

Semantic Analysis of the Concepts of “Transformation and Substitution” in the Noble Quran with Emphasis on Conceptual Interconnections

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to elucidate the semantic distinctions and analyse the conceptual interconnections among the lexical items related to “transformation and substitution” in the Holy Quran. Employing a descriptive-analytical and comparative methodology, the research examines the semantic network of ten key Quranic terms: “*badal*” (بَدَلَ), “*zawj*” (زَوْج), “*sawiy*” (سَوَّى), “*shabah/shibh*” (شَبَّهَ/شَبَّه), “*shakl*” (شَكَلَ), “*dihy*” (ضَهَّى), “*idl*” (عَدَلَ), “*mithl*” (مِثْل), “*mathal*” (مَثَل), and “*nidd*” (نَدَّ). The findings reveal that each term operates at a distinct semantic layer and conveys unique conceptual nuances: “*badal*” denotes successive substitution and alteration; “*zawj*” emphasises simultaneous pairing and complementary relationship; “*sawiy*” focuses on balance, moderation, and quantitative or qualitative equality; “*shabah/shibh*” indicates partial and potentially misleading similarity in one or more attributes; “*shakl*” refers exclusively to formal and external resemblance; “*dihy*” conveys apparent similarity accompanied by an intention to deceive or dissimulate; “*idl*” signifies equivalence in value, justice, and balance in the scales; “*mithl*” is the most general term for expressing any form of likeness; “*mathal*” is predominantly employed in the domain of illustrative parable and allegorical narrative; and “*nidd*” connotes peer-equality accompanied by rivalry, competition, and opposition. Through contextual analysis of the relevant verses and reference to primary lexicographical sources, the study concludes that precise differentiation among these terms facilitates a more nuanced understanding of the Quranic semantic subtleties and helps prevent erroneous interpretations.

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Introduction

In the contemporary era, where the dialogue of civilizations and the intersection of human knowledge have gained unprecedented momentum, theoretical studies in the foundational domain of meaning have emerged as one of the principal foci of international scholarly attention. Within this landscape, analytical semantics has established itself not merely as a lexical discipline, but as a powerful methodology for dissecting the concealed layers of historically and religiously significant texts. Transcending superficial descriptions and literal translations, this approach seeks to uncover the tightly interwoven conceptual networks and the coherent systemic order that internally structure a given text. Focusing on texts distinguished by linguistic richness and philosophical depth makes it possible to reveal the role of semantics as a bridge between text-specific studies and the broader domains of the humanities and social sciences.

The Holy Quran, as a foundational text characterised by universal scope and timeless relevance, constitutes an ideal object for the application of such an analytical approach. Its distinctive feature lies in the deliberate and finely calibrated deployment of lexical items that, while sharing certain common semantic fields, each possess secondary connotations, specific semantic ranges, and contextually determined, non-interchangeable applications. A systematic semantic study in this domain does not limit itself to defining individual words; rather, through the examination of paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations, contextual usages, semantic oppositions, and associative chains, it arrives at the discovery of the overarching “semantic system” governing the text. This process deepens our appreciation of the precision exercised in the selection and placement of every single term, while simultaneously unveiling the aesthetic and sapiential mysteries of the book.

The significance and impact of such research are by no means confined to the fields of religious or seminary studies; they occupy a central position across a wide spectrum of international disciplines. Linguists and semioticians are drawn to the analysis of meaning-construction within a complex, naturally occurring linguistic system. Philosophers of ethics and legal theorists seek to extract and comprehend the normative and axiological framework embedded in these conceptual networks. Moreover, translators of sacred texts grapple with the challenge of finding precise equivalents for concepts that may lack comparable accuracy and nuance in the target language—a challenge that can only be addressed through rigorous semantic analysis. Consequently, Quranic studies conducted from this perspective evolve into an interdisciplinary arena capable of exerting influence on fields as diverse as comparative theology, philosophy of language, translation studies, and moral psychology.

Recognising this imperative and the existing theoretical lacuna, the present research adopts a descriptive-analytical approach to investigate the conceptual networks of “substitution” and “replacement” in the Holy Quran. Its ultimate objective is to elucidate the distinctive semantic components and hierarchical and horizontal relations among the relevant lexical items, thereby offering a systematic model that not only yields a more accurate understanding of the divine intent, but also serves as a methodological framework for the analysis of other Quranic concepts. The outcome of such a study, transcending geographical and confessional boundaries, will prove valuable and inspiring for all scholars committed to achieving a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of meaning production in classical and foundational texts.

Literature Review

The semantic study of Quranic vocabulary has consistently remained one of the most fundamental and vibrant fields in both Quranic and

linguistic scholarship. Within this domain, lexicology and the analysis of semantic fields have played a pivotal role in uncovering subtle connotative nuances and preventing homogenising interpretations. Classical works such as Rāghib Iṣfahānī's *Mufradāt fī gharīb al-Qur'ān* may be regarded as the starting point of this tradition, as it adopts a markedly more analytical approach than general lexicons and systematically elucidates the meanings of words within their specific Quranic contexts.

Regarding the particular lexical set examined in the present study (*badal*, *zawj*, *sawiy*, *shabah/shibh*, *shakl*, *ḍihy*, *'adl*, *mithl*, *mathal*, *nidd*), although numerous classical and modern dictionaries and exegetical works have addressed these terms individually and sporadically, a systematic, comparative investigation of the entire set within a single semantic field has received scant sustained attention. For instance, major Quranic exegetes such as Ṭabrisī in *Majma' al-Bayān* and Zamakhsharī in *Al-Kashshāf*, as well as contemporary exegetes, have occasionally noted contextual distinctions among these terms across various verses; yet they generally confine themselves to broad definitions and rarely undertake a rigorous analysis of the subtle mechanisms that differentiate one term from another in relation to its counterparts. Even in more specialised semantic studies of the Quran that focus on concepts such as “similarity” or “substitution” have seldom brought all ten terms together for simultaneous comparative examination.

