



HISTORICAL STUDY OF SEMANTICS IN ARABIC LINGUISTICS AND ITS RELEVANCE TO ARABIC LANGUAGE EDUCATION

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Abstract

The study of historical semantics in Arabic linguistics is a field that traces the passage of the meaning of Arabic words over time. This study aims to examine the development of historical semantics in the Arabic linguistic tradition in a diachronic manner, from the classical to contemporary periods, and analyze its relevance to Arabic language education in Indonesia. Using a descriptive qualitative approach based on library research, data was collected from primary and secondary sources in the form of classical Arabic linguistic works, the latest scientific journals, and Arabic language education curriculum documents. The results show that Arabic historical semantics has undergone rich dynamics, from the tradition of classical Arabic lexicography (8th century AD) to integration with modern Western linguistics of the 20th century. An in-depth understanding of the shifting lexical meaning of Arabic has proven to be pedagogically relevant in developing classical text reading competence, enriching vocabulary teaching, and improving understanding of religious discourse. This study concludes that the integration of the historical-semantic dimension into Arabic language learning in Indonesia is not just an added value, but an epistemological inevitability that has so far received less attention in the design of the national curriculum.

Keywords: Arabic Linguistics, Arabic Language Education, Diachronics
Historical Semantics, Meaning Shifts



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INTRODUCTION

Arabic has survived for more than fourteen centuries as a language of science, religion, and literature a linguistic resilience unmatched by many of the world's languages. But behind this formal stability, there is a fact that often escapes the attention of educators: the meaning of Arabic words is never truly silent. The word حَرَج (haraja), for example, in the 7th century Qur'an means 'narrowness of mind' (Qs. Al-An'am: 125), while in contemporary Egyptian usage the same word can refer to 'flea market.' This kind of shift in meaning is not an anomaly, but rather a natural character of language that is alive and constantly moving (Jasum Pramana, 2025; Manaf & Hasan, Nur, 2026).

The urgency of this study is increasingly evident when we consider the scale of Arabic language education in Indonesia. The Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia recorded more than 26,000 madrassas with millions of students studying Arabic as a compulsory subject (Bassam Abul A'la, 2022). However, most of the ongoing curriculum still focuses on structural-grammatical competencies without paying adequate attention to the historical semantic dimensions that are crucial to understanding religious texts and classical Arabic literature. This condition is reflected in the findings of Hapianingsih and Fadli who show that the study of modern linguistics in Arabic language learning in Indonesia is still limited to syntactic and morphological aspects, while the diachronic semantic dimension has not been seriously touched (Hapianingsih & Fadli, 2024).

The phenomenon of shifting meaning in Arabic has actually been studied from several angles, documenting changes in the meaning of Arabic vocabulary absorption in Indonesian in the context of religious discourse, and found that most of the changes are narrowing (takhsis) and connotative shifts (Rosalia Firdaus, 2023). In particular, it examines Arabic semantic in the context of absorbed words and finds that ignorance of the historical meaning of words often triggers interpretative misunderstandings (Umar, 2025). Meanwhile, analyzing the absorption words of the Qur'an from the perspective of science is dilated and emphasizes the importance of historical-semantic awareness in understanding sacred texts (Elbanjari & Rafsanjani, 2023).

At the more theoretical level of Arabic linguistic studies, it examines the contribution of classical figures of Arabic semantics in the history and development of 'ilm al-dilalah, and confirms that this tradition has had a strong methodological foundation since the 8th century AD (Yayan Sopyan, 2025). The study of the theories of meaning in 'ilm al-dilalah also shows that the systematization of classical Arabic semantics has actually included dimensions that are diachronic, although they do not use modern terminology (Umar, 2025). In a more contemporary direction, the journal Lughawiyyat found that more than 60% of modern Arabic terms used in social media have meanings that are significantly different from their classical usage (Manaf & Hasan, Nur, 2026).

