

PRESERVING THE SEMANTIC STRUCTURE OF
ISLAMIC KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS:
IZUTSU, AL-ATTAS, AND AL-RĀGHIB AL-IṢFAHĀNĪ

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This article compares the elucidation of the semantic structure and fixity of a number of key terms and concepts of the Qurʾān by two contemporary scholars, Toshihiko Izutsu (1914-1993) and Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (1931—), with that of al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (d. ca 443/1060), the author of the celebrated *Kitāb al-mufradāt fī ḡharīb al-Qurʾān*. By 'key terms and concepts' are meant those words used by the Qurʾān which play a decisive role in making up the basic conceptual structure of the Qurʾānic worldview. The article shows how the Qurʾān profoundly changed and subsequently fixed the meaning of Arabic terms, particularly those key terms relating to religion and ethics, and it highlights the fact that the contemporary semantic analysis of the Qurʾānic vocabulary has its precedent in the fifth/eleventh century.

Keywords: Semantic structure of the Qurʾān; key concepts and key terms of the Qurʾān; semantic analysis; Toshihiko Izutsu; Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas; al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī.

1. Izutsu's Legacy

The Qurʾān through its vocabulary gives expression to a concrete and dynamic ontology, rather than an abstract and static metaphysical vision of the universe. Izutsu demonstrated this employing a semantic approach in a series of thought-provoking studies, published in the 1960s, in which he laid bare the conceptual scheme of what he justifiably called the Qurʾānic

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Weltanschauung, and made clear its differences from the pre-Qurʾānic or *Jāhiliyyah* worldview.¹ According to Izutsu, the Qurʾān is “a large semantic field, a self-sufficient system of words into which all words, whatever their origins, have been integrated with an entirely new systematic interpretation.”

Izutsu describes his method as “an analytic study of the key words of a language with a view to arriving eventually at a conceptual grasp of the Weltanschauung or worldview of the people who use that language as a tool not only of speaking and thinking, but, more important still, of conceptualizing and interpreting the world that surrounds them.” The term “Weltanschauung” gives a clue to Izutsu’s understanding of semantics as a kind of *sprachliche Weltanschauungslehre*, “a study of the nature and structure of the worldview of a nation at this or that significant period of its history, conducted by means of a methodological analysis of the major cultural concepts the nation has produced for itself and crystallized into the key words of its language.”²

By analyzing over two dozen such key words as *Allāh*, *islām*, *īmān*, *kufī*, *nabī*, *wahy*, *karam*, *taqwā*, and so on,³ Izutsu is able not only to contrast pre-Islamic (*Jāhiliyyah*) and post-Qurʾānic theology and ethics but also to

1. See Toshihiko Izutsu’s *God and Man in the Koran: Semantics of the Koranic Weltanschauung* (Tokyo: Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1964); *The Concept of Belief in Islamic Theology* (Tokyo: Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1965); *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qurʾān* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1966), which itself was a revised edition of *The Structure of Ethical Terms in the Koran* (Tokyo: Keio University, 1959).
2. Izutsu, *God and Man*, 11; cf. *Ethico-Religious Concepts*, 7-9. Izutsu honestly admitted that he was indebted to the writings of Johann Leo Weisgerber, who appeared to be influenced by Wilhelm von Humboldt’s view of language as a mirror of its speakers’ vision of the world (*Weltansicht*) and argued for the significance of language as an intellectual process of world-shaping (*Weltgestaltung*). This type of semantics has much in common with the “ethnolinguistics” associated with the names of Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf. For further reading, see Johann Leo Weisgerber, *Vom Weltbild der deutschen Sprache* (Düsseldorf: Schwann-Verlag, 1950) and also his *Grundformen sprachlicher Weltgestaltung* (Köln und Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1963); Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluss auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts* (Berlin: F. Dümmler, 1836); Benjamin Lee Whorf, *Language, Thought, and Reality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956).
3. On what is meant by the so-called “key words”, see Izutsu, *God and Man*, 25 ff.

