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## Lisān al-ʿArab as a Model of Lexicographical Authority in Arabic Tradition

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### ABSTRACT

*This study examines Lisān al-ʿArab by Ibn Manẓūr as a foundational epistemological system within the tradition of classical Arabic lexicography, challenging its conventional characterization as merely a comprehensive lexical repository. The research argues that the work represents a sophisticated act of methodological synthesis in which centuries of dispersed linguistic knowledge are reorganized into a coherent structure governed by transmission (naql), authority, and intertextual validation. Adopting a qualitative, textually grounded, and comparative methodology, the study analyzes selected lexical entries alongside their antecedents in earlier dictionaries such as Kitāb al-ʿAyn, Tahdhīb al-Lughah, and Al-Ṣiḥāḥ. The findings demonstrate that meaning in Lisān al-ʿArab is not independently generated but constructed through hierarchical textual authority, primarily drawing upon Qurʾānic discourse, Hadith literature, and pre-Islamic poetry. The trilateral root system is shown to function not merely as a morphological tool but as an epistemological framework that organizes semantic relationships into structured conceptual networks. Furthermore, the study establishes that Ibn Manẓūr's role extends beyond compilation to that of an epistemic synthesizer who reconfigures inherited material into a unified knowledge architecture. The research concludes that Lisān al-ʿArab represents both the culmination and stabilization of classical Arabic lexicography, marking a point of epistemological closure in the tradition. By conceptualizing the work as a meta-lexicographical system, this study contributes to broader debates in Arabic linguistics, Islamic intellectual history, and epistemology, while also highlighting its relevance for contemporary fields such as digital humanities and computational lexicography.*

**Keywords:** *Lisān al-ʿArab; Ibn Manẓūr; Arabic lexicography; epistemology of transmission (naql); classical Arabic linguistics; trilateral root system; intertextuality; Qurʾānic language; Hadith studies.*

### Introduction

Arabic occupies a unique position among world languages due to its dual function as both a linguistic system and the sacred medium of Islamic revelation. As the language of the Qurʾān, it has historically been subjected to sustained scholarly efforts aimed at its preservation, standardization, and interpretation. The expansion of Islam beyond the Arabian Peninsula, particularly during the first three centuries of the Hijri era, introduced significant linguistic diversity, resulting in dialectal variation, semantic shifts, and phonological change. These developments posed serious challenges to maintaining linguistic integrity, especially in relation to the correct understanding of the Qurʾānic text.

The urgency of preserving linguistic authenticity is deeply rooted in the Qurʾānic conception of language itself. The verse:

وَعَلَّمَ آدَمَ الْأَسْمَاءَ كُلَّهَا<sup>(1)</sup>

Translation: “And He taught Adam the names of all things.”

has been interpreted by classical exegesis as establishing language as a divinely conferred epistemic system. This theological grounding elevated Arabic beyond a communicative tool into a repository of revealed knowledge, thereby necessitating rigorous scholarly intervention to safeguard its meanings.<sup>(2)</sup>

The study of Arabic lexicography occupies a central position in the broader history of Islamic intellectual traditions, intersecting with grammar (nahw), philology (fiqh al-lughah), Qur’ānic exegesis (tafsīr), and Hadith studies. Unlike modern lexicography, which is grounded in descriptive linguistics and empirical corpora, classical Arabic lexicography developed within a transmission-based epistemological framework (naql) that privileged authority, authenticity, and textual continuity over innovation or observation.

Modern scholarship agrees that classical Arabic linguistic sciences emerged primarily in response to the need to preserve the linguistic integrity of the Qur’ān. The Qur’ānic language was perceived not merely as a communicative system but as a divinely sanctioned epistemic medium.<sup>(3)</sup>

The same Qur’ānic declaration concerning the teaching of names is also treated by early exegetes as evidence that language is foundational to human cognition and divine knowledge transmission.

