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A SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF FIVE NEAR-SYNONYMOUS ARABIC VERBS: JA'A, ATA, AQBAL, HADARA AND QADIMA

Abstract. *The Arabic language is renowned for its lexical richness, particularly in the domain of near-synonyms (الفروق اللغوية). This paper examines the semantic distinctions among five Arabic verbs that are commonly translated as «to come» in English: ja'a (جاء), ata (أتى), aqbala (أقبل), ḥadara (حضر), and qadima (قدم). Drawing upon classical Arabic lexicography, Qur'anic usage, and modern linguistic scholarship, the study employs a comparative analytical method to identify the distinctive semantic features, pragmatic contexts, and stylistic nuances of each verb. The findings reveal that despite their apparent synonymy, each verb carries unique connotations related to manner, purpose, distance, formality, and aspectual perspective. The study contributes to the field of Arabic lexical semantics and has implications for Qur'anic exegesis, Arabic language pedagogy, and translation studies.*

Keywords: *Arabic near-synonyms, lexical semantics, verbs of motion, furuq lughawiyya, Qur'anic vocabulary, Arabic linguistics.*

INTRODUCTION

One of the most remarkable features of the Arabic language is its extraordinary lexical precision. Classical Arab linguists devoted entire treatises to the study of semantic differences among apparently synonymous words, a discipline known as ilm al-furuq al-lughawiyya (علم الفروق اللغوية). Abu Hilal al-'Askari (d. 395/1005), in his seminal work al-Furuq al-Lughawiyya, established the foundational principle that true synonymy is rare in Arabic and that apparent synonyms invariably possess distinguishing nuances (al-'Askari, 1997:15). This principle is echoed by Ibn Faris (d. 395/1004), who argued that every Arabic root carries a core semantic nucleus from which all its derivatives branch out (Ibn Faris, 1979:7).

MAIN PART

The semantic field of «coming» or «arriving» in Arabic is particularly rich. While English primarily relies on a single verb «to come» Arabic possesses at least five distinct verbs that cover this semantic territory: *ja'a*, *ata*, *aqbala*, *ḥaḍara*, and *qadima*. Each of these verbs, despite sharing the general semantic feature of [+movement toward a destination], encodes different nuances regarding manner, purpose, distance, social register, and aspectual perspective.

The significance of these distinctions extends beyond theoretical linguistics. In Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsir*), the precise choice of verb is considered part of the inimitable rhetorical miracle (*i'jaz*) of the Qur'an. Al-Raghib al-Isfahani (d. 502/1108), in his *al-Mufradat fi Gharib al-Qur'an*, meticulously catalogued the subtle meanings of Qur'anic vocabulary, demonstrating that word choice in the Qur'an is never arbitrary (al-Isfahani, 2009:1/5). Similarly, al-Zamakhshari (d. 538/1144) in *al-Kashshaf* frequently analyzed the rhetorical reasons behind the selection of specific verbs in Qur'anic discourse (al-Zamakhshari, 1998:37).

Modern Arabic linguistic scholarship has continued this tradition. Tammam Hassan, in his influential *al-Lugha al-'Arabiyya: Ma'naha wa Mabnaha*, emphasized the importance of contextual analysis in determining the precise meaning of Arabic words (Hassan, 1994:335). Faḍil al-Samarra'i, in his works on Qur'anic expression, demonstrated how the Qur'an's choice between near-synonymous verbs serves specific rhetorical and semantic purposes (al-Samarra'i, 2003:29).

The objective of this study is to conduct a systematic comparative analysis of the five Arabic verbs of coming *ja'a*, *ata*, *aqbala*, *ḥaḍara*, and *qadima* identifying their distinctive semantic features, pragmatic conditions, and stylistic implications. The study aims to answer the following research questions: (1) What are the core semantic distinctions among these five verbs? (2) How do classical and modern Arab scholars characterize these differences? (3) What are the contextual and pragmatic factors governing the selection of each verb?

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a comparative analytical method (المنهج التحليلي المقارن) drawing upon three categories of sources:

Classical lexicographic sources constitute the primary foundation. These include: Ibn Manẓur's (d. 711/1311) *Lisan al-'Arab*, the most comprehensive classical Arabic dictionary (Ibn Manẓur, 1993); al-Fayruzabadi's (d. 817/1415) *al-Qamus al-Muḥiṭ* (al-Fayruzabadi, 2005); al-Zamakhshari's (d. 538/1144) *Asas al-Balagha* (al-Zamakhshari, 1998b); and Abu Hilal al-'Askari's *al-Furuq al-Lughawiyya* (al-'Askari, 1997). Al-Raghib al-Isfahani's *al-Mufradat* (al-Isfahani, 2009) was used as a primary source for Qur'anic lexical analysis.

