

THE PHENOMENON OF WORD FORMATION AND ITS SCHOLARLY INTERPRETATION IN THE WORK MIFTAH AL-ULUM

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18442088>

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Abstract

This article analyzes the phenomenon of ishtiqoq (etymological derivation) in Arabic linguistics based on Abu Ya'qub al-Sakkaki's seminal work, *Miftah al-Ulum*. The study examines morphological patterns of word formation and the relationship between root and derived forms through the prism of Sakkaki's unique scientific methodology. Furthermore, the paper elucidates the fundamental perspectives and scholarly debates between the Basra and Kufa schools of linguistics regarding the origins of derivation.

Keywords

Abu Ya'qub al-Sakkaki, *Miftah al-Ulum*, *ṣarf* (morphology), *ishtiqoq* (derivation), radical letters, non-radical letters, word.

A scholarly engagement with *Miftāh al-‘Ulūm* reveals that the work is fundamentally oriented toward the correct recitation and precise hermeneutics of the Holy Qur'an. Emphasizing this objective, al-Sakkākī commences his treatise with the following verse: "Thus do We explain the signs in various ways for those who are grateful" (Surah al-A'raf, 7:58) [2:9]. Al-Sakkākī interprets the methodological essence of *ṣarf* (morphology) through the Quranic term *nusarrifu* (We explain in various ways). In Arabic linguistics, the derivation of words via morphological patterns is also formally designated as *‘Ilm al-Taṣrīf* (the science of inflection/transformation) [cf. 5:287].

The phenomenon of *Ishtiqāq* (derivation) has been extensively scrutinized within the Arabic linguistic tradition, serving as the focal point for numerous scholarly debates regarding word formation. Al-Sakkākī maintains a distinct perspective on this linguistic process. Due to their systematic rigor, he designates these principles as *Qawānīn al-Ishtiqāq* (The Laws of Derivation) [1:5b]. While these laws align with the broader consensus of the grammatical tradition, they are

distinguished by significant original insights. Furthermore, these principles are deeply rooted in—and substantiated by—the conclusions of the preeminent schools of Arabic philology.

In the Arabic linguistic framework, the process of word formation is termed *Ishtiqāq*, which stands as the most productive method of lexical generation. Etymologically derived from the root *sh-q-q*, the term denotes "splitting," "derivation," or "origination."

The renowned contemporary linguist Muḥammad Ibrāhīm defines the term as follows: "Ishtiqāq is the process of deriving one word from another, wherein the two share a semantic core and structural affinity, executed according to specific morphological patterns and grammatical rules" [9:169]. Historically, until the mid-4th century AH, this phenomenon was primarily known as *al-Ishtiqāq al-Ṣaghīr* (Small Derivation) or *al-Asghar* (The Smallest). Toward the end of the 4th century AH, Ibn Jinnī expanded this discourse by introducing a new category involving derived words within a broad semantic field, which he termed *al-Ishtiqāq al-Kabīr* (Great Derivation) or *al-Akbar* (The Greatest) [5:140].

Sakkaki provides the following analysis regarding this linguistic phenomenon: وإذا تمهد هذا فنقول الطريق على ذلك هو أن تبتدئ فيما يحتمل التنويع من حيث انتهى الواقع في تنويعه وهي الأوضاع الجزئية. فترجع منها القهاري في التجنيس وهو التعميم إلى حيث ابتدأ منه وهو وضعه الكلي لتلك الجزئية كنحو أن تبتدئ من مثل لفظ المتبادر وهو موضع التبادر إلى معنى أعم في لفظ التبادر وهو المبادنة من الجانبين ثم ترد التبادر إلى أعم وهو المبادنة من جانب في لفظ بابن ثم ترده إلى أعم وهو حصول البينونة في لفظ بابن ثم ترده إلى أعم وهو مجرد البابن وهذا هو الذي يعني أصحابنا في هذا النوع بالإشتغال.

Abstract/Content: "If we are to engage with this matter, we state the following: the path leading to it involves the exhaustive transformation of a single form into various derivative structures. These diverse forms are particular (partial) manifestations, and the student, in the process of transformation, traces the form back to its origin. Returning to the starting point constitutes *ta'mīm* (generalization). The general form inherently pertains to the preceding particular form. For instance: *mutabāyin* (distinct/divergent) is derived from the word *tabāyun* (divergence); if reverted to a general meaning, these two derived terms trace back to the general form *mubāyanah* (differentiation). If the word *tabāyun* is generalized, it becomes *mubāyanah* in consideration of the root *bāyana*. Furthermore, if *bāyana* and *bāna* are returned to a state of generality, they trace back to the primary form, the masdar (verbal noun) *bayn* (separation). This is the view held by our companions" [1: 4b].

