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Discourse functions of opposition in Classical Arabic: The case in Ḥadīth Genre

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Abstract

This article offers a new perspective on Arabic antonymy 'al-ṭibāq' and opposition 'al-muqābala' in the Ḥadīth discourse by remodeling these two phenomena in Classical Arabic and developing a provisional typology of their discourse functions (e.g., co-ordination, sub-ordination, interrogation, comparison) in terms of their syntactic frameworks or environments (e.g., X *and* Y, *if* X *then* Y, X *or* Y?, X *more/less* [adj] *than* Y). These syntactic frames function as parametrical triggers of both canonical and non-canonical oppositions in the prophetic discourse. The provisional typology employs quantitative and qualitative approaches, adding substantial data-driven changes and introducing new data-based categories. Two full datasets have been manually mined and collected from the two major Ḥadīth collections, then tested quantitatively and qualitatively against the remodeled typology.[1] Results demonstrate that the syntactic environments hosting canonical antonyms trigger oppositions between other items that are (non)canonical opposites and non-opposites and that represent a variety of (in)human, (in)animate and (in)concrete entities. The proposed typology may serve as a new toolkit for investigating aspects of lexical-semantic opposition in other discourses and languages.

1. Introduction

The idea of the present linguistic inquiry was born during the analysis of one of the Prophet Muhammad's Ḥadīths[2] 'Traditions' in a research seminar held by Area 3 at the Georg-August University's Courant Research Centre (EDRIS).[3]

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  [1] Hsu (2015:58) gives some reasons for choosing the manual identification of contrastive constructions over the automatic: (a) human judgment is necessary in some cases and (b) some antonymic functions are frameless but have formal features that necessitate a manual analysis.
  [2] The term Ḥadīth refers to the reports on the words or actions of the Prophet of Islam, Muḥammad, and on his approval or disapproval of what was said or done during his lifetime. The major aspects of a Ḥadīth are the *matn* (the reported text), which contains the Prophet's actual words, and the *isnād* (the chain of reporters), which documents the history of the reported text transmission. For extensive work on an *isnad-cum-matn* analysis of Ḥadīth and Aḫbār, see Scheiner (2010).
  [3] The Courant Research Centre (CRC) carries the toponym "EDRIS" named after the Qur'anic *Idrīs* (Biblically, *Enoch*), who is known in the Islamic tradition as a prophet and as the first person to have known how to read and write and who is also renowned as a great inventor and as "the prophet of the philosophers" (cf. https://www.uni-goettingen.de/en/109214.html).

Being considered the fountainheads of the Islamic religion, the Qur'an and the Ḥadīth are interrelated and thus hold together a variety of intertextual strands, the knowledge of which helps better understand the former text in terms of the latter. The Ḥadīth is well recognized as an explicatory and supplementary material that has remodeled and rephrased a number of oppositions from the Qur'an. Al-ṭibāq 'antonymy' and al-muqābala 'opposition' are assumed to pervade the prophetic discourse and to play a pivotal role in structuring its information and shaping the way it is received and conceived. Given this assumption, the need arises for examining how oppositions are lexically selected, semantically related and syntactically patterned in the Prophet's mental lexicon and how they function within his discourse.

Contrary to previous research on antonymy and opposition in English that displays a revival of interest in the aspects of lexical-semantic opposition (e.g., Cruse, 1976; Lehrer and Lehrer, 1982; Lehrer, 1985; Murphy and Andrew, 1993; Mettinger, 1994; Fellbaum, 1995; Muehleisen, 1997; Jones, 2002; Murphy, 2006; Paradis and Willners, 2006, 2007, 2011; Murphy and Jones, 2008; Murphy et al., 2009; Davies, 2012; Novogrodsky et al., 2014; Weijer et al., 2014; among others), research on the Arabic counterparts is extremely sparse. A most directly related study is Al-Milījī's (1998) work on the rhetoric of al-ṭibāq 'antonymy' in the two Ṣaḥīḥ collections. However, his work differs from the present one in some aspects: (a) his work tests a sample set of antonyms against the traditional static taxonomy of al-ṭibāq in Arabic rhetoric, whereas the present one seeks to develop a new dynamic and provisional typology; (b) his work adopts a re-application of the Arabic rhetorical categories examining the relation of al-ṭibāq from a formal perspective (how it looks), while the current work investigates it from a functional perspective (how it functions), quantifying and qualifying its discourse functions and the syntactic frames in which these functions are triggered; and (c) his study approaches pairs of antonyms that are canonical (i.e., conventional) and hence semantically recognizable, but this study explores non-canonical oppositions which are unclear to the common readers , raising a question on how these oppositions impact the Ḥadīth text reception and consumption.

