

ARABIC LEXICAL COUPLETS AND THE EVOLUTION
OF SYNONYMY

BARBARA J. KOCH

Arabic writers make frequent use of lexical couplets, pairs of semantic neighbors coordinated with *and*. Unlike English couplets like *aid and abet* or *ways and means*, Arabic couplets are the result of a still-productive semantic strategy; many are nonce forms. A classification of a corpus of approximately eighty couplets on the basis of the semantic relationships between the coordinate terms reveals that newly-created couplets involve terms which modify each other, while older, more frozen couplets involve nearly or completely synonymous terms. On the basis of this evidence and evidence about other patterns of repetition in Arabic discourse, and in line with Saussure's and Jakobson's conception of the dynamic interplay between paradigmatic and syntagmatic structure, I suggest that repeated juxtaposition in discourse may be precisely what accounts for synonymy. In more general terms, paradigmatic classes are created, as well as reflected, in syntagmatic discourse.

1. Introduction¹

Perhaps the clearest way to state the question that underlies this paper would be in the words of a hypothetical English teacher wringing his hands over a set of student essays: "Why do people keep using two words where one would do? Why do newscasters reporting tragedies say that the public is 'shocked and stunned' instead of just 'shocked'? Why are people 'pleased and delighted' instead of just 'pleased' over good news?" I am no more interested in vindicating bad writers than any other linguist is. But there is clearly a reason for this two-words-as-one phenomenon, a reason which turns out, in fact, to shed light on the perplexing question of what paradigmatic structure is and where it comes from.

A lexical couplet, as I will use the term, is a structure like *pleased and delighted*. To put it more rigorously, a lexical couplet is a structure of the form AxB which meets the following criteria:

- 1) x is a coordinating conjunction, usually additive (*and*) but occasionally disjunctive (*or*).
- 2) A and B are synonyms or near-synonyms. The paper will have much more to say about the nature of synonymy, but for the

moment I will use the term in a non-technical sense: synonyms are words that have more or less the same meaning.

- 3) The structure AxB has a single referent; it is used to refer to a single object, action, or state, rather than to two temporally or logically discrete objects, actions, or states.

There are a number of frozen idiomatic lexical couplets in English, including the following:

aid and abet	first and foremost
beck and call	graft and corruption
checks and balances	hard and fast
death and destruction	law and order
decline and fall	leaps and bounds
each and every	null and void
fair and square	slander and libel
fears and anxieties	trials and tribulations
	ways and means

There are, however, relatively few English couplets like those mentioned at the beginning of this paper: couplets in which each of the two terms is also used separately, and which seem more creative and less glued together. Lexical coupling used to occur more frequently in English than it does now; lexical couplets were used extensively, for example, by Shakespeare. These lines from *King Lear*² provide several examples of the effect of non-idiomatic, fresh lexical couplets:

I yet beseech your Maiesty
If for I want that *glib and oylie* Art,
To speake and purpose not, since what I will intend,
Ile do't before I speake, that you make knowne,
It is no vicious blot, murther, or foulness,
No *vnehaste action or dishonoured step*
That hath depriu'd me of your *Grace and fauour*,
But even for want of that, for which I am richer,
A still solliciting eye, and such a tongue,
That I am glad to haue not, though not to haue it,
Hath lost me in your liking.

Lexical couplets have been noted and studied by a number of researchers, who have given them various labels. Vincent Monteil, in a very brief discussion of Arabic couplets (1960: 284) calls them *pléonasmes*; these are defined as 'exprimer le même concepte en "l'encadrant" (comme un artilleur fait de son objectif) entre deux mots synonymes ou de sens voisin.'³ Alfred Beeston, who also discusses Arabic couplets, labels them *hendiadis*. He defines *hendiadis* as 'the use of two words with overlapping semantic spectra to denote

the area of overlap' (1970: 112). But although some lexical couplets are examples of *hendiadis* as Beeston defines it, not all of them are.⁴ Paolo Valesio, from whom the Shakespeare passage above is borrowed, suggests *synonymic dittology* (1980: 42), or 'the expression of a given semantic nucleus through two (less frequently, three or more) synonymous words or phrases. . .' Valesio has studied *synonymic dittology* in Italian folklore, and in Shakespeare. Although what Valesio has studied and what is under examination in this paper do seem to be the same phenomenon and although, as Valesio shows, the term *dittology* has firm etymological roots in ancient Greek, I have chosen the less striking term *lexical couplets*, for purely aesthetic reasons.