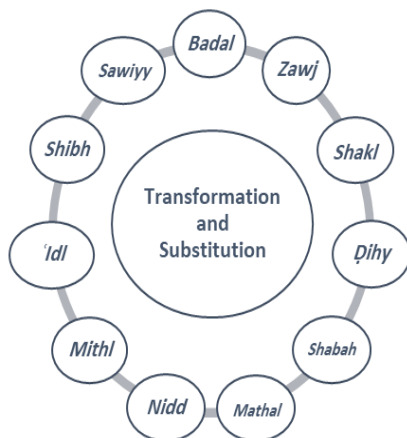
A comprehensive review of the existing literature reveals that while scattered studies have been conducted on certain individual items within this decadic network, no previous research has adopted a holistic semantic approach that simultaneously encompasses the entire set. The present study therefore seeks to fill this gap by systematically extracting data directly from the Quranic text and analysing them in light of primary lexicographical sources, with the aim of precisely delineating

the semantic scope, contextual conditions, and conceptual relationships of each term. The ultimate objective is to substantiate the hypothesis that each of these lexemes, even when superficially synonymous, operates at a distinct semantic level and carries a unique conceptual load. Such recognition constitutes a significant step toward a more accurate comprehension of the divine intent and toward enriching the field of Quranic exegesis.

Comparative Analysis of the Lexical Items

Within the scope of semantic research, the concept of “transformation and substitution” (*tabdīl wa jāyguzīnī*), together with a spectrum of interrelated lexical items, constitutes a coherent semantic constellation in which each term contributes in a specific manner to the articulation of this conceptual domain.

The Overall Chart of the Research



1. *Badal* (بَدَل)

The term “*badal*” fundamentally means the substitution of one thing in place of another after the original has ceased or been removed. Classical lexicographers distinguish “*tabdīl*” (change) from “*badal*”: while *tabdīl* may sometimes denote mere alteration, *badal* specifically refers to

replacement. Similarly, *badīl* is synonymous with *badal*, whereas *tabdīl* can occasionally signify absolute change even without an explicit substitute (Farāhīdī 1993, 8:45). The derivatives *ibdāl*, *tabdīl*, *tabaddul*, and *istibdāl* all share the meaning of placing one thing in the position of another and possess a broader scope than “*iwaḍ*” (compensation), which requires reciprocal exchange. By contrast, *tabdīl* applies to any form of change, even when no replacement or equivalent is provided.

A clear Quranic example appears in: “*But the wrongdoers changed the saying with other than what they were told*”¹ (Quran 2:59). The verse refers to the historical incident in which the Children of Israel, commanded to mock the divine command to say “*ḥiṭṭah*” (a plea for forgiveness), replaced it with “*ḥiṭṭah*” (wheat). Here, *badal* encompasses both lexical substitution and semantic distortion (disobeying the intended meaning of the divine instruction). Some exegetes define the act as “changing something from its original state” (Marāghī 1946, 1:125).

In the exegesis of the verse “... *And whoever changes Allah’s blessing after it has come to him...*”² (Quran 2:211), it is stated that the intended meaning of “altering the blessing of Allah” (*yubaddil ni‘mat Allāh*) is the alteration of the Book of God (Zamakhsharī 1994, 1:143). Likewise, in the commentary on the verses “...*They desire to change the word of Allah...*”³ (Quran 48:15) and “*And should anyone alter it after hearing it...*”⁴ (Quran 2:181), the term “alteration” (*tabdīl*) has been interpreted as changing the meaning (see Ṭabarsī 1997, 1:484 & 9:174; Ṭūsī, n.d., 2:110 & 9:322).

¹. ﴿فَبَدَّلَ الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا قَوْلًا غَيْرَ الَّذِي قِيلَ لَهُمْ...﴾ (البقرة/٥٩)

². ﴿... وَمَنْ يَبْدِلْ نِعْمَةَ اللَّهِ مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا جَاءَتْهُ...﴾ (البقرة/٢١١)

³. ﴿يُرِيدُونَ أَنْ يُبَدِّلُوا كَلَامَ اللَّهِ...﴾ (الفتح/١٥)

⁴. ﴿فَمَنْ بَدَّلَهُ بَعْدَ مَا سَمِعَهُ...﴾ (البقرة/١٨١)

The term “*badal*” connotes successive substitution and alteration, signifying that one entity follows another and assumes its place, such that the existence of the substitute (*badal*) necessarily entails the negation or supersession of the original (*mubdal minhu*). This substitution is not predicated on equivalence in value or exchange but rather on sequence and succession. This is exemplified in the verse “*And should anyone alter it after hearing it...*” (*Quran 2:181*), which refers to the modification of a bequest.

In contrast, terms such as “*zawj*” denote simultaneous coexistence and pairing of two entities (as in the case of husband and wife) and lack any element of substitution. “*‘Adl*” signifies equality in quantity or value for the purpose of establishing balance (as in justice or ransom), rather than alteration or succession. Likewise, “*nidd*” expresses parity accompanied by hostility and rivalry (as in associating partners with God), whereas “*badal*” inherently carries no connotation of antagonism.

The term is also distinct from lexemes that denote pure similarity, such as “*mithl*” (general resemblance), “*mathal*” (parable or illustrative description), “*shakl*” (formal resemblance), and “*shibh*” (partial similarity). Although “*badal*” may be grounded in resemblance, it emphasises the element of substitution and temporal succession. Even “*sawiyy*,” which connotes equality and moderation, refers to a static condition rather than a dynamic process of replacement. Thus, the primary distinguishing feature of “*badal*” is the concept of successive substitution and alteration, which sets it apart from all other related terms.