It is evident from the aforementioned definition that the morphological template (pattern) occupies a central position in the field of word formation within Arabic linguistics. Identifying the primary morphological root of a derivative word

is carried out systematically, as detailed in this definition. The objective is to simplify the process for the learner. In the definition, the application of the primary form or root to the morphological pattern *mutafā'il* led to the formation of the word *mutabāyin* (distinct). The meaning of the primary root is intrinsically linked to the semantics of the newly formed words, while phonetically, it maintains the consistency of the root consonants. (For example, in the words *mutabāyin* "distinct," *tabāyun* "divergence," *mubāyanah* "differentiation," and *bayn* "separation," the root consonants are consistently represented by *b-y-n* / ب-ي-ن).

There is an ongoing debate among Arabic linguists regarding the origin of *ishtiqāq* (derivation), which primarily occurs between the two major schools of Arabic linguistics. *Sakkāki*'s notation, "This is the view held by our companions," serves as a reference to the representatives of the Basra school of linguistics.

The Debate on the Origin of Derivation: Basran vs. Kufan Schools

The question of whether the origin of derivation (*ishtiqāq*) is the noun or the verb remains a subject of significant scholarly debate. Arab grammarians from the schools of Basra and Kufa engaged in extensive intellectual discourse regarding this matter. According to the Basran scholars, the origin of derivation is the *masdar* (verbal noun), as the verb is derived from it. Conversely, the Kufan scholars maintain the opposite view, asserting that the verb serves as the primary root. Both schools provide substantial evidence to support their respective positions.

Arguments of the Basran Scholars:

1. **Temporal Indeterminacy:** The *masdar* does not signify tense, whereas the verb is inherently bound to a specific time frame. Since the lack of temporal constraint is a characteristic of a primary root, the *masdar* constitutes the origin of the verb.

2. **Semantic Independence:** The *masdar* is a noun. A noun conveys meaning independently without relying on a verb, while a verb requires a noun to complete its semantic function. A true origin (asl) must possess the capacity for independent signification.

3. **Etymological Nomenclature:** The very term "masdar" (literally meaning "source" or "point of origin") signifies its role as the root of the verb.

4. **Conceptual Simplicity:** The *masdar* expresses a single concept—the occurrence of an action (event). The verb, however, expresses both the action and its temporality. Just as a single element precedes a composite one, the *masdar* serves as the foundation for the verb.

5. **Morphological Constancy:** The *masdar* represents a singular, unified meaning, whereas verbs branch into various forms and meanings. This is

analogous to gold as a raw material: the substance remains one, while the jewelry crafted from it takes many forms.

Arguments of the Kufan Scholars:

1. The most significant aspects of the aforementioned scholarly debate have been presented Morphological Correlation: The phonetic and structural integrity of the masdar often mirrors that of the verb. If the verb contains weak letters (ilala), the masdar follows suit; if the verb is sound, the masdar remains sound.

2. Emphatic Function: The masdar is frequently used to emphasize the meaning of the verb (maf'ul mutlaq). In linguistic hierarchy, the element being emphasized (the verb) is superior to the element providing the emphasis.

3. Existence of Defective Verbs: There are certain "frozen" or non-inflecting verbs (al-af'āl al-jāmida) such as ni'ma, bi'sa, 'asā, laysa, and habbadhā that lack a masdar. If the masdar were the true origin, these verbs could not exist without one.

4. Syntactic Causality: The verb acts as the catalyst for the usage of the masdar in a sentence. Therefore, the masdar is viewed as a functional extension of the verb.

5. Agent-Dependency: A masdar cannot convey a complete meaning without the implied action of an agent (fā'il). Since the masdar derives its full conceptual realization through the verb, the verb must be its origin [6: 235-245].

In the Arabic language, there exist words that are not etymologically linked to the verb or the masdar (verbal noun); these are categorized as auxiliary parts of speech. This implies the existence of primary (non-derived) words that are not formed based on any morphological pattern. The phenomenon of ishtiqaq (derivation) is a broad linguistic process primarily associated with nouns (substantives, adjectives, numerals, pronouns) and verbs. Furthermore, the process of derivation is not observed in loanwords, onomatopoeic words, or indeclinable particles that maintain a fixed syntactic role [4: 35].

Ibn Jinni, a preeminent figure in Arabic linguistics, defines derivation as follows: "In my view, derivation is of two types: minor derivation (al-ishtiqaq al-saghir) and major derivation (al-ishtiqaq al-kabir). Minor derivation involves taking the root consonants of a word, meticulously examining the extracted letters, and unifying them around specific semantic cores; naturally, in this synthesis, the structural systems and nuances of the words remain distinct" [3: 133-134]. For instance, from the root consonants s-l-m (س ل م - to be safe/sound), the word salamah (safety) is derived. By applying specific morphological patterns to these root letters, words such as salim (healthy), silm (peace), yaslamu (he becomes

healthy), and Salman (proper noun) are formed. This linguistic phenomenon is classified as minor derivation (الاشتقاق الصغير).

