

## “Synonymy in Arabic Considering Pragmatic Usage A Study of the Limits of Semantic Equivalence Across Language Corpora”

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### ABSTRACT

This research explores the issue of synonymy in Arabic through the lens of corpus-based pragmatics, examining particularly the boundaries of semantic identity of near-synonymous lexical items. The qualitative descriptive approach is based on a mixed corpus of formal news texts and X platform posts, allowing the study of synchronic natural language use in a variety of contexts. Five sets of near-synonyms - (قال/ذكر qāla/dhakara "say/mention"), (رأى/نظر ra'ā/naẓara "see/look"), (قتل/اغتال qatala/ighṭāla "die/assassinate"), (بدأ/شرع bada'a/shara'a "begin/start"), and (كبير/ضخم kabīr/ḍakhm "big/huge") - were analysed from four perspectives: semantic, pragmatic, collocational, and equivalence. It emerges that in Arabic, synonymy does not translate into semantic equivalence, but rather into a contextualized and restricted approximation based on collocational, pragmatic, and textual factors. Words have their own usage environment that controls their distribution and the extent to which they can be swapped. The research also shows that semantic equivalence is not a lexical attribute, but a relative, contextual, and emergent process that occurs only when several semantic and pragmatic criteria are fulfilled. This study, by reconceptualizing synonymy in a usage-based (pragmatic) perspective, shows the role of corpus data analysis in discovering subtle meanings. This paper adds to the understanding of meaning in Arabic and has implications for translation and discourse analysis.

**KEYWORDS:** Synonymy, Semantic Equivalence, Pragmatics, Corpus Linguistics

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Electronic corpora have brought about a major change in recent studies in linguistics, as they have allowed the study of language in context and the discovery of associative relations between lexical items and syntactic constructions in authentic discourse. This has helped better understand usage of a language as compared to language use in the abstract (Stefanowitsch, 2014; Kim & Davies, 2016; Deshors, 2017). And studies have revealed that words are not used in isolation; they connect with certain linguistic structures, and they function differently in various pragmatic contexts. This demonstrates the usage-based characteristic of language and meaning is necessarily contextual (Hilpert, 2014).

In this context, synonymy is a fundamental linguistic issue that has attracted much attention in the field of semantics. It is defined as the semantic relation between two linguistic items which express the same meaning or concept (Murphy, 2003). But many studies suggest that absolute synonymy is rare, if not inexistent, in languages. Instead, there is quasi synonymy which encompasses words that are similar in some of its meanings but different with other meanings (Cruse, 1986; Taylor, 2002; Zitouni et al., 2023).

This is especially important in Arabic, a language with a high degree of lexical diversity, and many expressions that are on the surface synonymous but have slight semantic distinctions that are determined by usage and context. Studies in the Arabic linguistic and Qur'anic has

demonstrated that each lexical item has its specific meaning that cannot be substituted with another lexical item without changing the meaning since their use is determined by specific contextual and semantic constraints (Abdul-Raof, 2018). Such subtleties may not be evident to native speakers, but are significant when interpreting precise texts, particularly in literature and religious contexts (AlQinai, 2011).

At the same time, the analysis of synonymy is also no longer relying on linguistic intuition and definitions found in dictionaries, but more on empirical studies based on corpora, that provide us with natural language data about word use in context. Corpus-based linguistic research has revealed that in addition to the lexicographical meaning of a word, its meaning is also determined by the words that it is used with (collocations) and the context in which it appears (context). This is known as collocational behavior and contextual meaning (Mohammed & Alqadi, 2015). Further, such a study of collocations helps to identify subtle differences between near synonyms that cannot be detected through purely theoretical analysis (Partington, 1998). In this respect, pragmatics has become an important discipline to study meaning in context. Meaning is no longer seen as static and defined by language structure, but rather as a dynamic interaction of language, context, and socio-cultural elements. Pragmatic studies suggest that meaning can be implied or constructed based on default interpretations of a shared socio-cultural context (Jaszczolt, 2005). Furthermore, given that Arabic is a high-context language, implicit meaning and multiple contexts play a pivotal role in meaning making.

Synonymy is, therefore, not separate from pragmatics. What may be seen as synonyms from a semantic point of view, may have different pragmatic functions depending on context. Studies have shown that in some contexts primary meaning is not derived from the linguistic form of the utterance but is built on a combination of information from the social context and general knowledge (Jaszczolt, 2005). This calls for a reevaluation of semantic synonymy as a relative rather than absolute notion.

Although there have been substantial results in the literature on synonymy studies and linguistics, it seems there is a noticeable gap that combines the analysis of synonymy in Arabic with a corpus-based pragmatic approach, particularly in the use of synonymous words in types of discourse. Many of these studies have either been theoretical semantic studies or synonymy research in specific domains (such as in the Qur'an) without the use of corpus to analyzing the usage of synonymy in different contexts (Zitouni et al., 2023).

Studies on Arabic linguistics have mainly been limited to translation -oriented approaches or to the analysis of restricted lexical domains (Alshunnag et al., 2021; Alhaj, 2022). Thus, this leaves an opportunity for further studies to explore synonymy in Arabic through incorporating quantitative corpus approaches with pragmatic analysis in this area, which will help to gain a greater understanding of meaning in real use.

In this respect, this study aims to explore synonymy in Arabic from a pragmatic viewpoint by investigating the limits of synonymy in several language corpora. It aims to find the level of equivalence in meaning among synonyms in different contexts, and the role of pragmatic context in the occurrence and restriction of synonyms. The study also aims to provide an empirical corpus analysis to give an account of near-synonyms and their differences through their usage in language.

This study is significant in its consideration of three dimensions: synonymy, pragmatics, and corpus linguistics. This provides a holistic approach to analysis of meaning in Arabic. It also fills an existing gap in research by integrating these dimensions in one comprehensive study

and offers empirical evidence to inform the re-appraisal of synonymy in terms of language usage.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Synonymy in Arabic Linguistics

Synonymy is considered one of central linguistic phenomena in Arabic linguistics since it has been connected - ever since the emergence of early Arabic linguistic thought- with the question of relationship between form and meaning. This has been a central issue for linguists, exegetes and *usul al-fiqh* scholars. Arabic linguistic studies were grounded in the assumption that lexical items are assigned to denote specific meanings, and that the understanding of this relationship is fundamental for interpreting texts, especially Qur'anic and Hadith texts. This has given synonymy a special status in analyzing fine-tuned differences in the meaning of lexically similar items (al-Jurjani, 1983).

Synonymy is one of the most prominent linguistic phenomena in Arabic linguistics studies, as it has been connected since the early days of Arabic linguistic studies to the issue of word-meaning relationship. This is an issue that has preoccupied linguists, exegetes, and Islamic jurists. The studies of Arabic linguists have started with the idea that words are created to express certain meanings and that knowing this is essential for the comprehension of texts, particularly the Qur'anic and Hadith texts. This resulted in synonymy being particularly significant in examining the nuances that distinguish words with semantically similar (Ibn Jinni, 1990).

Recent research has revealed that early linguists' opinions on synonymy were not consistent, but rather, fell into three main perspectives: the first which accepted the existence of synonymy, the second which rejected it, and the third which adopted it in some cases. This shows that their awareness of the complexity and simplicity of synonymy began early on. Some linguists accepted that several words could refer to the same meaning, while others believed that these different words have different connotations, and therefore, different words, though apparently meaning the same, have different connotations (Chik et al. 2024).

At this level, it is interesting to note that linguists did not initially enshrine the term "synonymy" as an independent scientific term, but rather through their references to the existence of different words that share the same meaning. For example, Sibawayh referred that there are different words for the same meaning, such as when he referred to "different pronunciation but unified meaning", much of the first references to this phenomenon (Sibawayh, 1988). Similarly, Al-Shafi'i stated that the Arabs have different names for one thing, giving further examples of the diversity of the Arabic language (Al-Shafi'i, 1938).

