

## A Lexicological Study of *Friendship* in Arabic

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### *Abstract*

Cras nec mi sit amet odio fringilla tempor. Being one of the main concepts that represent the Arab culture, this paper studies the Arab concept of *friendship* and the definitions some bilingual Arabic-English dictionaries provide of the lexical items that convey it, and how such concepts can be inaccurate or inadequate. It also focuses on how *friendship* is linguistically encoded through proverbs, collocations, and frequent expressions. The analysis and results of this paper can help translators since Arabic *friendship* words are quite numerous and tend to be frequently used.

### *Key Words*

The Arab culture, Concept of *friendship*, Arabic-English dictionaries, Arabic lexicology.



### *Introduction*

This paper studies the concept of *friendship* in Arabic, which is an important concept of the Arab culture. It is strongly related to Arab history, tradition and identity. Furthermore, this concept is difficult to understand, and it is often translated into other languages using inaccurate equivalents. Being an essential concept, it is expressed through a wide variety of Arabic linguistic expressions.

The paper aims at providing an adequate definition of *friendship* words from a lexicological as well as a lexicographic perspective. It also discusses its treatment in some English-Arabic and Arabic-English bilingual dictionaries. Moreover, it addresses how it is reflected linguistically in proverbs, collocations and frequent expressions.

### *Theoretical Background*

The present paper is yet another contribution in the literature on the complex relationship between language and culture (see Wierzbicka 2018, 2017; Goddard and Wierzbicka 2014; Peeters, 2017; Luque Durán 2007, 2006a, 2006b; Pamies 2007, 2008; Luque Nadal 2018, 2008), where, I believe, the Arabic case is quite relevant.

In a similar study to the present one, Al Jallad (2011) examines the notion of *al-karam* “generosity” in Arabic, which is a key concept of the Arab culture. He sheds light on its complexity and how it represents culture-specific range of meaning reflected through various linguistic expressions. Such complexity makes it difficult to provide adequate and accurate translation equivalents to its variants. What it means to be generous and what is considered to be a generous act are quite different in the Arab culture once compared to other cultures. Here in the present paper a similar challenge is faced, trying to define the Arab idea of *friendship* and its lexical coding and representation.

Al-Jallad (2008), in his study of the concepts of *al-halal* and *al-haram* in Arabic, shows how these concepts are often misunderstood. In a similar study, Al-Jallad (2001) explains how important it is to define words such as *jihad* and *hijab*. The word *jihad* is often thought to mean the “holy war” that all Arabs and Muslims want to declare against the West while *hijab* “veil” as a symbol of tyranny against women in the Arab world. Al Jallad explains that finding an equivalent to such words in English or other languages is rather challenging. However, providing these words with accurate definitions is important.

To provide an adequate definition of *friendship* words, the words were checked in a number of Arabic-English dictionaries (see references). Furthermore, the definitions provided in Arabic-English dictionaries were critically evaluated, taking into consideration accuracy, comprehensiveness, and clarity. Then, the various linguistic forms representing the concept were listed, stressing their interaction and with meaning.

### *Definition of Friendship*

For Arabs, *friendship* is a serious concept, and it is all about duration and intensity. It is of utmost importance to choose a friend that will never embarrass you in public. If your friend is a true friend, you feel at ease imposing on him or her at anytime, taking it for granted that they will do their

best to help you. Once you make a friend, you will do everything for the sake of your friend. Generally, and compared to the West, Arab *friendship* is more intense and “involves a system of balancing favors against obligations.” To keep a friend is a priority<sup>1</sup>.

Nydell<sup>2</sup> states:

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said, “A true believer is a mirror to his brother. He prevents him from any harm.” That means Friends wish well for their friends, and feel a strong grief when they see them in any kind of suffering. They work hard by all means to restore the rights of their friends, and give them all the help they need. They keep the secrets of their friends...Friends sympathies with their friends and they comfort each other. Friends exert each other toward piety and righteous deeds. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said, “Fear Allah and help each other for the sake of Allah. Have mercy upon each other. Visit each other and remember our matter and keep it alive.”

