

## KORANIC KEY-TERMS IN HISTORY

## I SYNCHRONIC AND DIACHRONIC SEMANTICS

Properly speaking, most of the problems dealt with in the present chapter do not fall within the scope of this book which, as has been made abundantly clear in the previous chapter, purports to be strictly a study of the Weltanschauung of the Koran through its vocabulary. This naturally determines the extent to which our consideration will be allowed to go. Of the 'history' of the Koranic key-terms only the pre-Islamic, i.e., pre-Koranic part is necessary for our special purpose, in so far as it sheds a clear light on the formation of the 'basic' meanings of the words. The historical development of the meanings in the post-Koranic ages is not in any way a matter of direct concern to us.

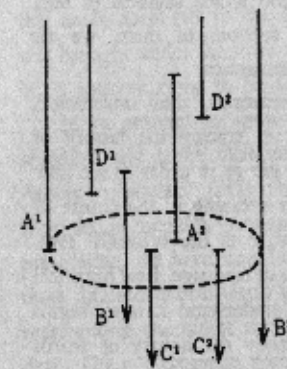
If, in spite of this obvious fact, we still insist on paying attention at this point to a few at least of the significant questions raised by historical semantics regarding the vicissitudes that some of the key-terms of the Koran underwent in the course of history, it is chiefly for the following three reasons. First: since, generally speaking, an examination of a question from two or more different, but closely related, angles usually ends in a deeper and more comprehensive view of the matter, we might reasonably expect that, in our particular case too, considering the problem of 'vocabulary' anew as a historical process, will, as a continuation of the above discussion, help towards clarifying some important aspects of the theoretical problems that have not been discussed fully in the last chapter.

Secondly, by following the semantic development of some of the key-terms of the Koran in non-Koranic systems that came into existence in Islam in course of time, we may be able to throw a new side-light on the peculiarity of the meanings which those words had in the Koran itself. Lastly, a careful examination of the problem of the possibility and significance of a historical semantics will clarify, by contrast, both the advantages and limitations of the methods and principles peculiar to static semantics, and, thus, enable us to

combine in the most fruitful way the two semantics in analyzing the structure of the Koranic vocabulary.

Now to go right into the *medias res*, 'vocabulary' may be looked at from two basically different methodological standpoints. In modern linguistics these two angles or points of view are called 'diachronic' and 'synchronic', respectively. Diachrony, as its etymology would suggest, is a view of language, which as a matter of principle emphasizes the element of time in everything linguistic. Thus vocabulary is, diachronically, a bundle of words, each one of which is growing and changing independently in its own peculiar way. Some words in the group may come to a stop, that is, cease to be used in the society at a certain period (*As*); others may continue being in use for a longer time (*Bs*); again new words may make their debut on the stage at a certain definite point of time and begin their history from that period (*Cs*).

If we cut horizontally the flow of history at a certain period, a cross-section is obtained, which may be pictured as a flat surface formed by a number of words that have survived the flow of time up to that point. On this surface, as we see, *As*, *Bs* and *Cs* appear all together, regardless of whether they have a long history behind them (*A<sup>1</sup>* and *B<sup>2</sup>*) or a short one (*A<sup>2</sup>* and *B<sup>1</sup>*), or even none (*C*), while those that have already ceased to be active before this point (*Ds*) naturally do not participate in the composition of this surface, regardless of whether they have died out quite recently (*D<sup>1</sup>*) or long ago (*D<sup>2</sup>*). Such a surface

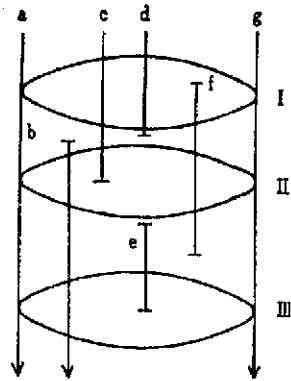


is precisely what we have meant in the preceding pages by 'vocabulary'—an organized system of words and concepts. For it is on such a surface, and on such a surface alone, that words appear to our eyes in the form of a complicated network of concepts. And the point of view which cuts across the historical lines of words and enables us in this way to obtain a static system of words, we call 'synchronic'.