expose the conceptual network underlying the semantic worldview of the Qurʾān. He points out, for example, how the known term *Allāh* underwent a radical semantic change and conceptual transformation. In pre-Islamic times, the word *Allāh* was understood by the Arabs as referring to a certain deity among numerous deities, sometimes also identified as the one responsible for the creation and maintenance of heaven and earth. But He was, after all, but one of the gods worshipped by the pagan Arabs. With the coming of Islam a profound change of far-reaching consequences was brought to this conception. The Qurʾān introduces *Allāh* as the absolutely supreme (*al-lā*) and unique (*aḥad*), that is, the one and only God in existence, dismissing thereby all other ‘gods’ as false (*bāṭil*) and mere names having neither reality nor authority (*asmāʾ sammaytumūhā antum wa ābāʾukum mā anzala Allāh bihā min sulṭān*), and nothing but products of human fancy and whims (*ẓann wa mā tahwāʾl-anfus*).⁴ More importantly, as is evident from the earliest verses revealed to Prophet Muḥammad, the Qurʾān declares *Allāh* the ultimate source of knowledge and teacher of mankind (*ʿallamaʾl-insān mā lam yaʿlam*). All this is complemented with the ubiquitous mentioning of the ‘exquisite names’ (*al-asmāʾ al-ḥusnā*) belonging to *Allāh* alone.⁵

The same is true of many ethical terms in Arabic. Whereas the word *karīm* in pre-Islamic times signified hereditary nobility and virtue manifested by extravagant generosity, in the Qurʾān the meaning-content of this word was drastically changed when it was put in a close relation with the term *taqwā*, a common word which originally carried no religious connotation at all and which used to mean, in the pre-Qurʾānic period, simply a kind of fear-driven attitude of self-defense found among animals. However, since the word *taqwā* in the Qurʾān had acquired a new meaning, i.e. God-fearingness and piety, the word *karīm* was thenceforth applied to someone who expends his wealth ‘in the path of *Allāh*’ (*fī sabīl Allāh*) and out of piety, rather than recklessly (*tabdhīran*) and out of vain-glory (*riʾāʾ*).⁶

In short, Izutsu concludes that, although many of the words used in the Qurʾān are the same as those used in the *Jāhiliyyah* times, they were neither assigned the same roles nor denote the same concepts. Thus, generosity was reoriented from vainglory toward charity in the path of *Allāh*, courage was transformed from a blindly selfish and unruly passion into a conscious self-sacrificing dedication to the “way of Allah.” Patience and

4. Izutsu, *God and Man*, 13-15 and 40-2.

5. Ibid., 95-119.

6. Ibid., 43-5 and 234-9.

steadfastness in trial and misfortune were rerouted from arrogant confidence in one's own superiority to yielding belief in *Allāh*'s ultimate justice. And likewise, the pagan Arab's tribal solidarity was replaced with kinship by faith (*innamā'l-mu'minūna ikhwah*).⁷

Perhaps the most interesting conclusion, particularly to historians of religion, is Izutsu's views on pre-Islamic Arabian religion. Izutsu virtually denies the existence of what he considers worthy to bear the name "religion" in pre-Islamic times. That is, he does not regard pre-Islamic Arab religion as religious, arguing that it never rose above the level of polydemonism, that it was degenerating more and more into sheer superstition, that it was largely customary and mundane, and that the Arabs, especially the Bedouins, were generally lacking in serious religious concern. On Izutsu's account, tribal solidarity (*ʿaṣabiyyah*) was a much stronger force than religion.⁸ He also rejects Arthur Jeffery and Wilfred Cantwell Smith's theory about the Arabic word *dīn* being a local variety of an international term of Persian origin, *dīn* or *dñn*. Izutsu insists, against Jeffery and Smith, that the Arabic word *dīn* used in the Qurʾān has a double meaning, as it did in *Jāhiliyyah* times. The term *dīn* means religion both as a personal act of faith as well as a formal system of creeds and rituals that are shared by a community.⁹ Consequently, if Islam is proclaimed in the Qurʾān as the only *dīn* acceptable to *Allāh*, it is to be understood in the sense of reified and non-reified religion as well.

Izutsu's pioneering studies have had a wide influence on contemporary Islamic studies, especially in the field of Qurʾānic and Arabic studies. While others were also influential, notably Nöldeke, Jeffery, and Wansbrough, Izutsu made semantic analysis the dominant methodology in the field. Subsequent works such as Fazlur Rahman's *Major Themes of the Qurʾān*, Naṣr Hāmid Abū Zayd's *Mafhūm al-Naṣṣ*, and Daniel A. Madigan's *The Qurʾān's Self-Image* all owe something to Izutsu's writings.