Greater derivation (al-ishtiqaq al-akbar), on the other hand, is observed specifically within triliteral roots. In this process, the positions of the three root consonants are permuted to create six possible combinations, all of which are unified by a core meaning. For example, the permutations of q-w-l (ق و ل, و ق ل, ل و ق, ق ل و, ل ق و, و ل ق) revolve around the semantic notions of "lightness" and "speed." This linguistic phenomenon is regarded as the "greatest derivation" [3: 133-134].

In contrast to the above definition, Al-Sakkaki writes: "If additional meanings are superimposed upon a general meaning, and if three distinct letters are arranged into six forms, four letters into twenty-four forms, and five distinct letters into one hundred and twenty forms according to a specific order, this constitutes ishtiqaq kabir (great derivation)" [1: 5a].

Among medieval Arabic grammarians, Ibn Duraid categorizes derivation (ishtiqāq) into three distinct types: "Derivation is the process of extracting a word from another to convey a specific new meaning, realized through defined relationships between the two lexemes. It is divided into three forms: if the constituent letters and their vocalizations follow a sequential order, it is termed minor derivation (al-ishtiqāq al-asghar); for example, al-akl (eating) derived from the verb akala (to eat). If the root letters are present but do not follow a strict sequence, it is classified as major derivation (al-ishtiqāq al-akbar); for instance, al-jadhb (pulling) from the verb jabadha (to drag). Furthermore, if the formation of a new word from a root involves the substitution of phonetically similar consonants during articulation, it is defined as greatest derivation (al-ishtiqāq al-akbar al-aqṣā); an example being na'aqa (to bray/croak) as a variant of an-haqa (to bray)" [8: 31].

Arabic is regarded as one of the most prolific languages globally in terms of word formation via morphological paradigms. In this regard, it shares typological similarities with Classical Latin and several other members of the Semitic language family [7: 37].

The lexicon is in a state of perpetual flux, and its development and enrichment occur through various mechanisms: lexical borrowing from other languages, general word formation, and the generation of new lexemes based on specific morphological templates. Word formation is a multidimensional linguistic phenomenon, facilitated by diverse instruments, methods, and specific morphological affixes. The discipline of word formation (morphology) investigates the methods of generating new lexemes, the specific characteristics of the

morphological paradigms involved in this process, and the unique phenomena that occur therein.

The prominent Arabic linguist Raji Asmar defines derivation as follows: "Derivation is a component that diverges from an original source; upon this separation, the radical letters of the root must be reflected within that component" [5: 139]. As previously noted, the phenomenon of derivation is structured by specific morphological paradigms. These paradigms consist of both radical (root) and augmentative letters. This process is governed by established linguistic laws, which are contingent upon morphological, semantic, and phonetic factors.

Sakkaki provides the following insights regarding ishtiqaq (etymology/derivation) and its fundamental characteristics: "Regarding the phenomenon of radical letters, it entails a process that requires a specific standard of constituent letters to achieve analogies where particular meanings revert to a general core meaning. This process does not preclude the modification, omission, or augmentation of letters; rather, all such changes are governed by established linguistic laws. The phenomenon of metathesis (al-qalb) also occurs in 'minor derivation' (al-ishtiqaq al-asghar). Even if it appears absolute, a specific rule is always involved. If a word were formed without these specific rules, it would be linguistically invalid. These rules manifest as letters, which are designated as 'radical letters' (root letters). Letters in a word other than the radicals are referred to as 'augmented letters' (ziyada). To identify the radical letters, they are systematically replaced with the morphological paradigm markers f'-a-1 (ف ع ا). If the radicals consist of four or five letters, the letter l (ل) is appended" [2: 17].

The morphological markers presented in this definition have been acknowledged by other scholars as well. Continuing his exposition, the scholar writes: "When the morphological form of a word is intended, it is realized through these letters. The structure composed of these letters is termed a 'template' or 'pattern' (qālib)" [2: 17].

Discerning the morphological template of a word facilitates the identification of its augmented letters. For instance, if the morphological form of the word madrasa (school) is mapped onto the aforementioned paradigmatic letters, the template maf'ala (مفعلة) is derived. In this structure, the letters mīm (م) and tā (ت) are augmented, while d-r-s (درس) constitutes the original radical letters. This morphological template is of paramount significance in derivation from semantic, morphological, and phonetic perspectives:

- Semantically: This template denotes a location characterized by the habitual repetition of an action or the permanent presence of an object. In this regard, the

word madrasa signifies a place where the process of "studying" repeatedly occurs – namely, a "school."

- Phonetically:

1. A new lexeme cannot be formed if the radical letters are not arranged in their systematic order.

2. Word formation is impossible without identifying the non-radical (augmented) letters.

- Morphologically: A valid word cannot be formed if augmented letters and radical letters are conflated without order.

All these processes are considered linguistic phenomena intrinsically linked to the morphological template.

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