

Semantic changes in Arabic: A comparative study of classical and modern word meanings from a cultural perspective

¹Ahmad Jezy, ²M. Shofiyyur Rahman Hawary, ³Husnatul Hamidiyyah Siregar

¹Sultan Syarif Kasim Riau State Islamic University, Indonesia

²Sultan Syarif Kasim Riau State Islamic University, Indonesia

³Sultan Syarif Kasim Riau State Islamic University, Indonesia

¹ahmadjezy72@gmail.com, ²shorary19@gmail.com,

³husnatul.hamidiyyah.siregar@uin-suska.ac.id

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Abstrak: Bahasa Arab telah mengalami perubahan makna kata-kata (semantic shift) dari era klasik ke era modern, dipengaruhi oleh budaya, teknologi, dan kebutuhan komunikasi baru. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis beberapa contoh kata Arab yang mengalami perubahan makna, membandingkan konteks klasik dan modernnya, serta mengidentifikasi faktor-faktor budaya yang memicu perubahan tersebut. Menggunakan pendekatan diachronik dan kajian dokumen teks klasik dan media modern, penelitian ini menyajikan tabel perbandingan makna klasik dan modern serta diskusi mendalam tentang proses perubahan semantik. Hasilnya menunjukkan bahwa perubahan budaya membawa dampak besar terhadap makna kata dalam bahasa Arab. Perluasan makna mencerminkan fleksibilitas bahasa menghadapi konteks baru; penyempitan makna menunjukkan kecenderungan spesialisasi konsep; sedangkan pergeseran total menjadi indikator adanya lompatan budaya yang besar. Kontribusi penelitian ini adalah memberikan gambaran sistemik tentang bagaimana budaya membentuk perkembangan semantik dalam bahasa Arab dari masa ke masa.

Kata kunci: Bahasa Arab Klasik, Bahasa Arab Modern, Perubahan Makna, Perspektif Budaya.

Abstract: The Arabic language has undergone semantic shifts from the classical era to the modern era, influenced by culture, technology, and new communication needs. This article aims to analyze several examples of Arabic words that have undergone semantic shifts, compare their classical and modern contexts, and identify the cultural factors that triggered these changes. Using a diachronic approach and examining classical texts and modern media, this study presents a table comparing classical and modern meanings and provides an in-depth discussion of the semantic change process. The results show that cultural changes have a major impact on the meaning of words in Arabic. The expansion of meaning reflects the flexibility of language in facing new contexts; the narrowing of meaning indicates a tendency toward conceptual specialization; while a total shift is an indicator of a major cultural leap. The contribution of this study is to provide a systemic overview of how culture shapes semantic development in Arabic from time to time.

Keywords: Classical Arabic, Modern Arabic, Changes in Meaning, Cultural Perspectives.

INTRODUCTION

Language is a highly complex system that reflects various aspects of human thought. It contains unlimited space, capable of accommodating all human knowledge and understanding about the world and the reality around us.¹ Language plays a very important role in the development and progress of a civilization. Its function is not only limited to being a means of communication between individuals, but also plays a role in shaping mindsets and serving as a means of expressing human emotions. In addition, language is the main foundation for all forms of knowledge and is an element that binds social relationships in human life.² Learning a language is a very long and complex activity.³

In essence, human language consists of two main elements, namely sound and meaning. Both elements are dynamic, so they can undergo changes and developments over time. In linguistic studies, the aspect of sound is studied in the branch of phonology, while the aspect of meaning is discussed in the branch of semantics.⁴

Arabic is one of the most popular and widely used Semitic languages. Arabic has undergone complex and dynamic developments due to its long history, significant religious role (especially in Islam), and official status in many Middle Eastern and North African countries. Over time, its phonological and morphological systems, as well as its semantic and lexical elements, have undergone significant transformations.⁵

