or borrowed, including related languages, e.g., borrowed terms like (telephone, television). Examples include Al-Jawālīqī’s *Al-Kitāb al-Mu‘rib* and Shihāb al-Dīn Khafājī’s *Shifā’ al-Ghalīl fī Mā Fī Kalām al-‘Arab min al-Dakhīl*. Theoretically, these types overlap; practically, etymological dictionaries focus on structure, giving meaning secondary importance, whereas historical dictionaries address both structure and meaning, often emphasizing semantic development.

Historical dictionaries track words over successive periods, tracing changes from first appearance to last usage.

2. Historical View of the Oxford English Dictionary (OED):

a) Definition:

The OED was the first English dictionary to record words, structures, and meanings historically, tracing word meanings with dated citations from 1150 to the latest edition (1970), compiling over 5,000 cards with examples from over 5,000 authors.

c) Linguistic Foundations of the OED:

19th-century historical linguistic studies greatly influenced lexicography. Samuel Johnson initiated the process, demonstrating in his preface that meanings could be collected and arranged historically. However, Johnson’s dictionary contained only 43,000 words, reflecting personal bias (e.g., “oats” for horse feed in England vs. human food in Scotland).

Richardson's dictionary (1836) applied a modern historical method, tracing meanings and usage changes with historical examples. Later, the Philological Society of London initiated the Historical Dictionary project (1858), which took about 70 years, with the first edition in 1928 (*A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles, ten volumes*), republished in 1961 as *The Oxford English Dictionary* (12 volumes). Many scholars contributed across generations, including Trench, Henry Coleridge (d. 1861), and James Murray (editor from 1879–1915), assisted by hundreds of volunteers and contributors like William Maines, an American surgeon and officer.

The OED succeeded due to:

1. Young scholars leading the project (e.g., Coleridge died at 31, Furnival at 36).
2. Collaborative work and volunteer contributions.
3. Linguistic and literary societies collecting and studying texts (e.g., Early English Text Society 1864, Chaucer Society 1868).
4. Continuous effort over 70 years without interruption.
5. Constant revision to keep pace with language change and new techniques.

The dictionary functioned as a connected chain where each participant contributed, aiming to compile a comprehensive historical dictionary of English.

3. Historical Perspective of the Arabic Historical Dictionary:

Historical dictionaries are among the most important achievements of the historical method in Europe, emerging in the 19th century. Despite the Arabic world's need, no complete historical dictionary exists yet, though many efforts have been made.

a) Background:

Arabic dictionaries contain rich linguistic heritage, attracting orientalist to use them in research. However, gaps exist: texts often lack dates, authors are omitted, meanings are accumulated without chronological order, and semantic development is rarely linked to historical and social context. To address this, linking words with their historical meanings is essential. Fischer, a German orientalist, first proposed an Arabic historical dictionary in 1935, inspired by the OED. World War II, illness, and his death (1949) prevented its completion. The Arabic Language Academy in Cairo attempted to organize Fischer's cards but could only publish a preface and small sample. Fischer's model aimed to cover all words historically, etymologically, morphologically, expressively, grammatically, rhetorically, and stylistically.

b) Arab Efforts:

The Arabic Language Academy attempted to continue Fischer's project with *Al-Mu'jam al-Kabir*, still incomplete. Other attempts occurred in the 1990s, e.g., the Arab Lexicographical Society in Tunisia, but nothing was completed. The Arab Center for Research and Studies in Doha organized expert workshops in 2012 and 2013 to plan and structure a historical Arabic dictionary, illustrating the ongoing efforts.

4. Historical Perspective of *Al-Mu'jam al-Kabir*:

a) Definition:

Al-Mu'jam al-Kabir is one of the largest and most important Arabic dictionaries, covering old and modern words in a detailed encyclopedic format. It aimed to include all words from primary dictionaries, extending beyond traditional citation eras. Compiled by numerous scholars from the Arabic Language Academy in Cairo, the first volume (covering Hamza) was published on April 5, 1970 (~700 pages). Subsequent volumes cover Ba, Ta–Tha, Jim, Ha, Kha, etc.

The dictionary contains three main aspects:

1. Methodological: accuracy of arrangement and clarity of headings.
2. Linguistic: comprehensive representation of language for both classical and modern users.
3. Encyclopedic: providing scientific and general knowledge under entries.

