

The Lexical Witness and Its Pedagogical Dimensions in Teaching Arabic to Native Speakers and Learners: A Reading in *Al-Mu 'jam al- 'Arabī al-Asāsī* (The Basic Arabic Dictionary)

Tiba Midni

Faculty of Arabic Language, Literature, and Oriental Languages

Department of Arabic Language and Literature

Submission Date: 13 July 2025 **Approval Date:** 13 Sep 2025 **Release Date:** 13 Oct 2025

Abstract:

This paper addresses the subject of the lexical witness as one of the most important pedagogical tools employed by the educational dictionary in serving learners of Arabic, whether native or nonnative speakers. It not only elucidates the meaning of a word but also presents it within a lively functional context that brings its sense closer and facilitates its use. Through an examination of *Al-Mu 'jam al- 'Arabī al-Asāsī*, it becomes evident that the examples it contains are formulated in simple, clear language that takes into account the learner's level and responds to their educational needs, thereby making it an effective means of developing linguistic and communicative competences. The lexical witness contributes to enhancing semantic comprehension, expanding the lexical repertoire, and consolidating vocabulary in memory, in addition to training the learner in the correct use of syntactic structures. Consequently, the lexical witness constitutes a central pedagogical tool that should be continually developed to suit different learning levels and keep pace with advances in the teaching of Arabic.

Keywords: lexical witness, teaching Arabic, *Al-Mu 'jam al- 'Arabī al-Asāsī*, nonnative speakers of Arabic, pedagogical dimension, educational dimension.

Introduction:

Despite the remarkable development in the field of educational lexicography, a pressing need remains to enhance the explanatory and instructional methods employed within these dictionaries, particularly those designed for nonnative speakers of Arabic. Among the most significant tools contributing to this objective is the lexical witness, which is expected to perform a distinct pedagogical function in supporting learners and reinforcing both linguistic and contextual comprehension. Hence, this study raises a central question: To what extent does the lexical witness in educational dictionaries, specifically in *Al-Muʿjam al-ʿArabī al-Asāsī* (The Basic Arabic Dictionary), contribute to achieving the goals of teaching Arabic as a second or foreign language? Furthermore, can lexical witnesses influence learners' guidance throughout their various stages of development? What are the implications of direct and indirect guidance for the formation of a balanced personality among dictionary users, as reflected in the examples and methods of their presentation?

Before delving directly into the core of the subject, it is necessary to define the corpus and provide a detailed and comprehensive overview of its content, beginning with its general structure and then moving to a more focused examination.

1. The Status of *Al-Muʿjam al-ʿArabī al-Asāsī* and Its Pedagogical Features

Al-Muʿjam al-ʿArabī al-Asāsī (The Basic Arabic Dictionary) is considered one of the most significant modern dictionaries devoted to the Arabic language because of its careful explanation of vocabulary, meanings, and synonyms. What makes it particularly noteworthy is its orientation toward both native speakers and Arabic learners. Its objective is educational and pedagogical, aimed at promoting a simplified Arabic language that can be learned worldwide. This goal was realised through the publication of the dictionary under the name of the international publishing house Larousse,¹ which oversaw its dissemination.

Owing to the renown of this publishing institution, the dictionary has had the opportunity to reach both Arab and Western countries, particularly those where Arab communities

reside, thereby enabling non-Arabic speakers to access the Arabic language in a functional and simplified manner.

To assess the importance of this dictionary, the extent to which it fulfils its designated educational and pedagogical mission, and the degree to which it achieves the aims set out in its introduction, this study undertakes a descriptive and analytical examination of both its form and content. With God's assistance, we begin by presenting preliminary and concise information about the corpus to introduce and familiarise the reader with it before delving into the specific topic of the lexical witness and its pedagogical role.

Documentation of the Corpus:

Title: *Al-Muʿjam al-ʿArabī al-Asāsī* for Native Speakers and Learners of Arabic

Authors:

- Aḥmad al-ʿĀyid
- Ṣāliḥ Jawād Ṭuʿmah
- Aḥmad Mukhtār ʿUmar
- Nadīm Marʿashlī
- al-Jīlānī ibn al-Ḥājj Yaḥyā
- Dāwūd ʿAbduḥ

2. General Form:

- Bold type faces were used to distinguish headwords from explanations.
- The lexical material is arranged in two long columns per page: one on the right, topped by the first word appearing in that column, and one on the left, topped by the last word in it.
- The dictionary was printed to a fixed size of 14 × 21 cm.
- It contains no colour except for the green and orange colour used on the outer cover.