The main purpose of this study is to measure how the comprehension of antonymy (Jones, 2002) and opposition (Davies, 2012) in the Ḥadīth genre, strictly Saḥiḥ al-Buḫārī (Al-Buḫārī, 1981) and Saḥiḥ Muslim (Al-Naysabūrī, n.d.), can be enhanced by enumerating their semantic categories, identifying their discourse functions, exploring their syntactic environments and figuring out their relevance to other lexical-semantic phenomena, such as *synonymy*, *hyponymy*, and *meronymy*. The purpose is three-fold: (a) to comparatively quantify and typify the discourse functions of oppositional pairs across the two Ṣaḥīḥ collections; (b) to comparatively quantify and exemplify the syntactic frames that host oppositional pairs across these two collections; and (c) to probe which Qur'anic oppositions have a lexical or semantic impact on the Ḥadīth ones. To realize these objectives and to analyze how meaning is encoded, processed, expressed, and decoded, it is necessary to seek answers to the following questions: (1) How are the Ḥadīth oppositions syntactically and semantically arranged onto the syntagmatic axis? (2) What are the textual functions which these oppositions perform in the Ḥadīth discourse? (3) Which Qur'anic and Ḥadīth oppositions are intertextually related?

To recap then, the contribution of this study resides in expanding the cross-linguistic research on the discourse functions of oppositions, technically referred to as 'antonyms' (cf. Jones, 2002:1; Davies, 2012:41), by focusing on a variety of Arabic specific to the Ḥadīth genre and significantly divergent from English, and in investigating the function of syntactic environments that frame 'canonical' oppositions as triggers of 'non-canonical' oppositions between non-opposites (cf. Davies, 2012). This study reconsiders, from a so-called 'quantilitative' (Hassanein, 2016) perspective, and reclassifies Ḥadīth opposition, as originally proposed by Jones (2002) and further refined by Davies (2012) and expanded by Hassanein (2013). The reanalysis of Ḥadīth discourse is likely to validate and consolidate the revised typologies and demonstrate how lexical-semantic opposition is manipulated as a discursive tool to serve theological and ideological purposes.

2. Background

Fromkin et al. (2003:178) cites O. Henry as literally saying ''Most wonderful of all are words, and how they . . . [relate] one with another.'' Words are associated according to a given relational pattern and thus shall be known by the company they keep (cf. Firth, 1957). A word *per se* is a world *per se* and has an intrinsic ability to spin, as a spider does, a spiderlike web of lexical, semantic, syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations to other words, a complex and intriguing web which I prefer to dub 'Word Wide Web' (WWW). Davies (2012:43) contends that such relations between words or word meanings have been one of the major preoccupations of lexical semanticists and exploring these relations is a prerequisite for the proper understanding of the linguistic knowledge presented in a text. Morris (2007:1) holds a similar view that when people read a certain text, semantic relations between words contribute to their understanding of that text. It is further assumed that recognition of semantic relations between two or more lexemes in any language is necessary to understand the meanings of lexemes (cf. Kreidler, 1998:86). Fig. 1 illustrates an almost infinite network of lexical-semantic associations.

In Fig. 1 the so-called WWW depicts a spiderword 'horse' as a seed word spinning a network of connective threads that relates it to other words. These connections differ in their given labels based on directionality between the related