Many internal factors (such as the economic environment of language) and external factors (such as technological, political, and cultural developments, as well as interlingual interactions) influence changes in word meaning in linguistics. The Arabic language, particularly in its modern form (al-'Arabiyyah al-Mu'āṣirah), evolved from classical Arabic (fusha) and is the form of Arabic used in the modern Arab world for official communication, education, and scientific writing. In addition, Arabic has absorbed many new terms and concepts from the Western world, which have changed the meaning of classical understanding to meet the needs of modern communication.⁶ Cultural changes stemming from technological modernization, globalization, media

¹ Dina Adzkia Izzanti et al., "Hakikat Bahasa dalam Objek Kajian Linguistik," *Semantik* 3, no. 1 (2025): 188–94.

² S. Effendi, "Linguistik sebagai Ilmu Bahasa," *Jurnal Perspektif Pendidikan* 5, no. 1 (2022): 10, <https://www.ojs.stkippgri-lubuklinggau.ac.id/index.php/JPP/article/view/353>.

³ Alam Budi Kusuma, "Pemerolehan Bahasa Pertama Sebagai Dasar Pembelajaran Bahasa Kedua (kajian Psikolinguistik)," *Al-Manar: Jurnal Komunikasi dan Pendidikan Islam* 5, no. 2 (2016): 117–41.

⁴ Balkis Aminallah Nurul Mivtakh, "Sejarah Perkembangan Ilmu Dalalah dan Para Tokoh-Tokohnya," *Tatsqifiy: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Arab* 1, no. 2 (2020): 87–99, doi:10.30997/tjpba.v1i2.2782.

⁵ Mahfud Saiful Ansori, "Perubahan Makna Bahasa: Semantik-Leksikologi," *SEMIOTIKA: Jurnal Ilmu Sastra Dan Linguistik* 2, no. 2 (2021): 151, doi:10.19184/semiotika.v22i2.24651.

⁶ M. Hum Mahridawati, "Leksikon Arab Kontemporer," *Tarbawi* 8, no. 2 (2019): 69–97.

development, and social and political transformation have become central factors that shift people's understanding of the meaning of certain words.

Changes in the meaning of words in contemporary Arabic show that the language is still alive and can adapt to the times. Linguists can analyze this dynamic scientifically using semantic and lexicological approaches. This is very important for the advancement of Arabic language research and the expansion of public understanding of cultural identity and contemporary communication in the Arab world. Not only semantic changes, but also often ideological, social, and cultural meanings.⁷

Theoretically and practically, Arabic is no different from other languages in that it can evolve for the benefit of its speakers. This is because a language will live as long as its community uses it and will die if its community stops using it.⁸

Based on the above explanation, Arabic, as one of the major classical languages, has a strong literary cultural tradition. However, with the passage of time and the emergence of modernity, globalization, technology, and lifestyle changes, many words in classical Arabic have undergone a transformation in meaning. Therefore, it is important to understand how culture influences the meaning of words so that the study of classical texts and their use in modern contexts becomes richer and more accurate.

Previous research on changes in Arabic meaning has been general in nature and has not directly highlighted the relationship between modern culture and shifts in vocabulary meaning. Ilmiatun (2022) and Asriyah (2017) only discuss historical developments in meaning without mapping the influence of contemporary culture. Jannah (2025) does examine changes in meaning in modern Arabic, but does not systematically compare classical and modern meanings and has not linked them to factors such as technology, globalization, and lifestyle. Other studies, such as Hakimi et al. (2023) and Tiawaldi & Wahab (2017), focus on language absorption or semantic analysis of modern media without a diachronic approach. In addition, many studies are still theoretical and do not include concrete examples of words whose meanings have changed due to cultural developments. This reveals a gap in the form of a lack of research that comprehensively combines historical analysis, modern linguistics, and cultural factors.