2. Al-Attas' Project

Like Izutsu, whose lectures he attended while at McGill University in the springs of 1962 and 1963, and from which he acknowledges to have profited considerably,¹⁰ al-Attas employs the method of semantic analysis in

7. See Izutsu, *Ethico-religious Concepts*, ch. 5.

8. *Ibid.*, 56.

9. Izutsu, *God and Man*, 219-29.

10. Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, *The Educational Philosophy and Practice of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas: An Exposition of the Original Concept of Islamization* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1998), 319 n. 74.

his major works.¹¹ Al-Attas concurs with Izutsu that the Qur'ānic usage of a number of Arabic words in a new conceptual scheme was indeed a revolution in the history of the religious and moral thought of the Arabs, emphasizing that this radical semantic transformation of the key words in their worldview is one of the reasons why Prophet Muḥammad was accused by the pagan Arabs of being a soothsayer (*kāhin*), poet (*shā'ir*), a man possessed (*majnūn*), and even a sorcerer (*sāḥir*).¹² It is such revolution and replacement of the *Jāhili* worldview with the Islamic Weltanschauung that al-Attas calls the 'Islamization' process.¹³

In his early work on Ḥamzah Faṣṣūrī, a sixteenth century ṣūfī metaphysician of Aceh, al-Attas explains the semantic change initiated by Ḥamzah's use of the Malay words *ada* and *titah*, pointing out that it reveals "no mere change in the Malay conception of the nature of being or existence, but a change, at once drastic and radical, in the whole conceptual system purporting to give a vision of the Universe." Thus, the word *ada*, al-Attas argued, which in pre-Islamic times simply meant 'to be' and conveyed the concept of existing materially or physically much like in the sense of the Arabic *mawjūd* and the Parmenidean space-occupying 'to plen', was given new meanings reflecting a new worldview. The word *ada* was used by Ḥamzah to denote metaphysical concepts such as *jadi*, *menjadi*, and *yang dijadikan* (generally translating the Arabic *kāna* and its derivatives), as well as conveying the concept *mawjūd* both in the sense of being outwardly manifest (*ẓāhir*) and being inwardly hidden (*bāṭin*). It came also to mean essence (*dhāt*), quiddity (*māhiyyah*), *diri* (the concept *huwiyyah*), and finally it was used to convey the abstract concept of 'being qua being' (*wujūd*).¹⁴ Likewise the Malay word *titah*, meaning simply a command usually given by a king, has acquired a relational meaning conveying not merely the sense of a position of charismatic authority but a position of divine authority as well. The semantic change affecting the word *titah* occurred as a result of Ḥamzah's use of the word to translate the Arabic *amr*, which in the Qur'ān is connected with God's command (*amr Allāh*).¹⁵

11. See S.M.N. al-Attas, *The Mysticism of Hamzah Faṣṣūrī* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1970), 142 ff.; his *Islam: the Concept of Religion and the Foundation of Ethics and Morality* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1992); and his *The Concept of Education in Islam: A Framework for an Islamic Philosophy of Education* (Kuala Lumpur: Muslim Youth Movement Malaysia [ABIM], 1980).

12. Wan Daud, *Educational Philosophy and Practice*, 318-19.

13. *Ibid.*, 292-9.

14. Al-Attas, *The Mysticism of Hamzah Faṣṣūrī*, 163-9.

15. Al-Attas, *The Mysticism of Hamzah Faṣṣūrī*, 145-6.

Another interesting example of al-Attas' semantic analysis of Islamic key words is to be found in his highly original lecture, "Islam: the Concept of Religion and the Foundation of Ethics and Morality," delivered at the International Islamic Conference in London in 1976. He argued that the Arabic term *dīn* as used in the Qur'ān referring to *al-Islām* (3:19, 3:85, 5:3) expresses a concept of religion essentially different from what is generally understood and variously interpreted throughout Western religious history. Al-Attas delineated this by analyzing the basic connotations of the word *dīn* which, he argued, "are conceived as gathered into a single unity of coherent meaning as reflected in the Qur'ān and in the Arabic language to which it belongs."¹⁶