Malkiel's (1959) article on *binomials* is also relevant to lexical couplets. Binomials, according to Malkiel, are pairs of words connected with a link which can be a preposition, a conjunction, or a 'zero link.' The words in the pair can be the same (*wall-to-wall*, *years and years*) or formal variants of each other (*bag and baggage*), or they can stand in various semantic relationships to one another, including opposition (*war and peace*) and complementarity (*space and time*) as well as synonymy. Malkiel's focus in this article is on the 'irreversibility' of many binomials, and on the phonological and semantic criteria which determine which of the two items in a pair comes first.

2. Arabic lexical couplets

As part of a larger study of the nature and function of repetition in contemporary Arabic, I have examined a corpus of eighty lexical couplets in Arabic, drawn from written and oral texts by four different authors, suggested by Arabic-speaking informants, and taken from Monteil's (1960: 205-6) list of *pléonasmes*. That a list like Monteil's exists testifies to the high frequency of lexical couplets in Arabic discourse. In fact, twenty-eight of the eighty couplets are from a single twenty-eight page text, where many are used more than once.

Unlike the English couplets listed above, Arabic couplets are the result of a still-productive semantic strategy; many are nonce forms. Thus, Arabic lexical couplets lend themselves to semantic analysis in a way English couplets do not. (Since, for example, *beck* no longer means anything at all by itself, it is impossible to decide what *beck* contributes to the couplet *beck and call*.)

Most Arabic couplets consist of nouns or verbs. The linking conjunction is usually *wa* 'and;' occasionally one finds couplets linked

with 'aw 'or.' Examples of noun couplets are these:

- (1) wuḡūhun wa-jilā'un⁵
clarity and clarity
- (2) al-ta'yīdu wa-al-musāfādatu
the aid and the help

An example of a verb couplet is:

- (3) tatawalladu wa-tanša'u
is-born and emerges

Although many of the noun couplets are used adjectivally or adverbially in prepositional phrases or in accusatives of specification (*tamyīz*) or manner (*ḥāl*), there are very few examples of couplets of adverbs or adjectives. This is partly because there are very few adverbs or adjectives in Arabic; most modification is accomplished with nouns or participial forms of verbs. One example of a participial-adverb couplet is this:

- (4) ḍāhīlan wa-madhūšan
dazed and perplexed

On the whole, noun couplets predominate. Sometimes, though, the couplet phenomenon involves whole phrases, as in these examples:

- (5) imtiḥānun ḥasīrun wa-'azmatun ḥāddatun
a-test difficult and a-crisis acute
- (6) al-'ārā'u allatī 'ubdiyat wa-al-'abḥāṭu
the opinions which were-brought-out and the researches
allatī nuṣirat
which were-published

In example (6) we see both a noun pair ('ārā'un/abḥāṭun) and a verb pair ('ubdiyat/nuṣirat).

3. Semantic categorization of the couplets

The lexical couplets in the corpus can be separated into a number of groups based on the semantic relationships of their first terms to the second terms. A description of each of these groups will enable the reader to get a closer look at some of the couplets. It must be stressed, however, that the procedure of semantic categorization followed in this section is to some extent a straw man which will be knocked down in the next section.

3.1 Modified-modifier couplets

In these couplets, the second term modifies the first term, usually by restricting its meaning or making it more concrete.

- (7) bi-kulli quwwatin wa-ḥiqḥin
with all power and gravity

Here, *ḥiqḥin* 'gravity,' 'heaviness' tells what kind of power: 'weighty power.' This contrasts with

- (8) bi-kulli quwwatin wa-ḥamāsin
with all power and zeal

or 'zealous power.' When *quwwatin* is the second term of a couplet, it serves as a modifier, as in

- (9) bi-kulli ḥunfin wa-quwwatin
with all vehemence and power

This couplet conveys the notion of 'strong vehemence.'