It includes words in Semitic, Akkadian, Syriac, Ethiopian, Hebrew, and Ugaritic, useful for comparative studies and pronunciation in Latin letters.

b) Methodology:

- The dictionary is arranged alphabetically (first, second, third letters) following al-Zamakhshari (*Asas al-Balagha*).
- It indicates cognates in Semitic languages, e.g., in the Ta entry: *tabut* (Abyssinian), *tebuta* (Aramaic), *teba* (Hebrew), as in Qur'an 2:248.
- Meanings are organized hierarchically: primary to secondary, concrete to abstract, literal to figurative, familiar to rare, referencing classical dictionaries, especially Ibn Faris' *Maqayis al-Lugha*. Verbs precede nouns; triliteral precedes quadriliteral; simple precedes augmented; intransitive precedes transitive, e.g., triliteral verb *yaf'al* (e.g., *nasara*, *yansuru*).
- Linguistic material is divided into two sections:

A) It compiled from dictionaries, literary, scientific, and historical books, and no book or dictionary is referenced unless it held a distinct opinion when necessary; that is, it is distinguished by comprehensiveness. It was not limited to words from a specific period but included words associated with developments in modern human civilization.

B) The dictionary expanded derivation from the root for ease of scholars; for example: “أكسد” from (oxide) and “أَين” from (ions).

C) Examples: The *Al-Mujam Al-Kabir* followed the approach of the ancients, citing the Qur'an, Hadith, literary texts, proverbs, and poetry, and it attempted, as much as possible, to arrange these examples chronologically. At the end of each volume, it indexed the names of poets mentioned according to their death dates, and if the date was unknown, it attributed them to their era, e.g., pre-Islamic or Islamic.

- In addition to meanings of words, *Al-Mujam Al-Kabir* included technical terms, as well as the names of countries, places, notable people, plants, and animals, and attempted to discuss them briefly.
- The notation that “which is not in its form began among intellectual circles and regulates certain words in the text according to the method of the ancients when necessary” applied in *Al-Mujam Al-Kabir* by using two methods:
 1. Stating the type of diacritic and its vowel, e.g., with a fatha, damma, or kasra; the first edition focused on this.
 2. Using diacritical symbols, placing a small horizontal line above or below the vowel (—); the second edition relied heavily on this method. The first method is considered more accurate.
- The dictionary also used some symbols for abbreviation, few in number, derived from old dictionaries, such as (ج) for plural. It also introduced a specific symbol (ـ :) consisting of (ـ) followed by a small horizontal line and two dots (one above the other), used instead of repeating a word when defining it anew.

Al-Mujam Al-Kabir placed great importance on following a methodology aligned with contemporary lexicographical composition. It organized its entries alphabetically, compiled both ancient and modern Arabic words, and clarified their connections by tracing examples historically, making it an important Arabic lexical resource.

C) Reasons for its incompleteness:

Al-Mujam Al-Kabir is one of the most significant and largest Arabic dictionaries, but several factors prevented its sequential completion. So far, only six volumes have been published over different periods. The reasons for this delay are:

A) First reason: The preparation and publication of the first volume naturally required time for methodological refinement and revision. Consequently, the Arab Language Academy members took approximately ten years per volume:

- Volume 1 (Hamza) published in 1970, 700 pages.
- Volume 2 (Ba) published in 1981, 768 pages.
- Volume 3 (Ta and Tha) published in 1992, 391 pages.
- Volume 4 (Jim) published in 2000, 755 pages.
- Volume 5 (Ha) published in 2000, 989 pages.

From these releases, it is clear that the Arab Language Academy deviated from the agreed-upon publication rate, particularly as Volume 5 was published in the same year as Volume 4, while Volume Kha took four or five years and occupied 1,252 pages in large, spaced script, exceeding the initial plan.

B) Second reason: Dr. Ahmed Mukhtar Omar estimates that completing *Al-Mujam Al-Kabir* may take around 300 years, based on the eleven years taken for Volume 3. Dr. Ahmed Shafiq Al-Khatib proposed two scenarios:

1. Using the completion rate of letter Kha, the dictionary would take 94 years based on *Al-Muḥiṭ* and 109 years based on *Al-Mujam Al-Wasīṭ*.
2. Using the rate of letters Ba, Ta, Tha, completion would take 409 years based on *Al-Mujam Al-Wasīṭ*.