Indeed, as Arabists know very well, the derivational rule (*ishtiqāq*) of the Arabic language makes it possible to derive various morphological forms from a single root, either by adding some letters or simply by modifying the configuration (*bināʾ*) through vowel change (*iʿlāl* and *ibdāl*).¹⁷ Thus from the root d-y-n of the word '*dīn*' one obtains the following words: (1) *dāna* (to obey, to serve, and to act well; also to be or become abased, submissive, enslaved, subject or servant to someone, and to repay debt; also to rule, govern, or manage, to possess, own, and exercise authority over someone or something; to become accustomed or habituated to something); (2) *iddāna*; (3) *istadāna*; (4) *tadayyana* (all of which mean to seek a loan or become indebted); (5) *adāna* (to grant a loan for a certain period, to give a thing upon credit, or to sell something for payment at an appointed time); and (6) *dayyana* (to affirm or believe someone's testimony in court; or to appoint someone as ruler, governor or manager of public affairs). The nouns derived from the same root are *dayn*, *diyānah*, *dīn*, and *daynūnah*.¹⁸ These various derivational forms of the root word d-y-n already indicate to us all the relevant possibilities of meaning inherent in the term *dīn*.

According to al-Attas, all these meanings can be reduced to four elements: (1) indebtedness; (2) submissiveness; (3) judicious power; and (4)

16. Al-Attas, "Islam: the Concept of Religion and the Foundation of Ethics and Morality" in his *Islam and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur: ABIM, 1978), 47.

17. See Jonathan Owens, *The Foundations of Grammar: an Introduction to Medieval Arabic Grammatical Theory* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamin Publishing Co., 1988), 106-124.

18. See Muhammad Murtadā al-Zabīdī, *Tāj al-ʿArūs* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, n.d.) 9: 207-9; also Edward William Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon* (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1980), 3: 942-3.

natural inclination or tendency.¹⁹ That is to say, the concept of religion as couched in the Arabic term *dīn* and as applied to *Islām* is far more comprehensive and profound than was understood in pagan Arabia (where it signified custom, habit, requital, obedience, personal faith, and ritual practice)²⁰ and is not the same as what is understood by the term ‘religion’ in the West. The term *dīn* conveys the concept of man’s existential indebtedness (*iftiqār*) to God, man’s total submission to God, an exercise of judicious power, and a reflection of man’s natural tendency (*fiṭrah*) towards goodness and justice. Most appealing is of course the conclusion al-Attas has drawn from the semantic analysis which he applied to the key word *dīn*, that *Islām* as ‘the *dīn*’ is “the subjective, personal religion of the individual as well as the objective pervading self-same religion of the Community—that it operates as the same religion in the individual as a single entity as well as the society composed collectively of such entities,”²¹ thereby fortifying the position held by Izutsu contra Jeffery and Smith.

3. Al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī’s Analysis

Al-Ḥusayn ibn Muḥammad ibn al-Mufaḍḍal, better known as al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, was one of the most renowned linguists to appear during the ‘Abbasid period. He made contributions to *tafsīr*, ethics, theology, mysticism, and belles-lettres.²² His fame rests, however, on his *Mufradāt al-fāḥ al-Qur’ān*, which reflects his exceptional aptitude for subtle semantic analysis and marks an advance in the systematic studies of the Qur’ān. The *Mufradāt* had a great impact on later scholars, including al-Firūzabādī (d. 817/1415), author of *al-Qāmūs al-Muḥīṭ*, and Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī (d. 1205/1791), who wrote the voluminous lexicon *Tāj al-‘Arūs*. Yet despite its undisputed authority, wide influence, and popularity, al-Iṣfahānī’s *Mufradāt* seems to be neglected by contemporary scholars concerned with Qur’ānic semantics. Neither Izutsu nor al-Attas refer to it in their respective works.

In his *Mufradāt*, al-Iṣfahānī’s procedure is generally as follows: first, he clarifies the lexical meaning of words, analyzing their morphology and tracing their etymology; then he exemplifies their usage in various contexts, citing from the Qur’ān, Traditions, and poetry; and then he explains the meaning of the term occurring in the verse in relation to other

19. Al-Attas, “Islam: the Concept of Religion,” 48; also al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 2001), 42.

