

The Historical Dictionary Between Tradition and Modernization

Jamila Abid

Specialization: Arabic Language

Rank: Associate Professor, Section "A"

University: Moujahid Abdelhafid Boussouf University, Mila

Email: djamila.abid@centre-univ-mila.dz

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Abstract:

Perhaps the meticulous attention given by linguists to individual words, in order to prevent their extinction or disappearance, caused them to focus less on tracking changes in meaning—even though semantic development studies have reached their peak. In order to advance dictionary-making and achieve optimal development, modern scholars turned their attention to constructing a historical dictionary—a resource that meets our needs by providing word meanings along with their various and evolving senses across different eras, from their origins to the present.

The historical dictionary documents the first appearance of each word in the language and traces the changes in its meanings and pronunciation. It also shows the word's origin and whether it was borrowed from another language, directly or through intermediaries. This dictionary relies on texts found in both ancient and modern Arabic corpora to demonstrate the age of a word and its usage across time. Its work does not stop at traditional compilation; it continues into the modern era through the digitization of the dictionary, making it accessible to researchers. This introduction leads us to the following questions:

- To what extent do we need a historical dictionary that defines the historical boundaries of word usage across time?
- What are the outcomes of building a historical dictionary?
- Has the dream of the Arabic language come true—gathering the scattered vocabulary from ancient and modern corpora across long ages?

Keywords: historical dictionary, dating of Arabic words, Arabic efforts, dictionary digitization.

Introduction

The historical dictionary is the dream of the Arabic language—to have its counterpart in the domain of usage: a dictionary that gathers vocabulary from ancient corpora, documents their meanings, and records their usage across different eras, identifying the most significant transformations that have occurred to them over the course of eighteen centuries. The realization of this project has required enormous efforts from scholars across many Arab lands in order to build a memory for the Arabic language, such that whenever a word is sought, its history of usage may be found across long ages and different generations. Thus, the historical dictionary becomes the corpus that records the life and history of vocabulary.

Definition of the Historical Dictionary

The historical dictionary is a chronicle of the word within the life of the language, tracking the development that has occurred in its meanings and the changes that have occurred in its pronunciation. It also clarifies the original meaning of the word, records its various meanings, and arranges them in a sequential numerical order according to the dates of their occurrence (Abd al-Aziz, 2008, p. 48).

Its Importance

The Arabic language has bequeathed a vast heritage left behind by scholars of Arabic—works that were composed to meet the needs of learners. Yet, despite this, Arabic suffers from a clearly manifest lexical deficiency when compared with Western dictionaries. This deficiency lay in the absence of a historical dictionary for the Arabic language. The importance of the Arabic historical dictionary is no less than that of other languages' dictionaries; indeed, it represents a **qualitative leap in Arabic dictionary-making**. The historical dictionary contributes to the study of the Arabic language in a scientific manner and its precise linguistic description, because it chronicles the word and the conditions of its change across different eras and contexts, including the changes that have affected its sounds, its morphological structures, its syntactic constructions, and the semantic development it has undergone.

Its Nature and Function

As for its nature, it is the voluminous book that includes the largest and oldest words, chronicling their usage and providing the reader with meanings. Professor Ali al-Qasimi states: “The historical dictionary is a type of dictionary that aims to provide the reader with information about the origin of words, their history, and their meanings by tracing their development from their earliest recorded appearance to the present day” (al-Qasimi, 2005, p. 235). Its function is determined through two matters:

First: The historical dictionary should include every word that has been used in the language, whether it is used in ancient or modern times, or in both eras.

Second: The dictionary documents the history of each word in “its form, meaning, and usage,” representing this word with a number of citations (al-Qasimi, 1975, p. 54).

As for the beginning of the modern lexicographical movement, some authors indicate that it was based on borrowing from ancient dictionaries, with minor adaptations in treatment and few additions in modern usages, yet it did not address issues of rooting, linguistic change, and historicization (al-Qasimi, 1975, p. 54).

The Arabic library has contained many dictionaries that differed in their arrangement and explanation, just as their ancient and modern examples differed. Although each provided a comprehensive definition of the vocabulary item, along with presenting related words with approximate meanings, they did not fulfill the purpose despite the presence of citations. What was lacking was the dating of those citations so that the dictionary might become a historical one—“one that presents the life of the word across successive historical eras, whereas the ancient dictionary, or what is termed the descriptive dictionary, is confined to a specific period without mixing its vocabulary with that of another period” (al-Qasimi, 1975, p. 55).

Furthermore, the historical dictionary has been described by several terms, such as “prescriptive,” “normative,” “didactic,” and the like (al-Qasimi, 1975, p. 54).

Features of the Historical Dictionary

The sources of the historical dictionary consist of materials, or written records dating back to an earlier period of the language’s life. As for the information the dictionary provides regarding pronunciation, it is built upon those records, which has resulted in the emergence of dead words.

It provides us with the origins and history of words, while avoiding description or explanation, and adhering to the historical narrative (al-Qasimi, 1975, p. 55).