We may do well to remark that vocabulary in this particular sense, i.e., a static surface of words is something artificial, to be very exact. It is a static state produced artificially by our stopping with one stroke the flow of history of all the words of a language at a certain point of time. The resulting cross-section gives us the impression of being static and standing still, but in reality

it only looks like so. To put it in another way, it is static only when we look at it from a macroscopic point of view. Microscopically, the surface is seething with life and movement. This latter point comes out very clearly when a language is in a critical, revolutionary period, like, for example, modern Turkish. Old elements keep dropping off, new elements keep coming in; some of the new-comers find a good place in the system, but many of them disappear quickly to be replaced by others. The whole vocabulary changes its aspect even at very short intervals. And when a language stands in such a stage of transition and transformation, it is extremely difficult to obtain a relatively stable, static surface.<sup>1</sup>

Be this as it may, in normal cases we can obtain as many surfaces as we like by simply making such artificial horizontal cuts across the historical flow of words at several points (cross-sections I, II, III, for example, in the diagram).



And if we compare these surfaces with each other, whether the whole surfaces or only some particular sections of them, we are doing historical semantics.

Historical semantics, thus understood, does not consist in tracing the history of individual words *per se* in order to see how they change their meaning in the course of history. This latter is the typically 19th-century approach to language. Real historical semantics, as we understand it now, begins only when we study the history of words

in terms of the whole static systems to which they belong, when, in other words, we compare with one another two or more 'surfaces' which one and the same language, say Arabic, presents at different stages of its history, separated from each other by an interval of time.

The interval may be made long or short according to the purpose of our analysis. For instance, even the language of the Koran itself may be regarded as a historical process extending over some twenty years with two distinctive periods, the Meccan and the Medinan. In that case, we may quite reasonably make two horizontal cuts across the historical development of this language at these critical points, and compare the two cross-sections with each other, if our

1) This is the main reason why it is so difficult to compile a good dictionary of present-day Turkish.

aim happens to be the semantical study of the development of Islamic thought within the confines of the Koran. In fact, since Theodor Nöldeke published his epoch-making view on this matter, many important discoveries have been made regarding the 'history' of the Koranic vocabulary, which have made it clear that the language of Revelation underwent a profound change semantically after the Prophet's migration to Medina.<sup>2</sup> Or, adopting rather a long-range perspective, we may also reasonably treat the Koranic vocabulary as a whole as a static system and compare it with other systems which came into existence later in Islam, as we are actually going to do in the present chapter.

Now, as a general rule, in the case of a young and vigorously growing culture like that of the early Islam, the historical development of language shows a very marked tendency towards progressing complexity and proliferation. In our particular case, the triumph of Islam established the unshakable authority of the Koran as the Sacred Book, and the direct linguistic effect of this made itself felt in the fact that practically the whole Arabic vocabulary was brought under the sway of the Koranic vocabulary, and the Arabic language in its entirety came to be affected gravely by this fact.

In an attempt to show this in the simplest and clearest possible way, I would isolate three different semantic 'surfaces' in the early history of the Arabic vocabulary: (1) pre-Koranic, or Jähili, (2) Koranic, and (3) post-Koranic, particularly Abbasid. At the first stage thus distinguished, i.e., the pre-Islamic, we have, roughly speaking, three different systems of words, with three different world-views underlying them: (1) a purely Bedouin vocabulary representing the oldest and most typically Arabian Weltanschauung of nomadism, (2) a mercantile vocabulary, which is naturally closely related to, and based on, the former, which, however represents quite a different spirit and world-outlook, an outcome of the recent development of the mercantile economy in Mecca, which is therefore, deeply penetrated by words and ideas peculiar to the merchants of this town,<sup>3</sup> and (3) the Judeo-Christian vocabulary.

2) There is a certain respect in which Prof. Montgomery Watt's works, *Muhammad at Mecca*, Oxford, 1953 and *Muhammad at Medina*, Oxford, 1956, may be rightly regarded as a comprehensive study of this phenomenon. As one of the most interesting examples we may mention the very problematic word *tanakki*, which he discusses from the philological point of view in *Muhammad at Mecca* (Excursus D). He shows there how this word representing the important religious concept of "self-purification" or "being purified" falls off gradually and fades out in course of time before another more important word *islām* meaning "self-surrendering".

3) Regarding the significance of this particular vocabulary in the formation of the

a system of religious terms in use among the Jews<sup>4</sup> and the Christians living in Arabia, including the more problematic Hanifitic system.<sup>5</sup> These three are the major constituents of the pre-Islamic Arabic vocabulary.