2. *Zawj* (زَوْج: Pair)

Zawj denotes the concomitance and accompaniment of one thing with another. From this meaning derive expressions such as “*zawj al-mar’ah*” (a woman’s husband) and “*al-mar’ah zawj ba’liha*” (a wife is

the *zawj* of her husband), standing in opposition to “*fard*” (singular). It is said that *zawj* means a pair, as in “*‘indahū zawjā ni ‘āl*” (a pair of sandals) and “*zawjā ḥamām*” (a pair of pigeons), which may refer to two males or two females (Ibn Durayd 1987, 1:473; Jawharī 1984, 1:320). It also signifies form or type that possesses a counterpart, such as male and female or opposites like wet and dry; every colour and every category is likewise called *zawj* (Rāghib Iṣfahānī 1991, 111; Ibn Manzūr 1992, 2:292).

To either the male or the female in animals capable of pairing, *zawj* is applied, and to anything that is coupled or associated with another—whether similar to it or its opposite—*zawj* is said. Allah states: “*and made of him the two sexes [al-zawjayn], the male and the female*”⁵ (Quran 75:39). In verses such as “*O Adam, dwell with your mate [zawjaka] in paradise*”⁶ (Quran 2:35), “*They and their mates [azwājuhū]*”⁷ (Quran 36:56), and “*Muster the wrongdoers and their mates [azwājahū]*”⁸ (Quran 37:22), *azwāj* refers to their peers or those whom they followed (Rāghib Iṣfahānī 1991, 384). “*Toward what We have provided certain groups [azwājan] of them*”⁹ (Quran 20:131) means likes and peers, and “*various kinds [azwājan] of vegetation*”¹⁰ (Quran 20:53) means similar kinds.

In the verse “*And for them therein are spouses purified*” (Q 2:25), *azwāj* has been interpreted as the “*ḥūr al-‘īn*” (big-eyed houris) or worldly women (wives), and it is stated that *azwāj* is the plural of *zawj*; when referring to a woman, it is called *zawjah*, though the former term

⁵. ﴿فَجَعَلَ مِنْهُ الزَّوْجَيْنِ الذَّكَرَ وَالْأُنثَى﴾ (القيامة/ ٣٩)

⁶. ﴿... يَا آدَمُ اسْكُنْ أَنْتَ وَزَوْجُكَ الْجَنَّةَ ...﴾ (البقرة/ ٣٥)

⁷. ﴿هُمْ وَأَزْوَاجُهُمْ...﴾ (يس/ ٥٦)

⁸. ﴿اخْشَرُوا الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا وَأَزْوَاجَهُمْ...﴾ (الصافات/ ٢٢)

⁹. ﴿...إِلَى مَا مَتَّعْنَا بِهِ أَزْوَاجًا مِنْهُمْ...﴾ (طه/ ١٣١)

¹⁰. ﴿...أَزْوَاجًا مِنْ نَبَاتٍ شَتَّى﴾ (طه/ ٥٣)

is more commonly used (Ṭabarsī 1997 Sh, 1:163; Burūsawī 2000, 1:84). In the verse: (*kull-i zawjin bahīj*) “every delightful kind [of plant]”¹¹ (Quran 22:5), *zawj* is interpreted as colour, type, category, or species (Qurṭubī 1992, 13:14; Tha‘ālabī 1996, 4:110). In the verse “In both of them will be two kinds [*zawjān*] of every fruit”¹² (Quran 55:52), *zawjān* is understood to mean kinds or categories (Ālūsī 1996, 9:115; Tha‘ālabī 2001, 7:9). The reference to “your wives [*azwājika*]” in the verse, “O Prophet! Say to your wives...”¹³ (Quran 33:28) evidently and unanimously among exegetes denotes the wives of the Prophet (s) (Ibn Jawzī, 1986, 4:213; Ālūsī 1996, 14:117). Likewise, *azwāj* in the verse “As for those of you who die leaving wives [*azwājan*] ...”¹⁴ (Quran 2:234) refers to women (wives) for men (A Group of Researchers 2013, 3:582).

The term *zawj* denotes a complementary relationship based on symmetry between two independent yet mutually completing entities that exist simultaneously and side by side, forming a pair. This concept stands in opposition to *fard* (singular) and emphasises an inherent and natural bond (such as husband and wife or male and female in plants), without necessarily implying complete similarity or substitutability. In contrast, terms such as *badal* refer to the replacement and alteration of one thing or concept with another over time, such that with the arrival of the *badal*, the *mubdal minhu* (original) ceases to exist. *Zawj* also differs from terms that denote mere formal resemblance (*shakl*) or similarity in a specific attribute (*shabah*); for *zawjiyyah*, beyond relative similarity, stresses pairing and the principle of duality. Furthermore, *zawj* is distinguished from concepts that indicate absolute

¹¹. ﴿... كُلَّ زَوْجٍ بَهِيجٍ﴾ (الحج/٥)

¹². ﴿فِيهِمَا مِنْ كُلِّ فَأْكِهَةٍ زَوْجَانِ﴾ (الرحمن/٥٢)

¹³. ﴿يَا أَيُّهَا النَّبِيُّ قُلْ لِزَوَّاجِكَ...﴾ (الأحزاب/٢٨)

¹⁴. ﴿وَالَّذِينَ يَتُوفُونَ مِنْكُمْ وَيُذَرُونَ أَزْوَاجًا...﴾ (البقرة/٢٣٤)

equality or essential identity (*mithl*, *‘idl*, *sawiyy*): *mithl* signifies similarity in essence or attribute, *‘idl* denotes quantitative and valuative equivalence, and *sawiyy* refers to balance and proportionality in state; whereas *zawj* does not necessarily imply equality or identity but rather emphasises a binary, symmetrical relationship—even if the two sides are not entirely identical (as with two similar yet non-identical fruits).