However, this acknowledgment of synonymy did not necessarily imply complete equivalence between words. Several linguists identified differences between words that are synonyms. Ibn al-Anbari showed that although two words might convey the same general meaning, they have each a specific meaning or connotation, either explicit or implied, thus proving that synonymy in Arabic is relative (Ibn al-Anbari, 1987). Al-Tha'alibi and Al-Suyuti also worked along these lines, stressing the importance of distinguishing between words, and not assume complete equivalence between them (Al-Suyuti, 1998).

As linguistic studies developed and the concept of "synonymy" became more focused, especially among the works of Al-Farabi and Ibn al-Sarraj, as it referred to a relationship between different words that share the same meaning (Ibn al-Sarraj, 1972; Al-Farabi, 1990).

But discussions persisted as to the level of correspondence between words, as some linguists considered that there was no perfect synonymy and differences (even subtle ones) existed between them.

On the other hand, recent studies have added new dimensions to the study of synonymy, particularly in relation to classical and modern Arabic texts. Semantic studies demonstrate the differences between synonymous words in terms of meaning gradience and usage. For instance, the difference between "علم" (ilm, knowledge) and "معرفة" (ma'rifa, recognition/experiential knowledge) shows that the former is generally used to mean universal knowledge while the latter refers to personal, experiential understanding (Ryding, 2005; Ibn Manzur, 1995). This example shows that synonymy is within a certain context, not universal. A similar pattern appears in the pair "قلب" (qalb, heart) and "فؤاد" (fu'ād, inner/emotional heart) illustrates that while both refer to the heart as the organ of emotion and cognition, the latter connotes a heightened level of emotion. While both terms refer to the seat of emotions and thought, "قلب" is applied in broader, more neutral contexts, whereas "فؤاد" often conveys heightened emotional intensity. This supports those synonymic differences are highly evident in texts (Holes, 2004). This diversity suggests that context plays an important role in determining meaning and that synonymy is relative (Ibrahim, 2018).

In addition, studies show variations in the application of synonyms in ancient and modern Arabic. Contemporary practices are inclined toward semantic economy and functionality, especially in media and scientific discourse (Ibrahim, 2018). In such discourse, words may be used synonymously without regard to the connotative semantics of the classical synonyms, for instance, due to socio-cultural changes.

Moreover, advances in linguistics and corpus have also played a role in synonymy. We can study word use in the natural language, in different contexts, how words co-occur, and produce other semantic effects (Dickins et al., 2016). This approach allows us to have a clearer view of the differences between near synonyms, better than intuitive or theoretical-only approaches.

From the above, synonymy in Arabic linguistics cannot be considered as an absolute relationship between lexical items. Instead, it is a fluid relationship that is mediated by meaning, context and usage. Apparent synonyms may vary in their fine semantic features and pragmatic functions, which calls for a relative understanding of synonymy derived from usage and context, rather than abstract lexical meanings.

## 2.2 Semantic Equivalence

Semantic equivalence is an important concept in the fields of linguistics and translation because it is concerned with the effort that is made to establish a correspondence or convergence of meaning between linguistic items from two different languages. This concept is necessary because it is the focus of the translation process, which is not merely a word transfer but, more importantly, it involves meaning transfer at different levels (semantic, pragmatic or text level) (Sidiq & Anis, 2023).

Recent literature reveals that semantic equivalence is not a straightforward process, but rather intricate because the process involves both linguistic and non-linguistic factors, such as, grammatical structure, cultural difference and lexical difference between the source and the target language. Furthermore, meaning has multiple levels: lexical meaning, which refers to word meaning and, grammatical meaning, which refers to grammatical structure of the

sentence. Thus, semantic equivalence can be considered as a process involving all levels (Mulyanic, 2022).

With respect to translation, semantic equivalence is considered a search for the literal meaning in the target language that corresponds to the word or phrase in the source language. However, it is not yet entirely free from constraints, especially because of the non-equivalence between the semantic system of one language to another. This may cause subtle differences between the meaning of its translation equivalents (Kwok et al., 2023). So, translation is not a literal translation, but rather a translation that maintains meaning and intention of the original work (Yunianti & Fajria, 2023).

Moreover, studies indicate "translation equivalents" fail to fully convey the meaning due to language being polysemic and abstractive in its nature. Words do not always correspond to referents but can represent abstract meanings that can differ across languages (Lupyan & Winter, 2018). This makes it possible that, while there may be more than one linguistic equivalent, they are not synonymous.

Also, the number of meanings (lexical senses) in words from different languages varies, which results in variation in the level of equivalence, as a word in one language may be broader or narrower in meaning than its equivalent in another language. Šipka categorized the types of equivalence into four categories: complete equivalence, partial equivalence, multiple equivalence, and lack of equivalence, which suggests that complete equivalence is not always the case (Šipka, 2015).

In addition, the connotative meaning also affects the degree of complexity in achieving equivalence, as a word might have a different connotation (or cultural and emotional meaning) in one language than in another (Bradley & Lang, 1999; Thompson et al., 2020). For instance, a word might be negative in one language but positive in another language; therefore, a change in words' meaning would occur despite having direct translations (Thompson et al., 2020; Bradley & Lang, 1999). The boundaries of meaning in languages also contribute to lower the level of equivalence, since different cultures categorize objects differently and name them differently as well (Ameel et al., 2009; Malt & Majid, 2013).

As a result, in recent years there have been advances in the trend towards measuring semantic equivalence using a tool called "semantic alignment" through the analysis of word use in corpora. The idea here is that words that are used similarly are likely to have similar meanings and so can measure the semantic equivalence via statistical models such as word embeddings (Günther et al., 2019).

Although these have achieved progress, they come with limitations - the difficulty of including all relevant contexts, lack of data, and issues with translation ambiguity, in that words may be translated into multiple words, not all of which may be suitable for the given context. This demonstrates that semantic equivalence is not absolute equivalence but relative, and contextual, as well as contextualized. In translation studies, semantic equivalence is not considered in only linguistic terms, but also cultural and pragmatic terms. Translation is seen as a compromise between fidelity to the original text and intelligibility for the target audience. From this perspective, "dynamic equivalence" was proposed, which prioritizes the same effect for the reader, rather than the original text (Tian et al., 2024).

Pym also proposed a contemporary view of equivalence as a dynamic process that is based on the recreation of meaning and function in the target context, rather than a mere formal exchange between languages. This process involves a distinction between semantic

equivalence (direct meaning) and dynamic equivalence (effect and response), as a means of recognizing the interactive nature of translation (Pym, 2023).

Hence, semantic equivalence does not constitute a state of absolute equivalence between languages, but a negotiation process affected by linguistic, cultural, and contextual dynamics. Words do not migrate from one language to another as discrete entities, but as fluid meanings that are dependent on context and use, so equivalence is relative to the extent of similarity, rather than absolute equivalence.

### 2.3 Pragmatics and Meaning

Pragmatics is an important sub-discipline of linguistics focusing on meanings and usage. Meaning is not abstracted forms of the language, but it is seen in the communicative interaction between the speaker and the listener in a social and cultural environment. Meaning in pragmatics is dynamic and co-interpreted and constructed by contextual information, which includes the common ground share by the speakers of a discourse. This approach is related to John Austin and John Searle's theory of speech acts, who highlighted that language can be used not only as descriptive but also performative and to perform communicative acts in context (Searle, 1969; Austin, 1975).

In this context, pragmatics illustrates that there are different possible meanings for a sentence in its context, in which its meaning depends not only on how it is grammatically structured or on its literal meaning but in many cases on the intentions of the speaker. We can see this in the following sentence: "Can you pass me the salt?", which literally asks about the speaker's ability, but is pragmatically used as a request. This is also observed in Arabic utterances such as: "ممکن تديني الكتاب؟" (Can you give me the book?) where the literal meaning cannot be narrowed down to its grammatical meaning but can be used to fulfil a communicative goal (e.g., a request) (Searle, 1969; Grice, 1975). The divergence between the literal meaning (what is said) and intended meaning (what is meant) in the example above underlines the context dependence on defining the meaning of discourse, and therefore pragmatics is interested in moving beyond lexical semantics to the goals and intentions of the speaker.