Exegetical works (tafsir) were consulted to examine how these verbs function in Qur'anic discourse. Key sources include al-Ṭabari's (d. 310/923) *Jami' al-Bayan* (al-Ṭabari, 2000), al-Zamakhshari's *al-Kashshaf* (al-Zamakhshari, 1998), and Ibn 'Ashur's (d. 1393/1973) *al-Taḥrir wa al-Tanwir* (Ibn 'Ashur, 1984).

Modern linguistic studies provide the theoretical framework. These include Tammam Hassan's structural-contextual approach (Hassan, 1994), Faḍil al-Samarra'i's studies on Qur'anic semantics (al-Samarra'i, 2003), and Ibrahim Anis's foundational study on near-synonymy *Fi al-Lahajat al-'Arabiyya* (Anis, 2003). Western linguistic frameworks of lexical semantics, particularly componential analysis and prototype theory (Cruse, 1986), were also applied where relevant.

The analytical procedure involved: (1) collecting the lexical entries for each verb from classical dictionaries; (2) identifying and cataloguing Qur'anic attestations of each verb using concordance tools; (3) examining how exegetes and linguists characterized the distinctions; and (4) synthesizing the findings into a comparative semantic framework with distinctive features for each verb.

RESULTS

Ja'a (جاء): The Unmarked Verb of Coming

The verb *ja'a* (جاء) represents the most semantically neutral and frequently used verb of coming in Arabic. Ibn Manẓur defines it simply as the antonym of *dhahaba* («to go»): it denotes arrival at a place without specifying manner, purpose, or distance (Ibn Manẓur, 1993:1/45). Al-'Askari characterizes *ja'a* as the most general (a'amm) of all verbs denoting arrival, noting that it can be used for both physical and abstract coming (al-'Askari, 1997:164).

In the Qur'an, *ja'a* and its derivatives appear over 270 times, making it by far the most frequent verb of coming in the sacred text. It is used for a wide range of subjects:

human beings, angels, divine punishment, truth, falsehood, night, and abstract concepts. For instance, in Surat al-Isra' (17:81): جاء الحق وزهق الباطل («Truth has come, and falsehood has departed»). Al-Isfahani notes that ja'a in the Qur'an is used both transitively and intransitively and covers the widest semantic range among arrival verbs (al-Isfahani, 2009:199).

Al-Samarra'i observes that ja'a is typically used in Qur'anic contexts involving momentous events, solemn occasions, and situations carrying a sense of gravity or weight. He notes that when the Qur'an describes the arrival of something significant truth, divine command, or a decisive moment it tends to favor ja'a (al-Samarra'i, 2003:84).

Ata (أتى): Purposeful and Facilitated Coming

The verb ata (أتى) shares significant semantic overlap with ja'a but possesses distinctive nuances. Al-'Askari identifies a key difference: while ja'a denotes mere arrival, ata often implies coming with ease, compliance, or a specific purpose (al-'Askari, 1997:165). Ibn Manẓur adds that ata frequently carries the connotation of bringing something along or fulfilling an objective (Ibn Manẓur, 1993:17).

In Qur'anic usage, ata appears approximately 260 times. Al-Isfahani observes that ata in the Qur'an often emphasizes the ease or smoothness of approach, as opposed to the weightier arrival implied by ja'a (al-Isfahani, 2009:58). A notable example is Surat Ṭa-Ha (20:69): ولا يفلح الساحر حيث أتى («...and the magician will not succeed wherever he goes»), where ata emphasizes deliberate, purposeful movement.

A particularly illuminating example of the distinction between ja'a and ata is found in the story of Prophet Musa. Al-Samarra'i demonstrates that the Qur'an consistently uses ata when Musa approaches the fire willingly and with expectation, while ja'a is used when describing external events arriving upon someone (al-Samarra'i, 2003:87). Tammam Hassan confirms that the transitivity pattern of ata frequently taking a prepositional complement with bi- («with») reinforces its semantic feature of purposeful or productive arrival (Hassan, 1994:341).

Aqbala (أقبل): Approaching with Visible Orientation

The verb aqbala (أقبل), derived from the root q-b-l meaning «facing» or «turning toward,» carries a distinctive aspectual nuance. Unlike ja'a and ata, which typically denote completed arrival, aqbala emphasizes the process of approaching the subject is visibly advancing toward the speaker or a reference point. Ibn Manẓur defines it as turning one's face toward something and advancing in its direction (Ibn Manẓur, 1993:536).