Other modified-modifier couplets are the following:

- (10) al-ḥurūfu wa-al-mulābasātu
the circumstances and the concomitants
(the concomitant circumstances)

- (11) tawārat wa-idmaḥallat
they-disappeared and they-dissipated

In (11), *tawārat* is neutral with respect to the possibility of re-appearance. The second term, *idmaḥallat*, modifies the first term adverbially: 'they disappeared in such a way that they will not reappear.' In couplets (12) and (13) the second term is more concrete than the first: the first is abstract, the second physical.

- (12) ḥawājizun wa-sudūdun
obstacles and dams

- (13) al-ḥadmu wa-al-taxrību
demolition and razing

A verbal example of an abstract-concrete couplet is (14):

- (14) kunnā nukāfiḥu wa-nuqātilu
we-were we-struggle and we-fight
(we were struggling and fighting)

The sense of this couplet is 'we were struggling; in fact, even physically fighting.'

3.2 Implicational couplets

A closely related group consists of couplets in which there is a relationship of implication between the first term and the second. The relationship can go in either direction: the first term can lead to the second, or the second to the first. Couplets in which the implication proceeds from the first term to the second are these:

(15) riḡṣātu xawfin wa-tahayyubin
a-shiver (of) fear and awe

(16) bi-ṣuwarin wa-wasā'ila ṣattā
with forms and means various
(with various forms and means)

In (15), *xawfun* 'fear' causes *tahayyubun* 'awe;' this is similar in meaning, although one step more abstract, than the English *fear and trembling*. In (16), *ṣuwarun* 'forms' lead to *wasā'ilu* 'means,' or actual tools. This is not exactly like English *ways and means*: although there may once have been a distinction in abstractness between *ways* and *means* in this couplet, the expression is now so idiomatic that the two terms are not distinct in meaning.

In couplets (17) and (18), the implication proceeds the other way, from the second term to the first.

(17) al-xibrātu wa-al-tajāribu
experience and experiences

A note on the English gloss will clarify the difference here. Both *al-xibrātu* and *al-tajāribu* are plural forms. But *al-tajāribu* refers to actual events, or even experiments, while *al-xibrātu* refers to the result of these events, the knowledge one gains through having experiences, or, in English, the abstract singular *experience*.

(18) al-ḡarqalatu wa-al-muḡāraḡatu
hindrance and opposition

Here, opposition to an idea leads to attempts to hinder it.

3.3 Hendiadic couplets

A third group of couplets are ones in which the two terms share some meaning element, and it is this shared meaning element which is the referent of the couplet.

(19) al-wahmu wa-al-xayālu
illusion and imagination

Here, *wahmun* is destructive, *xayālu* constructive; the shared notion of unreality is the sense of the couplet.

(20) al-'aṣlā'u wa-al-'anḡādu
the remains and the debris

The shared meaning in this couplet is 'ruins' or 'destroyed things;' 'aṣlā'un are human remains, 'anḡādun are nonhuman remains, like the debris from a ruined building.

3.4 Metaphorical expansion

Particularly in phrasal couplets, like (21), the second term can be a metaphorical version of the first:

(21) kānat hiya al-ḡalla li-kulli muṣkilatin wa-hiya
was it the solution for every problem and it
al-dawā'a li-kulli dā'in
the cure for every ill

(It was the solution for every problem and the cure for every ill.)

3.5 Synonym groups

The preceding four categories of couplets have consisted of pairs in which the meanings of the two items were different enough that it was possible to see how the items acted on one another to create a composite or refined meaning. The couplets in the category of synonym groups, on the other hand, are more difficult to analyze in this way. The members of the couplets in this category, when they occur in couplets, seem to be really synonymous.