Title:

Several questions revolve around the content of the title, particularly the meaning of the term "Basic." The intent is to indicate a foundational dictionary that cannot be dispensed with a design designed primarily for beginners learning the language, whether Arabic or non-Arabic. It tends, however, to lean toward the needs of non-Arabs, as they require the facilitation and simplification of ordinary linguistic difficulties when learning Arabic.

Publisher:

The Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organisation (ALECSO), in collaboration with a group of scholars, linguists, and experts, prepared this dictionary.² Between 1981 and 1988, in cooperation with the Coordination Office for Arabisation.

As its name suggests, ALECSO is a specialised agency concerned with nurturing and advancing culture and education in Arab countries. Headquartered in Tunis, it operates under the umbrella of the League of Arab States. It was established pursuant to Article Three of the Charter of the Arab Cultural Unity, and its official founding was announced in Cairo on July 25, 1970.

Among its tools for achieving its profound educational mission are as follows:

The Coordination Office for Arabisation in Rabat:

The office was established in 1383 AH / 1962 CE, preceding the foundation of ALECSO itself, and later became affiliated with it. Its mission is to coordinate efforts aimed at developing the Arabic language through the Arabisation of terminology and the publication of dictionaries.

3. Content of *Al-Mu'jam al-'Arabī al-Asāsī*:

- The dictionary contains twenty-five thousand entries arranged alphabetically, supported by examples and citations drawn from the Qur'ān, the Prophetic Ḥadīth, proverbs, and diverse contextual usages.

- It includes coined, Arabic, and borrowed words approved by linguistic academies while also favouring commonly used vocabulary and avoiding obscure terms.
- It covers modern terminology and presents a range of proper names, including countries, cities, rivers, and eminent figures, in Arab history, such as caliphs, leaders, jurists, scholars, poets, writers, and artists.
- It dates historical events via both the Hijri and Gregorian calendars.
- It follows the traditional method of arranging lexical entries and their derivations according to the alphabetical approach commonly used in most Arabic dictionaries, which is based on the first letter of the root.
- With respect to its encyclopaedic dimension, the dictionary “has expanded considerably to encompass many fields of knowledge religion, literature, science, the arts, and notable figures through the use of sound, living, and contemporary Arabic as used across the Arab world.”³
- The dictionary is characterised by simplicity, which appears as follows:
 - Simplicity of arrangement.
 - Simplicity of style.
 - Simplicity in the use of familiar and commonly used vocabulary.⁴
- The entries within each section are ordered according to the second and third letters, following the sequential order of the Arabic alphabet.

4. What Is the Lexical Witness, Its Nature, and Its Primary Function?

Definition of linguistic weakness:

Al-Mu'jam al-'Arabī al-Asāsī defines the witness (*shāhid*) as “a proof,” from which the grammatical witness is derived, meaning a piece of authentic Arabic speech cited to demonstrate grammatical rule.⁵

According to Rashād al-Ḥamzāwī, the witness is an integral component of the dictionary, functioning to simplify the understanding of entries and to clarify their explanations. He further asserts that “examples constitute part of the description of the dictionary’s entries, for they mitigate the dryness of terminology and definitions.”⁶

The witness, in essence and by its very nature, is a linguistic device, one of the explanatory tools used by lexicographers to establish the legitimacy of a word's usage, its authenticity within the language, and the validity of its meaning. The linguistic witness often functions as evidence tied to a particular time and place; it may be attributed to a specific speaker within a defined context, although its origin sometimes remains anonymous.

Among the contextualised witnesses are words, sayings, or texts distinguished by particular features such as being sacred or aesthetically artistic. These include Qur'ānic verses, Prophetic ḥadīths, verses of poetry, and proverbial sayings attributed to sages, politicians, warriors, or even wise eccentrics and those of similar character.

Given the importance of the linguistic witness in lexicographical discourse, it is often typographically marked by quotation marks to distinguish it from other explanatory elements. For example, *Al-Mu'jam al-'Arabī al-Asāsī* highlights its literary and linguistic witnesses, which possess distinct features.