On the Education side, it analyzed the shift in meaning and formation of new terms in Arabic-language communication on social media and concluded that Arabic language learners who were not equipped with historical semantic awareness were vulnerable to miscommunication and misinterpretation (Nabilah et al., 2025). His study in Arabiyatuna also shows that Arabic teaching materials for beginners need to integrate historical context so that students are not trapped in a static understanding of meaning (Saleh & Mar, 2025). The interference of mother tongues with Arabic learning is greatly aggravated by the absence of historical understanding of the vocabulary absorbed.

Despite the development of the above studies, there is still a real research gap: there has been no systematic study that connects the historical semantic tradition of Arabic (from the perspective of classical and modern 'ilm al-dilalah) with the concrete needs of the Arabic language education curriculum in Indonesia. This study is here to fill that gap. This article argues that an understanding of the historical semantics of the Arabic language is not only an added value, but an epistemological foundation that determines the depth of a student's Arabic literacy. By tracing the historical development of semantic studies in the Arabic linguistic

tradition and connecting it to the needs of contemporary Arabic language education in Indonesia, this article seeks to open up a more serious discussion space on the reorientation of the curriculum that is sensitive to the dimension of historical meaning. The solutions offered move from the macro level (national curriculum policy), meso level (development of teaching materials), to the micro level (classroom practice and teacher training).

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical literature review design. The paradigm used is interpretivist, by positioning linguistic texts as intellectual artifacts that need to be understood in the socio-historical context of their emergence (Poth et al., 2024).

Research Target/Subject

The subjects of study include: (1) classical Arabic linguistic works related to semantics and lexicography (8th to 12th centuries AD); (2) modern Arabic linguistic literature of the 20th and 21st centuries; and (3) documents and research on Arabic language education in Indonesia. Sources are purposively selected based on their relevance, credibility, and representativeness.

Research Procedure

The procedure is carried out in four stages: (1) identification and selection of sources through Google Scholar, SINTA, JSTOR, and al-Maktabah al-Syamilah; (2) critical reading and recording based on thematic categories; (3) synthesis and analysis to build coherent arguments; and (4) the withdrawal of pedagogical implications that link historical-linguistic findings with the practical needs of Arabic language education.

Instruments, and Data Collection Techniques

The main instrument is the researcher himself (human instrument) with two techniques: (1) documentation from relevant written sources; and (2) systematic content analysis to identify patterns, themes, and arguments related to Arabic historical semantics and their implications for Education (Gurhan, 2025). Thematic matrices are used as a guide for organizing data.

Data Analysis Technique

The analysis was carried out using qualitative content analysis with an inductive-deductive approach. Deductively, the theoretical framework of the Arabic 'ilm al-dilalah tradition is used as an analytical lens. Inductively, the categories of findings are built from within the data itself. The validity of the data is guaranteed through source triangulation and member checking with academic colleagues in the field of Arabic linguistics.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Roots of Historical Semantic Traditions in Classical Arabic Linguistics

The claim that the classical Arabic linguistic tradition has a historical-semantic dimension requires strict methodological precision. There is a fundamental difference between learning the meaning of words synchronously (at a single point in time) and tracing them diachronically. The study of modern historical semantics requires the reconstruction of the path of meaning change based on time-layered textual data. In this strict technical sense, what the classical Arab scholars did was not entirely identical to 'historical semantics' in the modern sense, but its methodological features were functionally diachronic.

Ibn Faris (d. 1004 AD) in *Maqayis al-Lughah* consistently distinguishes between *al-asl* (the basic meaning of the root word) and its derivative meanings that develop through metaphor and metonymy, a procedure that demands temporal consideration. Ibn Faris is the most recent classical contribution to the principles of modern historical semantics, as he explicitly acknowledges that derivative meanings arise later from their original meanings (Yayan Sopyan, 2025). Al-Asma'i (d. 831 AD) in his study of *al-furuq al-lughawiyah* (differences in the meaning of synonymous words) also showed the awareness that words that look similar actually have different nuances that are partly historical. The main difference with modern historical semantics lies in its systematicity and empirical basis: classical Arabic scholars work primarily from linguistic intuition and memorization of texts, while modern historical semantics demand a documented textual corpus. By understanding these differences and similarities, we can appreciate the contribution of the Arab tradition in a more proportionate and critical way.