The vocabulary of the Koran is, linguistically, a mixture of these three different systems. This does not mean, however, that words drawn from the three different sources exist in the Koran side by side as heterogeneous elements. The Koranic vocabulary is, as has been repeatedly emphasized in the preceding pages, a large semantic field, and as such it is an organized totality, a self-sufficient system of words into which all words, whatever their origin, have been integrated with an entirely new systematic interpretation. Take, for example, again the most important word *Allāh*. The name of *Allāh*, as we have already seen and as we shall see more in detail later, was not unknown to the pre-Islamic Arabs; it was widely known not only within the confines of the monotheistic Judeo-Christian circles, but even among the pure nomads at large. The fact, however, that the word was in use in Jahiliyyah should not make us blind to another more remarkable fact that this same word *Allāh* means something quite different in the Koran from what it meant in pre-Islamic times. And here we see the importance of the methodological concept of 'relational' meaning that has been introduced in the last chapter. The same old word *Allāh* acquires in the Koran quite a peculiar relational meaning because of its position in the organized whole.

If we compare the Koranic vocabulary with the pre-Islamic one as a whole, we notice immediately that the former has the supreme focus-word, *Allāh*, which presides not only over one particular semantic field within the vocabulary, but over the entire vocabulary comprising all the semantic fields, that is, all the smaller conceptual systems that fall under it, while the pre-Islamic system of words has no such supreme focus-word.<sup>6</sup> This is one of the most fundamental differences between the two systems. And although, as we shall see, the pre-Koranic and the Koranic concepts have much in common in the meaning structure—not only as regards the 'basic' meaning but even a greater part of the 'relational' one—yet this one fundamental difference alone is enough to make

Koranic language, see, for instance, C. C. Torrey, *The Commercial-Theological Terms of the Koran*, Leiden, 1892.

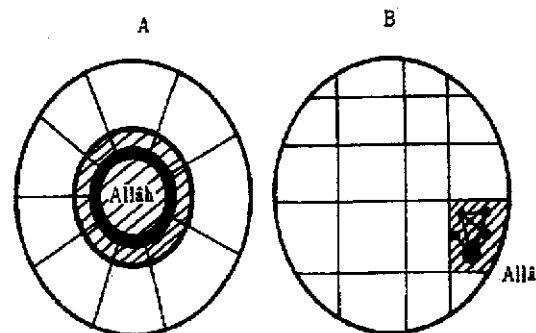
4) We must remember that Medina at that time was one of the biggest centers of Judaism.

5) As regards the Hanifs and their language, see later chapter IV, section V.

6) Except, of course, in the narrower section of the Judeo-Christian monotheistic ideas. But evidently the Jews and Christians are not in any way representative of the pre-Islamic Arabia. They are, after all, a local phenomenon, linguistically at least.

the two systems totally different in nature and structure from each other in regard to the concept of *Allāh*.

In the Koranic system, there is not even one single semantic field that is not directly connected with, and governed by the central concept of *Allāh* (Picture A).<sup>7</sup> This situation it is that, as I said in the last chapter, the non-semanticists usually mean when they say that the world of the Koran is



essentially 'theocentric'. In the pre-Islamic system *Allāh* is but a member of one specific semantic field (Picture B). There is a kind of conceptual coherence in the Koranic world-

view, a sense of a real system based on, and centered round the concept of God, which is not to be found in the Jahili system. For here, in this new system, all the semantic fields, and consequently all the keyterms are under the sway of this central and highest focus-word. In fact, nothing can escape from it; not only those concepts that are directly connected with religion and faith, but all moral ideas, and even concepts representing the most mundane aspects of human life, such as marriage and divorce, inheritance, commercial matters like contracts, debts, usury, weights and measures, etc., have been brought into direct relation with the concept of God.

Moreover, in the Jahili system, the concept of *Allāh* stands side by side with that of *ālibāh* "gods" or "divinities" with absolutely no incompatibility between them, except, of course, in the more narrowly limited and very particular field of *Allāh* peculiar to the pre-Islamic Jews and Christians, which is not being taken account of for the moment.<sup>8</sup> There is in the Jahili system no

7) In the diagram A, the central area surrounding the word *Allāh* represents a semantic field consisting of words which stand for various concepts used in the Koranic description of what *Allāh* "does" and "is". This is what will develop later in Islamic theology into what is known under the name of 'Divine attributes' *ṣifāt Allāh*.