1. For Qur'ānic citations, the verses are placed between square brackets [...] and followed by the word [Qur'ān].
2. For other forms of linguistic witnesses, such as Prophetic ḥadīths, proverbs, maxims, and well-known sayings, the quotations are usually enclosed in inverted commas " ... ", followed by a label such as [Ḥadīth] or [Mathal] ("proverb"), although the source is not always attributed to its author.
3. For free contexts, that is, sentences composed by the author himself, no clear typographical indication or distinguishing mark is provided afterwards.
4. The Rationale for Citing Linguistic Witness and Its Types:

Since ancient times, the primary purpose of the linguistic witness has been to serve as evidence that substantiates or refutes a given statement. This function can be summed up as follows:

1. **Verification of the word's authenticity and meaning:** For this reason, early Arabs frequently cited examples from eloquent poetry.
2. **Clarification of semantic boundaries and contributions to definitions:** Definitions alone are often insufficient to capture the whole meaning, especially for words with multiple senses or overlap between literal and figurative usage. This is why Ḥusayn Naṣṣāremphasises that words possessing numerous or closely related meanings are particularly in need of examples to elucidate them.⁷

The linguistic witness remains indispensable because some issues cannot be adequately understood without the aid of an appropriate example that clarifies them, where definitions alone fall short or fail together in many lexicographic contexts. Hence, as scholars have stated, "Many conjunctive particles and similar terms cannot readily be understood through mere explanation; they are widespread and semantically intertwined, and thus require illustrative examples."⁸

From the foregoing discussion on the significance of the linguistic witness, its importance is evident. We may now proceed to its various types.

1. **The Witness of the Qur'ān:**
2. This is the speech of God, embodied in the noble Qur'ānic verses, and regarded as the foremost source for spiritual refinement and the primary authority for evidential citation, both verbal and practical, for Muslims in matters of creed, worship, and transactions. Owing to the significance of this pedagogical tool, *Al-Mu'jam al-'Arabī al-Asāsī* utilised Qur'ānic verses as evidence, placing them strategically where they best served their purpose. The compilers were attentive to thematic relevance and frequently employed it. In the sections devoted to the letters alif (ا) and bā' (ب), the two sample chapters selected for the present study, the dictionary contains over 333 verses, the number of which varies from one entry to another.
3. **The Witness from the Prophetic Ḥadīth:**
4. The noble Ḥadīth comprises the speech of the Prophet Muḥammad, which represents the second source of Islamic legislation after the Qur'ān. Scholars

consult it to elucidate matters that are presented concisely in the Qur'ān and to clarify what may be obscure to human understanding. Arabic dictionaries with an Islamic orientation generally employ ḥadīths to facilitate the explanation of lexical material, and no such dictionary can dispense with them entirely.

Naturally, *Al-Mu'jam al-'Arabī al-Asāsī* also incorporates them, although not to a degree comparable with its reliance on Qur'ānic citations. In the selected sample chapters (alif and bā'), only 20 ḥadīths are cited, a very modest figure compared with the number of Qur'ānic verses found in the same sample, as noted above.

3. The Witness of English Arabic Poetry:

The use of poetic citations to clarify words and meanings is an ancient practice, dating back to the earliest need for dispelling ambiguity in vocabulary and sense, particularly during the scientific and literary renaissance that accompanied the overall development of life with the advent of the Arab awakening in the early seventh century CE. This period coincided precisely with the intellectual and civilisational transformation brought about by the emergence of Islam and its explicit call to favour knowledge and encourage its pursuit.

By employing poetry as a form of witness or exemplar, the intention is to juxtapose the meaning of a term with what is found in its poetic usage and context in eloquent Arabic verse, thereby removing ambiguity and resolving obscurity.

In such cases, poetry has undoubtedly become a fertile lexicographical tool in the hands of lexicographers, learners, and others, just as it was in earlier times a rich source for argumentation, enjoyment, study, and artistic expression. As stated, "In the Age of Ignorance, poetry was the repository of Arab knowledge and the culmination of their wisdom; they drew upon it and returned to it."⁹ Others expressed this as follows: "Poetry is the science of the Arabs and their archive."¹⁰

Despite the prestigious position enjoyed by Arabic poetry, *Al-Muʿjam al-ʿArabī al-Asāsī* chose to minimise its use as a source of citations. Evidence of this is found in the study sample (chapters under the letters alif and bāʾ), where only seven scattered verses of poetry were recorded.