3. *Sawiyy* (سَوِيّ)

Sawiyy denotes uprightness and moderation between two things. It is said “*hādhā lā yasāwī hādhā* هذا لا يساوى هذا” meaning “this is not equivalent to that.” *Masāwāt* refers to valid equivalence through measurement, weighing, or scaling. Sometimes equivalence is qualitative, as in “this blackness is equivalent to that blackness.” “*Sāwaytu hādhā bi-hādhā* ساويتُ هذا بهذا” means “I raised it until it matched the other,” and “*sawwaytu aḥadahumā bi-l-ākhar* سَوَّيْتُ احدهما بالآخر” means “I raised it until its length equalled the other’s.” Among the Arabs, *sawiyy* means ‘adl (justice/equity), and *sawā’* means *mustawī* (level). *Siwah*, *sawā’*, *sāwī*, and *istawā* all share the same meaning. When one thing is like another, it is said “*suwwiya bihi* سَوَّى به,” and “*rajul sawiyy al-khalq* رجل سَوَّى الخلق” means a man of well-proportioned creation (see Ibn Fāris 1983, 3:112; Rāghib Iṣfahānī 1991, 439; Farāhīdī, 1993, 7:326; Ibn Durayd 1987, 1:237 & 2:707).

Sawiyy signifies equivalence and balance. *Istawā* is used in two senses: (1) when attributed to two or more agents, as in “*istawā Zaydun wa-‘Amrun fī kadhā*” meaning “Zayd and ‘Amr became equal,” and Allah states: “...*They are not equal with Allah...*”¹⁵ (*Quran* 9:19); (2) intrinsic moderation of a thing, as in “*possessed of sound judgement*.”

¹⁵. ﴿لَا يَسْتَوْنَ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ...﴾ (التوبة/ ١٩)

He settled [*fasta-wā*]”¹⁶ (Quran 53:6), and “When you, and those who are with you, are settled [*istawayta*]...”¹⁷ (Quran 23:28). When transitivised with *‘alā*, it connotes dominion, as in “[He] settled on the Throne [*‘alā al-‘arsh istawā*]”¹⁸ (Quran 20:5), interpreted as everything in the heavens and earth becoming equivalent for Him—meaning all are aligned according to His will, and He has rendered them equal in that direction (Rāghib Iṣfahānī 1991, 439). “who created you and proportioned you [*fasawwāka*]...”¹⁹ (Quran 82:7) means He made your creation conform to wisdom. Some interpret *sawīyyan* in “Your sign is that you will not speak to the people for three complete nights [*sawīyyan*]”²⁰ (Quran 19:10) as consecutive; whereas *sawīyy al-khalq* means sound and healthy limbs, and *khalq* here denotes absence of illness or defect (Ibn Kathīr 1988, 5:191; Zuḥaylī 1998, 16:57). In “So follow me that I may guide you to a right path [*ṣirāṭan sawīyyan*]”²¹ (Quran 19:43), it is said to mean a moderate, straight path that does not lead from truth to misguidance. The straight path is an explicit metaphor for the creed that leads to truth and salvation, likened to a direct road (Ṭabarsī 1997, 6:780; Ṭabāṭabā’ī 1996, 14:18).

From a comparative semantic perspective, the term *sawīyy*, in contrast to related lexical items, emphasises the concept of equality, balance, and moderation in essence or attributes, without implying substitution or complete similarity. In comparison with *badal*, which indicates replacement and alteration as in the verse “And should anyone

¹⁶. ﴿ذُو مِرَّةٍ فَاسْتَوَى﴾ (النجم/٦)

¹⁷. ﴿فَإِذَا اسْتَوَيْتَ أَنْتَ وَمَنْ مَعَكَ ...﴾ (المؤمنون/٢٨)

¹⁸. ﴿عَلَى الْعَرْشِ اسْتَوَى﴾ (طه/٥)

¹⁹. ﴿الَّذِي خَلَقَكَ فَسَوَّاكَ ...﴾ (الانفطار/٧)

²⁰. ﴿... آتِيكَ إِلَّا تَكَلَّمُ النَّاسُ ثَلَاثَ لَيَالٍ سَوِيًّا﴾ (مريم/١٠)

²¹. ﴿... فَاتَّبِعْنِي أَهْدِكَ صِرَاطًا سَوِيًّا﴾ (مريم/٤٣)

alter it after hearing it...’’²² (Quran 2:181), *sawiyy* denotes equilibrium and equivalence between two entities or concepts as in “a right path [ṣirāṭan sawiyyan]” (Quran 19:43), meaning a balanced and upright way. Likewise, unlike *zawj*, which stresses pairing and simultaneous complementarity (such as the marital bond between man and woman), *sawiyy* conveys equality in quantity or quality without regard to oppositional or complementary relationality.

In contrast to *mithl*, the most general term for similarity applied to essence, attribute, or meaning as in “...The wives have rights similar to [mithl] the obligations upon them...”²³ (Quran 2:228), *sawiyy* focuses primarily on quantitative or qualitative balance and less on apparent or essential resemblance. Furthermore, unlike *shakl*, which is confined to formal resemblance, *sawiyy* can be applied to abstract dimensions such as justice and uprightness as in “and proportioned you [fasawwāka]”²⁴ (Quran 82:7) in the verse on human creation. Finally, *sawiyy* exhibits a fundamental distinction from *nidd*, for *nidd* refers to parity accompanied by rivalry and opposition as in false deities in “equals [andādan]”²⁵ (Quran 14:30), whereas *sawiyy* lacks any negative or hostile connotation and expresses equality and moderation solely in a positive direction.