The novelty of this research lies in its integrative approach, which links changes in the meaning of Arabic words with cultural factors from classical to modern times. This research not only identifies forms of meaning change (expansion, narrowing, shift), but also explains the causes, ranging from communication

⁷ Anisatul Jannah, "Perubahan Makna Kata Dalam Bahasa Arab Modern : Kajian Semantik Dan Leksikologis," *Jurnal Inovasi Metode Pembelajaran* 7, no. 3 (2025): 103–15, doi:10.19184/semiotika.v22i2.24651.2.

⁸ Abdul Mu'in, *Analisis Konstruktif Bahasa Arab dan Bahasa Indonesia: Telaah Terhadap Fonetik dan Fonologi* (Jakarta: Pustaka al-Husna Baru, 2004).

technology, transportation modernization, media globalization, to socio-political transformation. This study also presents a comparative table of classical and modern meanings for words such as *حاسوب*, *قلم*, *سيارة*, *هاتف*, and *قطار*, providing a more systematic and empirical diachronic overview. This approach, based on historical and contemporary data, offers a methodological contribution that is rarely found in Arabic semantic studies.

The purpose of this study is to compare the meanings of Arabic vocabulary in classical and modern contexts through a diachronic semantic approach, identify types of meaning change, and explain the cultural factors that influence them, including technology, modernization, globalization, and social change. This research also aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the relationship between culture and semantic development, thereby benefiting learners, teachers, and researchers in understanding classical texts and the use of modern Arabic.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative method with a semantic analysis approach. This method was chosen because the purpose of the study is to understand and describe the phenomenon of changes in word meaning due to cultural influences, rather than to measure it quantitatively. Data collection was carried out using reading and note-taking techniques, then the data was analyzed and presented in the form of descriptions.

Data was obtained from classical dictionaries such as *Lisān al-‘Arab* and *Al-Mu‘jam al-Wāsiṭ*, as well as modern usage in mass media and the internet. The analysis was carried out by comparing classical and modern meanings and identifying the types of semantic changes that occurred.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Changes in Word Meaning

One characteristic that is also the essence of every language is that language is dynamic. In the context of the essence of language, Chaer and Agustina say that dynamic means that language is not immune to various changes that can occur at every linguistic level, such as phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and lexicon.⁹

In semantics, there are two terms related to changes in meaning, namely: semantic shift and semantic change. Semantic shift refers to the expansion, narrowing, connotation, synesthesia, and association of a word's meaning that still exists within a single semantic field. In semantic shift, the original reference does not change or get replaced, but the original reference undergoes an expansion or narrowing of its reference. The difference with semantic

⁹ Abdul Chaer dan Leonie Agustina, *Sosiolinguistik Perkenalan Awal* (Jakarta: PT Rineka Cipta, 1995).

change is that in semantic change, the reference changes while the symbol remains the same.¹⁰

A shift in meaning can be defined as a change or shift in meaning within a sentence in the form of expansion, narrowing, connotation, synesthesia, and association of meaning from the original sentence that remains unchanged or is replaced with the original sentence that has undergone expansion or narrowing of reference. This can also be considered as a symptom of the shift of the original sentence from the same sound symbol and a change in its original reference.¹¹

Many things are related to changes in meaning, including broad changes in meaning, narrow or specific changes in meaning, total changes in meaning or changes that are completely different from the original meaning, euphemistic changes in meaning, and vulgar changes in meaning.¹² The causes of development or changes in meaning can come from external and internal sources. External sources include civilization and social development. Meanwhile, internal sources include the use of language itself.¹³

From the previous explanation, we can conclude that the Arabic language's semantic system remains flexible over time, allowing for changes in the meaning of vocabulary without losing the basic meaning of the language.

