

Linguistic Exaptation in Arabic

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Abstract:

In contemporary years, there is an interesting linguistic topic that has been attracted by many scholars which is "linguistic exaptation", for example, "functional renewal" (Brinston and Stein, 1993), "semantic reanalysis" (Eckardt, 2011), and "revival" Ghazala (2014). "Linguistic exaptation" is described by those scholars but with different terms. This phenomenon is significant since languages are constantly losing some semantic contents of lexical words, but sometimes retaining the phonetic string to be reused with new semantic content. If languages have fixed linguistic system, there will be no sign of vitality in the language and no room for change. Therefore, the main goal of this study is to concentrate on whether the phenomenon of linguistic exaptation exists in Arabic or not. For the sake of the validity of the analysis and results, the method employed here is based on Arabic dictionaries, articles, and also published books. The results suggest that the phenomenon "linguistic exaptation" occurs in Arabic language and there are many Arabic examples that represent this phenomenon such as *sjarah* 'car', *qitar* 'train', *dzaridah* 'newspaper', *d3wal* 'mobile phone', *ħari:m* 'women', and *hatif* 'telephone'.

Keywords: exaptation; biology; linguistics; semantic; change.

Introduction

The term 'exaptation' comes from evolutionary biology. It was coined by S.J. Gould and E.S. Vrba (1982) as, in their title, "a missing term in the science of form". Gould writes:

"We wish to restrict the term adaptation only to those structures that evolved only for their current utility; those useful structures that arose for other reasons, or for no conventional reason at all, and were then fortuitously available for other changes, we call exaptations. New and important genes that evolved from a repeated copy of an ancestral gene are partial exaptations, for their new usage cannot be the reason for the original duplication."

(Gould 1983: 171, cited in Lass 1990)

Some scholars (e.g., Lass (1990)) tend to adapt the concept of "Exaptation" used in evolutionary biology to refer to language change through time. Exaptation in linguistics is a kind of conceptual renovation of material that is already there, but either serving some other purpose, or serving no purpose at all (Lass, 1997). It is the process whereby a linguistic element loses its semantic content and abandoned for a while of time, then it is revived or reused with a new meaning. For instance, the Arabic word *sjarah* 'car' was used to refer to a group of people who travel around the world. However, this word lost its old

meaning due to the modern technology and inventions. Nowadays, the same word is reused again but with different semantic content to mean the vehicle "car". So, Pieces of linguistic system are always falling off and undergo two main paths: deleted completely, or recycled in novel and creative ways. For example, the following noun phrase "Se guma" that means "the man" from Old English is deleted and replaced by a new noun phrase which is 'the man' (Hogg, 2012). Another example that represents the process of words recycling is the one that is provided by Eckardt (2011) in which the English word "mete" was used to indicate "food or meal". However, this word is now used to mean "meat".

The phenomenon of linguistic exaptation is sometimes referred to as "reanalysis". According to Harris and Campbell (1995), reanalysis is a mechanism which changes the underlying structure of a syntactic pattern that does not involve any immediate or intrinsic modification of its surface manifestation. They state that reanalysis directly changes underlying structure, which they understand to include information regarding at least: (i) constituency, (ii) hierarchical structure, (iii) category labels, (iv) grammatical relations, and (v) cohesion. Lass's example is basically included in category labels. Moreover, they argue that semantic change is involved in many of these reanalyses.

The current study sheds light on the expected phenomenon of linguistic exaptation existed in Arabic language. It investigates whether this concept does exist in Arabic language or not. If there are instances of linguistic exaptation in Arabic, the author demonstrates the original meaning of the lexical item as well as the new semantic content of this lexical item. As far as the author knows, the notion of linguistic exaptation in Arabic is not researched heavily and extensively. Therefore, the present study focuses on this topic and provides a thorough analysis of this phenomenon.

The significance of this study comes from the following fundamental points:

- i. The phenomenon of linguistic exaptation is one of the important components in the field of morphology and semantic.
- ii. Linguistic exaptation has been discussed widely across different languages, but not intensively in Arabic language.
- iii. Linguistic exapted words nearly exist in most languages even if they are not recognized by native speakers.

To the best of the researcher's knowledge, there is very limited researches in Arabic that investigates the semantic changes in the internal representation of Arabic words such as "Semantic of words" (Onais, 1984) and "Historical development of some words in Arabic language" (Idrees, A., Ahmed, J., & Ali, S., 2020). Moreover, concentrating on such phenomenon will definitely raise our knowledge of the Arabic content words that lost their semantic meaning and undergo another meaning. Basically, the study seeks to provide answer to the following fundamental question:

1. Does the phenomenon of linguistic exaptation that is described by Lass (1990) exist in Arabic language? If so, what are the lexical words that exhibit the phenomenon of linguistic exaptation?