4. *Shibh / Shabah* (شِبْه / شَبَه)

Shibah denotes likeness and resemblance between two things in description and colour (Ibn Fāris 1983, 3:243). “*Shubbiha fulānun bi-fulān* شُبِّهَ فُلَانٌ بِفُلَانٍ” means that something became confused for him, such that he sees one thing in the likeness of another. For equal things,

²². ﴿فَمَنْ يَدَّلُهُ بَعْدَ مَا سَمِعَهُ...﴾ (البقرة/١٨١)

²³. ﴿وَلَهُنَّ مِثْلُ الَّذِي عَلَيْهِنَّ﴾ (البقرة/٢٢٨)

²⁴. ﴿... فَسَوَّاهُ...﴾ (الانفطار/٧)

²⁵. ﴿...أُنْدَادًا...﴾ (ابراهيم/٣٠)

it is said “*ashbāh*” (likenesses). *Shabah*, *shabīh*, and *shibh* all share the same meaning. It is said “*fulān shibh-i fulān*” meaning “so-and-so resembles so-and-so.” “*Shabbaha al-shay’a bi-l-shay’* شَبَّهَ الشَّيْءَ بِالشَّيْءِ” is used when one thing takes on the form of another, and *shibah* occurs when equality arises between two things (see Farāhīdī 1993, 3:404; Ibn Durayd 1987, 1:346). “*Shabah* شَبَّهَ” refers to a substance from the class of minerals that resembles gold. *Shibh* and *shabīh* are like *karīm* and *karam*. *Shibh* means similarity, and based on the explanations of the word *shibh*, according to lexicographers its meaning is the same as that word, and the difference between the two may only be in their usage (Fayyūmī 1984, 303; Ibn Fāris 1983, 3:204).

The phrase “*and they were given something resembling it [mutashābihan]*”²⁶ (*Quran* 2:25) means that some of them resemble others in colour but not in taste or essence, and it has been said to mean identical in perfection and goodness. “*Allah has sent down the best of discourses, a scripture [composed] of similar motifs [kitāban mutashābihan]*”²⁷ (*Quran* 39:23) means that some parts resemble others in rulings, wisdom, and the uprightness of order and arrangement (Rāghib Iṣfahānī 1991, 443). In the verse “*and they were given something resembling it. In it there will be chaste mates for them...*”²⁸ (*Quran* 2:25), *mutashābihan* has been interpreted as: some of them resemble others in appearance and fragrance, while differing in pleasure and taste or in excellence and goodness; due to the strength of the resemblance, it is as if the essence of one is the essence of the other (see Marāghī 1945, 1:69).

²⁶ ﴿وَأُتُوا بِهِ مُتَشَابِهًا﴾ (البقرة/٢٥)

²⁷ ﴿اللَّهُ نَزَّلَ أَحْسَنَ الْحَدِيثِ كِتَابًا مُتَشَابِهًا﴾ (الزمر/٢٣)

²⁸ ﴿وَأُتُوا بِهِ مُتَشَابِهًا وَلَهُمْ فِيهَا أَزْوَاجٌ...﴾ (البقرة/٢٥)

In the verse “*but so it was made to appear to them [shubbiha lahum]*”²⁹ (Quran 4:157), it is written that the Jews sent one of their companions to kill Jesus (a), and the man entered but did not find Jesus. Allah made him resemble Jesus and cast his likeness upon another (Shawkānī 1994, 1:616). In the verse, “... *Alike are their hearts [tashābahat qulūbuhum]*”³⁰ (Quran 2:118), it is said that the hearts of some resemble those of others in disbelief, hardness of heart, objecting to prophets without proof or evidence, and enmity; their hearts are alike in misguidance and ignorant disbelief (Ṭabarsī 1997, 1:371; Sabzawārī 1998, 1:413). In the Quran, the forms *shibh* and *shabah* with these two vocalisations do not appear.

From a comparative semantic perspective, the term *shibh/shabah*, when contrasted with the other related lexical items, exhibits subtle semantic distinctions. It denotes a partial resemblance based on one or several specific features, which does not necessarily imply complete identity in all aspects and often carries a potential for creating ambiguity or confusion, as exemplified in its Quranic usage in “*but so it was made to appear to them [shubbiha lahum]*” (Quran 4:157). In contrast, *mithl* is the most general term for expressing any form of similarity, whether concrete or abstract, without carrying the semantic load of ambiguity. *Shakl* focuses exclusively on formal and external resemblance, whereas *shibh* can encompass non-visible features as well. On the other hand, *badal* denotes a relationship of substitution and replacement typically accompanied by alteration, while *shibh* emphasises mere resemblance without any obligation of substitution. *Zawj* stresses pairing and complementarity rather than simple similarity.

Compared to *nidd*, which incorporates the notion of opposition, *sawiyy*, which signifies balance and uprightness, and *idl*, which centres

²⁹. ﴿وَلَكِنْ شُبِّهَ لَهُمْ﴾ (النساء/ ١٥٧)

³⁰. ﴿تَشَابَهَتْ قُلُوبُهُمْ﴾ (البقرة/ ١١٨)

on quantitative equality and justice, the term *shibh* lacks these additional semantic burdens. Moreover, unlike *mathal*, which refers to a parable or illustrative example, *shibh* directly addresses the relationship of resemblance itself—and specifically a partial and potentially misleading type. Thus, the primary distinguishing feature of *shibh* lies in its emphasis on an incomplete and ambiguity-laden resemblance, without implying complete equality, substitution, opposition, or balance.

5. *Shakl* (شَكْل)

The primary semantic root of *shakl* is formal resemblance or likeness in appearance. From this root derive expressions such as *amr-i mushkil* and *amr-i mushtabih*, both meaning “this is like that.” *Shakl* signifies *mithl* (like); “*fulānun shakl fulān*” means “so-and-so resembles so-and-so in his states.” *Shakl* means *mithl* or *shabah*; “*hādhā min shakl hādhā*” means “this is of the same kind as that.” It also denotes a woman’s coquetry or affectation. “*Hādhā min shakl hādhā*” can mean “of its type and manner,” referring to something that resembles another in most of its attributes. It is probable that it derives from *shakl* meaning the singular of *shamā’il* (characteristics). “*Shākilat al-insān*” means his face, aspect, or manner. “*Shakalahū*” means “he formed him,” and “*shakala al-kitāb*” means “he diacriticised or restricted the book” (Azharī 2001, 10:15; Zamakhsharī 1979, 336).