Al-'Askari distinguishes *aqbala* from the other verbs of coming by its inceptive-progressive aspect: it marks the beginning and continuation of the approach rather than its completion (al-'Askari, 1997:167). The visual dimension is essential *aqbala* implies that the observer can see the subject coming from a distance. Al-Isfahani notes that in the Qur'an, *aqbala* is used to create vivid, cinematic imagery of approach, as in Surat al-Şaffat (37:27): «وأقبل بعضهم على بعض يتساءلون» («And they will approach one another, questioning each other»), where the verb captures the gradual turning and advancing toward one another (al-Isfahani, 2009:390).

Al-Samarra'i emphasizes that *aqbala* in the Qur'an is frequently associated with physical directionality and face-to-face encounter, distinguishing it from the more result-oriented *ja'a* (al-Samarra'i, 2003:91). Anis corroborates this analysis, noting that *aqbala* belongs to a class of Arabic verbs where the Form IV pattern (*af'ala*) adds an inchoative-directional nuance to the base meaning (Anis, 2003:156).

Ḥaḍara (حضر): Attendance and Formal Presence

The verb *ḥaḍara* (حضر) occupies a semantically distinct position from the other four verbs. Its primary meaning is not merely «to come» but rather «to be present, to attend.» Ibn Manẓur defines it as the antonym of *ghaba* («to be absent»), emphasizing the state of being at a place rather than the motion of arriving there (Ibn Manẓur, 1993:4/188). Al-Fayruẓabadi similarly glosses it as being present at an assembly or event (al-Fayruẓabadi, 2005:391).

Al-'Askari draws a critical distinction: while *ja'a* focuses on the act of coming and *ata* on purposeful arrival, *ḥaḍara* foregrounds the result of coming the state of being present and participating (al-'Askari, 1997:198). In modern linguistic terms, *ḥaḍara* is a stative-resultative verb that profiles the endpoint rather than the trajectory of motion. This is reflected in its typical collocations: one says *ḥaḍara al-dars* («attended the lesson»), *ḥaḍara al-majlis* («attended the council»), *ḥaḍara al-ḥafl* («attended the ceremony»).

In the Qur'an, *ḥaḍara* and its derivatives appear in contexts emphasizing witnessing, attendance, and formal presence. For example, in Surat al-Baqara (2:133): «أم كنتم شهداء إذ حضر يعقوب الموت» («Or were you witnesses when death approached Ya'qub?»), *ḥaḍara* conveys the solemn sense of death being present as a witnessed event (al-Ṭabari, 2000:2/574). Ibn 'Ashur comments that *ḥaḍara* was selected here precisely because it emphasizes presence and witnessing rather than mere arrival (Ibn 'Ashur, 1984:1/741).

Qadima (قدم): Arrival from a Journey with Honor

The verb *qadima* (قدم) denotes coming from a distant place, typically after a journey, and carries connotations of honor, dignity, and formal reception. Ibn Manẓur explicitly links it to arrival from travel (*qudum min al-safar*), distinguishing it from the more general *ja'a* (Ibn Manẓur, 1993:12/466). Al-Fayruẓabadi adds that it implies honor and elevation in the manner of arrival (al-Fayruẓabadi, 2005:1044).

Al-'Askari characterizes *qadima* as carrying an inherent semantic feature of [+distance] and [+honor]: the subject has traversed a considerable distance and the arrival is noteworthy, often welcomed or anticipated (al-'Askari, 1997:375). This is reflected in the Arabic tradition of using expressions like *qadima al-ḍuyuf* («the guests arrived») and *qadima min al-madina* («he arrived from the city»), which imply a respectful welcome.

In the Qur'an, the root q-d-m appears in several forms. A notable verbal usage is in Surat Hud (11:98): يقدم قومه يوم القيامة فأوردهم النار («He will precede his people on the Day of Resurrection and lead them into the Fire»), where the notion of leading and arriving first is combined with the verb's directional semantics. Al-Isfahani observes that *qadima* in its various forms consistently implies priority, precedence, and dignified approach (al-Isfahani, 2009:659). Al-Samarra'i notes that in everyday Arabic, *qadima* is almost exclusively used for long-distance arrivals and formal receptions, never for casual or routine coming (al-Samarra'i, 2003:96).