External factors such as the influence of foreign languages, especially English and French, which have entered through the media, education, and technology, have caused the Arabic language to undergo significant linguistic changes, especially in terms of understanding and structural usage. The following are examples of words that have undergone changes in meaning in Arabic:

Word	Classical Meaning	Modern Meaning	Type of Change
سيارة	The passing group	Car	Narrowing
هاتف	Unseen voices / formless whispers	call Telephone	Expansion
شبكة	Net for catching fish	Internet/Digital network	Expansion
قناة	Canal/water channel	TV channel	Expansion
فأرة	Mouse	Computer mouse	Metaphor

Types of Meaning Change

Changes in meaning in Arabic are a linguistic phenomenon that arises naturally in response to the social and cultural dynamics of Arab societies over time. There are three types

¹⁰ Joniska Wwan Saputra et al., "Bahasa Arab Dan Tantangan Zaman : Perubahan, Pergeseran, Dan Strategi Pemertahanan," *Tadris Al-Arabiyyat: Jurnal Kajian Ilmu Pendidikan Bahasa Arab* 5, no. 2 (2025): 301-18.

¹¹ Ida Nursida, "Perubahan Makna Sebab dan Bentuknya: Sebuah Kajian Historis," *Alfaz* 2, no. 2 (2014): 46-61.

¹² Abdul Chaer, *Pengantar Semantik Bahasa Indonesia* (Jakarta: PT Rineka Cipta., 2002).

¹³ Asriyah, "Bahasa Arab Dan Perkembangan Makna," *Diwan : Jurnal Bahasa Dan Sastra Arab* 03, no. 01 (2017): 36, doi:10.24252/diwan.v3i1.2911.

of changes in meaning that occur in Arabic vocabulary, namely: broadening of meaning, narrowing of meaning, and complete change of meaning. Analysis of the data shows that these changes do not occur randomly, but rather follow patterns of culture, technology, and the communicative needs of Arabic speakers.

1. Widespread Changes in Meaning (توسيع المعنى)

Semantic extension occurs when a word that originally had a limited semantic scope develops to encompass new, broader meanings. This process is commonly found in vocabulary that has undergone transformation due to socio-cultural influences and the advent of modern media technology. Example:

Word	Classical Meaning	Modern Meaning
صحافة	Things related to written pages	Journals/print and digital media
رجل	Lower part of the human body	Lower part of an object Table legs, mountain legs
مجلس	Seating area	Meeting, conference, or hearing
شبكة	Net for catching fish	Internet/Digital network
قناة	Canal/water channel	TV channel or channel

A change in meaning in the form of addition or expansion is a phenomenon that occurs in a word or lexeme that originally had only one meaning, but then, due to various factors, acquired other meanings. Meaning expansion occurs when a word acquires additional meanings that are broader than its original meaning, and the word is extended to new contexts that are conceptually similar.¹⁴ This phenomenon demonstrates the dynamics of language influenced by social and cultural developments in society. Because they are used in more diverse or broader contexts than before, words that previously had limited meanings can develop new meanings.

The tendency of language users to broaden the referential scope of a term for the sake of ease of communication causes this expansion of meaning. As a result, a word can have additional meanings that were not previously included in the scope of its original language users. This expansion of meaning shows that the Arabic lexicon is not stable and can change according to the social and cultural circumstances and communication needs of the language's speakers.

2. Narrowing of Meaning (تضييق المعنى)

Unlike expansion, narrowing of meaning occurs when a word that originally had a broad meaning is narrowed to refer to a more specific concept. This process is

¹⁴ Jannah, "Perubahan Makna Kata Dalam Bahasa Arab Modern: Kajian Semantik Dan Leksikologis."

often associated with the development of scientific disciplines, religious institutions, and modern social systems.

Narrowing of meaning (taḍyīq al-ma'nā) is when a word that previously had a broad meaning is reduced or limited to be more specific. This is different from broadening of meaning. This process shows that society is changing the way they understand certain words. These changes in meaning are usually caused by cultural changes, technological advances, or the need to distinguish between concepts that were not previously distinguished lexically. Narrowing of meaning occurs when a word that previously had a broad meaning becomes narrow or specific in its use, with the word being used consistently in a particular context to the extent that other meanings are rarely used. Example:

Word	Classical Meaning	Modern Meaning
عالم	A knowledgeable person/scientist	Islamic scholar/intellectual
دابة	Anything that crawls on the earth	Four-legged animal
نجم	Anything that shines	Star/planet
طائر	Anything that flies	Specific bird
زكاة	Growth	A specific form of worship involving wealth

3. Total/Complete Change in Meaning

A complete change in meaning means changing the meaning of a word from its original meaning to a new meaning, even though there may be a connection between the original meaning and the new meaning. A change in social connotation occurs when a word acquires a new meaning influenced by social, cultural, and religious changes.¹⁵ Example:

Word	Classical Meaning	Modern Meaning
صلاة	Worshiping gods in	Hinduism Prayer in Islam
حرية	Freedom in slavery	Freedom of thought, speech, and expression
قطار	Camels walking in a row	Train
سوق	Place of gathering	Place of buying and selling
عم	Elderly man	Paternal uncle (father's brother)

Based on all of the above examples, it can be concluded that changes in the meaning of words in Arabic are strongly influenced by cultural developments, especially technology, globalization, social change, and the development of modern science. The expansion of meaning reflects the flexibility of language in facing new contexts; the narrowing of meaning indicates a tendency toward conceptual

¹⁵ Adit Tiawaldi dan Muhibb Abdul Wahab, "Perkembangan Bahasa Arab Modern Dalam Perspektif Sintaksis Dan Semantik Pada Majalah Aljazeera," *Arabiyat : Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Arab dan Kebahasaaraban* 4, no. 1 (2017): 1-19.

specialization; while a total shift in meaning is an indicator of a major cultural leap. These three processes prove that Arabic, like other languages, is a living entity that continues to adapt to the world of its users.

Changes in the Meaning of Cultural Factors

Social and cultural factors also play an important role in changing the meaning of Arabic. This is because every social change, including values, culture, and social structure, requires new terms or redefinitions of old terms in order to remain relevant.

For example, the word “حجاب” (ḥijāb), which literally means ‘barrier’ or “cover,” had a general meaning in classical Arab society. However, in contemporary Islamic society, its meaning has become more specific, referring to the “veil” or “Muslim clothing” worn by women. This demonstrates the influence of social norms, religious movements, and interpretations of Sharia law on the meaning of the word.¹⁶

The semantic changes caused by these social transformations show that the understanding of word meanings depends on the historical and cultural context of society. Therefore, studies of Arabic semantics must consider socio-cultural developments as an important component in meaning change. The following are examples of Arabic vocabulary that have undergone meaning change due to cultural factors:

Word	Classical Meaning	Modern Meaning	Type of Change	Influential Cultural Factors
هاتف (hātif)	Unseen voices / formless whispers	Telephone (a device for long-distance voice communication)	Extension of Meaning	Modern communication technology; globalization.
سيارة (sayyārah)	The passing group	Car	Narrowing	Modern transportation; urbanization
قلم (qalam)	Quill pen, a traditional writing instrument	All types of modern writing instruments	Expansion of Meaning	Educational development; various new media and writing tools
حاسوب (hāsūb)	Calculating manually or estimating	Computer	Expansion of Meaning	Digital technology; spreading the concept of computers to the Arab world
مصباح	Traditional oil lamp	Electric lights (bulbs, neon)	Expansion of Meaning	Modernization of lighting;

¹⁶ Fauzan Hakimi et al., “Transformasi Makna Kata Serapan Bahasa Arab Pada Bahasa Indonesia Dalam Istilah Agama Islam Dari Aspek Bahasa Dan Budaya,” *Riyahuna: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa dan Sastra Arab* 3, no. 1 (2023): 1–17.