The term *shakl* in this form and root appears in the Quran only once: “and other kinds [of torments] resembling it [*min shaklihī*]”³¹ (Quran 38:58). Regarding the meaning of *shakl* in this noble verse, it is said: its like in form, in performing actions, and in the principle of mating animals; *shikāl* refers to the tether with which an animal is bound, and from this meaning is metaphorically derived *shakaltu al-kitāb*, akin to

³¹ «آخِرُ مَنْ شَكَّلَهُ أَزْوَاجٌ» (ص/٥٨)

qayyadtuhū: I restricted it. “*Shākilatihī*” in the verse “Say, Everyone acts according to his character [*shākilatihī*]...”³² (Quran 17:84) is interpreted as: according to his disposition that binds and constrains him (Rāghib Iṣfahānī 1991, 462); likewise, regarding *shaklihi*, it is said: its like, its similar, or its kind (Tha‘labī 2001, 8:214; Ālūsī 1996, 12:206).

The term *shakl* emphasises tangible and perceptible resemblance in external form and is primarily employed in the domain of sensory observations, such as the similarity between two birds of the same species. In contrast, related terms such as *mithl* possess a broader semantic scope, encompassing any form of similarity, whether concrete, abstract, or legal. *Shabah/shibh* likewise denotes the presence of a specific point of resemblance, whether visible or non-visible, but is not restricted to formal similarity as *shakl* is. *Mathal*, however, focuses more on narration and description through parable than on direct resemblance.

On the other hand, *shakl* exhibits fundamental differences from terms that denote substitution, pairing, or opposition. For example, *badal* indicates successive substitution and the absence of the original; *zawj* stresses concomitance and complementarity, not necessarily external resemblance; *nidd* conveys parity accompanied by opposition; *sawiy* centres on quantitative or qualitative equality and balance. None of these concepts inherently falls within the semantic domain of *shakl*.

6. *Dihy* (ضيهي)

Dihy means the resemblance of one thing to another; “*dāhāhu yuḍāhīhi*” means “*ضاهاه يضاهيه*” means “it resembles it in form.” It is sometimes used with hamzah (*yuḍāhi* ‘يضاهي’). “*Muḍāhāh*” means making one thing resemble another. “*Fulānun ḍahyun fulānun*” has been interpreted as meaning “his peer or similar” (Ibn Fāris 1983, 3:374; Fayyūmī 1984,

³². ﴿قُلْ كُلُّ يَعْمَلُ عَلَىٰ شَاكِلَتِهِ...﴾ (الإسراء/ ٨٤)

365; Ibn Manzūr 1992, 8:97). Additionally, “*ḍahyā* ضَهْيَا” refers to a woman who does not menstruate, as if she has become like a man in this respect (Farāhīdī 1993, 4:70; Azharī 2001, 6:192; Jawharī 1984, 6:241). The form “*yudāhi’ūn*” appears in the Quran only once: “*That is an opinion that they mouth, imitating [yudāhi’ūna] the opinions of the faithless of former times...*”³³ (Quran 9:30), meaning “they make it resemble it,” “imitate it,” or “make it similar” (see Rāghib Iṣfahānī 1991, 308; Ṭabāṭabā’ī 1996, 9:244).

The term *ḍihy* and its verbal noun *muḍāhāh*, which appear only in verses 22-24 of *Sūrat al-Kahf*, refer to an apparent resemblance accompanied by hypocrisy and the intent to deceive. This concept carries a strongly negative semantic load, conveying seductive imitation and deceptive mimicry—such as performing an action merely for show, without partaking in its truth.

Ḍihy is distinguished from more neutral terms such as “*shakl*” (formal resemblance) and “*shabah/shibh*” (sharing certain features), as these lack the element of intent and deception. It also exhibits a fundamental difference from “*badal*” (substitute) and “*zawj*” (pair and companion), which denote genuine relationships. The term stands in opposition to concepts that signify true equality and identity, such as “*idl*” (equivalence in value), “*sawiyy*” (intrinsic balance), and “*mithl*” (the most general term for similarity). It is even distinct from “*nidd*” (peer and rival), since *nidd* emphasises overt competition, whereas *muḍāhāh* focuses on pretence and constructing a superficial resemblance for the purpose of deception. Therefore, *ḍihy* can be defined as a hypocritical and deceptive imitation, rather than a mere neutral resemblance.

7. *Idl* (عَدْل)

³³ ﴿ذَٰلِكَ قَوْلُهُمْ بِأَفْوَاهِهِمْ يُضَاهِيُونَ قَوْلَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا...﴾ (التوبة/ ٣٠)

Idl has two contrasting meanings: one denoting uprightness and equality, the other curvature or deviation. When something is equivalent to another, it is said “*huwa idluhū* هو عدله.” “*Huwa ya dilu* هو يعدل” means “he rules justly,” and *idl* signifies a just ruling. “*Idl al-shay*” means “the equivalent of that thing.” *Idl* also refers to the counterpart of something from a different category. *Idl* means *mithl* (like), and among people, *idl* designates one whose conduct is satisfactory and whose path is correct. *Idl* also denotes the price of something. “*Adl* عدل” and “*idl* عدل” have closely related meanings. *Adl* is applied to matters perceived through insight, such as rulings, whereas *idl* and *adil* pertain to things perceived through the senses, such as weighed items. *Adl* is that which penetrates souls directly and is the opposite of *jawr* (injustice), while *idl* means *mithl* (like) (Farāhīdī 1993, 2:38; Ibn Fāris 1983, 4:246-247; Rāghib Iṣfahānī 1991, 551; Ibn Manẓūr 1992, 11:431).

Idālah and *mu’ādalāh* mean equality, and *adl* and *idl* have closely related meanings; however, *adl* is applied to matters perceived through insight, such as rulings, and on this basis is the statement of Allah: “...or its equivalent [*adl*] in fasting...”³⁴ (Quran 5:95). *Idl* and *adil* are used for things perceived through the senses, such as weighed, counted, or measured items; thus, *idl* and *taqsīt* (division) have equivalent meanings (Rāghib Iṣfahānī 1991, 551). In the exegesis of the verse “Beware of the day... nor any ransom [*adl*] shall be received from it...”³⁵ (Quran 2:48), the term *adl* has been interpreted as ransom (*fidya*: averting evil through monetary or non-monetary compensation). *Fidā*’ is called *adl* because it becomes equivalent and similar to what is ransomed, signifying uprightness and resemblance, which can occur

³⁴. «أَوْ عَدْلُ ذَلِكَ صِيَامًا...» (المائدة/٩٥)

³⁵. «وَاتَّقُوا يَوْمًا... وَلَا يُؤْخَذُ مِنْهَا عَدْلٌ...» (البقرة/٤٨)

despite differences in various aspects. ‘*Adl* means ransom, while ‘*idl*’ it means like (Mughniyyah 1981, 96; Ālūsī 1996, 1:253).