Barakat (1993) argues that *friendship* is one of the “primary” kinds of relations, which means that it is a spontaneous relation between individuals with “unlimited commitment” to each other. It is related to the “service-oriented” nature of the Arab society in general. It is a communal society, which contrasts sharply with the individual-centered society of the West. For example, Arabs often travel in company “intimately and spontaneously engaged in lively conversation.” Furthermore, Arabs have a strong “sense of belonging through sustained commitments and loyalties to family, community, and friends.” (p. 19).

Similarly, Hamad (2011) explains that in the Arab world:

[...] there is a high importance placed on the value of friendship and the necessity of relationships between two people. The family does come first and foremost in the Arab culture but friendships are also a value that is respected and young people are taught to cherish all relationships with others. One can obtain a different level of intimacy from a friendship that cannot be obtained through relationships within the family. (p. 3)

Al-Kandari and Gaither (2011) explain that relationships in the Arab culture, be it *friendship* or any other kind of relationships are typically characterized by strong commitment to religion, loyalty to the group, rejection or hesitance to

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<sup>1</sup> NYDELL, M., 2006, Understanding Arabs. London: Intercultural Press, Inc.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.factofarabs.net/ERA.aspx?Id=345&TID=7>

change in general, pride in history, nostalgia to the past, and clear recognition of hierarchal order.

As for gender, Scharf and Hertz-Lazarowitz (2003), in a contrastive study of Arab and Jewish children's relationships in their social network at school, conclude that there was better quality of peer relationships among Arab students and among boys while Jewish students and girls showed better quality of best-friend relationships than their counterparts.

More about gender and *friendship* in the Arab culture can be found in Hamed (2012). He argues that same-sex *friendships* are the most frequent or in some communities within the Arab world the only possible kind of *friendships*. However, *friendships* between boys and girls are not common and in some cases simply prohibited. It is believed that close relationships with the opposite sex can lead to dishonorable consequences. Furthermore, since marriages can be pre-arranged, relationships between boys and girls before marriage are typically seen as not necessary.

To summarize, *friendship* is an important Arab concept from a religious perspective as well as social and traditional point of view. Having friends is simply necessary, and being loyal to them is indispensable. In Arab culture, a true friend is the one that is always there for you when you need them.

#### *Friendship Words*

In this section, the various lexical items embodying the notion of *friendship* in Arabic are listed along with their definitions in the dictionaries consulted in the present study. Furthermore, some of the frequent collocations, proverbs, sayings where these words are used are discussed to help understand better the meaning and the use of each of these *friendship* variants.

##### 1. صديق "sadīq"

The word صديق most likely will be the first to come to the mind of the native speaker of Arabic when asked to give the equivalent to the word *friend* in English. It is undoubtedly the lexical item most frequently used to express the concept. It can be said to capture most of the universal semantic spectrum of the notion of *friendship*. Put differently, it represents the general most ample range of meaning of the concept.

According to Baalbaki (1995), the word صديق “ṣadīq” is a noun, denoting “friend, pal, chum, crony, comrade” (691). On the same page, he lists the feminine form صديقة “ṣadīqah” defined as “friend.” The noun صداقة “ṣadāqah” is also mentioned and defined as “friendship, amity” (690). It is clear that Baalbaki’s definition, using five different English words to define one in Arabic, reflects the general and ample range of reference the word has. However, Wehr (1976) defines the word صديق using one word only “friend” and the noun صداقة “ṣadāqah” as “friendship.” (509).

On the other hand, Wortabet (1984) defines the word صديق as “true friend” and صداقة as “true or sincere friendship; love, affection.” (341). It can be argued that there is no evidence based on use or the definition of the word in other dictionaries to justify limiting the use of the word to “true friend” only or to equate *friendship* with love and affection.