Comparative Semantic Matrix

The following table synthesizes the distinctive semantic features of the five verbs based on the analysis above:

Feature	ja'a	ata	aqbala	ḥaḍara	qadima
Arabic	جاء	أتى	أقبل	حضر	قدم
Core meaning	General coming	Purposeful coming	Approaching visibly	Being present / attending	Arriving from afar
Distance	Any	Any	From a visible distance	Irrelevant	Long distance
Purpose	Unmarked	+Purpose / +Result	Unmarked	+Participation	+Honor / +Reception

Aspect	Perfective	Perfective	Inceptive- progressive	Stative- resultative	Perfective
Register	Neutral	Neutral	Literary / Vivid	Formal / Official	Honorific / Formal

Table 1. Comparative semantic features of five Arabic verbs of coming.

DISCUSSION

Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study support the classical Arabic linguistic principle articulated by al-ʿAskari and Ibn Faris that true synonymy is exceedingly rare in Arabic. The five verbs examined, while sharing the general semantic domain of [+coming], each encode a unique configuration of semantic features relating to manner, purpose, aspect, distance, and social register. This aligns with the componential analysis approach in modern lexical semantics (Cruse, 1986:265), which holds that near-synonyms are distinguished by subtle but systematic differences in their semantic components.

The distinction between jaʿa (unmarked, general) and ata (marked for purpose and ease) is particularly significant for Qurʿanic studies. As al-Samarraʿi demonstrated, the Qurʿan’s selection between these two verbs is never random but serves precise rhetorical purposes (al-Samarraʿi, 2003:88). This finding reinforces the broader principle of Qurʿanic iʿjaz (inimitability) that every lexical choice in the Qurʿan is deliberate and meaningful.

The case of aqbala is particularly interesting from a linguistic typology perspective. Its inceptive-progressive aspectual profile sets it apart from the other four verbs, all of which default to a perfective reading. This demonstrates that Arabic verbs of motion can encode not only path, manner, and goal the parameters identified in Talmy’s (2000) motion event typology but also aspectual perspective on the event. The morphological pattern of Form IV (afʿala) contributes this aspectual nuance, as Anis has observed (Anis, 2003:158).

Implications for Translation and Pedagogy

The semantic richness documented in this study poses significant challenges for translation. Translating all five verbs as «to come» in English as is common in both literary and religious translation results in a substantial loss of meaning. A more precise

translation practice would render ja'a as «came,» ata as «came (with/for),» aqbala as «approached» or «advanced,» ḥaḍara as «attended» or «was present at,» and qadima as «arrived (from a journey)» or «graced (an occasion).» Hassan's contextual approach to Arabic semantics provides a valuable framework for translators navigating such distinctions (Hassan, 1994:347).

For Arabic language pedagogy, the findings suggest that teaching near-synonymous verbs in isolation as discrete vocabulary items is insufficient. Students benefit from contrastive presentation that highlights the distinctive features of each verb, ideally illustrated with Qur'anic and literary examples. This approach aligns with the semantic field method advocated by modern applied linguists for vocabulary instruction (Nation, 2001:56).

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations. First, it focused on the five most common verbs of coming and did not examine less frequent near-synonyms such as wafada (دفو), which also carries connotations of honorable arrival. Second, the analysis was primarily based on classical sources and Qur'anic usage; a corpus-based study of modern Arabic texts would complement these findings. Third, dialectal variation how these verbs are used differently across Arabic dialects was beyond the scope of this study. Future research could profitably address these gaps, as well as extending the analysis to other semantic fields (e.g., verbs of seeing, verbs of knowing) where Arabic displays similar lexical richness.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that the five Arabic verbs of coming ja'a, ata, aqbala, ḥaḍara, and qadima are not interchangeable synonyms but rather form a structured semantic network, each encoding unique features of manner, purpose, aspect, distance, and register. Ja'a serves as the unmarked, general verb of coming; ata adds the dimension of purpose and facilitated approach; aqbala profiles the visible, ongoing process of approaching; ḥaḍara foregrounds the resultant state of presence and formal attendance; and qadima encodes long-distance travel with connotations of honor and dignified reception.

These findings validate the classical Arabic linguistic tradition that regarded near-synonymy as a source of expressive richness rather than redundancy. The precise deployment of these verbs in the Qur'an exemplifies the principle of lexical precision that classical scholars identified as a hallmark of eloquent Arabic. For modern scholarship, translation practice, and language pedagogy, a nuanced understanding of these distinctions is essential for accurate interpretation and faithful rendering of Arabic texts.

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