In comparison with the other related lexical items, the term ‘*idl*’ emphasises valuative, quantitative, or functional equality, as well as the establishment of balance and justice in an ethical-accounting relationship (such as equilibrium on scales). This contrasts with *mithl*, which denotes conceptual or concrete similarity; *shakl*, which signifies external resemblance; and *shibh*, which indicates imprecise and potentially misleading similarity. Unlike *badal*, which refers to substitution and replacement (typically successive), ‘*idl*’ implies the simultaneous and balanced coexistence of both parties. ‘*Adl*’ also differs from *zawj*, which stresses complementary pairing (such as husband and wife), and from *nidd*, which conveys parity accompanied by opposition and hostility; for ‘*idl*’ lacks the notion of complementarity or hostile rivalry and is founded purely on equality and valuative balance.

8. *Mithl* (مِثْل)

The term *mithl* is employed in three senses: 1. resemblance; 2. the thing itself or its essence; 3. excess. “*Hādhā mithlu hādhā* هذا مِثْلُ هذا” means “this is the like of that.” *Mithl* and *mathal* share the same meaning. Something that resembles another in example or quantity is called *mithl*. *Mithl* is the most general term coined for the meaning of similarity, and sometimes *mithl* is used while intending the essence itself, as in “*mithluka lā yaf‘alu hādhā* هذا مِثْلُكَ لَا يَفْعَلُ هَذَا” (someone like you does not do this). “*Muththila al-shay’u bi-l-shay’* مُثِّلَ الشَّيْءُ بِالشَّيْءِ” means “it has become equal to and measured against it.” It is said “*hādhā mithluhū wa mathaluhū* هَذَا مِثْلُهُ وَ مَثَلُهُ” just as “*shibhuhū wa shabahuhū* وَ شَبَّهَهُ” is said; all share the same meaning. When said absolutely “*hādhā mithluhū*,” it means that it substitutes for it, whereas when qualified “*huwa mithluhū fī kadhā* هُوَ مِثْلُهُ فِي كَذَا” it means “it is equal only in one

aspect and not in others” (see Fayyūmī 1984, 563; Ibn Fāris 1983, 5:296; Ibn Durayd 1987, 1:432; Farāhīdī 1993, 8:228; Zamakhsharī 1979, 761; Jawharī 1984, 5:1816; Ibn Manẓūr 1992, 13:21).

The term *mithl* is the most general and comprehensive Arabic term for expressing the concept of similarity. In comparison with its related lexical items, it possesses a broader semantic scope and a more neutral connotative load. Unlike *shakl*, which denotes only external resemblance, or *badal*, which emphasises substitution, *mithl* encompasses both concrete and abstract similarities. Likewise, unlike *zawj*, which signifies pairing and complementarity, *mithl* is not restricted to duality or oppositional relationality. In contrast to *nidd*, which carries the sense of rivalrous parity and opposition, *mithl* lacks any ideological burden and merely indicates the presence of a point of resemblance. Finally, in distinction from *mathal*, which refers to parable and proverb, *mithl* expresses the foundational concept of “likeness” itself. Thus, *mithl* is a comprehensive term free from formal, temporal, numerical, or conceptual restrictions, whereas the other lexemes narrow the scope of this concept through specific qualifications.

9. *Mathal* (مَثَل)

Mathal also means like, just as *shabah* and *shibh* do. The *mathal* that is struck (proverb) is derived from this meaning. The hadith or statement itself is also called *mathal*. *Mathal* and *mathīl* mean *shabah*. It has been said that *mithl* means *shibh*, while *mathal* means description; “*ḍaraba Allāhu mathalan* ضرب الله مثلاً” means “Allah described.” *Mathal* is the name for a type of discourse. The word *mathal* is used for the state of metaphor, and also for the discourse itself. *Mathal* is something mentioned for another thing, making that thing like it (Ibn Manẓūr 1992, 13:21; Ibn Fāris 1983, 5:296; Farāhīdī 1993, 8:228; Fayyūmī 1984, 565).

In the verse, “*So said those who had no knowledge, [words] similar to [mithla] what they say*”³⁶ (Quran 2:113), it is said that “*mithla qawlihim*” means Allah rebuked them (the Jews) because of their resemblance to the ignorant (‘Āmilī 1992, 1:134; Ibn ‘Āshūr 1999, 1:659). In the verse, “*So said those who had no knowledge, [words] similar to [mithla] what they say*”³⁷ (Quran 2:118), the meaning of *mithl* is clarified in the continuation of the verse: “*Alike are their hearts [tashābahat qulūbuhum]*”³⁸; thus, *mithl* means similarity. Given the clarity of the meanings of *mithl*, exegetes have not explained *mithl* itself. In the verse, “*The wives have rights similar to [mithlu] the obligations upon them...*”³⁹ (Quran 2:228), without specifying the meaning of *mithl*, they have explained the manner of likeness; for instance, it is said: like in good companionship, like in obligation and entitlement, not in kind, and like in right (see Bulāghī 1999, 1:205; Tūsī, n.d., 2:241; Ḥaydarī-Rād 2024, 13).