Being the most frequent in terms of use, the words صديق “ṣadīq” and صداقة “ṣadāqah” are used in wide variety of collocations, proverbs, sayings and other expressions that further demonstrate the use and meaning of these words. In example (1), the proverb indicates the importance of having a friend and how much it is necessary, especially when one is going through difficult moments in life.

- 1) الصديق عند الضيق (Modern Standard Arabic)  
alṣadīq ‘ind alḍiḳ  
the friend when trouble  
A friend in need is a friend indeed

In example (2), the collocation reflects the generic range of meaning and use of the word:

- 2) دولة صديقة (Modern Standard Arabic)  
dawlah ṣadīqah  
state/country friend  
A friendly state or country

In example (3), the saying underlines the importance of an old friend, using the metaphor of the mirror since a friend can help you know who you are and can give you honest opinions about what you have done or what you decide to do:

- 3) خير مرآة صديق قديم (Modern Standard Arabic)  
khayru mirā ṣadīq qadīm  
best mirror old friend  
The best mirror is an old friend

The following example highlights the status a friend has in one's life:

- (4) من بعد نفسك خص صديقك (*Non-Standard Arabic*)  
min ba'īd nafsak khuṣ ṣadīkāk  
since after yourself think of your friend  
The most important person after yourself is your friend

## 2. صاحب "sāhib"

The noun صاحب "sāhib" is related formally and semantically to the verbs صاحب "sāhaba" and صاحب "sāhab;" both mean "to accompany." However, the word صاحب "sāhib" does not mean only "companion." Like the word صديق "sadiq," it could refer to "friend," "pal," "fellow," and "associate," covering various possible dimensions of the umbrella concept of *friendship*.

Two interesting uses of the word are worth underlining. The first is the use of the word to mean "owner" while the second is common in various dialects of Arabic (Syrian, Jordanian, Lebanese...), which is to use the feminine form صاحبة "sāhibat" to mean "girlfriend." In Arabic, it is quite challenging to find an equivalent to the English word "girlfriend" because from a cultural perspective the concept does not or should not exist. The only possible relationship between a male and a female is that of marriage or engagement.

According to Baalbaki (1995), the word صاحب "sāhib" means "companion, comrade, associate, fellow, friend, pal" (684). However, while Baalbaki refers to the use of the word to mean "owner, proprietor, possessor, holder," (684), he does not mention the use of the feminine form to mean "girlfriend." Wehr (1976) provides a similar definition, adding the words "adherent, follower." Wehr also defines the noun form صحبة "suhbat" defined as "friendship, companionship, company, escort" (504). Furthermore, Wortabet (1984) offers a similar definition repeating the words "companion, associate" (228).

Based on the definitions given by the dictionaries and the examples of use in collocations and sayings, the main difference in meaning between this variant and other variants of *friendship* in Arabic is the emphasis on companionship and association. Someone can be your صاحب "sāhib" "companion" during a trip, but he or she is not necessarily your "friend." This important component of the meaning is sort of relevant to the use of the word to mean "owner" since if you own something, it will always "keep your company."

The word صاحب “*ṣāhib*” is used in various collocations, proverbs, sayings that further clarify its meaning. In example (5), the saying indicates the importance of having a صاحب “*ṣāhib*” because one is considered lonely and isolated if he or she does not have a relative or a صاحب “*ṣāhib*.” This saying reflects the companionship dimension of meaning, which prevails in this variant.

5) ما له صاحب ولا قريب (*Modern Standard Arabic*)  
mā lahu ṣāhib wa lā qarīb  
no have companion nor relative  
He is very lonely/quite alone.

In example (6), the verb form is used in a proverb, arguing that one can tell a lot about someone through his or her companions, and the way they are:

6) قل لي من تصاحب أقل لك من أنت (*Modern Standard Arabic*)  
qul lī man tuṣāhib aqul lak man ant  
tell me who accompany tell you who (are) you  
Tell me who are your friends or what kind of people accompany  
you, I can tell you a lot about you.