8) For a detailed consideration of the relation between the purely Jahili conception of *Allāh* and the Judeo-Christian one, and the influence which the latter might have exercised upon the former before the name of *Allāh* came into the Islamic system, see chapter IV, which is exclusively devoted to this very problem.

sharp contrast observable between Allāh and other *alibab* even where the former is made to stand at the top of the hierarchy of all supernatural beings. Besides, this semantic field of supernatural beings itself occupies quite a peripheral place in the whole conceptual system of Jahiliyyah in comparison with other more important fields that have more direct relevance to the tribal life of the Arabs, the sense of honor, for example, and social and individual virtues that have nothing at all to do with God and religion.

There should be no misunderstanding here. In the Koranic system, too, there is the concept of *alibab*. We must not confuse the ontological order of things with the semantic one. In other words, the fact that the Koranic world is essentially monotheistic should not lead us into thinking erroneously that, *semantically* as well as ontologically, Allāh stands alone without any peers. On the contrary there *are* concepts of "gods" and "idols" in the Koranic system. Only, all these stand in a negative relation to Allāh; they are there simply as something the existence of which must be denied most emphatically. Speaking in more semantical terms, they are there in the Koran to be connected with the concept of "falsehood" *bāṭil*, while the concept of Allāh is to be connected with that of "truth" *ḥaqq*.

A further implication of the above statement is this: when we say that the name of Allāh came into the Koranic system from the pre-Islamic one, this should not be taken to mean that of all the semantic elements associated with the name, only those that were considered "good" from the Islamic point of view were accepted, while all "bad" elements were simply left behind. The fact is that all the elements, both good and bad, came into the Koranic system, and only in this new field some were accepted and some were rejected. And this process of rejection and acceptance is vividly depicted in the Koran itself. Otherwise, words like *sharik* "partner (viz. of Allāh)" and *nidd* "similar one" would never have been given a place there.

Since the Koran is, linguistically, a work of genuine Arabic, it will readily be seen that all the words used in this Scripture have a pre-Koranic or pre-Islamic background. Many of them came from the rank and file of pre-Islamic Arabic. In other terms, many of them, even those that were raised to the status of key-words in the Koran, had been in pre-Islamic times common words standing far below the level of key-words. Such was for example the word *taqwā* which we shall analyze in detail in a later context.<sup>9</sup> As everybody knows,

9) See chapter IX, section II.

the word acquired in the Koran an enormous importance as one of the most typically Koranic key-terms, one of the corner-stones on which the whole edifice of the Koranic piety was based. But before that, in Jahiliyyah, it was an extremely common word that meant simply a very ordinary sort of animal behavior—self-defensive attitude with an accompanying sense of fear.

But there were also a good number of words that came into the Koran in the capacity of key-terms with an important pre-Islamic history behind them. To put it in another way, some of the Koranic key-words had already been playing in Jahiliyyah a remarkable role as key-words. Only, their semantic structure changed profoundly as they were transposed from one system to the other. As an illustration of the main thesis of this chapter, this latter case presents a more interesting—because more complicated—problem. As a matter of fact, some examples of this phenomenon have been given in the last chapter. But there they were considered in connection with problems of a somewhat different nature. Here I will give an extremely interesting example as a forerunner, so to speak, of what will come later in abundance.

The word I have in mind is *karim*. This word was a very important key-term in Jahiliyyah, meaning nobility of lineage—a man "of noble birth", going back to an illustrious ancestor by an unblemished pedigree. And since, in the old Arab conception of human virtue, extravagant and unlimited generosity was the most conspicuous and concrete manifestation of a man's nobility, *karim* had acquired also the meaning of a man characterized by an extravagant generosity going to the degree of *our* concept of a "squanderer".

The meaning-content of this word had to suffer a drastic change when it was put, in the Koranic context, into a close relation with *taqwā* to which a passing reference has just been made. The Koran declared with utmost clarity that "the most *karim* (noble)" of all men was the one who took the attitude of *taqwā* towards Allāh:<sup>10</sup>

إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاكُمْ

"Surely the noblest of you all in the sight of Allāh is one who is characterized by the greatest *taqwā*".

Such a combination of two words, no one would ever have dreamt of in pre-Islamic times. This old Arabic word *karim*, epitomizing an important aspect of the Arab outlook on life, was almost forcibly—we might say—put into an entirely new sphere of the monotheistic piety of Islam. It would be no

10) Surah *al-Hujrāt* (XLIX), v. 13.

exaggeration to say that this was indeed a revolution, re-creation in the history of the moral ideas of the Arabs, for nobody in ancient Arabia would ever have thought of giving a formal definition of *karam* "nobility" in terms of *taqwà* "fear of God". From now on, a man worthy to be called "noble" in the real sense of the word was not a man of noble birth belonging to a noble family and noble tribe, nor was he a man who would go on squandering impulsively and thoughtlessly all his possessions without stopping to reflect for a moment that he and his whole family might, by his acting in this way, be driven to utter misery and ruin the very next morning. But precisely this latter feature used to be considered the most distinctive mark of a "noble" man. And the ancient poets never tired of praising and extolling this virtue, for it was, together with that of bravery and valor on the battlefield, was almost the only means of preserving one's ancestral honor.