The essence of this question is directly related to Lass's work (1990) as well as Harris and Campbell (1995) in which the question mainly investigates the linguistic exaptation as described by Lass or reanalysis as described by Harris and Campbell.

Lass (1990) applied the same kind of thinking of exaptation in evolutionary biology to language change. That is, to see language change as "mosaic evolution". He suggested that organic exaptation has a linguistic parallel, which may throw some light on the strategies languages use in their development. Lass (1990) thought that there is a common sort of language change, occurring in many diverse guises, that can insightfully be seen as a kind of exaptation. Aronoff and Fudeman (2011) states that Lass's intention of what he calls linguistic exaptation is that it refers to morphemes that lost their semantic content as a result of language change and are left contentless strings of phonemes floating around in the system. Thus, the morpheme that has lost its semantic content is revived with a new meaning.

A simple abstract case will illustrate the general principle (Lass, 1990). He generally states that:

"Say a language has a grammatical distinction of some sort, which it codes by means of morphology. Then say this distinction is jettisoned, prior to the loss of the morphological material that coded it. This morphology is now, functionally speaking, junk".

(Lass, 1990, p. 36)

According to Lass (1990), there are three principles that can be done with the linguistic junk:

- i. Dump it entirely.
- ii. Keep it as marginal garbage or nonfunctional/non-expressive residue ("suppletion", "irregularity").
- iii. Keep it, but instead of relegating it as in (ii), use it for something else, perhaps equally systematic.

Lass provides a lot of examples that illustrate the concept of linguistic exaptation. One of them is the case of reuse of a part of Dutch adjective morphology as marking on a new type of adjectives in Afrikaans which is spoken in South Africa. In the 17th century, the morpheme -e indicated the nominative or accusative case depending on the noun gender. However, in Afrikaans gender system was broken down and collapsed and the morpheme -e was functionless and contentless morpheme. It could be dumped or kept as a marginal garbage, but instead it was used as an inflectional morpheme to mark a new category of adjectives. This new category was invented to distinguish between inflected adjectives and non-inflected adjectives. For instance, in Afrikaans *witt-e water* "white water", and zero-ending non-inflected adjective like *een ander plaats* "another place" (Lass, 1990).

Review of Literature

Brinton and Stein (1993), Lass (1997), and Ghazala (2014) share, to some extent, the notion of grammatical or syntactic functional change in which a previous morpheme is revived to generate a new meaning or function. Brinton and Stein (1993) argue that syntactic and morphological change is seen generally as functional renewal. "Functional renewal" refers to the retention or revival of an existing syntactic form with a new or renewed function. In their view, a new syntactic form arises with the same meaning as an older syntactic form, or with a new meaning. In functional renewal, an older form makes a resurgence with a meaning which is new, has been lost, or was on the decline. Functional renewal may be one thing in terms of another, as in terms of similarity, for example, the use of Latin *ad* 'to' + *mit* 'send' for location (*admit*), or of *tissue* understood in two ways (Brinton and Stein, 1993). It may involve the emergence of new meanings in older syntactic forms -although the new meanings are usually related to previously existing meanings- or it may involve re-emergence or resurfacing of older forms and meanings after a period of dormancy. They mentioned that a prerequisite for functional renewal is that an older form be freed of its former meaning, becoming available for the acquisition of new meaning.

Lass (1997) mentions that exaptation can lead to grammaticalization (gradual process whereby a lexical item becomes a grammatical item, known as primary grammaticalization, which may be followed by further formal and semantic reduction, known as secondary grammaticalization) and even to the growth of new grammatical categories. He illustrates an example about the rise of progressive aspect in English, and the possibilities in other Germanic languages. Of all the Germanic dialects, only English has grammaticized progressive aspect. In the seventeenth century, the simple present is still aspectually ambiguous. Even in the middle of the eighteenth century, the progressive had still not extended to passives (*the house is building* rather than *the house is being built*), and the full grammaticization in all context did not occur until the nineteenth century. One might wonder about what is the origin of this construction? Lass answers the question by stating that in Old English, the structure V + present participle existed, and used sometimes with a clearly progressive sense, most often not. In Alfred's *Orosius* he finds ninth-century Old English using both: *pæt scip wæs... yrnende* 'the ship was . . . running', which is a progressive, vs. *se ea bið flowende ofer eal AEgypta land* 'this river is flowing [=habitually flows] over all the land of Egypt. Thus, the construction itself was setting there on the margins, and centuries later was incorporated into a new aspect system, forming one form of grammatical opposition which formerly did not exist. Moreover, Ghazala (2014) states that 'revival', also called 'engendering', is the use of an old, dead word with a new meaning, with its old meaning being usually ignored

Traugott (2022) provides a comprehensive description and classification of the types of semantic change, most of them lexical/contentful and considered in isolation. The most important factors that cause the semantic change are:

- i. Metaphorization: conceptualizing 'woven cloth' for 'aggregation of cells in animals or plants'.