This type of analysis also relates to the concept of "illustrative force" determining the rhetorical effect of utterances. This was demonstrated in Austin and Searle's theory of speech acts where they show that utterances not only convey meaning but also perform a communicative act such as requesting, commanding, or apologizing (Searle, 1969; Austin, 1975). Hence, the meaning in pragmatics can be understood when the relationship between language structure and interaction context is conceptualized as an integrated relationship that plays a role in meaning creation and comprehension.

Likewise, utterances can have meanings other than the literal ones in some pragmatic contexts. This can be seen in the sentence "الجو ممطر" (It is raining), which does not only serve to describe the weather, but in the context, may be interpreted as an implication to cancel going out or postpone a planned activity. This type of interpretation is an example of conversational implicature, which draws on the common ground between conversation participants to determine the meaning of discourse (Grice, 1991).

Paul Grice's cooperative theory has aided in understanding the process of meaning-making in language interactions. Grice assumes interlocutors work from a cooperative principle that is the basis for interpretation and understanding. This principle is captured by a series of rules or "axioms" of discourse such as the principles of quantity (sufficiency of information), quality (truthfulness), relevance (contextuality) and style (clarity and organization) (Grice, 1991).

Given these principles, "conversational implicature" is a key concept within the theory. It accounts for a speaker's ability to convey an implicit meaning by going beyond a statement's literal meaning. Therefore, a speaker's statement, "It's raining", is not always taken to be a declarative sentence. Sometimes, it can be understood as a suggestion to change or halt a specific course of action, given the context and the roles of the discourse participants (Grice, 1975; Sperber & Wilson, 1986; Taguchi & Kádár, 2023).

This perspective develops within the framework of Relevance Theory, proposed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson. They assert that the recipient attempts to interpret discourse in such a way as to get the most cognitive benefit for the least effort and that meaning results from inference based on context (Sperber & Wilson, 1986). This perspective draws attention to the fact that many meanings are not explicitly communicated by discourse but inferred via the link between the discourse and the context, hence strengthening the inferential nature of pragmatic meaning.

Another theory that also contributes to understanding discourse meaning in relation to social factors is Politeness Theory, which developed by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson (1987). The speaker shows regard for the listener's image by using linguistic means to avoid jeopardizing the listener's self-image (Brown & Levinson, 1987). This is because meaning is not only constructed linguistically but also socially, in relationship to notions of power and distance, making pragmatics an interdisciplinary field between the linguistic and the social. Also, recent studies in pragmatics emphasize that meaning is not unilaterally created by the speaker, but instead created interactively by the speakers involved in discourse, called interactional pragmatics. In this approach, meaning is constructed in a series of speech roles (Eelen et al., 2001). Meaning is not produced independently of the whole interaction, but rather emerges through the interaction, and the speakers' response and interpretation. This analysis shows that meaning is fluid and co-evolves with discourse, and not a static part of the sentence.

Applied pragmatics studies, especially in second language acquisition, also provides insights into learners' understanding of implicit meanings. These research works demonstrate that the understanding of conversational implicatures, humor, and irony is related to both language and contextual knowledge (Taguchi & Roeve, 2020; Ellis et al., 2021). This research implies that to interpret pragmatic meaning, we do not only need linguistic knowledge, but we also need to know a lot about the cultural and social context .

Considering the above, pragmatics provides a holistic view of meaning because of the intersection of language, context, and users. It shows that meaning is not limited to the lexical or syntactic denotations of words, but is constructed through various processes of intention, reasoning, and interaction. As such, pragmatics is a critical field of study to gain a better understanding of the Arabic language, especially in semantic studies such as synonymy and semantic equivalence, where the actual meaning of words is determined by the context in which they are used, not solely by their lexical definitions.

## **2.4 Previous Studies**

In recent years, studies in the field of linguistics have shown an increasing concern with examining the relationship between synonymy, semantic equivalence, and pragmatics, especially in the case of the Arabic language, which is known for its semantic density, degrees of meaning and usage.

Edmonds & Hirst (2002) studied near synonymy from a computational linguistics point of view and developed a model to represent fine-grained semantic distinctions between near synonyms. The authors of this study proposed the notion of clustered lexical representations, where terms with a similar meaning are represented in a cluster but distinguished in terms of context-dependent features such as denotation, connotation, stylistic preferences, and collocational patterns. The study showed that lexical selection is not arbitrary, constrained by context, and pragmatic factors such as meaning, purpose, and style, which influence the selection of synonyms. Significantly, they found that near synonyms cannot be used interchangeably, as each lexical unit has semantic and pragmatic features that affect its use. This finding resonates with corpus-based and usage-driven approaches to meaning, which postulate that meaning is contextual rather than-lexically determined. But the study is largely based on a computational modeling approach, with scant reference to analysis of natural discourse, which suggests the need for further research using corpus data in typical discourse, especially in languages like Arabic.

Inkpen & Hirst (2002) built on previous studies on near-synonymy, by including collocational patterns in lexical knowledge representation to enhance lexical choice amongst near-synonyms. The authors employed corpus-based techniques to extract collocations of a given word and tested how collocations distinguish between near-synonyms within a lexical semantic cluster. They found that collocations significantly restrict the ability to not only maintain lexical choice but also to always be able to choose between near-synonyms since words can create stronger or weaker associations with certain near-synonyms and even be incompatible with others. This provides evidence that lexical meaning is not only defined by underlying semantic aspects but also by usage patterns. Moreover, the study showed that very large corpora are essential in capturing nuanced distinctions in usage that are not accessible through intuition. The findings offer compelling empirical evidence for usage-based accounts of meaning and are consistent with the notion of context-dependent synonymy and the role of collocations in constraining synonymy. But, the study mainly examines computational modeling methods using English data, a fact that reveals the need for more corpus-based pragmatic research into other languages like Arabic.

In terms of the theoretical foundation of the concept of synonymy, the study by Ali (2022) presented a critique of synonymy as a phenomenon in terms of its existence and constraints. It aimed to answer the question of whether synonymy is a real linguistic phenomenon or simply a trite linguistic phenomenon. This study was based on a critical analysis of the opinions of classical and modern linguists, which showed two major trends: the first that accepts the existence of synonymy, as seen in the works of Al-Zajjaj and Al-Fayruzabadi, and the second that rejects the existence of complete synonymy in the sense that words do not share the same meaning as exemplified by Abu Hilal Al-Askari and Ibn Faris. The findings revealed that the controversy is not confined to the lexical level but also the semantic level, because words that are similar in meaning may differ in their specific meanings according to their context and use. The significance of this study is in the establishment of the relativity of synonymy, together with its contextual linkage, which is a vital starting point to solving the problem of semantic equivalence in the translation process.

Similarly, the study by Ghanem et al. (2023) tackled synonymy from a quantitative lexicographical-semantic point of view. It was concerned with developing a model to extract synonyms based on degrees of synonymy. It involved the construction of a large database and its assessment by language experts. The findings revealed differences in the degree of

synonymy and confirmed its relativity. This finding reinforces the argument that synonymy is a gradual, contextual, and relative phenomenon, which is directly linked to the issue of semantic equivalence in translation.

In the field of applied studies, Zitouni et al. (2023) offered a detailed semantic analysis of the differences between near synonyms in the Qur'anic text, and how these differences are preserved in translation. It revealed that there are many semantic differences that are lost in translation, since words are translated as synonyms, which results in a loss of true meaning. Such a result highlights the role of pragmatic in meaning interpretation and translation.

The study by Alshunnag et al. (2024) also examined the lexical issues in translating Arabic texts into English, showing that most translations are deficient, with a partial or near-equivalence, because they do not consider the differences between synonyms. The study illustrated that this shortcoming affects the text's effective impact, particularly in terms of its technical use, and is linked to the relationship between synonymy and pragmatic context in establishing meaning.

The above studies show unanimously agree that synonymy in Arabic is relative and contextual. They also emphasize that fine-grained semantic differences between words are not captured in translation, resulting in a lack of semantic equivalence. Additionally, most studies emphasize that meaning is not established only at the lexical level, but also at the pragmatic level, and depends on communicative intentions, suggesting the need to link semantic and pragmatic dimensions in analyzing meaning.