The word is also used idiomatically in various collocations where it may mean both “owner” and “companion.” For example, in (7), a writer is referred to as the owner of the pencil or someone who has the pencil as a companion:

7) صاحب قلم (*Modern Standard Arabic*)  
ṣāhib qalam  
owner/companion pencil  
a writer/author

3. خليل “*khāllī*”

The word خليل “*khāllī*” is a noun derived from an Arabic root, which means literally “in between.” Hence this variant of *friendship* refers to someone who has got into one’s life. It is the most appropriate variant to use to refer to a very close friend. One’s خليل “*khāllī*” is not simply a companion or a normal friend. He or she is a true or an old friend.

Baalbaki (1995) emphasizes that aspect of meaning thorough defining the word using the words “close friend,” “intimate friend,” and “bosom friend.” He even goes further indicating that the word can mean “boyfriend, sweetheart,” or “lover” (523). However, this use of the word is rather very formal, and it can be argued that it is strictly used in literary texts, in particular poetry. Similarly, Wehr (1976) uses “bosom friend” to define the word; however, he also states that the word can also mean simply “a friend.” (252). Wortabet (1984) also provides a somewhat similar definition, stating that the word means “intimate and sincere friend.” (150).

The meaning of the word خليل “*khāllī*” is reflected through its use in various linguistic expressions. For example, in (8), where the plural form is used, people are said to pretend to be “best friends” to the rich. The more money one has, the more close friends he or she gets.

8) إذا ما زاد مالي فكل الناس خلاني (*Modern Standard Arabic*)  
idhā mā zād mālaī fakul annās khillānī  
if that increase money mine all people friends mine  
The more money I have, the more close friends I make

Similarly, the role of that kind of friend is underlined in one of the sayings of the prophet Muhammad that is often used as a proverb. In example (9), the prophet states that one always follows the religion of his or her best friend. The importance of religion in the Arab culture helps us understand the significant status that kind of friend has here.

9) الرجل على دين خليله (*Modern Standard Arabic*)  
arrajul ‘alā dīn khallīh  
the man on religion friend his  
The man follows the religion of his best friend.

#### 4. رفيق “rafīq”

The word رفيق “rafīq” is a noun related to the Arabic word رفیق “rifq,” which means gentleness and kindness. This *friendship* variant is often defined or translated as companion, ignoring the fact that it can be used to mean indicate close *friendship*. However, Baalbaki (1995) provides an ample definition of the word, capturing all its nuances. It is defined as “companion, associate, comrade, fellow, consort, mate, friend, pal.” (591). Along the same lines, Wehr (1976) uses the same words of Baalbaki to define رفيق “rafīq,” adding the words “buddy, attendant, partner, accomplice” (351). Furthermore, Wehr highlights the common use of the word to refer to “a comrade in Marxist terminology.” It is often used to refer to citizens in Arab countries with communist affinities (e.g., Syria). Wortabet (1984) sort of summarizes the two previous definition using the three key words “companion, comrade, friend.” (221).

The variant رفيق “rafīq” is used quite frequently in various expressions that reflect its meaning components. In example (10), the combination of companionship and close friendship indicated by the variant is echoed in an interesting collocation. A husband/wife is the companion/close friend of life.

10) رفيق العمر (Modern Standard Arabic)

rafīq al‘umr

companion life

The companion/friend of my life (my wife/husband).

A similar sense is embodied with the collocation in example (11). However, “road or path companion” is commonly used with a political shade of meaning. For example, a political activist would use the expression to refer to their friend who belongs to the same political party or political orientation.

11) رفيق الدرب (Modern Standard Arabic)

rafīq addarb

companion path

my path/road/trail companion

The use of the word in the collocation given in example (12) is quite representative of its core meaning since the friends who we make at school are definitely a combination of friends and companions.