In their study of the history of the development of *'ilm al-dilalah* providing useful historical mapping, the classical Arabic semantic tradition developed not in isolation, but in dialogue with the needs of interpretation, *fiqh*, and lexicography that are inherently diachronic (Jasum Pramana, 2025). Table 1 summarizes the development of semantic studies in the Arabic linguistic tradition chronologically:

Table 1. The Development of Historical Semantic Studies in the Arabic Linguistic Tradition

Period	Main Characters	Main Works	Historical Semantic Dimensions
8th century AD	Al-Khalil ibn Ahmad	Kitab al-'Ain	Phonetic lexical classification; Variations in meaning according to context
9th century AD	Al-Asma'i (d. 831 A.D.)	Al-Asma' wa al-Sifat	Synonymous studies (<i>al-furuq al-lughawiyah</i>); The Nuances of Historical Significance
10th-11th centuries AD	Ibn Faris (d. 1004 AD)	<i>Maqayis al-Lughah</i>	Tracking of <i>al-asl</i> (basic meaning) and derivation of diachronic meaning
11th century AD	Ibn Jinni (d. 1002 AD)	Al-Khasa'is	Al-isytiqaq al-kabir: semantic relationships between consonantal roots
20th century AD	Ahmad Mukhtar Umar	<i>'Ilm al-Dilalah</i> (1998)	Systematization of change in meaning: <i>tawassu'</i> , <i>takhsis</i> , <i>irtifa'</i> , <i>inhibit</i>
21st century AD	Manaf et al.	<i>Squirting</i> (2026)	The semantic shift of classical Arabic vocabulary to contemporary usage

The Transformation of Arabic Semantic Studies in the Modern Era

The meeting of the world of Arabic linguistics with modern European linguistics brought about a significant transformation in the way semantics were studied in the context of Arabic. Ahmad Mukhtar Umar in his *'Ilm al-Dilalah* explicitly discusses *al-taghayyur al-dalaliy* (change of meaning) with systematic categorization: expansion of meaning (*tawassu' al-ma'na*), narrowing of meaning (*takhsis al-ma'na*), increase in value (*al-irtifa'*), and decrease in value (*al-inhibit*). That this systematization remains the most comprehensive framework used in the teaching of *'ilm al-dilalah* in Indonesian Islamic universities (Umar, 2025).

An important contemporary dimension, the shift in the meaning of Arabic vocabulary is now also happening at a much higher pace due to digitalization and social media. Their study found that Arabic terms that were originally religious or classical underwent significant expansion, narrowing, or connotative shifts in the use of Arabic social media (Manaf & Hasan, Nur, 2026). This confirms that the study of Arabic historical semantics is not only a matter of the past, but also of the present that is constantly moving.

The Relevance of Historical Semantics to Arabic Language Education in Indonesia

The relevance of historical semantic studies to Arabic language education operates on three levels. First, at the level of competence in reading classical texts, that misinterpretations of religious Arabic texts by students often stem from ignorance of the historical meaning of words. For example, in classical jurisprudence it means a transaction of buying and selling, but in the context of Islamic politics it means an oath of allegiance to the leader of a metonymic shift that is only well understood by students armed with historical semantic awareness (Khairil Malik, Nicolas Habibi, Milki Aan, 2022).

Second, at the level of teaching vocabulary (mufradat). The approach of teaching modern linguistics in Arabic classes in Indonesia tends to ignore the historical dimension of the word (Hapianingsih & Fadli, 2024). Offers an interesting alternative: a dzauq (intuitive linguistic appreciation) approach that requires students to understand vocabulary in layers, including its historical layers (Solehudin, 2025). That students who are equipped with an understanding of historical semantics are better able to understand the shift in meaning in contemporary Arabic communication and are more likely to avoid miscommunication (Manaf & Hasan, Nur, 2026).

Third, at the level of religious discourse. In the study of the absorption of the Qur'an from the perspective of science, it is emphasized that a deep understanding of religious discourse is impossible to achieve without historical-semantic awareness (Elbanjari & Rafsanjani, 2023). The word jihad, as a classic example, in early Arabic texts has more of a spiritual meaning than the dominant military dimension in 20th-century popular discourse. Documenting how the shift in the meaning of Arabic words in Indonesian religious discourse impacts misunderstandings of religion among ordinary people (Rosalia Firdaus, 2023).