- ii. Metonymization: association, usually in terms of contiguity, for instance, *board* 'table' > 'people sitting around a table, governing body.' Many traditional examples of metonymic shift involve part for whole (often called "synecdoche"), as in *keel* for *ship*.
- iii. Pejoration: association of a term with negative meaning, such as, Old English *stincan*, 'smell (sweet or bad)' > *stink*, *cnafa* 'boy' > *knave*, *conceit* 'idea, opinion' > 'overestimation of one's quality'.
- iv. Amelioration: association of a term with a positive meaning, such as Middle English *nice*, 'foolish, innocent' > 'pleasant', and examples of preemption of meaning as a symbol of pride (e.g., *queer*).
- v. Narrowing: restriction of meaning, as in Old English *deor* 'animal' > *deer* (a specific kind of animal).
- vi. Generalization: extension of meaning, as in Latin *armare* 'cover one's shoulders' > *arm*.

In addition, Onais (1984) summarizes the reasons that may lead a particular morpheme to lose its content and function and acquires a new form to the following points:

- i. Misunderstanding: when a person hears a new word for the first time and the meaning in the mind of speaker is totally different from the hearer's mind. The hearer may not have the opportunity to hear the word again and thus clarify the original intended meaning. The word will be associated with a new semantic content in the hearer's mind. This word may spread across generation after generation leading this word to acquire the misunderstood meaning of the word.
- ii. Broadening: the second reason occurs when a word is changed and thus result in a word that resembles the former one resulting in a mixed semantic content. Therefore, the word will have a lot of meanings. For example, the Arabic word *xaijom*, means nose, has changed in some dialects, e.g., Sudanese dialect, to refer to the mouth as well as the nose.
- iii. Cliché: cliché (trite or expression that is very often said and is therefore not original and not interesting) may affect word due to various factors including politic, social, or affectional reasons. For instance, the Egyptian words '*bafa*, *bek*, *afendi*' means 'sir or master' was used during the nineteenth century to indicate a high rank and prestigious man. However, these words become cliché. It is used nowadays to any man regardless of its status.

Eckardt (2011) points out that meaning changes often allow insights in cultural history and major processes of change can be observed both in history and daily life. Eckardt gives many examples in English in which word meaning has changed. For instance, the old English word *mete* was used to indicate the concept 'food' or 'meal' in general, whereas the new one *mete* refers to the concept 'meat, edible muscle matter of animals'. Other examples include the word *dog* in which the old meaning was used to 'special breed of dogs'. However, the word nowadays is used also to refer to 'species canis'. Similarly, the word *mouse* is used to mean 'small rodent', but now the meaning is extended to also refer to 'computer control'. Also, the word *press* was used to indicate 'machine for printing', but now it is used to 'newspaper'. The rapid evolution of technology, culture, and media definitely play a significant role in these semantic changes of some words.

Methodology

The data obtained in this study is based on Arabic language and is collected from various sources including the holy Muslim book 'Qur'an', Arabic dictionaries, Arabic published articles, and Arabic books. First, the researcher explores whether Lass's notion of linguistic exaptation does exist in Arabic or not. Second, the researcher concentrates on the semantic changes that a number of Arabic words have

undergone. Basically, the researcher refers to the mentioned sources to look for words that exhibit internal semantic changes and then the words were measured according to the current use and current time. Some words that have undergone a change in meaning have been included in the study so that their old use and meaning and also modern use and meaning have been explained. Then, the researcher describes and discussed these changes and how linguistic exaptation in Arabic provided a clear picture of the phenomenon. For instance, in old Arabic book the word *qomaf* was used to mean valueless something or someone, whereas the new semantic meaning is merely "fabric". Since the majority of people do not have a complete knowledge of the old uses and meanings, the researcher chooses this method because she believed that going through Arabic authentic documents is the best way to figure out the linguistic exaptation. By studying linguistic exaptation in Arabic, the researcher could provide a more precise and accurate picture of the phenomenon. Finally, experts in Arabic language are consulted to guarantee the validity and reliability of the data.