Thus, the completion time remains far longer compared to the Oxford English Dictionary, which took about half a century.

C) Third reason: The work requires extended time for precise methodology and successive reviews by experts in Arabic, Semitic, Persian, and Turkish languages, followed by committee review, coordination, and refinement. Dr. Ahmed Mukhtar Omar emphasizes reconsidering the project urgently to avoid the need for major revisions for 20th and 21st-century material in future volumes.

These reasons and others have delayed the dictionary's completion. Accelerated collaborative efforts in scientific, material, and administrative fields could have shortened this delay.

D) *Al-Mujam Al-Kabir* as historical: differing opinions:

- Opinion 1: Dr. Nasir Al-Din Al-Asad argued that *Al-Mujam Al-Kabir* could replace a historical dictionary, as it follows a clearer methodology than Oxford or Fischer's historical Arabic dictionary.
- Opinion 2: Dr. Muhammad Hasan Abdul Aziz, member of the Scientific Committee of the Historical Arabic Dictionary, claims it is not a historical dictionary merely for citing poems of classical or modern poets. Dr. Ibrahim Madkour of the Arab Language Academy also denies its historical status, noting preparatory work remains incomplete.
- Opinion 3: Mr. Hilal Al-Jilali argues it is both etymological and historical, tracing Arabic words and their Semitic derivatives, including rendering in Ethiopic, Syriac, Hebrew, Aramaic, Ugaritic, and Latin letters, as shown in examples:
 1. “أبد”: in Hebrew abbadh – always.
 2. “التوحش”: in Akkadian abtu – disappeared, fled, perished; in Ugaritic abd – lost; in Aramaic abadh – lost, perished; in Syriac ebadh – lost, spoiled, destroyed; in Ethiopic abda – lost, astray, angry.

Ultimately, *Al-Mujam Al-Kabir* did not aim to fill the historical dictionary gap for Arabic but to trace language across eras, approaching historical dictionary function through chronological ordering of examples.

Thirdly – Historical study of *Lisan al-Arab*:

1. Translation of *Lisan al-Arab*:

A) Author: Abu al-Fadl Jamal al-Din Muhammad ibn Makram al-Ifriqi, born in Egypt in 630 AH, possibly Tripoli. He worked in the Bureau of Composition in Cairo and as governor of Tripoli. He excelled in various Arabic sciences, taught many 8th-century AH scholars, loved summarizing extensive books, especially literary works, returned to Egypt, and died in 711 AH. He lost his sight late in life and authored several works, including *Mukhtār al-Aghānī* and *Lisan al-Arab*.

B) *Lisan al-Arab*: One of the largest Arabic dictionaries, an extensive encyclopedia, containing about eighty lexical entries, citing thousands of Arabic poetic verses.

C) Purpose: In the preface, Ibn Manzur noted the two methods of earlier dictionaries and aimed to produce a dictionary with both good collection and proper arrangement.

D) Sources: He drew from *Tahdhib al-Lughah* (Al-Azhari), *Muhkam* (Ibn Sida), *Sihah* (Al-Jawhari), *Hawashi* (Ibn Bari), *Al-Nihaya fi Gharib al-Hadith* (Ibn Al-Athir), filled with quotations from poetry, Qur'an, and Hadith.

E) Method: He divided the book into chapters based on the last letter of the root, observing standard alphabetical order (ج, ت, ب, ء...). For instance, words ending with Ba go under Ba chapter, those ending with Mim under Mim chapter, etc. Words ending with Waw or Ya are grouped accordingly.

F) Research method:

- Strip the word of suffixes and return it to its root.
 - Correct weak letters to their origin (e.g., استيطان → root وطن, إصابة → root صوب).
 - Consider the last letter for chapter placement; first letter determines subsection. For example: words like كذب, ضرب, رغب, لعب, كتب, ركب fall under Ba chapter and then organized by the first letter in precise alphabetical order.
2. Historical methodology in *Lisan al-Arab*:
- Distinguishing original Arabic from borrowed or foreign words: Ibn Manzur mentions whether a word is pure Arabic or adapted/borrowed, citing its origin. For instance:
 - دبح: Persian origin, not Arabic, adapted as *dibaj*.
 - باذنجان: Persian origin, adapted.
 - باج: Persian origin, adapted to mean a single thing or color of food.