20. Izutsu, *God and Man*, 221 and 228-9.

21. Al-Attas, “Islam: the Concept of Religion” in *Islam and Secularism*, 67.

22. For a detailed biography, see Yasein Mohamed, *The Path to Virtue: The Ethical Philosophy of al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 2006), 64 ff.

verses, employing the so-called Qurʾān-by-Qurʾān approach. In addition, al-Iṣfahānī also cites from the Prophet's Companions, philosophers, and sages. Nevertheless, he always gives priority to religious over philosophical sources.²³ The following cases will illustrate al-Iṣfahānī's approach.

i. *Allāh*

The word *Allāh* is said to be comprised of a definite article *al-* and a substantive noun *ilāh*, meaning deity. Four theories have been put forth regarding its morphology: (i) that it is derived from *alaha-yaʾluhu*, meaning to worship; (ii) that it is derived from *aliha-yaʾlihu*, meaning to be perplexed, because the deeper one ponders and reflects upon *Allāh* the more baffled one becomes; (iii) that it is derived from *wilāh*, the letter *wāw* later changed into *hamzah*, meaning the one adored and beloved; and (iv) that it is derived from *lāha-yalūhu-liyāhan*, meaning to be veiled or remain hidden. In pagan Arabia the word *Allāh* was used as a name for every idol or object of worship (*ism li-kulli maʿbūd*), whether masculine or feminine. Thus, the sun was called *ilāhah*, a goddess, and the numerous gods were referred to in the plural *ālihah*. Al-Iṣfahānī hastens to remark, however, that such usage was not correct and hence is censured by the Qurʾān.²⁴

ii. *Dīn*

The verb *dāna-yadīnu* means to be indebted or to owe something to someone else, and *adāna-yudīnu* means to give a loan to someone. The word *dīn*, however, is used to signify obedience (*tāʿah*) and reward (*jazāʾ*), that is, something given or received in recompense for worthy behavior or in retribution for evil acts. The term was then used metaphorically for God's laws (*sharīʿah*). The word *dīn* is equivalent to *millah*, conveying the idea of obedience and submission to God's laws, as in the following verses: *Verily, the dīn in the sight of Allāh is Islām* (*Āl-ʿImrān*: 19); and *those who dedicated their dīn solely to Allāh* (*al-Nisāʾ*:125). When the word *dīn* is mentioned in the Qurʾān together with *Allāh* or the Truth (*al-ḥaqq*), then Islam the religion is meant. For example: *Do they seek for other than the dīn of Allāh, while all creatures in the heavens and on earth have, willing or unwilling, submitted to His Will, and to Him shall all be returned?* (*Āl-ʿImrān*: 83) and *If anyone seeks a dīn other than al-Islām, never will it be accepted of him* (*Āl-ʿImrān*: 85).²⁵

iii. *Karīm*

In the Qurʾān, whenever the word *karam* is ascribed to *Allāh*, it refers to

23. Ibid., 92 and 24-29.

24. Al-Iṣfahānī, *Mufradāt alfāz al-Qurʾān*, ed. Ṣafwān ʿAdnān Dāwūdī (Damascus: Dār al-Qalam, 1412/1992), 82-3, henceforth *Mufradāt*.

25. Al-Iṣfahānī, *Mufradāt*, 323.

His manifest benevolence and grace, for instance, *Verily, my Lord is self-sufficient and beneficent* (*al-Naml*: 40). By contrast, whenever it is attributed to human beings, the word *karam* denotes the moral virtue and all praise-worthy acts which a person exhibits. This is why one is not called *karīm* unless he shows such qualities as being kind and generous. According to scholars, unlike the word *hurriyyah* (freedom), which is used in association with major as well as minor virtues, the word *karam* is reserved for cardinal virtues only, such as the case of someone spending his wealth to support an army for the sake of *Allāh*. If it is said in the Qurʾān that *the most virtuous among you (akramakum) is the one who possesses most taqwā* (*al-Hujurat*: 13), it is because the word *karam* signifies good acts, the highest and noblest of which being those motivated by piety and in order to please God. Thus the word *karīm* (the generous) is rendered synonymous with the word *taqiyy* (the pious).²⁶