However, the studies also show that there is a gap in research: the lack of a unified approach that brings together synonymy, semantic equivalence, and pragmatics in a holistic analysis. Previous studies have either dealt with synonymy from a lexicographical point of view, with problems in translation, or with the pragmatic dimension separately, without establishing connections among these dimensions. In addition, practical studies have not sufficiently tackled the effect of different levels of synonymy on semantic equivalence, especially in the context of corpus analysis.

This study is significant in trying to fill this gap by providing an integrated approach linking synonymy, semantic equivalence, and pragmatics in a coherent theoretical framework. It uses corpus analysis to show the construction of meaning in context. The research also provides a contribution to understanding the nature of meaning in Arabic, and a practical application to enhance translation in terms of considering the nuances of meaning and pragmatics context.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Research Design

The current study is qualitative theoretical-analytical research. It involves a study of linguistic phenomena in a pragmatic context, using corpora as a natural source based on real language usage. The research methodology uses a descriptive-interpretive technique aiming at describing the semantic relations between near synonymous words in Arabic and interpreting the differences among them in terms of the pragmatic context. Within this approach, semantic analysis is applied to discover conceptual (lexical) and denotative (pragmatic) meanings, while pragmatic analysis is used to comprehend how meaning is constructed because of context and intentions. The study also draws on the analysis of several corpora, enabling the tracking of the real usage contexts of the words under investigation. This helps to offer a scientific definition of the scope of semantic equivalence.

#### 3.2 Data Sources and Corpus Description

This study is based on a mixed corpus of formal and informal communicative texts, using news articles and social media contributions. It attempts to capture a broad range of speech acts that differ in stylistic level and pragmatic. The study adopts this approach due to the methodological postulation that the field of synonymy and boundaries of semantic equivalence cannot rely on one genre of language. It requires examining a range of discourse patterns that represent the pragmatics of contemporary Arabic.

In this regard, the first corpus is comprised of news texts derived from various Arab news media, especially Saudi news outlets like Al-Riyadh and Okaz journals, and other popular Arab news sites. The reason for adopting this type of text is that it is highly precise and consistent from a stylistic perspective. The language of news is a quasi-formal standard language model which displays rather stable parameters in lexical choice, particularly as far as verbs and descriptive words with exact semantic meaning is concerned. Demonstrating institutional usage of lexical items, particularly in the fields of politics, economy and security, is also possible in news texts, making them an appropriate place for the study of semantic subtleties between near synonyms, such as (قال/ذكر qāla/dhakara “said/mentioned”) and (قتل/اغتيال qatala/ightāla “killed/assassinated”).

The second corpus includes data from the X platform (formerly Twitter), where a sample of public updates was collected representing interactions between users in various informal situations. The reason for including such data is to track free language use to allow for monitoring dynamic language use with less restricted features than news texts. This type of data highlights dynamic patterns of language use, as expressed in contextual usage of words, denotations, and connotations, as well as interactions in real-time communicative contexts. The emphasis was, where possible, on users' texts in the Saudi context, without placing strict constraints, to balance contextual specificity with the potential to apply the results in the context of contemporary Arabic language.

The data in this study is naturally occurring data; that is, not prepared for research, but rather used in natural speech communication contexts. This increases the reliability of the pragmatic insights because it enables the analysis of words in context. Roughly half of the texts were also chosen to represent a broad range of topics (such as public events, daily news, and social commentary) to provide a range of contexts in which the words in question are used.

As for the method of data analysis, a qualitative analysis was used. We selected examples of clear and relevant cases of use of the word pairs being studied, considering the frequency, representation, and diversity of these cases in different contexts. Collocations and the words surrounding each word being studied also informed the selection to help distinguish semantic and pragmatic features. Thus, the juxtaposition of the linguistic corpus in the dual approach creates an integrated model of analysis that combines standard language and interactive communication and enables identification of the formation of meaning in diverse linguistic levels of use, which is crucial to explain the boundaries of the semantic equivalence in terms of synonymy and pragmatics.

### **3.3 Sampling and Selection Criteria**

This study employs purposive sampling, systematically selected in accordance with the research objectives and its analytical nature. This is not a statistical study, but one that aims to offer a close analysis of the concept of synonymy while accounting for pragmatic elements. This form of sampling is ideal for qualitative linguistic studies, as it enables the selection of

linguistic items that are representative of the phenomenon under investigation in a meaningful and targeted way; hence, it contributes to the accuracy of the study and its analysis.

In this context, five pairs of semantically related Arabic words (near-synonyms) were selected and researched as follows: (قال/ذكر qāla/dhakara "said/mentioned"), (رأى/نظر ra'ā/naẓara "saw/considered" vs. "looked"), (قتل/اغتيال qatala/ightāla "killed/assassinated"), (بدأ/شرع bada'a/shara'a "started/formally commenced"), and (كبير/ضخم kabīr/ḍakhm "big/large" vs. "massive"). These pairs, in turn, were chosen according to certain scientific criteria that guarantee an appropriate representation of the phenomenon of interest and enable the analysis of the phenomenon within the linguistic corpora selected for the purpose of this study.

First, the criterion of apparent synonymy was considered, based on the assumption that the words chosen are synonymous in general and can be used as synonymic lexical choices in as many contexts as possible. This criterion seeks to select language units that are presumed to be synonymous, or at least semantically similar, and thus enable testing to what extent this synonymy is fulfilled at the pragmatic level when passing from the lexical to the pragmatic.

Second, the criterion of expected tactical difference applies in those words were selected that are likely to display some form of pragmatic differences based on the context, such as differences in: formality, semantic loading or communicative purposes. For instance, the first word might be exclusively used in formal or media contexts, while the second one is more typical of general or interactive contexts, or one word might introduce an additional nuance (like evaluation or intentionality) absent in the other word. This criterion is fundamental to this study as it allows us to connect the concept of synonymy with pragmatic analysis and to show approximate semantic equality in actual discourse.

Third, the frequency of use in linguistic works (in news and social media contexts) was used as a criterion for words that are commonly used in texts and tweets. This criterion allows for collecting some data on the contexts of each word to analyze collocations and other uses. This also increases the validity of the findings as it allows for examining the phenomenon across several instances, not just individual uses.

Fourth, diversity in the morphological and syntactic structures of lexical items from input data was also considered. The list comprises both verbs (e.g., قال qāla, رأى ra'ā, قتل qatala, بدأ bada'a) and adjectives (e.g., كبير kabīr, ضخم ḍakhm), thus allowing the examination of synonymy across different word classes. The variation allows for the investigation of the constancy of semantic or pragmatic patterns across categories and allows for the inclusion of a broader range of frameworks, including different types of syntax and different types of contexts.

Pragmatically, these pairs were identified corpora, and examples of their use in various contexts were identified, with a particular emphasis on examples where semantic or pragmatic distinctions are apparent. The examples were not selected arbitrarily, but rather in accordance with the principle of qualitative representativeness, so that the examples are based on patterns of usage most representative of the phenomenon at hand.

The use of purposive sampling is a reasonable decision in this case, since the research involves examining a complex linguistic phenomenon that has to do with interactions between meanings and contexts. This requires the choice of amenable data for interpretation rather than undirected large samples. Additionally, this approach facilitates the identification of cases that effectively illustrate the scope of synonymy and informed the formulation of theoretical inferences from the evidence present in context.

### 3.4 Analytical Framework

This study adopts an integrated model of analysis, which integrates several factors into the investigation: semantic analysis, pragmatic analysis, corpus analysis and semantic equivalent analysis. This integration seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of meaning beyond the lexical level, and through account of its communicative context and use. This is in line with the type of problem tackled in the study, which relates to the limits of synonymy and semantic equivalence in the Arabic language.

The first level is to use semantic analysis to describe the primary meanings of the words being studied, by denoting their denotative meanings and the nuances of meaning between words within the same semantic field. This includes studying the semantic properties of the words and establishing whether they share a common part of the meaning, or have differences in some of the elements, thus enabling the formation of an initial semantic hypothesis regarding the nature of the synonymy between them. This level of analysis only helps access the study but is not enough to explain furious uses.