Findings

After investigating the resources, the answer for the first part of the research question is reached. In Arabic, the phenomenon of linguistic exaptation does parallel the one that is described by Lass (1990) which is a linguistic process whereby words lose their semantic content and through the time they are replaced by a new meaning with the same phonetic shape. There are several and countless instances in which an old Arabic word is abandoned for a period of time, and then it is revived and reused with a new meaning but with the same phonological shape. The following points clarify each instance. In addition, each instance is provided in the gloss with a current meaning, and then its old meaning is also provided below each example.

1. *Sjarah*
Car-INDEF;SG
'Car'

This word is used in classical Arabic to mean "long distance desert travelers" (as mentioned in the Holy Qur'an, Chapter of Yosef, verse 10). Nowadays, this term is used to refer to any kind of car in general (with its old meaning being retained in Quran).

2. *qitar*
Train-INDEF;SG
'Train'

It is an old word used to indicate "a line of camels". Now, it is used to refer to the train, whose components resembles a line of camels in shape.

3. *dzaridah*
Newspaper-INDEF;SG
'Newspaper'

Previously, this word was used to mean "a small palm stick used to write on patches". Currently, it is used to mean the newspaper.

4. *hatif*
Telephone-INDEF;SG
'Telephone'

"hatif" was usually used to mean "a person whose voice is heard, but not seen. However, it has been reused to indicate "telephone".

5. *d3wwal*

Mobile phone-INDEF;SG

'Mobile phone'

This word was used to refer to someone who travels around the world constantly. Now, it is used to refer to the mobile phone.

6. *ħari:m*

Women- INDEF;PL

'Women'

This word was used to mean something that is prohibited to touch. Now, it used to refer to "women".

7. *sofrah*

Cloth made of plastic-INDEF;SG

'Cloth made of plastic'

It was used to mean "the traveler's food". These days, it is used to refer to food table in general.

8. *ħarami*

Thief-INDEF;SG

'Thief'

It was used to indicate something or someone that is prohibited. This word now is used to refer to "thief".

9. *qomaf*

Fabric-INDEF;SG

'Fabric'

This word was used to refer to two meanings: 1- to refer to mean people, or 2- what fell on the ground. Nowadays, it is used to refer to "any kind of fabric".

10. *ħad3ib*

Eyebrow-INDEF;SG

'Eyebrow'

In old meaning, this word was used to mean "a prime minister". On contrast, this word now is used to mean "eyebrow".

11. *ħistirad*

Importation-INDEF;SG

'Importation'

This word was used to mean "asking for water". Now, it is used to mean "importation".

12. *morahq*

Teenager-INDEF;SG

'Teenager'

In old use, people say[daxal Makkah moraheqa] which means "he came to Makkah late". So, this word was used to indicate an action that is done very late. This word in its current use is reused to mean someone who reached a certain period of his/her physical and mental development. In my opinion, it specifically refers to "teenager".

Generation by generation, semantic content evolve, new words are borrowed or invented, the meaning of old words drifts, and morphology develops or decays. The rate of change varies, whether the

changes are faster or slower, they build up until the "original meaning" becomes arbitrarily distant and different. After a thousand years, the original and new meaning will not be mutually intelligible.

Conclusion

The current study investigates the phenomenon of "linguistic exaptation" in Arabic. It appears that this phenomenon appears in many languages including Arabic. Linguistic exaptation is the process whereby a linguistic element has lost its semantic meaning and then reused with another meaning with the same phonetic string. This study contributes significantly to the field of linguistics in general and to the field of morphology in particular in that it raises our morphological and linguistic knowledge of Arabic free morphemes that lost their semantic contents and by the passage of time they are revived with new meanings. It is noticeable that many Arabic words have been exapted linguistically, for instance, *sjarah* 'car', *qitar* 'train', *dzaridah* 'newspaper', *hatif* 'telephone', *d3wwal* 'mobile phone', *ħari:m* 'women', *sofrah* 'cloth made of plastic', *ħarami* 'theif', *qomaf* 'fabric', *ħadzib* 'eyebrow', *ʔistirad* 'importation', and *morahq* 'teenager'.

Suggestions and Recommendations

Last but not least, I suggest that there is a need for additional and further investigations and studies which explore the reasons that drive these free morphemes to shift their semantic contents specifically in Arabic language and in other languages in general. Such studies will enhance our knowledge of the phenomenon.

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