Synonym groups are sets of synonymous terms which can be combined almost at will to create couplets. One such set includes the following terms:

taḡawwurātun 'developments'
taḡallubātun 'changes'
ta'yayyurātun 'changes'
'aḡdāḡun 'events, incidents'
xuḡūbun 'events, accidents'

Some of the couplets that can be made with these terms are these:

(22) al-taḡawwurātu wa-al-taḡallubātu
(23) al-taḡallubātu wa-al-tayayyurātu
(24) al-taḡawwurātu wa-al-'aḡdāḡu
(25) al-'aḡdāḡu wa-al-xuḡūbu

It would be misleading to attempt to give each of these couplets or each of the items in them, English glosses: all of them are used for 'occurrences,' 'events,' 'things that happened.' Although there are slight differences in their meanings, they are for the most part used interchangeably.

3.6 Near freezes

Several of the couplets consist of terms which are not distinguishable in meaning, but which are not always used together in a couplet. These couplets are almost idiomatic: the terms have a strong tendency to be used together, but they do not immediately call up

one another, as do the terms in completely frozen couplets. Three examples are these:

- (26) al-šatmu wa-al-sabbu
abuse and insult
- (27) 'afḥālu-hu wa-'aḥmālu-hu
deeds his and works his
(his deeds and his works)
- (28) lā yajūzu wa-lā yumkinu
not it-is-possible and not it-is-doable

The notion of a near-freeze can perhaps be made clearer with reference to some English couplets: *fears and anxieties* is an idiomatic couplet. We can and do, however, use the terms *fears* and *anxieties* separately, and when we hear the word *fears* we do not automatically think of the word *anxieties*. The couplet *beck and call*, on the other hand, is a completely frozen idiom. We never use the word *beck* alone and rarely use the word *call* in this sense ('at his call'). If we were to hear the word *beck* by itself (for example, if someone asked 'What does *beck* mean?') we would immediately think of *call*.

3.7 Freezes

The final category consists of Arabic couplets like *beck and call*. Many of these have religious or ritual origins, just as many English couplet freezes are legalistic. Some examples are these:

- (29) yawmu al-baḥḥi wa-al-nuṣūri
day resurrection and resurrection
(the day of resurrection; the last judgement)
- (30) al-qaḍā'u wa-al-qadaru
judgement and destiny
(fate; the will of God)
- (31) lā yuḥaddu wa-lā yuḥṣā
not it-is-counted and not it-is-numbered
(innumerable; surpassing all number)

4. Discussion: the diachronic perspective

The preceding division of the corpus of couplets into semantic classes was by no means as easy to make as its presentation suggests. In fact, serious problems arose in the attempt. One of the most important questions which had to be answered in examining each couplet was 'are these two words synonyms?' This question proved to be remarkably difficult to answer: sometimes the words seemed to mean the same, then, on further thought, they did not, or vice versa; sometimes the words seemed to become more synonymous the more

we looked at them. It gradually became clear that there were really two questions to be answered, namely, 'Are these two terms synonyms in this couplet?' and 'Would these two terms be considered synonyms if used elsewhere?' In many cases, the answer to the first question was 'yes,' while the answer to the second question was 'no.'

Furthermore, many couplets seemed to be able to fit equally well in several of the semantic classes. The categories are really quite fuzzy at the boundaries; in fact, they are more like clusters of items around points on a continuum ranging from most clearly modificational to most clearly frozen than they are like well-defined classes. If this is the case, then there are not a number of different ways in which lexical couplets can be used. Instead, there is one thing that lexical couplets do, and they do it to a greater or lesser degree. The analytic methodology of classification has not illuminated what this function is.

Thus, there are still two unanswered questions about lexical couplets: What do we mean by 'synonym,' if two words can be synonymous sometimes and not synonymous at other times? and, What are lexical couplets doing linguistically? To answer these two questions, it is necessary to take a different perspective on lexical couplets. Instead of viewing the couplets in the corpus as a synchronic body of data to be described as they occur at a single point in time in the Arabic texts, we need to view the corpus as a reflex of a diachronic process: the process by which *synonymy is created through juxtaposition in discourse*. The more often items appear together in couplets, the more synonymous they become; using things together makes them similar.