At level two, a pragmatic analysis is used to consider meaning in its pragmatic context. This is done through the study of the function of words and context in meaning. These include notions of informality, valuation, intentionality, and the nature of the discourse (informative, interactive, verbal), and the social relationship with the speakers. This allows for differences between words or phrases which are not transparent on the lexical-semantic level but are rather observable in usage to be identified, thus facilitating a better understanding of synonymy as a contextual phenomenon.

The third level is the corpus analysis of words in their natural contexts these are extracted from news texts and social media. This involves, among others, the pattern of repetition, collocations, and syntactic constructions in which the words are used, and therefore highlight their pragmatic context. This level provides an avenue for bridging theoretical insights and empirical evidence and offers contextual support for semantic and pragmatic insights. At the fourth level, semantic equivalence analysis is used to determine how far the words under investigation can be regarded as synonyms when translated. This analysis aims at exploring the extendibility of meanings by testing different contextual uses of the words and confirming the possibility of translating them into a single equivalent while conserving the different semantic and pragmatic differences. It also tries to identify the instances of meaning distortion that occur if the lexemes are treated as synonyms, thereby identifying the limits of semantic equivalence.

To plan the analysis and standardize it across all the word pairs, a comprehensive analytical model which combines these levels was applied, as illustrated in the following table:

**Table 1. Integrated Analytical Framework for Examining Near-Synonyms**

Analytical Dimension	Analytical Components	Purpose
<b>Semantic Analysis</b>	Lexical meaning; semantic features	Identifying similarities and differences in core meaning
<b>Pragmatic Analysis</b>	Context; intention; communicative function	Interpreting meaning in relation to usage
<b>Corpus Analysis</b>	Frequency; collocation; textual context	Identifying patterns of actual language use

<b>Equivalence Analysis</b>	Translatability; meaning loss	Evaluating the limits of synonymy in translation
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This multiples approach offers a unified model for the analysis of lexical items on different levels and their interrelation between the lexical, pragmatic and usage levels. This allows better understanding and interpretation of the boundaries of semantic equivalence in Arabic.

### 3.5 Analytical Procedures

The analytical procedures followed in this study rely on structured framework to connect the linguistic variables extracted from the corpora in question with the issues addressed in the analysis of semantic, pragmatic and equivalence aspects. These procedures aim to provide consistent analysis for the selected pairs of words, and so increase the results' validity and replicability. The analysis unfolds in five stages, in an interrelated manner, from data extraction to the limits of semantic equivalence.

The first stage involves the selection of contextual instances for the words to be analyzed from the selected corpora (news and social media). We adopt the principle of "full context", which implies not considering the sentence, but the entire context that can allow us to understand the meaning of a word in a natural way. The variation of the contexts in terms of topic (political, social, cultural) and genre (formal/informal) is also taken into consideration to capture the realistic use. The example utterances are documented, as well as the source and type of conversation (news-based or interactive).

In the second phase of analysis, the collocational context of each usage type of the given utterance is observed by seeing the words that frequently co-exist with it in the given context. The purpose of this analysis is to identify the "semantic environment" of the utterance because collocations are a means of identifying semantic nuances. For instance, an utterance can be associated with formal or technical occurrences and its synonym with informal or colloquial occurrences, which indicate a usage that cannot be indicated by the lexical meaning of an item. In the third stage, pragmatic function classification of contextual usage occurs through the analysis of the use of the utterance for communication in the discourse. This involves categorizing uses in terms of functions such as informing, evaluating, implying, stressing and/or persuading. The formality and affectivity of events, as well as the speaker-addressee relationship are also interpreted, to better understand how meanings are framed in each case. The level is important for draws out pragmatic differences invisible to abstract semantic analysis. The fourth stage involves a pairwise comparison of the words in each pair, where words are compared in terms of their lexical meaning, collocations, pragmatic use, and contexts based on the analysis presented in the previous stages. This process seeks to identify whether they are synonyms in all contexts or whether there is a lexically restricted usage context for each word which makes it difficult to substitute one for the other.

Finally, in the fifth stage, the consequences of the differences identified for semantic equivalence is evaluated by examining how the words can be used interchangeably in translation. This includes looking at cases where, upon replacement, word meaning shifts or the significance of a word from a semantic or pragmatic point of view is lost, as well as cases where the words can be used interchangeably. This aims to address the question of the extent of real synonymy (as opposed to theoretical) in practical use. To promote consistency of the analytical procedures, the following table of procedures was addressed:

**Table 2. Analytical Procedure for Near-Synonym Analysis**

Stage	Procedure	Analytical Tool	Output
1	Contextual extraction of examples	Linguistic corpora	Documented contextual examples
2	Collocational analysis	Frequency and context tracking	Collocational patterns
3	Functional identification	Pragmatic analysis	Functional classification
4	Pairwise comparison	Comparative analysis	Identification of differences
5	Equivalence evaluation	Contextual–translational analysis	Determination of equivalence limits

### 3.6 Methodological Rigor

This study adopted a set of procedures that aim to ensure the quality of analysis and the validity of its results in the context of qualitative research based on linguistic corpora. This was done along four key dimensions: analytical, transparency, theoretical and traceability.

First, to ensure analytical consistency, all word pairs were analyzed based on a single analytical approach. Every analytical unit went through the same set of analysis steps: extracting contextual information, establishing collocation relation, analyzing pragmatic function, and comparing with one another. Autonomous interpretive tools were also applied, to maintain the coherence of the logic of the analysis across all pairs and avoid interpretive biases.

Second, clear references to the sources of data, information on the nature of the text (news or social media) and illustrative examples of context were presented. The processing and analysis process was well documented, so that it was transparent how to go from data to analysis, without any ambiguity and over-simplification. Third, a specific theoretical framework was applied for analysis and interpretation combining semantics and pragmatics. The analysis considered concepts such as contextual meaning, concomitant meaning, conversational implicature and pragmatic function. These notions were used throughout the analysis, as such ensuring it was done based on clearly stated theoretical notions instead of in isolation.

Fourth, traceability was achieved by keeping a record of all examples subject to analysis and providing a link to their relevant data sources and within a linear and accessible analytical flow. A record of analysis was also kept, including the examples and their semantic and pragmatic categories, and results can be reviewed, or the procedures reapplied to comparable data.

### 3.7 Ethical Considerations

This study is based on a code of ethics that covers the use of linguistic data from digital blogs, privacy, and scientific practices in research. Open linguistic data in the form of text was analyzed from sources accessible to the public, such as news websites and X platform publications, without relying on any restricted or privileged data sources.

As for the social media data, only public postings were selected and analyzed without any trace of information that might identify the authors' identities, such as name, account name profile picture. Texts were used to analyze language, not expressions linked to the identity of individuals, to mitigate any possible privacy concerns. When necessary, slight edits were made (if needed) to the wording to maintain its meaning while changing the wording to avoid possible identification of the text.

This study plans to use the data exclusively for scientific purposes, with examples used only for linguistic, semantic, and pragmatic study, without any other use. The study aims neither to assess persons nor their attitudes, but only the language use in its natural environment. Such processes are in line with standard ethical guidelines, which stress the need to balance the use of information with users' analysis. As such, this research sought to respect privacy, enhance transparency, and support responsible use of digital data in academic research.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1 Overview of Corpus Findings

The analysis in this study is based on a purposively corpus, which includes 70 contextual examples (14 examples for each of the five pairs of near-synonyms: قال/ذكر qāla/dhakara - "say/mention"), رأى/نظر ra'ā/naẓara - "perceive/look"), قتل/اغتيال qatala/ighṭāla - "kill/assassinate"), بدأ/شرع bada'a/shara'a - "begin/start"), and كبير/ضخم kabīr/ḍakhm - "big/huge"). The examples were strategically distributed between two major types of discourse: (1) formal (news reports and newspaper articles, mostly from Saudi Arabia sites such as Al-Riyadh and Okaz), and (2) informal (tweets on the platform X). The aim of this distribution is to reflect the language as it is used by people in a variety of pragmatic settings of contemporary Arabic.