This declaration was interpreted by early exegetes as evidence that language itself is foundational to human cognition and divine knowledge transmission. This theological framing positioned lexicography as a sacred scholarly activity.<sup>(4)</sup>

Kees Versteegh argues that Arabic linguistic sciences developed through a “preservationist impulse,” where scholars sought to document “pure Arabic” as spoken by Bedouin tribes and reflected in pre-Islamic poetry.<sup>(5)</sup>

Similarly, Ramzi Baalbaki emphasizes that the epistemological basis of Arabic lexicography lies in authoritative transmission chains, analogous to Hadith methodology.<sup>(6)</sup>

Jonathan Owens extends this analysis by suggesting that Arabic linguistic thought reflects a structured attempt to stabilize linguistic variation within a unified normative framework, rather than describing linguistic diversity objectively.<sup>(7)</sup>

### **Historical Background of Lexicographical Authority in Arabic Tradition**

In response, early Arab scholars developed a highly sophisticated tradition of lexicography grounded in systematic documentation of vocabulary, meanings, and usage. This tradition evolved cumulatively through the contributions of major figures such as al-Khalīl ibn Aḥmad al-Farāhīdī, whose Kitāb al-‘Ayn introduced a phonetic ordering system; al-Azharī, whose Tahdhīb al-Lughah emphasized authenticity through Bedouin transmission; Ibn Sīdah, whose Al-Muḥkam expanded lexical scope; and al-Jawharī, whose Al-Ṣiḥāḥ refined structural organization.

Thus, classical lexicography is not descriptive but normative, archival, and authoritative.

The development of Arabic lexicography is cumulative and intertextual. Early scholars laid methodological foundations that later culminated in Ibn Manẓūr’s synthesis.<sup>(8)</sup>

### **Al-Khalīl ibn Aḥmad (d. 175/791)**

His Kitāb al-‘Ayn introduced the revolutionary idea of organizing lexical material according to phonetic articulation rather than alphabetical order. This reflects an early attempt at systematic linguistic structuring, rooted in phonological theory.<sup>(9)</sup>

**Al-Azharī (d. 370/980)**

In *Tahdhīb al-Lughah*, al-Azharī emphasized authenticity through Bedouin linguistic authority, reinforcing the idea that linguistic validity is grounded in pre-Islamic oral tradition.<sup>(10)</sup>

**Al-Jawharī (d. 393/1003)**

In *Al-Ṣiḥāḥ*, he introduced a more user-friendly alphabetical system, representing a shift toward accessibility while maintaining traditional epistemic assumptions.<sup>(11)</sup>

**Ibn Sīdah (d. 458/1066)**

His *Al-Muḥkam* represents one of the most comprehensive attempts to compile Arabic vocabulary systematically, yet its complexity limited its usability.<sup>(12)</sup>

These works collectively illustrate a tension between:

- comprehensiveness
- accessibility
- methodological consistency

This tension is precisely what Ibn Manẓūr later resolved through synthesis.

**Lisān al-‘Arab**

Within this intellectual trajectory, Ibn Manẓūr’s 13th-century work *Lisān al-‘Arab* emerges as a monumental act of synthesis. Rather than producing an original dictionary in the modern sense, Ibn Manẓūr compiled, reorganized, and preserved the accumulated lexical knowledge of preceding centuries into a unified and highly systematic reference work. His own admission underscores this methodological stance:

“I have not introduced anything new, but only gathered what was dispersed.”<sup>(13)</sup>

This statement reflects a broader epistemological orientation in medieval Islamic scholarship, where knowledge was understood as transmission (*naql*) and preservation rather than innovation (*ibdā’*).

Thus, *Lisān al-‘Arab* represents a critical moment in the history of Arabic intellectual production, in which synthesis becomes the dominant mode of scholarly authority. It is not merely a dictionary, but a structured epistemological system, organizing linguistic knowledge through principles of authority, intertextuality, and morphological coherence.

Despite its canonical status within Arabic linguistic tradition, *Lisān al-‘Arab* has largely been treated in modern scholarship as a reference tool rather than as a methodologically sophisticated epistemic construct. Existing studies tend to emphasize its encyclopedic scope while neglecting the deeper structural logic governing its compilation.<sup>(14)</sup>

This has resulted in several critical gaps:

- Insufficient analysis of how Ibn Manẓūr restructured earlier lexicons into a unified system
- Limited engagement with the epistemological principles underlying transmission-based knowledge
- Lack of critical exploration of the relationship between linguistic authority and religious textuality
- Neglect of *Lisān al-‘Arab* as a form of meta-lexicographical synthesis

More importantly, modern linguistics—shaped by empiricism and descriptivism—has often failed to adequately interpret pre-modern lexicography within its own epistemic framework. This study, therefore, seeks to reposition *Lisān al-‘Arab* as a systematic knowledge structure, rather than a passive repository of lexical data.