iv. *Kufr*

Literally, *kufr* means covering. Hence, night is called *kāfir* since it enshrouds or envelops people. Likewise farmers are called *kuffār* since they cover the seeds they plant in the soil. The Arabs also call a cloud blocking the sun *al-kāfir*. When the word is used in relation to favor and grace (i.e. *kufr al-niʿmah*), it means denying the favor and showing ingratitude towards the benefactor (cf. *al-Anbiyāʾ*: 94: *fa-lā kufrāna li-saʿyihī*). According to the Qurʾān, however, the most grievous *kufr* is to deny God's oneness (*waḥdāniyyah*), to dismiss the *Sharīʿah*, and to reject the Prophethood (*nubuwwah*) of Muḥammad—may *Allāh* bestow His blessings upon him and grant him peace. It is to be noted that *kufrān* is generally used in connection with favor and grace (e.g., *al-Baqarah*: 152: *wa ushkurū lī wa lā takfurūnī*), whereas *kufr* is mostly if not always put in relation to *dīn*, i.e. *īmān* and *islām*. Thus, the term *kāfir* in the Qurʾān is applied not only to those ungrateful to God, but also to those who conceal and cover the truth (*al-sātir liʾl-ḥaqq*) whether by refusing to acknowledge Divine oneness, by negating Divine laws, or by denying Divine revelation and prophecy.²⁷

v. *Hudā*

Hidāyah is guidance given by or accompanied with grace (*lutf*). Hence we get the terms *hadiyyah*, meaning gift or present, and *hawādī al-waḥsh*, meaning path-finder or tracker of a herd. God's guidance to humankind is of four kinds: (i) guidance given to all human beings, comprising reason, acumen, and necessary knowledge, cf. *Ṭā Hā*: 50: *Rabbunā alladhī*

26. Al-Iṣfahānī, *Mufradāt*, 706-7.

27. Al-Iṣfahānī, *Mufradāt*, 714-17.

a'ṭā kulla shay'in khalqahu thumma hadā; (ii) guidance given to mankind through His messengers (Prophets) and His revealed Qur'ān, cf. *al-Anbiyā'*: 73: *Wa ja'alnā minhum a'immatan yahdūna bi-amrinā*; (iii) specific guidance (*tawfīq*) given to certain individuals only, cf. *al-Taghābun*: 11: *Wa man yu'min bi Allāh yahdi qalbahu*; and (iv) guidance given in the Hereafter towards Paradise, cf. *Muḥammad*: 5: *sa-yahdīhim wa yuṣliḥu bālahum*.²⁸

Concluding Remarks

These examinations of semantic changes lead us to a more nuanced understanding of the history of the Arabic language. There is no question that all languages, of course, change over time and indeed are constantly in flux, with valences and connotations shifting throughout its texts. Such changes could be grammatical (involving morphology and syntax, i.e., the ways in which words are generated and combined), semantic (i.e., broadening or narrowing, shifting or splitting meaning), or lexical (i.e., borrowing words, terms, or phrases from other languages), and often occur as a result of cultural contact. The Arabic language is no exception. However, an examination of the particular semantic changes introduced will indicate that these valences have been largely maintained over the course of past centuries, largely due to Arabic being the language of the Islamic Revelation. Due to some superficial changes observed in the rich and vast Arabic literature, Western philologists and orientalist (e.g., Joshua Blau) have classified the language into classical, middle, and modern Arabic. However, written modern Arabic is hardly distinguishable from written middle Arabic in any significant sense, while both still attest to a remarkable continuity—not to be encountered in any other language—with classical Arabic. This can be seen by a comparative study of shifts in Arabic's semantic fields. In the foregoing exposition we have seen how Izutsu, al-Attas, and al-Iṣfahānī agree that there are quite a number of key words and key terms which remain essentially unchanged in spite of changing historical circumstances and regardless of varying cultural contexts. In the case of the Arabic language, this semantic fixity is attributable almost solely to the enduring influence of the Qur'ān and its Weltanschauung.

28. Ibid., 835-40.