As for distribution, each pair was subjected to a balanced analysis (7 examples from formal discourse and 7 from informal discourse) to delineate exact usage patterns in terms of different degrees of formality. We utilized uniform criteria in the analysis, namely sense in context, collocation, pragmatic value, formality, and interchangeability. This allowed the development of a holistic analysis for each member of the synonym pair.

Preliminary analysis of the data shows there are systematic semantic and pragmatic differences among lexical items traditionally classified as synonyms. In all the pairs, no case of complete semantic equivalence was found. Rather, the semantic relations span partial equivalence, nonequivalence, and subordination (hyponymy). Additionally, some lexical items are found to be repeatedly associated with types of contexts. For instance, قال qāla "said") is mainly used in contexts of human attribution (to human sources), while ذكر dhakara "mentioned") is often used to refer to source documents or non-human sources, a pattern reflected in numerous examples in the corpus.

At the pragmatic level, this study shows that the variation in lexical items goes beyond semantic meaning to include discourse function. The functions of different lexical items vary, playing different roles within the discourse, which can be informational, evaluative or documentary. Moreover, the degree of formality emerges as a key determinant in lexical selection. Some items may be favoured in formal communication (e.g., شرع shara'a "commenced"), اغتيال ighṭāla "assassinated"), ذكر dhakara "mentioned") while other items may occur more frequently in informal speech (e.g., قال qāla "said"), بدأ bada'a "began"), كبير kabīr "big").

### 4.2 .Pairwise Semantic and Pragmatic Analysis

#### 4.2.1 ذكر / قال (qāla/dhakara "say/mention")

The corpus data, both formal and informal in nature, show that there is a regular pattern of usage which distinguishes between the two lexical items about source attribution and discourse use. قال qāla "said") is constantly linked to referenced reporting by human sources in

institutional and professional positions (e.g., spokesperson, minister, expert) given the reporting function attributed to them. Conversely, (ذكر dhakara “mentioned”) is systematically used in an institutional discourse frame, in association with textual sources (e.g., statements, reports), which consistently denotations a sense of documentation and textual attribution. Collocational patterns also suggest this distinction, with (قال qāla) consistently co-verbs with human agents, while (ذكر dhakara) is mostly linked with official documents in most of the formal cases in the textual data. Pragmatically, using one item instead of the other will then change the nature of the attribution (human vs. textual), and affect the reporting function. As such, the equivalence between the items exhibits constrained partial equivalence, relative to source type and (pragmatic) situation, rather than complete equivalence.

#### 4.2.2 رأى / نظر (ra’ā/naẓara “perceive/look”)

Corpus data show a stark semantic–pragmatic contrast between the items by discourse genre. The verb (رأى ra’ā “perceived/considered”) is always used to describe evaluative, cognitive perception related to epistemic agents (e.g., experts, researchers, authorities) in explanatory structures (رأى أن “considered that”), thus, exhibiting an evaluative/pragmatic function. On the other hand, (نظر naẓara “looked/examined”), is limited to two main functions: visual perception (نظر to “looked at”) and procedural evaluation (نظر في القضية “examined the case”), as indicated by its distributional patterns (نظر + إلى/في). This item is not frequently used in evaluative expressions, and rarely occurs in informal speech in this function. Pragmatically, (Indeed, the substitution of (رأى ra’ā) for (نظر naẓara) not only entails a departure from the evaluative reading, but also a shift from the meaning of “perceive/examine” to the meaning which is incongruous with the intended communicative purpose. So, the two items participate in a functional semantic variation, without any significant degree of semantic identification.

#### 4.2.3 اغتال / قتل (qatala/ightāla “kill/assassinate”)

Our corpus analysis shows the two items to be associated with semantic specialization. The verb (قتل qatala “killed”) is a generic term that can be used to describe numerous contexts (criminal, military, accidental) and agents and patients (e.g., person, civilians, soldier), normally with a neutral semantics. By contrast, (اغتيال ightāla “assassinated”) is restricted to political and media contexts, and involves deliberate killing of prominent personalities (e.g., official, leader, journalist) as seen in all formal instances. The collocation (اغتيال + شخصية عامة) Semantically, (اغتيال ightāl) is a hyponym of or a specific kind of killing. Pragmatically, when substituting (قتل qatala) with (اغتيال ightāla), the semantics of intention and premeditation are introduced whilst such semantics are lost through (اغتيال/قتال ightāla/ qatala). Thus, the equivalence of the two is partial and unsymmetrical and not synonymous.

#### 4.2.4 بدأ / شرع (bada’a/shara’a “begin/commence”)

The wordlist results suggest a certain semantic overlap between the two items in the meanings of beginning; yet pragmatic scrutiny demonstrates the differences in their uses and distribution. The verb (بدأ bada’a “began”) is used in both formal and informal discourse types and is collocated with a variety of agents (e.g., institutions, projects, individuals), suggesting an unrestricted and variable use. By contrast, (شرع shara’a “commenced”) is limited to formal, institutional contexts (e.g., authorities, judges) and suggests a sense of purposeful and deliberate initiation, a feature of formal/textual discourse. It is rarely used in informal contexts, as this reflects pragmatic constraints. Replacing (شرع shara’a) with (بدأ bada’a) often unnaturally marks informal contexts, while (بدأ bada’a) is not a problem in any context. Hence, the two items are conditionally partially equivalent, with markers of formality and intentionality.

#### 4.2.5 ضخم / كبير (kabīr/ḍakhm “big/huge”)

Corpus evidence reveals nuanced differences in meaning associated with degree and intensity. The term (كبير kabīr “big”) is an all-purpose item with a wide range of collocational options, and has diverse quantitative/evaluative meanings (e.g., large number, major event), and both formal and informal uses. But (ضخم ḍakhm “big/huge/massive”) is collocated with more specific items (often in economic or media contexts, e.g., massive investment, substantial spending) and it bears an increase in intensity. Collocations reveal that (ضخم ḍakhm) is not allowed in certain positions acceptable for (كبير kabīr) (e.g., "وقت ضخم" is not felicitous). Pragmatically, (ضخم ḍakhm) is more evaluative; (كبير kabīr) is merely descriptive. Hence, in this case, relative constrained synonymy is accounted for in terms of collocational and scalar constraints.

Meanwhile, the findings from the five pairs suggest that in Arabic, synonymy does not result in semantic equivalence but constrained pragmatically defined similarity constrained by collocational, text-type dependency, or discourse function. Hence meaning is not an inherent property of the lexeme but is negotiated in discourse situations. This analysis thus creates constraints on the potential for full semantic equivalence, and supports the dynamic, usage-based view of synonymy.

### 4.3 Collocational Patterns and Usage Trends

The analysis of collocational patterns in the corpus reveals that distinctions between the examined lexical items become more salient through recurrent patterns of co-occurrence (collocational patterning). These items do not function as isolated units; rather, they operate within constrained usage networks that shape both their meaning and discourse function. The data indicate that each lexical item develops a distinct “collocational profile” that differentiates it from its counterpart within each pair and restricts the possibility of semantic substitution.

In the pair (قال/ذكر qāla/dhakara “say/mention”), (قال qāla) frequently co-occurs with human agents occupying institutional or professional roles (e.g., spokesperson, minister, expert), a pattern that dominates formal news discourse and appears, though in simplified forms (قال، قلت، قالوا)، in social media. In contrast, (ذكر dhakara) occurs almost exclusively with textual sources (e.g., report, statement), thereby fulfilling a clear documentary function. This collocational distribution demonstrates that the distinction between the two items extends beyond lexical meaning to encompass the type of attribution (human vs. textual).

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In the pair (رأى/نظر ra’ā/naẓara “perceive/look”), (رأى ra’ā) is associated with evaluative constructions (رأى أن “considered that”) and epistemic agents and appears across both news and social media discourse as a marker of evaluation. By contrast, (نظر naẓara) collocates with prepositions (نظر إلى/في “looked at/into”) and is restricted to specific contexts (visual or legal), with near absence in informal evaluative discourse. This pattern indicates that collocation

reflects a structural distinction in the type of process encoded by the verb, rather than mere stylistic variation.