This diachronic perspective on lexical couplets helps to answer both the questions posed above. If the continuum of couplet relations described above is seen as the synchronic reflex of the diachronic process of couplet-freeze formation, it becomes quite clear why the couplets are hard to separate into discrete classes. Couplets are originally modificational, but they move inexorably towards the frozen end of the scale. Furthermore, the observer phenomenon by which the couplets came to seem more synonymous the more we looked at them also becomes explicable: as my informant and I examined and discussed the couplets we were using them, and thereby pushing them along the path to synonymy. It should be noted that in suggesting that one take a diachronic perspective on Arabic couplets I am not proposing to do a diachronic study of them. This would be a very large project requiring a great deal of etymological research. If one were to do such a study, I would hypothesize that he would find that the most idiomatic, frozen couplets are the

oldest, and that the items in them originally stood in a modificational relationship to one another.

What we are seeing here, then, is an example of the process by which paradigmatic structure comes to be. Lexical couplets of the English, frozen, *aid and abet* type are Jakobson's (1960) poetic function: paradigmatic equivalence projected onto a syntagm. Arabic modificational couplets—couplets in their earliest, newest interpretation—are the converse: syntagmatic juxtaposition which will ultimately create a synonym paradigm. Syntagmatic association forces interpretation in terms of paradigmatic similarity, which in turn dictates the syntagmatic structuring. As Jakobson puts it (1966: 399):

Phonemic features and sequences, both morphologic and lexical, syntactic and phraseological units, when occurring in metrically or strophically corresponding positions, are necessarily subject to the conscious or subconscious questions whether, how far, and in what respect the positionally corresponding entities are mutually similar.

Using two words where one would do may be a stylistic flaw in English prose, but it may also be one aspect of a key process in the evolution of language: the continual structuring and restructuring of the paradigmatic building blocks.

NOTES

1. This paper is a revised version of one presented at the Linguistic Society of America Annual Meeting, 1982. I would like to thank Mahmoud Al-Batal for his invaluable help in analyzing the data.
2. This version of the speech is from Wilhelm Viëtor (1886) *King Lear: Parallel Texts of the First Quarto and the First Folio with Collations of the Later Quartos and Folios*. Marburg: Elwert/Whittaker 11.222-32. It is discussed in Valesio (1980: 53ff).
3. *Pleonasmus* is the classical term for the use of more words in a sentence than are necessary to express its meaning. This can be either a fault in style, or, if used purposely, a figure of speech (Lausberg 1960: sect. 502, 503).
4. Beeston's definition of hendiadis is somewhat broader than the traditional use of the term. Traditionally, a figure was called hendiadis only if one of the two terms functioned as an attributive to the other, as in 'chomping on iron and bit,' meaning 'chomping on an iron bit.' See 'hendiadys' in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Lausberg's *Handbuch* does not mention the term.
5. Here, and elsewhere, transliterations are made on a morpheme-by-morpheme basis, and do not always reflect actual pronunciation. When the English word order follows the Arabic, only one gloss is given.

REFERENCES

- Beeston, Alfred Felix Landon. 1970. *The Arabic language today*. London: Hutchinson and Co.
- Jakobson, Roman. 1960. Concluding statement: linguistics and poetics. *Style in language*, ed. by Thomas A. Sebeok, 350-77. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- _____. 1966. Grammatical parallelism and its Russian facet. *Lg.* 42.398-429.
- Lausberg, Heinrich. 1960. *Handbuch der literarischen Rhetorik: eine Grundlegung der Literaturwissenschaft*. Munich: M. Hueber.
- Malkiel, Yakov. 1959. Studies in irreversible binomials. *Lingua* 8.113-160.
- Monteil, Vincent. 1960. *L'arabe moderne*. Paris: Librairie C. Klincksieck.
- Valesio, Paolo. 1980. *Novantiqua: rhetorics as a contemporary theory*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Indiana University
Fort Wayne, Indiana