12) رفيق الدراسة (Modern Standard Arabic)

rafīq addirāsah

companion studying  
my schoolmate/friend at school or university.

### 5. زميل “*zamII*”

The noun زميل “*zamII*” is one of the most specific variants of *friendship*. In fact, it can be used to emphasize that someone is not a close friend. What it reflects is companionship; however, it is almost always used to refer to a work or a school companion.

Baalbaki (1995) decides to equate the meaning of “*zamII*” with رفيق “*rafIq*” above, stating that both mean the same; “companion, comrade, fellow, friend;” however, he adds the key word “colleague” to the definition of “*zamII*” (609). It can be argued here that the use of the word “friend” as an equivalent to “*zamII*” is rather controversial. The same can be said about the indication that رفيق “*rafIq*” and زميل “*zamII*” are exact synonyms. Baalbaki also refers to the use of زميل “*zamII*” to mean “fellow” as in a fellow member of an academic foundation or institution, which is of frequent use in Arabic.

Wehr (1976) also emphasizes the companionship aspect of the meaning defining the word as “companion, crony, associate, comrade, colleague, accomplice.” He also refers to the noun form “*zamālat*” defined as “comradeship, colleague-ship.” (382). Wortabet (1984); however, chooses to define the variant using one word “comrade.” The word is also defined as “one who rides behind,” (246), which reflects the meaning that someone who is a زميل “*zamII*” does not have to be a “friend.”

The word زميل “*zamII*,” like other *friendship* variants, is used in different expressions, illustrating its meaning. In example (13), the collocation stresses the core meaning of companionship, and it is a fact that the typical first-to-come-to-mind use of the word is to mean a companion at work.

- 13) زميل في المهنة (*Modern Standard Arabic*)  
zamII fi almahnat  
companion in profession  
workmate

### 6. Other Variants

There are many other friendship variants in Arabic; however, they are less common of restricted or context-specific use. Here we present some with examples.

a) جليس “jalIs”

It literally means “a person with whom someone sits.” The core meaning is companionship. In example (13), the word is used in a very famous line of poetry that most Arabs know by heart:

- 13) وخير جليس في الزمان كتاب (Modern Standard Arabic)  
wakhayr jalIs fizzaṣmān kitāb  
best sitter in time book  
Your best friend of all times is a book.

The two collocations in example (14) are quite frequent as well:

- 14) الجليس الصالح وجليس السوء (Modern Standard Arabic)  
aljalIs aṣṣālah wa jalIs assu‘  
sitter straight and sitter evil  
The good companion and the bad companion.

b) سمير “samIr” (someone who holds conversations with you at night)

It can be used to refer to a “friend” in general; however, its specific use is to refer to someone who holds conversations with one or keep one’s company at night, as shown in example (15).

- (15) سمير الملوك (Modern Standard Arabic)  
samIr almulu:k  
companion at night (of kings)  
companion of kings, especially at night

c) قرين “qarIn”

The noun form قرين “qarIn” means “mate” or “partner” once used in general, as in example (16).

- (16) إياك وقرين السوء (Modern Standard Arabic)  
Iyākah waqarIn alsu‘  
watch mate evil  
be careful of an evil companion

However, its specific component of meaning is to refer to someone who is equal; therefore, it is often used to refer to one's husband or wife.

d) نديم “nadIm”

The word نديم “nadIm” in general means “comrade, friend, pal.” However, its specific and most frequent use, in particular in literary texts, is to refer to a drinking companion, as shown in example (17)

(17) ملاً كأساً لنديمه

mala‘ ka’san linadImih

fill a cup his friend

He poured a drink for his drinking pal.

### Conclusion

The concept discussed above is one of many that define the Arab-Islamic culture, uncovering the Arab and Islamic way of thinking and their identity. Clearly, such concepts are semantically and culturally complex, which makes them open for different interpretations. Therefore, the job of the translator as well as the lexicographer becomes quite difficult, trying to provide definitions or equivalents to such concepts.

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