For the pair (قتل/اغتيال qatala/ightāla “kill/assassinate”), (قتل qatala) exhibits broad collocational flexibility (e.g., kill a person, civilians, a child) and appears across all discourse types. In contrast, (اغتيال ightāla) is almost exclusively associated with constructions referring to high-profile individuals (e.g., official, leader, journalist) and appears predominantly in formal news discourse, with near absence in social media. This pattern indicates that “assassination” is not a freely interchangeable alternative, but a pragmatically constrained choice tied to political and media framing.

In the pair (بدأ/شرع bada'a/shara'a “begin/commence”), (بدأ bada'a) demonstrates wide collocational range (e.g., begin a project, a student, start feeling) and appears across all discourse types. In contrast, (شرع shara'a) is restricted to formal institutional constructions (e.g., authorities commenced, the judge initiated) and is virtually absent from informal usage. This indicates that collocational behavior encodes distinctions in formality and intentionality. Finally, in the pair (كبير/ضخم kabīr/ḍakhm “big/huge”), (كبير kabīr) shows high collocational flexibility (e.g., large number, major issue, considerable time) and is widely distributed across discourse types. In contrast, (ضخم ḍakhm) is associated with restricted, typically economic or media-related collocations (e.g., massive investment, substantial spending, large-scale expansion) and appears primarily in formal news discourse. This demonstrates that the distinction between the two items lies not only in meaning but also in register.

**Table (3): Collocational Distribution Across Discourse Types**

Pair	Lexical Item	Prominent Collocations	News Discourse (n=7)	Social Media (n=7)	Pragmatic Function
قال/ذكر	قال (qāla)	spokesperson, minister, expert	7/7	6/7	direct human reporting
قال/ذكر	ذكر (dhakara)	report, statement	7/7	1/7	textual documentation
رأى/نظر	رأى (ra'ā)	“considered that”, analysts	7/7	4/7	evaluation
رأى/نظر	نظر (naẓara)	to/into	3/7	1/7	visual/procedural
قتل/اغتيال	قتل (qatala)	person, civilians	7/7	5/7	general
قتل/اغتيال	اغتيال (ightāla)	official, leader	7/7	0/7	targeted
بدأ/شرع	بدأ (bada'a)	project, individual	7/7	7/7	neutral
بدأ/شرع	شرع (shara'a)	authorities, judge	7/7	0/7	formal
كبير/ضخم	كبير (kabīr)	number, issue	7/7	7/7	general
كبير/ضخم	ضخم (ḍakhm)	investment, spending	7/7	1/7	intensification

The data presented in the table indicate that collocational patterns vary systematically across discourse types. Lexical items with institutional or formal connotations (e.g., ذكر dhakara, اغتال ightāla, شرع shara'a) tend to occur almost exclusively in news discourse, whereas more general items (e.g., قال qāla, بدأ bada'a, كبير kabīr) exhibit broader distribution across both discourse types. This finding confirms that collocational behavior is closely tied to discourse function, thereby limiting the possibility of treating these lexical items as freely interchangeable synonyms.

#### 4.4 Pragmatic Functions Across Contexts

Analysis of the corpus shows that the differences between the lexical items being examined have at least two semantic stages, each with pragmatic functions, which are crucially linked to discourse and platform. In modern Arabic, the choice of lexical items is heavily conditioned by different contexts of communication (formal and informal) and nature of the platform (institutional news discourse and interaction on X), which in turn affects their distribution and function.

In formal news discourse, lexical items associated with institutional attribution and documentation tend to dominate. This is seen in the use of (قال qāla "said") to attribute statements or utterances to human sources of official status, while (ذكر dhakara "mentioned") is governed by a documentary function due to reference to reports or statements in text. For example, (اغتيال ightāla "assassinated") in news discourse is used to flag politically framed events with targeted acts of killing, thus extending its reporting function to a-political discourse. Similarly, (شرع shara'a "commenced") in this discourse is a marker of institutional procedures with intentions and formalities.

On the other hand, in more casual discourse - especially at X - we see much more pragmatic versatility with unmarked and general lexical items. The verb (قال qāla "said") is used to mark verbiage as speech in the individual or collective sense, without formal rules for reporting. Likewise, (بدأ bada'a "began") is often used in informal discourse to describe an individual event or action (e.g., "بدأت أتابع" bada'tu utābi' "I started following", "بدأت أشعر" bada'tu ash'ur "I started feeling"). The adjective (كبير kabīr "big") is used in an evaluative sense, to communicate magnitude or importance in general. In contrast, lexical items like (شرع shara'a) and (اغتيال ightāla) are not used, or are infrequently used, in informal contexts; they are associated with formal institutional settings.

Such contrast between the two discourse types highlights that some lexical items are pragmatically constrained and can be only used in certain contexts. For example, (اغتيال ightāla) is absent from social media data, implying that it is pragmatically constrained to media contexts which demand an accurate description of an event. Likewise, (شرع shara'a) is barely used in informal contexts, highlighting its institutional nature. On the other hand, lexical items like (بدأ bada'a) and (كبير kabīr) are highly flexible and regardless of the formality of the context, they easily shift between formal and informal.

From a functional perspective, the examined lexical items can be classified into three major pragmatic categories:

- (1) institutionally bound items (e.g., (ذكر dhakara "mentioned"), (شرع shara'a "commenced"), (اغتيال ightāla "assassinated")),
- (2) general reporting items with adaptive usage (e.g., (قال qāla "said"), (قتل qatala "killed"), (بدأ bada'a "began")),

(3) flexible evaluative items (e.g., (كبير kabīr “big”), (رأى ra’ā “considered”)).

This classification demonstrates that lexical choice is not determined solely by semantic meaning but by the communicative role each item performs within discourse.

Thus, the results suggest that pragmatic information plays a crucial role in defining synonymy. Substitutions not sensitive to context often produce pragmatic infelicity; for instance, using (شرع shara’a) for (بدأ bada’a) in general contexts, or (اغتيال ightāla) for (قتل qatala) in everyday contexts, results in marked or unacceptable expressions due to the mismatch in the pragmatic functions. Therefore, meaning in Arabic results from a multifaceted relation between language structure (lexical items and constructions), context and function. This lends support to the idea that synonymy does not constitute a stable lexical relation but rather a usage-based, pragmatic concept constrained by pragmatic factors.

#### 4.5. Limits of Semantic Equivalence

The limits of semantic equivalence form the interpretive context within which the output of semantic, pragmatic, and collocational analysis comes together. The corpus findings show that synonymy in Arabic cannot satisfactorily be conceptualized as an identity/difference relation. Instead, it must be regarded as gradations of equivalence determined by specific constraints of context and usage.

These results show that semantic equivalence is only realised in a very minimal form when words are equivalent in reference, share a similar usage context, and are not heavily constrained by pragmatic factors. However, this equivalence is still conditional and restricted. This is the case with the pair (بدأ/شرع bada’a/shara’a “begin/commence”), where equivalence can be established in formal settings that require intentional action and the initiation of a process. But this level of equivalence fails in non-formal registers because of the pragmatic “markedness” of (شرع shara’a). This points to equivalence being achieved when general semantic content fits with contextual appropriateness and functional suitability.

Equivalence mostly appears in the form of incompletely proximal semantic relations where words share common semantic content but differ in pragmatic or collocational aspects of word usage, curtailing substitution possibilities. An example here is the pair (قال/ذكر qāla/dhakara “say/mention”) that describe information transfer but where differences in attribution (human vs. text) restrict substitution. Similarly, in the pair (كبير/ضخم kabīr/ḍakhm “big/huge”), we observe that substitution of (ضخم ḍakhm) for (كبير kabīr) involves a change in degree of size and level of evaluation while maintaining semantic meaning. In these instances, substitutions do not result in mere error or strain, but rather change in pragmatic or discursive function, thus preventing full synonymy.