Arabic lexicography is best understood as a cumulative and interdependent scholarly tradition, rather than a sequence of isolated contributions. As argued by Kees Versteegh, the discipline developed in close interaction with Qur'ānic exegesis, grammar, and philology, forming a unified intellectual enterprise.

Jonathan Owens further emphasizes that Arabic linguistic thought cannot be reduced to static preservation; rather, it reflects a complex engagement with linguistic variation, standardization, and authority. However, despite these advances, *Lisān al-ʿArab* remains under-theorized as a meta-lexicographical synthesis, consolidating multiple epistemic strands into a single system.

*Lisān al-ʿArab* represents not merely the culmination of classical Arabic lexicography, but the crystallization of a distinct epistemological paradigm in which knowledge is preserved, authenticated, and systematized through transmission. Its enduring influence lies in its ability to transform dispersed linguistic material into a coherent and authoritative intellectual structure.

The study of Arabic lexicography occupies a central position in the broader history of Islamic intellectual traditions, intersecting with grammar (*naḥw*), philology (*fiqh al-lughah*), Qur'ānic exegesis (*tafsīr*), and Hadith studies. Unlike modern lexicography, which is grounded in descriptive linguistics and empirical corpora, classical Arabic lexicography developed within a transmission-based epistemological framework (*naql*) that privileged authority, authenticity, and textual continuity over innovation or observation.

Within this tradition, *Lisān al-ʿArab* by Ibn Manẓūr (d. 711/1311) represents not an isolated dictionary but the culmination of centuries of cumulative scholarship. Modern research increasingly recognizes that it functions as a meta-lexicographical synthesis, consolidating earlier works into a unified epistemic structure rather than introducing a new lexical theory. Modern scholarship increasingly interprets Ibn Manẓūr not as an innovator but as a systematizer of inherited knowledge. He explicitly states in his introduction that his goal was to compile earlier works rather than introduce new material.

His primary sources include:

- *Tahdhīb al-Lughah* (al-Azharī)
- *Al-Muḥkam* (Ibn Sīdah)
- *Al-Ṣiḥāḥ* (al-Jawharī)
- *Al-Nihāyah fī Gharīb al-Ḥadīth* (Ibn al-Athīr)

This intertextual structure reflects what can be described as a layered epistemology, where meaning is constructed through accumulation rather than reinterpretation.

Baalbaki argues that Ibn Manẓūr's contribution lies not in originality but in restructuring dispersed knowledge into a navigable system. However, this raises an important epistemological question: whether synthesis itself constitutes intellectual production or merely archival labor.<sup>(15)</sup>

### **Lisān al-ʿArab as a Meta-Lexicographical System**

A key gap in existing literature is the failure to conceptualize *Lisān al-ʿArab* as a meta-lexicographical text, meaning a work that organizes other dictionaries rather than independently generating lexical theory.

- Unlike earlier works, Ibn Manẓūr:
  - does not prioritize original field data
  - does not construct new semantic theories
  - instead creates a network of authoritative citations

This structure transforms the dictionary into a knowledge aggregation system, where authority is distributed across multiple earlier texts rather than centralized in the author.

From a modern epistemological perspective, this resembles what would now be called a database architecture of knowledge, though without computational abstraction.

For example, lexical meanings are often supported through Qur'ānic usage:

إِنَّ هُوَ إِلَّا ذِكْرٌ لِلْعَالَمِينَ<sup>(16)</sup>

Such verses are used not merely as religious references but as semantic anchors. Prophetic traditions serve as linguistic proof-texts, reinforcing semantic legitimacy through authoritative speech. Pre-Islamic poetry functions as the highest form of linguistic authentication. As Ibn 'Abbās is reported to have said, "Poetry is the archive of the Arabs." This triadic structure (Qur'ān–Hadith–Poetry) forms a hierarchy of linguistic authority.<sup>(17)</sup>

### Critical Perspectives in Modern Scholarship

Modern scholars are divided in their assessment of Lisān al-'Arab. Versteegh emphasizes its role in preserving pre-Islamic linguistic material, arguing that it functions as a linguistic archive rather than a theoretical text. Owens critiques classical lexicography for lacking a theory of linguistic change and variation, noting its static conception of language. Other scholars argue that despite its limitations, Lisān al-'Arab represents the most comprehensive attempt to unify Arabic lexical knowledge into a single system.