It also arranges the meanings of its entries in a manner that clarifies how their meanings developed and generated one another—that is, it examines the life of each word in the language and records, for example, the first text in which the word appeared. It illustrates this with the word “namat” (pattern), which first appeared in the Mu’allaqa of Zuhayr, unless it becomes clear to us that it appeared in an older Arabic inscription (Fahmi, n.d., p. 61; al-Qasimi, 1975, p. 55). This means that the historical dictionary must reflect the life of the word from the oldest text in which it appeared, and proceed with it, identifying its changing meaning and levels of usage. It is a dictionary oriented in a historical direction.

The historical dictionary serves as a record of the history of the Arabs and Muslims, containing vocabulary items along with an explanation of their styles, structures, and meanings, and indicating which words were used and which fell into disuse or were abandoned, while also highlighting the most important events that occurred in their time, and recording the most significant changes that have befallen them across ages and regions, documenting major events such as conquests, wars, migrations, and calamities (Abd al-Aziz, 2008, p. 42).

The First Arabic Historical Dictionary

Fischer’s Historical Dictionary

The first historical dictionary was conceived by August Fischer, one of the most prominent German linguists, who was concerned with producing a historical Arabic dictionary modelled on the Oxford English Dictionary, which had been published shortly before his birth. He devoted extraordinary attention to it and worked on its composition for fifty years, applying his method to the Arabic language. He spent a long time collecting texts from which to extract the meanings of words and constructions, tracing them across different eras and recording the most significant changes and transformations that had occurred to them. With the support of the Arabic Language Academy in Cairo, to which he submitted his project for publication upon its completion, the Academy enabled him with the means to achieve his goal of composing the historical dictionary. He spent approximately four years gathering, completing, organizing, and formatting his material. However, World War II intervened between him and his formidable project, forcing him to return to his homeland. Afterwards, his return to Cairo to complete his work was hastened by illness, and death overtook him. This dictionary remained scattered for years, and efforts to reunite its parts were made, but what had been transferred to Germany constituted only a small portion. The Academy attempted to reunite what had been scattered from the parts of his dictionary but was unable to recover what had been transferred to Germany. It noted that what remained in

its possession was incomplete, and it found nothing to publish except the introduction he had prepared himself and a specimen from the letter Alif to the word “abad.” It was indeed published, and its first edition sold out (Madkur, 1968).

The Great Dictionary at the Arabic Language Academy in Cairo

This dictionary took unique steps in the rooting of words. Its aim was to produce an advanced Arabic dictionary that would document the temporal changes of each vocabulary item and establish the language as an entity whose roots strike deep into history and extend broadly across civilization. However, this dictionary drifted away from its intended goal, as stated in its introduction: “As for the production of a historical dictionary, that is a difficult matter requiring preparatory works, and only one has been printed, in 1956.” It then continued in production from 1970 to 2022, with approximately fifteen volumes printed, reaching the letter Sad, and it still continues with the letter Ta (Abd al-Ghani, 1991, p. 262).

Early Beginnings of the Arabic Historical Dictionary

After August Fischer passed away, leaving behind only an introduction that could not satisfy a reader beyond serving as a memorial to its author, his project stirred those who were zealous for their language into moving the project forward and realizing a historical dictionary for the Arabic language. However, this dictionary remained in the hands of Arabs for nearly the entire twentieth century, its historical treatment extremely difficult due to the vast temporal and geographical extension of the use of Arabic.

Yet the late twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century witnessed the first signs of genuine interest in producing the historical dictionary. The Arab Lexicographical Society in Tunisia took up the cause in 1989, dedicating its Second International Scientific Conference in November 1989 to the subject. The proceedings of that conference were published in the double issue 5–6 (1989–1990) under the title *The Arabic Historical Dictionary*, which addressed the historical dictionary of the Arabic language by clarifying (al-Nass, n.d.):

- **Dating Arabic words:** the history of the word in terms of its root and morphology in the Arabic language, conducting a historical division of the research for each individual word.
- **Etymologizing Arabic roots:** returning to the origins and roots to etymologize the word in the Arabic language, conducting the research division for each word according to its root.
- **Word meanings and the development of their semantic values:** chronologically recording all meanings of words in all their forms, variations, morphological structures, and the constructions in which they appeared, along with the history of their usage and the development that the word underwent over time, up to its contemporary meanings.
- **The development of terminology across eras:** examining the development of the word and its terminology over time and on the tongues of the Arabs from the pre-Islamic period to the present day, conducting a temporal division of the research for each individual word.

However, this project was halted, then resumed in 1993 without producing any work until 1996, when the project began anew under the name “Corpus of the Arabic Historical

Dictionary.” This project succeeded, over eight years, in producing a corpus covering four centuries of the life of words, starting from the pre-Islamic era with a poetic corpus dating from 200 CE to 609 CE.

This phase of the revival of the Arabic Historical Dictionary project, under the auspices of the Arabic language academies, concluded with the formation of the “Historical Dictionary Committee.” This activity led to the attention of Sheikh Sultan bin Muhammad Al Qasimi, who recognized the civilizational value of the project and took the initiative to provide headquarters for the Historical Dictionary project and allocate a permanent budget for its completion (Ubayd Allah, 2019, p. 101).