In comparison with other similar lexical items, the term *mathal* possesses the broadest semantic scope. Unlike *shakl*, which refers solely to external resemblance, or *shabah*, which focuses on similarity in a specific feature, *mathal* is capable of expressing any form of resemblance—whether concrete, essential, qualitative, or abstract. Moreover, in contrast to *badal*, which conveys the concept of substitution and succession, *mathal* denotes the simultaneous coexistence of two similar entities. The term also differs from *zawj*, which emphasises complementarity and pairing, since *mathal* indicates pure likeness without requiring an oppositional relationship. Furthermore, unlike *nidd*, which carries the semantic burden of rivalry

³⁶. ﴿كَذَلِكَ قَالَ الَّذِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ مِثْلَ قَوْلِهِمْ﴾ (البقرة/١١٣)

³⁷. ﴿كَذَلِكَ قَالَ الَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِهِمْ مِثْلَ قَوْلِهِمْ﴾ (البقرة/١١٨)

³⁸. ﴿...تَشَابَهَتْ قُلُوبُهُمْ...﴾ (البقرة/١١٨)

³⁹. ﴿...وَلَهُنَّ مِثْلُ الَّذِي عَلَيْهِنَ...﴾ (البقرة/٢٢٨)

and hostile parity-seeking, *mathal* lacks any negative connotation and merely expresses resemblance. *Mathal* is also distinct from *sawiyy* (quantitative equality and balance) and *‘idl* (valuative equality and justice), because likeness in *mathal* does not necessarily imply mathematical or valuative equivalence but is more concerned with essential and attributive similarity. Thus, as the most comprehensive term in the domain of resemblance, *mathal* encompasses a broader and more inclusive concept than the other more specialised lexemes in this field.

10. *Nidd* (نَدَّ)

Nidd means driving away and separation. “*Alladhī yunādu fī al-amr* الذي يُناد في الأمر” means “the one who, in a matter, brings an opinion contrary to that of his companion.” It is also used in the sense of like or similar to something that is opposed to it in affairs, signifying equality, whose plural is *andād*. *Nidd* is something that takes the place of another. *Niddīd* is like it, but it is not used except in a context where it is opposed to its like (Ibn Manẓūr 1992, 13:22; Ibn Fāris 1983, 5:355; Ibn Durayd 1987, 1:115; Farāhīdī 1993, 8:10; Ibn Manẓūr 1992, 3:430).

The lexeme “*nidd*” exhibits a marked semantic distinction when compared to cognate terms such as “*badal*,” “*mithl*,” “*shakl*,” “*zawj*,” and “*sawiyy*.” This term denotes not merely equality or parity, but rather an inherent opposition and hostility. In contrast to “*badal*,” which signifies substitution without necessitating antagonism (as in the revocation or alteration of a bequest), or “*mithl*,” which indicates only a general similarity devoid of negative connotation, “*nidd*” conveys parity in a hostile and illegitimate manner. Even relative to “*zawj*”—which implies a harmonious pairing and conjunction without conflict—and “*sawiyy*,” which denotes neutral quantitative or qualitative equivalence, “*nidd*” consistently incorporates notions of rivalry, enmity, and unwarranted claims to equality. Consequently, the distinguishing

feature of “*nidd*” lies in its unique conflation of “similarity” with “active opposition,” rendering it singular within the religious and literary lexicon, particularly in references to polytheism (*shirk*) and improper rivalry with the Divine.

Conclusion

In this study, one can discern a complex yet coherent network of semantic relations among the lexemes under examination. This analysis reveals that, although these terms may at first glance convey notions of “similarity” or “equality,” each occupies a distinctly separate semantic domain and is employed in the Quranic context with remarkable precision. The fundamental distinction within this network lies between the concepts of substitution, coordination/equality/balance, and similarity.

The terms “*badal*” and “*nidd*,” while both referring in some manner to “*substitution*,” stand at entirely opposite poles. “*Badal*” denotes a subsequent substitution that is often neutral or even positive, where the existence of the substitute necessitates the disappearance or supersession of that which is substituted (*mubdalun minhu*). In contrast, “*nidd*” emphasizes a hostile, competitive, and illegitimate parity, in which the existence of the “*nidd*” not only does not require the negation of the “*manūdd*” (the original), but rather involves a mutual and simultaneous opposition and antagonism toward it, as in the act of associating a partner with God. This opposition also positions “*nidd*” in direct contrast to concepts such as “*zawj*,” which connotes pairing and companionship based on complementarity and cooperation.

Although the terms “*sawiy*” and “*idl*” both denote the concept of equilibrium, they differ in their domains of application. “*Sawiy*” emphasizes steadfastness, inherent moderation, and qualitative equality, as exemplified in the notion of the “straight path,” whereas “*idl*” focuses primarily on quantitative equality, as well as value-based

and legal equity (such as justice in adjudication or equivalence in retribution). These two lexemes stand in stark contrast to “*muḍāha*,” which signifies a form of superficial similarity that is hypocritical and deceptive.

The third group comprises lexemes expressing “similarity,” which encompass a spectrum of meanings. Within this spectrum, “*mithl*” serves as the most general and encompassing term, covering any form of resemblance, whether tangible or abstract. “*Mathal*”, shifting toward the domain of narration and description, is more commonly employed to convey allegorical and proverbial themes. “*Shibh/shabah*” highlights partial similarity, often engendering ambiguity in one or several specific attributes, while “*shakl*” concentrates exclusively on the formal and external aspect of such resemblance. The key distinction here is that these lexemes denote merely the quality of “likeness” and lack any connotation of substitution, value-based equality, or opposition.

In final conclusion, it may be asserted that the precision and subtlety in the deployment of these lexemes in the Noble Quran attest to a profound and purposeful semantic system, wherein the slightest alteration in lexical choice can lead to a complete shift in the intended meaning. Comprehending these nuanced distinctions is not only essential for an accurate understanding of Quranic teachings and the prevention of erroneous interpretations but also serves as clear evidence of the linguistic inimitability of this heavenly scripture and the depth of meanings embedded in its vocabulary. This study demonstrates that the networked analysis of vocabulary constitutes an indispensable approach for uncovering the hidden layers of meaning in religious texts and achieving a comprehensive and multifaceted understanding thereof.

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