Thus, the debate centers on whether the work should be understood as:

- a historical archive, or
- a systematic epistemological model

A major gap emerges from the literature: while extensive scholarship exists on Arabic lexicography, few studies treat Lisān al-'Arab as a theoretical epistemic structure.

Most studies:

- describe sources
- summarize content
- or trace historical development

Few engage with:

- epistemology of knowledge organization
- authority construction mechanisms
- intertextuality as a structural principle

Arabic lexicography developed as a cumulative and transmission-based discipline grounded in authority and textual authenticity. Within this tradition, Lisān al-'Arab occupies a unique position as a synthesizing work that consolidates earlier lexical traditions into a unified epistemic structure. However, despite its significance, it remains under-theorized in modern scholarship. The existing literature has yet to fully explain its function as a meta-lexicographical system of knowledge organization, a gap that this study directly addresses.<sup>(18)</sup>

### Ethical Considerations

As this study deals with classical religious and linguistic texts, it ensures:

- accurate representation of Qur'ānic and Hadith material
- faithful citation of classical sources
- avoidance of anachronistic interpretations

Outlined multi-dimensional qualitative methodology grounded in textual analysis, historical philology, and epistemological interpretation. The framework is designed to uncover not only the structure of Lisān al-'Arab, but also the deeper intellectual logic governing its composition.

By combining transmission theory, structural linguistics, intertextuality, and philology, the study positions *Lisān al-‘Arab* as a system of knowledge organization rather than a mere lexical compilation.

This chapter presents the core analytical component of the study, examining *Lisān al-‘Arab* not as a static lexicon but as a structured epistemological system. The central argument advanced here is that Ibn Manẓūr’s work represents a sophisticated act of knowledge reconfiguration, in which dispersed lexical traditions are reorganized into a unified system governed by authority, transmission, and intertextual validation.<sup>(19)</sup>

Rather than treating the dictionary as a neutral repository of meanings, this chapter argues that it operates as a hierarchically structured knowledge architecture, where meaning is constructed through citation, lineage, and morphological ordering.

At its core, *Lisān al-‘Arab* is governed by a pre-modern epistemology in which knowledge is:

- transmitted (*manqūl*)
- authenticated (*mu‘tamad*)
- accumulated (*majmū‘*)
- and structured (*munazzam*)

Unlike modern dictionaries that rely on semantic autonomy, Ibn Manẓūr’s work constructs meaning through authoritative layering.

Each lexical entry is effectively a micro-archive, containing:

- Qur’ānic citations
- Hadith evidence
- poetic attestations
- earlier lexicographical definitions

This produces what can be described as a vertical epistemology of language, where meaning is validated upward through increasing authority.

### **Qur’ānic Semantic Anchoring**

One of the most significant features of *Lisān al-‘Arab* is its reliance on Qur’ānic usage as the highest semantic authority.

For example, the root ع-ل-م (‘-l-m) is anchored in Qur’ānic discourse:

the previously cited Qur’ānic verse concerning the teaching of Adam the names, which connects the root ع-ل-م with knowledge, naming, and conceptual categorization.<sup>(20)</sup>

In classical lexicography, this verse is not merely theological; it is linguistic evidence demonstrating the divine origin of naming and conceptual categorization.

Ibn Manẓūr uses such verses to:

- establish semantic boundaries
- validate lexical meanings
- prioritize Qur’ānic usage over colloquial variation

This reflects a broader epistemological principle: Revelation functions as a linguistic standardizer. Hadith literature plays a secondary but crucial role in lexical validation. For instance, prophetic usage of terms such as *ḥilm* (forbearance) or *‘ilm* (knowledge) is frequently cited to demonstrate correct semantic application. The methodological implication is significant:

- Qur’ān → absolute linguistic authority
- Hadith → normative linguistic clarification
- Poetry → empirical linguistic evidence

This triadic structure forms a graded epistemology of language.