"We seek to defend our ancestral honor", a poet in the *Hamásah* says, "with their (=our camels') meat and with their milk; for, verily, a *karim* is a man who is able to defend (viz. his honor which has been handed down to him from his illustrious ancestors.)"<sup>11</sup>

نُدَافِعُ عَنْ أَحْسَانِنَا بِلُحُومِهَا \* وَأَلْبَانِهَا إِنَّ الْكَرِيمَ يُدَافِعُ

This character which, as I have said, was one of the cardinal virtues in the eyes of the pre-Islamic Arabs, is, from the new Koranic point of view, not a real virtue at all. Nor is it real generosity even, because the ultimate source from which it springs is sheer vainglory and pride, the desire to make a show of generosity. Such a man is, in the language of the Koran,<sup>12</sup> "expends of his wealth simply for the pleasure of an ostentatious display, and not from his belief in Allah and the Last Day".

الَّذِي يُنْفِقُ مَالَهُ رِثَاءَ النَّاسِ وَلَا يُؤْمِنُ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ

In another place<sup>13</sup> it is clearly stated that those who squander away their possession from such a motive are but "brothers of Satan".

وَأَنْتَ ذَا الْقُرْبَىٰ حَقُّهُ وَالْمِسْكِينِ وَابْنِ السَّبِيلِ . وَلَا تُبْذِرْهُ تَبْذِيرًا إِنَّ الْمُبْذِرِينَ  
كَانُوا إِخْوَانَ الشَّيْطَانِ وَكَانَ الشَّيْطَانُ رِيبَهُ كُفُورًا .

"Give the kinsman his due, and the poor, and the wayfarer. But never

11) *Diwan al-Hamásah (sharh al-Marzúqí)*, ed. Ahmad Amin and 'Abd al-Salám Hārún, 4 vols., Cairo, 1951, Number DCCXLVI, 2, the name of the poet unknown.

12) *Sūrah al-Baqarah* (II) v. 266/264.

13) *Sūrah al-Isra'* or *Banā Isra'īl* (XVII) v. 28-29/26-27.

waste in sheer waste for those who squander are brothers of Satan, and Satan is ever ungrateful to his Lord".

Here we see *karim* which once embodied the highest Jahili ideal of reckless generosity as the direct manifestation of nobility, in the process of transforming itself into something entirely new and different through the influence of a new semantic situation. The idea of generosity itself suffers a profound change; at the same time, and in correlation with it, the word *karim* comes to be applied to a truly pious believer who, instead of expending his wealth blindly and thoughtlessly and merely for display, never hesitates to expend it for a definite purpose which is really "noble" in the new conception, i.e., in alms, "in God's way" (*fi sabil Allāh*<sup>14</sup>), being always careful to strike the happy medium between sheer prodigality and sheer miserliness,<sup>15</sup> and that from the deep religious motive of *taqwà*.

Thus one and the same word makes its appearance with the same basic meaning in these two successive systems, but it is given an entirely different value and entirely different connotations according as it is used as a key-term in one or the other because of the particular associations it forms around itself in the particular sector of the system. And exactly the same thing happens between the Koranic vocabulary and the subsequent systems, albeit in a far subtler and, therefore, less obvious way. This we shall see presently.

## II THE KORAN AND THE POST-KORANIC SYSTEMS

When we come down to the third stage of development as distinguished above, that is, the classical, age of Islamic culture, we meet with a proliferation of relatively independent conceptual systems. In other words, Islam produced many different systems of thought in the post-Koranic periods, theology, jurisprudence, political theory, philosophy, mysticism being among the most important of them. Each of these cultural products of Islam developed its own conceptual system, i.e., its own 'vocabulary', itself consisting of a number of sub-systems just as we have seen in the case of the Koranic vocabulary. Thus

14) See, for example, LVII, v. 57; II, v. 263-264/261-262.

15) See XVII, v. 31-32/29-30; XXV, v. 67.