Counter-Argument and Rebuttal

The main objection to historical semantic integration is the argument of practicality: the historical dimension will overwhelm an already dense curriculum. This argument contains the problematic assumption that 'historical Arabic and contemporary Arabic' are two completely separate entities. It found the opposite: more than 60% of Arabic terms used in contemporary texts have significant roots in classical Arabic literature. Therefore, historical understanding is not an additional burden, but a provision to understand contemporary Arabic more accurately (Manaf & Hasan, Nur, 2026). Students who have a historical understanding of Arabic vocabulary show lower levels of mother tongue interference and higher ability to disambiguate meanings (Solehudin & Arisandi, 2024).

Towards the Integration of Historical Semantics in the Indonesian Arabic Language Curriculum

Recommendations for integrating historical semantics into the curriculum are only meaningful if they are built on an honest needs analysis of actual conditions on the ground. Based on the study of the results of the latest research, at least two structural obstacles need to be openly acknowledged. The first obstacle is the readiness of teachers. Most Arabic teachers in madrassas have not been formally briefed on Arabic historical semantic material. This condition shows that the integration of historical semantic material without the accompaniment of a systematic teacher professional development program (CPD) is at risk of becoming a failed policy at the implementation level (Hapianingsih & Fadli, 2024).

The second obstacle is the readiness of students. reminding that the understanding of layered vocabulary historically can only be optimally absorbed by students who already have an adequate vocabulary of active vocabulary. This suggests that historical semantic integration needs to be designed gradually, rather than uniformly assigned to all levels (Solehudin & Arisandi, 2024). The implications of Arabic vocabulary absorption in Indonesian on Arabic learning can actually be an effective entrance to introduce the historical dimension of meaning to beginner learners, because Indonesian students are familiar with many Arabic words that

have shifted their meanings (Khoirul Bariyah, 2019). Table 2 offers a realistic and step-by-step integration roadmap:

Table 2. Roadmap for Historical Semantic Integration in Indonesian Arabic Language Education

Level	Objectives	Form of Implementation	Key Challenges
Macro (Curriculum)	Ministry of Religion / Director General of Pendis	Add awareness of meaning changes in KI Arabic MA & PTKI	Bureaucratic resistance; Curriculum revision takes a long time
Meso (Textbook)	Author & publisher	Etymological and historical notes on keywords	Author's capacity; Limitations of textbook space
Micro (Class)	Arabic teacher	The 'word story' approach (qissah al-kalimah); Contextual Discussion	Teacher ability; Limited class hours duration
CPD Teacher	LPTK / PTKI	Historical semantic training in PPG & in-service training programs	There is no standardized specific CPD module yet

This roadmap recognizes that effective implementation requires proper sequencing: teacher capacity building must precede curriculum updates, and revisions of teaching materials must run in parallel with teacher training programs rather than after.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that Arabic historical semantics has real and urgent pedagogical relevance for Arabic language education in Indonesia, although its implementation requires a realistic and gradual approach. The classical Arabic linguistic tradition has contained a strong diachronic foundation, although it differs methodologically from modern historical semantics. The integration of this dimension needs to start from teacher capacity development, followed by updating teaching materials and curriculum, considering the readiness of the education ecosystem that still needs to be strengthened. Advanced empirical research, especially the trial of historical semantics-based approaches at various levels of Indonesian madrasas, is urgently needed to strengthen the evidence base for a more substantive reorientation of the Arabic curriculum.

DECLARATION OF AI AND AI ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this work, the author used Claude (Anthropic) as an artificial intelligence tool for two limited purposes: (1) the tracing and grouping of initial references based on the topic of the study of Arabic historical semantics; and (2) checking the consistency of the citation format of the 7th edition of APA. After using the tool, the author reviewed, evaluated, and edited the entire content thoroughly. All arguments, analyses, synthesis, and conclusions are the result of the author's original thought, and the author is solely responsible for the accuracy and academic integrity of the content of this publication.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; In-vestigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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