Pre-Islamic poetry occupies a unique position as the empirical foundation of Arabic usage.<sup>(21)</sup>

A well-known methodological principle in classical philology states:

“Poetry is the archive of the Arabs.”

In *Lisān al-‘Arab*, poetic citations serve to:

- confirm rare lexical meanings
- establish grammatical usage
- preserve archaic vocabulary

For example, the poetic line:

وَقَدْ أَغْتَدِي وَالطَّيْرُ فِي وُكُنَاتِهَا<sup>22)</sup>

is used in lexicographical tradition to demonstrate contextual meaning of verbs related to movement and time.

This demonstrates that poetry functions as a linguistic corpus before the concept of corpus linguistics existed. The trilateral root system (جذر) is not merely morphological—it is epistemological.<sup>(23)</sup>

In *Lisān al-‘Arab*, meaning is not organized alphabetically in the modern sense but conceptually through root derivation.

For example:

- ك-ت-ب → writing system
- ع-ل-م → knowledge system
- ق-و-ق → speech system

This structure reflects a worldview in which:

Language is not arbitrary, but internally rational and derivational.

Thus, lexical knowledge is organized as a network of conceptual families, not isolated definitions.<sup>(24)</sup>

### **Intertextuality as a Mechanism of Authority**

A defining feature of *Lisān al-‘Arab* is its extreme intertextual density.<sup>(25)</sup>

Each entry is constructed through:

- citation stacking
- layered attribution
- cross-referencing earlier authorities

This produces what may be described as a chain of textual legitimacy, where meaning is never independent but always supported.

This structure resembles what modern theory would call:

distributed authorship of knowledge

Authority is not located in Ibn Manẓūr but in the network of transmitted texts.

### **Epistemological Closure of the Lexicographical Tradition**

One of the most significant findings of this analysis is that *Lisān al-‘Arab* represents a form of epistemological closure in Arabic lexicography.

After Ibn Manẓūr:

- no major structural innovation appears
- later works (e.g., *Tāj al-‘Arūs*) primarily expand rather than transform
- the methodological framework remains stable

This suggests that Ibn Manẓūr did not simply compile knowledge—he stabilized.

The epistemology of pre-modern Islamic sciences as transmission-based and authority-driven.

It introduces *Lisān al-‘Arab* as a meta-lexicographical system, redefining it as knowledge

infrastructure rather than a simple dictionary. It also highlights intertextuality as a fundamental mechanism in the construction of meaning within classical Arabic scholarship. The influence of *Lisān al-‘Arab* extends across Qur’ānic exegesis, Hadith studies, and Arabic philology. It stabilized the lexicographical tradition and remained authoritative for centuries, shaping later works such as *Tāj al-‘Arūs*. Even in modern scholarship, it continues to serve as a primary source for historical semantics and philological research. <sup>(26)</sup>

### **Critical Reflection and Future Directions**

While the work lacks features valued in modern linguistics—such as diachronic analysis and systematic semantic differentiation—these limitations reflect its preservationist epistemology rather than methodological weakness. Future research should explore computational approaches to mapping its intertextual networks, undertake comparative lexicographical studies, and further examine transmission-based epistemologies across Islamic sciences. <sup>(27)</sup>

### **Conclusion**

This study has demonstrated that *Lisān al-‘Arab* cannot be adequately understood within the limited framework of a conventional dictionary or lexical repository. Rather, it must be situated within the broader epistemological and intellectual traditions of classical Islam, where knowledge is not produced through individual innovation but transmitted, authenticated, and systematized through established chains of authority. By re-examining Ibn Manzūr’s work through this lens, the research establishes that *Lisān al-‘Arab* represents a highly sophisticated act of methodological synthesis, transforming dispersed linguistic materials into a coherent and hierarchically structured knowledge system.