4. The Witness of Proverbs:

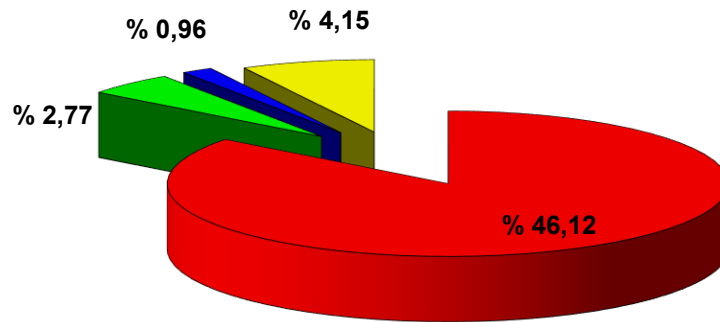
5. By "the witness from proverbs," we refer to time-honoured sayings originally uttered in specific circumstances, which later became widely circulated and gained both a context of origin and one of application. A maxim, on the other hand, typically represents the distilled wisdom of experience expressed in speech or action; in this context, speech is more relevant to our topic. Such maxims offer benefit, avert harm, or lend an element of artistry or eloquence to discourse. *Al-Muʿjam al-ʿArabī al-Asāsī* incorporated several of these, using them in appropriate contexts. In the two chapters examined (alif and bāʾ), we counted 30 such sayings.

When these figures are related to the total number of entries, 375 under alif, 347 under bāʾ, with a combined total of 722, the proportional distribution becomes clearer, as shown in the table below.

Type of Constrained Witness	Total in Chapters alif + bāʾ	Percentage of Total Entries (722)
Qurʾānic verses	333	46.12 %
Prophetic ḥadīths	20	2.77 %
Poetry	7	0.96 %
Proverbs and maxims	30	4.15 %

Table: Constrained witnesses and their percentages in chapters alif and bāʾ.

A corresponding diagram illustrates the proportional use of each type of citation represented in the above table.



Analysis of the Constrained Witness Data

The above table reveals that the Qur'ānic witness (highlighted in red) occupies first place, representing 46.12 % of the total number of witnesses in the chapters alif and bā'. In our view, this predominance of Qur'ānic citations may be attributed to a specific social context experienced by the compilers during a particular period, such as the public's heightened interest in matters of creed and faith during the preparation of the dictionary.

Other objective justifications may be identified upon careful analysis of the religious discourse in these citations and the attitudes of the compilers, such as the following:

- Religious pedagogical orientation is achieved by placing select noble verses prominently before readers and listeners.
- A reminder of the importance of the Qur'ānic witness in enriching the information provided and authenticating it, given that Muslims regard the Qur'ān as the most authentic, refined, and eloquent Arabic text.
- Documenting a specific social and religious era, namely, the period during which this dictionary was compiled, an era of enlightenment that saw an Islamic doctrinal awakening, known to some as the religious revival, particularly during the 1980s.

- The dictionary aligns with the contemporary Arab reality by fostering a distinctive doctrinal environment through carefully chosen Qur'ānic verses suitable for explaining terms, especially those drawn directly from the Qur'ān, which carry moral, social, and aesthetic values deemed necessary for the upbringing of the younger generation, both in the present and future.
- Contributing to the preservation of the traditional connection between successive generations and linking the past to the present, the Qur'ānic witness serves as a bridge between the old and the new within Muslim heritage and its abundant literary corpus.

Following this is the proportion of citations from the Prophetic Ḥadīth. Although some scholars do not regard the ḥadīth as a linguistic witness, primarily because a ḥadīth may be transmitted by meaning rather than exact wording and a term may be eloquent without being original, *Al-Mu'jam al-'Arabī al-Asāsī* adopted the position that the ḥadīth serves as a linguistic witness in its very wording. It thus incorporated it into this domain at a rate of 2.77 %, which remains low compared with the proportion of Qur'ānic citations.

From the preface to *Al-Mu'jam al-'Arabī al-Asāsī*, it appears that the compilers sought innovation and modernity in many aspects of their lexicographical method. They departed from traditional dictionary conventions, which often accorded poetic citations with great reverence and frequently employed them. In contrast, *Al-Mu'jam al-'Arabī al-Asāsī* significantly reduced the number of poetic witnesses and relied more on free contexts and constructed examples. For this reason, the proportion of poetic citations recorded in our examined sample did not exceed 0.96 %.

Proverbs and maxims, the subject of our current discussion, consist of concise verbal expressions with meanings and lessons of pedagogical value. They are distinguished by encapsulating the speaker's experiential wisdom and represent an art form of expression that evokes aesthetic pleasure and psychological comfort when it resonates with the listener.