(misbāh)		lights, LEDs)		urbanization & electrification
جريدة (jarīdah)	Palm fronds as an ancient writing medium	Newspapers, print and digital media that disseminate news	Shift & Expansion of Meaning	The development of print media; literacy; modern education
سياسة (siyāsah)	Training/taming horses / simple arrangements	Politics, governance & public administration	Shift & Expansion of Meaning	The development of nation states; modern systems of government
مذيع (midyāʿ)	(Not found in the classical era; the term is derived from the root word أذاع)	Radio	Neologisme/Makna Baru	The invention of broadcasting devices; the influence of foreign technology
قطار (qithār)	Camels or lines on long-distance journeys	Train	Shift of Meaning	Modern transportation infrastructure; industrialization
صاروخ (shārūkh)	A burning flame or a fast-moving object (such as fireworks)	Rocket / missile	Shift & Expansion of Meaning	Military; space exploration; high technology
تِلْفَاز (tilfāz)	Modern neologisms, not found in classical texts.	Television	Creation of new meanings (neologisms)	The globalization of entertainment technology.
بريد (barīd)	Royal courier on horseback	Pos; email (al-barīd al-iliktrūnī)	Expansion of Meaning	Contemporary communication culture.
كتاب (kitāb)	Al-Qur'an	Written sheets, notes, printed books.	Expansion of Meaning	Modern printing narrows the meaning.
مكتب (maktab)	A place for children to learn to write.	Office.	(semantic shift)	Modern bureaucratic culture.
طائرة (ṭā'irāh)	Birds, something that flies.	Airplane.	Shifting and narrowing of meaning	Aviation technology gives new meaning

Changes in meaning in Arabic show that language evolves in line with the cultural dynamics of society. The findings of this study show that technological innovation, social change, and political developments are the main factors driving the resemantization of various vocabulary.

From the previous discussion, the social and cultural background of a society is one of the factors that causes language to undergo changes or shifts in meaning.¹⁷ The meaning of words in a language changes along with changes in social structure, values, and customs. These changes are a natural response of language to social change, demonstrating that language is not a static system, but changes along with the dynamics of the society that speaks it.¹⁸

Transportation developments changed the meaning of the words *سيارة* and *قطار* from traditional concepts of travel to modern vehicles. Communication technology also gave new meanings to *هاتف* and *مذياع*, adapting to the advent of telephones and radios. Meanwhile, political modernization expanded the meaning of *سياسة* from simply “taking care of horses” to “managing state affairs.”

In general, changes in meaning are influenced by four main factors: 1) Technological modernization, which introduces new meanings such as in *حاسوب* and *طائرة*. 2) Changes in lifestyle, which modify old meanings such as *مكتب* and *جريدة*. 3) Globalization, which adapts foreign terms such as *تلفاز* and *راديو*. 4) Communication needs, which expand the use of old words such as *قلم* and *كتاب*.

CONCLUSION

Cultural changes have a significant impact on the meaning of words in Arabic. From the examples above, it can be seen that Arabic vocabulary is able to adapt to the times. The words *قلم*, *سيارة*, *هاتف*, and *حاسوب* are only a small part of a broader semantic phenomenon. Semantic studies prove that language evolves according to the culture of its users. By understanding these changes in meaning, learners of Arabic can be more discerning in interpreting classical texts while using the language in a relevant way in the modern era. These semantic studies show that meaning is never static, but always changes according to social, cultural, and technological needs.

For Arabic learners, understanding the differences between classical and modern meanings is very important. This is to avoid misunderstandings when reading classical texts such as the Qur'an, hadith, and ancient literature, as well as when using Arabic in the contemporary era.

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¹⁷ Ibrahim et al., “Faktor sosial yang berpengaruh terhadap pergeseran bahasa lowa,” *Kembara: Jurnal Keilmuan Bahasa, Sastra, dan Pengajarannya* 5, no. 2 (2019): 208–18, doi:https://doi.org/10.22219/KEMBARA.Vol5.No2.208-218.

¹⁸ Ayu Wandira et al., “Sejarah Bahasa Arab Dalam Penyebaran Agama Islam Di Indonesia Abad 20,” *Menulis : Jurnal Penelitian Nusantara* 1, no. 4 (2025): 1–5, doi:https://doi.org/10.59435/menulis.v1i4.202 Website.

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