By an Emiri decree in 2016, the Arabic Language Academy in Sharjah was established in the Emirate of Sharjah, through cooperation with the Union of Arabic Language Academies. Its most recent conference, held in Algeria in January 2017, called for the expedited completion of the linguistic dictionary to serve as a supplement to the preceding Arab academies (Ubayd Allah, 2019, p. 101).

The Sharjah Arabic Historical Dictionary

The Arabic Historical Dictionary was completed in October 2024, overseen by Sheikh Dr. Sultan bin Muhammad Al Qasimi, a member of the Supreme Council of the Federation and Ruler of the Emirate of Sharjah. This project was accomplished through a partnership between the Academy and the Union of Arab Scientific and Linguistic Academies in Cairo (Sharjah Arabic Historical Dictionary, n.d.).

The Sharjah Arabic Historical Dictionary is published in a paper edition comprising 125 volumes, each volume containing approximately 700 pages, with 8 volumes dedicated to the letters Hamza and Ba. Another digital edition is available to researchers at the following link: <https://www.almojam.org/>. Seven hundred scholars and researchers participated in it, from the planning stage through to printing. It is based on a database that includes all roots of the Arabic language with their entries, along with a digital library containing thousands of books and sources.

A Specimen Entry for the Root: Th-B-R

The root thabr appears in a number of South Arabian inscriptions dating to the first half of the first millennium BCE, specifically the seventh century BCE (5/394 CE). It appears in the verb form thabara, meaning “he ruined, destroyed, demolished, or smashed.” The inscription reads: “makhadha/nakhadha/nafadha wa-thabarah wa-wafatah.”

Thabara, with the ba opened (fathah), and yathburu, with the ba closed (dammah).

Thabara Allahu fulanan thaburan: He destroyed him (i.e., God destroyed so-and-so with destruction).

(Q.S.) 480 AH / 1087 CE to (1–621 CE).

‘Ufayra’ al-Himyarite, the soothsayer, said (d. 110 AH / 512 CE), addressing a king who intended to propose to her: “O you king, may you be spared condemnation: my follower is possessive, resolute in my affairs, and my suitor is ruined, and my punishment is destruction.” (almojam.org, n.d.).

The Doha Historical Dictionary of the Arabic Language

After the printing and publication of the Sharjah Historical Dictionary, the enthusiasm of other Arab states increased to build a dictionary that would be the reference of the Arabs,

racing to document the oldest speech—whether poetry, prose, or wisdom. It is a scientific, revivalist project that aims to document the “memory” of every word in the Arabic language by recording—according to available information—the date of its first appearance with its original meaning, the dates of its semantic and morphological transformations, and its users throughout its development, while documenting the texts that attest to the accuracy of the information presented (Doha Historical Dictionary, n.d.).

Phases of Operational Establishment

The Doha Historical Dictionary of the Arabic Language was established at the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, after more than a year of scholarly deliberation and planning. It was accomplished through successive temporal phases.

His Highness Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, the Emir of the State of Qatar, supported the project of building the Doha Historical Dictionary on 25 May 2013, with a generous grant.

The completion of the first phase of work on the dictionary was announced on 10 December 2018. This phase covered the vocabulary of the Arabic language from the oldest available text (according to the available texts, inscriptions, and sources) to the year 200 AH. This announcement was accompanied by the launch of the electronic portal and the making of the completed lexicographical materials available to all users.

Work continued on the second phase of the dictionary, which covers the vocabulary appearing in the historical period from 201 AH to 500 AH, for another four years. At the end of 2022, the completion of this phase was announced, along with the commencement of the third, open-ended phase, which is concerned with the historical period from 501 AH to the present day. Work remains ongoing until the dictionary is completed with the last letter of the last chapter of the dictionary (Doha Historical Dictionary, n.d.).

The Electronic Portal

The Doha Historical Dictionary of the Arabic Language presents its content through an advanced electronic portal that enables users to search the lexicographical materials, the list of sources, the linguistic corpus, and the Semitic cognates, in addition to an advanced search feature for roots, terminology, and Semitic cognates. The portal also provides statistical information about words, showing their frequency rates in the dictionary and in the linguistic corpus (Doha Historical Dictionary, n.d.).

The dictionary also provides researchers and specialists with other sources of great importance, such as the computational linguistic corpus, a bibliography (list of sources), Semitic cognates, statistical data, and more (Doha Historical Dictionary, n.d.).

These are the most significant historical dictionaries that have been announced, endeavoring to investigate the origins of the language and the meanings of its vocabulary across different eras. They have demonstrated their effectiveness owing to the absence of comparable counterparts in the linguistic domain.

Conclusion

The historical dictionary chronicles the first appearance of each word in the language and traces the changes that have occurred in its meanings and its pronunciation. It also reveals the origin of the word and whether it was borrowed from another language directly or through intermediary languages. The dictionary relies, in presenting that information, on

the texts available and past in ancient authored works, and even in inscribed language, to which history has assigned a role in establishing the origins of the Arabic language. The historical dictionary is the destination (qibla) of researchers, where they find what they seek, presented on an electronic page should the printed edition not be available.

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