Notably, *Al-Mu'jam al- 'Arabī al-Asāsī* paid attention to this type of citation, selecting those most pertinent to its lexical entries. For the analysed samples, their proportion reached 4.15 %.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Al-Mu'jam al- 'Arabī al-Asāsī* has accorded the lexical witness deliberate and meticulous attention. Its examples are simple, purposeful, and serve clear linguistic and educational functions, aligning with learners' needs by presenting words in accessible and contextually appropriate situations that facilitate comprehension and usage. Nevertheless, achieving the modernity required today calls for careful observance of pedagogical characteristics and standards by ensuring the following:

- Alignment of the dictionary's educational objectives with the demands of the contemporary era.
- Linguistic accuracy, clarity, and ease of understanding and use.
- The cognitive abilities of the target audience are considered through the determination of the necessary lexical repertoire.
- Avoidance of offensive vocabulary, including terms of insult, abuse, or denigration.
- Exclusion of examples and contexts that may offend modesty or contradict human values.
- The inclusion of newly coined words whose usage has been approved by the Arabic linguistic academies.
- Attention should be given to lexicographical structure and the harnessing of its pedagogical role in refining behaviour and character, fostering a spirit of scholarly coexistence among individuals, generations, and nations through the careful selection and effective placement of examples and contexts in vital areas such as raising generational awareness of their shared destiny and nurturing pride in their past, present, and future.

Furthermore, the field of lexicographical authorship continues to require additional applied research focusing on the evaluation of lexical witnesses in all types of educational dictionaries, particularly by standardising pedagogical criteria from selection to formulation. Such efforts would enhance the dictionary's effectiveness and dissemination in the context of teaching Arabic to nonnative speakers. *Al-Mu'jam al-'Arabī al-Asāsī* thus remains the nucleus and founding model for future works that will enrich purposeful lexicographical production.

Sources and references:

- 6 – Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih al-Andalusī, *Al-‘Iqd al-Farīd*, Dār al-Kitāb, Beirut, 1982.
- 5 – Ibn Sallām al-Jumahī, *Ṭabaqāt Fuḥūl al-Shu‘arā’*, commentary by Maḥmūd Muḥammad Shākir, Maṭba‘at al-Madanī, Cairo, n.d.
- 4 – Ḥusayn Naṣṣār, *Al-Mu‘jam al-‘Arabī: Nash‘atuhu wa-Taṭawwuruḥu*, Vol. 2, 2nd ed., 1968.
- 3 – Muḥammad Rashād al-Ḥamzāwī, *Min Qaḍāyā al-Mu‘jam al-‘Arabī Qadīman wa-Ḥadīthan*, 1st ed., 1986.
- 2 – ALECSO, *Al-Mu‘jam al-‘Arabī al-Asāsī for Native Speakers and Learners of Arabic*, Larousse Publishing, 1989.
- 1 – Šālīḥ Bulaīd, *Maṣādir al-Lughah*, third-year university course, Dīwān al-Maṭbū‘āt al-Jāmi‘iyyah, 1994.

Endnotes:

¹ Pierre Larousse (1817–1875) was a French grammarian, lexicographer, and publisher born in Toucy. He began his career as a primary school teacher, devoting himself to pedagogical research and lexicographic authorship. In 1850, together with his associate Auguste Boyer, he founded “Librairie Larousse,” through which they published a series of encyclopaedias and schoolbooks, including *La Grammaire supérieure* (The Advanced Grammar), published in 1885, which became a foundation for linguistic studies in French primary schools. They also produced *Le Grand Dictionnaire Universel du XIXe Siècle* (The Great Universal Dictionary of the 19th Century), begun in 1863 and published in instalments between 1864 and 1876, later compiled into volumes from 1866 to 1876. This monumental lexicographic work remains one of the most valuable sources of study from that century, as summarised in *the Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2006 edition.

² Šālih Bulaīd, *Mašādir al-Lughah*, third-year university course, Dīwān al-Maṭbū‘āt al-Jāmi‘iyyah, 1994, p. 122.

³ *Introduction to Al-Mu‘jam al-‘Arabī al-Asāsī*, p. 9, paragraph 5.

⁴ Šālih Bulaīd, *Mašādir al-Lughah*, third-year university course, p. 122.

⁵ ALECSO, *Al-Mu‘jam al-‘Arabī al-Asāsī*, entry ش ه د, p. 706.

⁶ Muḥammad Rashād al-Ḥamzāwī, *Min Qaḍāyā al-Mu‘jam al-‘Arabī Qadīman wa-Ḥadīthan*, 1st ed., 1986, p. 176.

⁷ Ḥusayn Naṣṣār, *Al-Mu‘jam al-‘Arabī: Nash‘atuhu wa-Taṭawwuruḥu*, Vol. 2, 2nd ed., 1968, p. 774.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 774.

⁹ Ibn Sallām al-Jumahī, *Ṭabaqāt Fuḥūl al-Shu‘arā’*, Vol. 1, p. 24.

¹⁰ Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih, *Al-‘Iqd al-Farīd*, Vol. 5, p. 281.