On the other hand, the data show examples of semantic non-equivalence due to conceptual and/or pragmatic incompatibilities. This is apparent in the pair (رأى/نظر ra’ā/naẓara “perceive/look”), where (رأى ra’ā) and (نظر naẓara) represent a difference in types of cognitive process (mental vs. perceptual/procedural). This is also the case in the pair (قتل/اغتيال qatala/ightāla “kill/assassinate”) in which the pairing is one of hyponymy and (اغتيال ightāla) is limited to an intentional context while (قتل qatala) is more generic. Here, substitution results in semantic distortion or reframing.

By way of this example, the boundaries of semantic equivalence in Arabic can be conceived as having three aspects:

a) a semantic level, in terms of overlap in primary meaning.

b) a pragmatic level, upon the communicative role of the lexical item in discourse.

c) a collocational level, related to structural and collocational constraints.

Equivalence is demonstrated when the three levels intersect - a scenario that is a rare facet of language use.

Thus, the of Limits of Semantic Equivalence highlights not just the unavailability of absolute synonymy, but its limitation by rigid standards of usage that determine the circumstances under which it can or cannot be used. Thus, Arabic synonymy cannot simply be a lexical relationship between words; rather it has to be seen as a usage-dependent and context-bound process. This would not mean that semantic equivalence is a lexical property, but a contextual process that results from the relationship between meaning, usage, and discourse.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show theoretical and methodological links to recent trends toward usage-based linguistics and corpus linguistics, which view meaning as an interactional, dynamic outcome that emerges from discourse and pragmatics, rather than from lexical structure. This study shows that none of the pairs investigated - (قال/ذكر qāla/dhakara "say/mention"), (رأى/نظر ra'ā/naẓara "perceive/look"), (قتل/اغتيال qatala/ightāla "kill/assassinate"), (بدأ/شرع bada'a/shara'a "begin/commence"), and (كبير/ضخم kabīr/ḍakhm "big/huge") - is perfectly synonymous. Rather, they display varying degrees of equivalence, such as partial synonymy, semantic inclusion and semantic difference, in line with previous studies on the infrequency of absolute synonymy (Cruse, 1986; Murphy, 2003).

These results implicitly provide a direct backing to classical and contemporary linguistic arguments that near-synonymous pairs show subtle distinctions in meaning and use (Ibn al-Anbari, 1987; Al-Suyuti, 1998), which can only be discerned in context. In this work, lexical differentiation was not based on distinctions imposed by a lexicon, but by collocation and pragmatic function, substantiating that synonymy in Arabic is only context-relative, as also pointed out by Ali (2022), and Ghanem et al. (2023).

As for the corpus-based perspective, the findings emphasize the importance of collocation in meaning formation. Linguistic items have "collocational profiles" that determine their "natural" environments and limit possibilities of substitution, even among items of similar meanings. This finding corroborates Partington (1998), Stefanowitsch (2014), and other researchers who suggest that meaning is constructed by usage patterns. Therefore, the differences between (قال/ذكر qāla/dhakara) does not reflect principal semantic meanings but rather attribution (to a human vs. to text), which can only be discovered through corpus analysis.

Furthermore, the results show the structural-functional aspect of lexical variation. The distinction between (رأى/نظر ra'ā/naẓara) shows a conceptual semantic difference in type of cognition (mental vs. visual/procedural) and suggests that what may seem synonymy on the surface might reflect semantic variation. This is in line with research that suggests synonymy can include variation in primary semantic features (Ryding, 2005).

This is also supported for semantic equivalence where the results support most contemporary thinking on translation that defines equivalence as a variable and negotiated notion (Šipka, 2015; Pym, 2023). The results suggest equivalence is based on the intersection of three sources of information: semantic compatibility, pragmatic compatibility, and collocation. The absence

of any one of these makes for partial or non-equivalence, as found in (بدأ/شرع bada' a/shara' a), where equivalence is achieved in formal contexts but not informal ones, because of pragmatic constraints.

The findings also align with empirical studies of translation that demonstrate that failure to maintain distinctions among near synonyms will result in loss of meaning (Zitouni et al., 2023; Alshunnag et al., 2024). The results show that choosing a single English equivalent to represent multiple Arabic lexical items results in the loss of semantic and pragmatic distinctions, underlining previous arguments that equivalence is contextual.

At the pragmatic level, our study adds to recent theories that maintain that meaning is achieved through an interaction between language, context, and users (Sperber & Wilson, 1986; Jaszczolt, 2005). The study found strong associations between lexical choice and contexts that vary in terms of formality and type of communication (institutional vs. interactive). Some lexical items - (اغتيال ightāla "assassinate"), (شرع shara' a "begin") and (ذكر dhakara "mention") - are limited to formal, institutional discourse, while others - (قال qāla "say"), (بدأ bada' a "begin") and (كبير kabīr "big") - are more versatile. This makes it clear that near-synonyms are not only semantically but also functionally and discourse-dependent, constrained by pragmatic factors that limit their usage.

This study contributes theoretically by reconceiving synonymy from a usage-based pragmatic point of view. It shows that synonymy is not an all or nothing equivalence relation, but rather a clinal phenomenon determined by semantic, pragmatic, and collocational factors. And it proposes the notion of "limits of semantic equivalence" as a contextualized rather than an inherent lexical feature, thus contributing to theoretical debates in semantics and translation studies. The study also confirms corpus methods as a crucial resource to tease out the differences between synonyms.

Practically, The study provides a methodology for translation, language education and natural language processing (NLP). It indicates the need for translators to differentiate based on pragmatic and collocational distinctions, rather than engaging in generalized equivalence, so as to maintain semantic integrity. The result suggest that vocabulary instruction should focus on contextualized usage of synonyms, rather than synonym lists. The findings can also inform NLP, by incorporating the pragmatic and collocational constraints into models for semantic representation and language comprehension.

Though the study offers insightful results, its use for generalization suffers from several limitations. First, the study is underpinned by a small purposively sampled corpus and does not permit statistical generalization. Second, it looks at five lexical pairs, which narrow the scope of generalization in the Arabic language. Third, the study uses only two discourse genres (news and social media), which does not include other genres that may have different usages. Finally, although the qualitative approach adopted in the study affords interpretive possibilities, it doesn't make quantitative claims about levels of synonymy or equivalence, and a future study combining the two might be useful.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to investigate synonymy in Arabic from a pragmatic corpus-based point of view, and to understand the bounds of semantic equivalence between synonyms. It started from the general assumption that synonymy is not established as an inherent semantic parallelism, but because of a compound set of pragmatic and contextual factors. The findings,

through the analysis of five pairs of words in informative and interactive discourse, revealed that the relationship between the words doesn't fall into the category of absolute synonymy but is sent across a range of partial synonymy, semantic inclusion, and non-equivalence.

It revealed that meaning in Arabic language is not established at the level of the lexicon, but instead is comprised of three components: collocation, pragmatic, and discursive modes. The involvement of words in the study demonstrated that each word carries a certain "pragmatic signature" that confines it to a certain discourse environment, and narrows the potential for substitution by other words, albeit semantically similar. We also found that some words are constrained within institutional environments, while some others are endowed with pragmatic autonomy which allows them to change modes. This confirms that the use of words is ruled by functional and contextual factors that go beyond meaning.

Given this, we propose a new conceptualization of "semantic equivalence", which is a relative and dependent process that can only occur when meaning is linked to context and concomitance. It also highlights that when words are treated as complete synonyms, the deletion of nuanced variants takes place, which may lead to undesirable consequences in areas, including translation and discourse analysis. Thus, the study of synonymy in Arabic needs to be understood from the lexical point of view to a pragmatic use (encompassing the notion of meaning).

So, study contributes to a unified framework for synonymy, pragmatics, and corpus analysis, and confirms that meaning is not static - not inherent to words - but rather it is a result of the dynamic interaction between language, context, and language use. It also leaves the room for further studies based on larger data and multi-method techniques and which enhance a reliable scientific understanding of the nature of meaning in contemporary Arabic.

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### **Ethical Considerations**

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards for research involving publicly available textual data. All data were collected from open-access sources, including news platforms and posts from the platform X. No personal or identifiable information was collected. The data were analyzed strictly for academic purposes, and all examples were treated as linguistic data to ensure user privacy and confidentiality.

**Conflict of Interest:** The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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