At the core of this system lies a transmission-based epistemology (*naql*), in which meaning is constructed not through semantic autonomy but through layered textual authority. The study has shown that lexical entries in *Lisān al-‘Arab* function as micro-archives, integrating Qur’ānic citations, Hadith literature, pre-Islamic poetry, and earlier lexicographical sources into a unified interpretive framework. This intertextual density is not incidental but constitutive of meaning itself, reflecting a scholarly tradition in which linguistic validity is inseparable from authoritative textual grounding. In this sense, language in *Lisān al-‘Arab* is not merely descriptive but normative, anchored in revelation, prophetic usage, and the linguistic heritage of the Arabs.

The trilateral root system further reinforces this epistemological structure by organizing lexical knowledge into conceptual networks rather than isolated definitions. As demonstrated in the analysis, roots such as *‘-l-m*, *k-t-b*, and *q-w-l* do not merely denote semantic fields but represent interconnected systems of meaning that reflect an underlying rationality within the Arabic language. This morphological organization transforms the lexicon into a conceptual architecture, where derivation, association, and semantic expansion operate within a structured framework. Thus, the dictionary becomes not only a tool for reference but a model for understanding how meaning itself is generated and stabilized within a linguistic tradition. Equally significant is the role of intertextuality as a mechanism of authority. Ibn Manzūr’s method of citation stacking and layered attribution produces what may be described as a distributed epistemology, in which authority is not centralized in the author but dispersed across a network of earlier texts. This challenges modern assumptions about authorship and originality, suggesting that intellectual production in the classical Islamic context is rooted in synthesis and preservation rather than innovation. In this regard, *Lisān al-‘Arab* exemplifies a form of meta-lexicography, organizing not only words but the very structures of knowledge through which those words acquire meaning.

One of the most important conclusions of this study is that *Lisān al-‘Arab* represents a point of epistemological closure in the history of Arabic lexicography. Following Ibn Manẓūr, subsequent works such as *Tāj al-‘Arūs* largely expand upon rather than fundamentally transform the established framework. This indicates that the essential principles of lexicographical organization—root-based structuring, intertextual validation, and hierarchical authority—had reached a stage of stability and completion. In this sense, Ibn Manẓūr’s contribution is not merely cumulative but definitive, marking the consolidation of a centuries-long intellectual tradition.

At the same time, this study has highlighted the limitations of interpreting classical lexicography through modern linguistic paradigms. Contemporary approaches, grounded in descriptivism, empiricism, and corpus-based analysis, often fail to account for the epistemological assumptions underlying pre-modern scholarship. The apparent absence of diachronic analysis or semantic differentiation in *Lisān al-‘Arab* should not be viewed as a deficiency but as a reflection of its distinct intellectual orientation, in which the preservation of authoritative meaning takes precedence over the documentation of linguistic change. Recognizing this distinction is essential for a more nuanced engagement with Arabic linguistic heritage.

Finally, the study underscores the continued relevance of *Lisān al-‘Arab* in contemporary scholarship. Beyond its historical significance, the work offers valuable insights into the organization of knowledge, the role of authority in meaning construction, and the potential for integrating traditional epistemologies with modern methodologies. In particular, the intertextual structure of the text lends itself to digital humanities approaches, including computational modeling of citation networks and semantic mapping of root systems. Such directions open new possibilities for bridging classical scholarship with contemporary analytical tools.

In conclusion, *Lisān al-‘Arab* should be recognized not merely as the most comprehensive dictionary of the Arabic language, but as a foundational epistemological system that defines how linguistic knowledge is preserved, structured, and transmitted within the Islamic intellectual tradition. By reframing the work as a meta-lexicographical construct, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of Arabic lexicography, while also inviting further research into the broader dynamics of knowledge production in pre-modern scholarly cultures.

### **Suggestions**

This study opens several directions for further academic inquiry:

#### **Digital Humanities and Arabic Lexicography**

Computational modeling of *Lisān al-‘Arab* could:

- map intertextual networks
- analyze citation density
- reconstruct semantic fields

#### **Comparative Lexicographical Studies**

Future research may compare Arabic lexicography with:

- Greek lexicographical traditions
- Sanskrit grammatical systems
- Latin medieval dictionaries

#### **Epistemology of Islamic Sciences**

Further work is needed to explore whether similar transmission-based epistemologies exist in:

- Hadith sciences
- Tafsīr methodology
- Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh)

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