Thus, Ibn Manzur partially applied the historical method etymologically without intent.

- Tracking lexical life over successive periods: Some words show semantic change over time. For example:
 - النفاق: originally literal, later figurative in Islam.
 - الكفر: traced from Moses to Jesus to Muhammad, meanings mostly constant across these eras, but different before them. Ibn Manzur cited Quranic examples without intending historical tracking.

Many words changed meaning over time, but Ibn Manzur's purpose was collection and preservation, not historical lexicography.

The researcher observes the change of a word from its literal meaning to a figurative one. Of course, a historical dictionary traces a word over time, its fields of usage, and the changes it undergoes, whether in form or content, following the sequence of meanings according to chronological order and logical reasoning. This is what Fischer addressed in the expressive aspect. For example:

- **Al-Atnāb**: "The ropes that tighten the house between the ground and the streets." This word changed its meaning from literal to figurative, becoming *al-itnāb*: exaggeration in

praise or blame and abundance in it; that is, verbosity and lengthening of speech. As observed, the semantic meaning of the word changed from one period to another and came to indicate something entirely different.

- **Thalj (Snow):** “Snow that falls from the sky. In the Hadith of Umar, may Allah be pleased with him: ‘until the certainty of snow came to him.’ It is said: ‘My soul has snowed with the matter,’ meaning it was reassured and settled upon it and trusted it.”

Thus, the word *thalj* as presented in *Lisan al-Arab* shifted from a figurative meaning to a literal one. During Umar’s era, it indicated the certainty existing in the soul and heart, while today it refers to the white substance falling from the sky.

3. Identifying the factors influencing the life course of Arabic words:

In this field, the word **Hajj** illustrates a change in meaning over time. It had a specific connotation in the pre-Islamic era, and in the Islamic era, it acquired a completely different one. Ibn Manzur mentioned in *Lisan al-Arab* many words whose meanings changed over time.

- **Hajj:** “Intention. Someone ‘hajjilnā’ means he arrived; ‘hajjah yahujju hajja’: he intended. Ibn al-Sikkit said: ‘They frequently differ regarding it.’ This is the original meaning. Then its use became specific to traveling to Mecca for ritual and pilgrimage to the Kaaba.” As noted, the meaning of *hajj* changed from a general sense to a specific one, referring specifically to the sacred house of Allah.
- **Al-Ma’tam:** Originally referred to the gathering of men and women in joy and sorrow, later narrowed to women’s gatherings for mourning.

Hence, *al-ma’tam* initially indicated both joy and sorrow, but later its meaning was restricted to sorrow. *Lisan al-Arab* mentions the semantic change of this word without intention, as evidenced by the absence of the timeline for this change. Here, the stylistic aspect is applied, determining whether a word’s meaning is general or specific.

Finally, we attempt to reach a clear conclusion: is *Lisan al-Arab* by Ibn Manzur a historical dictionary? Especially after reviewing all the preceding data about it. The answer is provided by Ibrahim Al-Samarrai in his book *Mu’jamiyat*, where he posed a similar question: “Can we ask ourselves: Do we have a historical dictionary in our heritage? Can we consider, for example, *Lisan al-Arab* as such a dictionary?”

The answer to both questions is that we do not possess this dictionary, and neither *Lisan al-Arab* nor other extensive works fulfill this criterion.

In conclusion, the historical methodology has multiple outcomes in linguistic studies, one of the most important being the emergence of historical dictionaries, such as the Oxford English Dictionary, considered the first historical dictionary. Arab efforts in this field began with the attempts of the German orientalist Fischer, then the Arab Language Academy in Cairo, which failed to implement Fischer's historical dictionary project. Instead, *Al-Mujam Al-Kabir* was published, which remains incomplete. In addition, efforts by the Lexicographical Society in Tunisia and the Research Center in Doha are ongoing to produce a historical dictionary.

Ultimately, the Arab world urgently needs a historical dictionary. Arab efforts must unite and coordinate to accomplish this long-awaited dictionary, applying all mechanisms of the historical methodology so it becomes a true historical dictionary. *Lisan al-Arab* played an important linguistic role in Arabic lexicography, but it is not a historical dictionary; it is only a normative dictionary.

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