

Specialization of Meaning of the Term ‘Muhajir’: A Morphological and Semantic Analysis Based on the Quran and the Malay Language

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ABSTRACT

The term *muhajir*, derived from the Arabic root h-j-r, has traditionally been associated with migration and the *Muhajirin* who migrated from Makkah to Madinah. However, its emerging use in Malay discourse to refer to converts to Islam (*mualaf* or *saudara baru*) raises important questions concerning its morphological formation, semantic specialization, and appropriateness as a developing terminological choice. This study is motivated by the absence of a comprehensive linguistic account explaining how the meaning of *muhajir* develops from its Arabic lexical and Quranic foundations into a specialized meaning within the Malay socioreligious context. The study therefore aims to examine the morphological and semantic characteristics of *muhajir*, identify its semantic boundaries in relation to synonymous Arabic lexical items, and investigate its contextual meanings in the Quran and Malay.

A componential analysis and descriptive-comparative were employed using Arabic and Arabic-Malay lexicographical sources, supplemented by Quranic data retrieved from the Quranic Arabic Corpus. The findings demonstrate that the root h-j-r fundamentally conveys the concepts of leaving, separating, and avoiding, while the augmented verb's derivation for *hājara* exhibits a specialized meaning of religious migration. Furthermore, *muhajir* shifts from an eventive meaning to an identificational meaning referring to a recognized social group. The study demonstrates that its emerging Malay usage reflects a meaningful process of semantic extension and terminological innovation.

Keywords: Muhajir; semantic specialization; morphological analysis; lexical semantics; Quranic Arabic; Arabic-Malay; Muslim converts.

INTRODUCTION

Lexical elements are the main foundation in constructing grammatical sentences and in their accurate application for terminological purposes. Every lexical item has unique characteristics regarding its root and morphological expression. The root or entry of a lexical item can be recognized as a morphological structure forming the foundation of a language. Arabic language, renowned as a derivational and rich language is frequently viewed as having a distinct advantage and unique strength.

In the study of Arabic lexical elements, there are three main components: nouns, verbs and function words (*al-Rājiḥi*, 1971). Nevertheless, this chapter focuses on the Arabic term *Muhajir*, which is categorized as noun. The use of this term has drawn the attention of researchers as it represents an innovation in Arabic-based terminology within the Malay language.

In Malay dictionaries, this term was borrowed from Arabic language with restricted meaning. However, efforts to reinforce of this term needs to be supported by thorough and precise linguistic research.

Within the context of studies on Islamic conversion among non-Muslims in Malaysia, an effort to introduce the term Muhajir was initiated by Khadijah Mohd Khambali @ Hambali et al. (2017). This was followed by two additional articles that discussed the use of this term as an alternative to mualaf, saudara baru (new brethren) and similar terms, namely Khairul Azhar Meerangani (2019) dan Suraya Sintang et al. (2021).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The use of muhajir in the Malaysian discourse of Islamic conversion has received increasing scholarly attention. Khadijah Mohd Khambali @ Hambali et al. (2017) initially proposed muhajir as an alternative term for mualaf and saudara baru, followed by discussions by Meerangani (2019) and Suraya Sintang et al. (2021). These studies highlight the potential of muhajir as a terminological alternative for describing Muslim converts and their social identity.

However, in Malay discourse, the term muhajirin has a restricted meaning, referring specifically to the group of emigrants who migrated from Mecca to Medina in the time of early Islam. Therefore, muhajir term to be used in synonym with mualaf or saudara baru needs to be supported by semantic evidents.

Linguistically, muhajir derives from the Arabic root ه ج ر, whose core meanings include leaving, separating, distancing oneself, and avoiding (Uthman et al., 2015). The root generates several morphological patterns; each associated with distinct semantic functions. Of relevance is the augmented verb hājara (هاجر), which denotes migration or leaving one's homeland, while other derivations retain meanings associated with abandonment, avoidance, separation, or reciprocal action (al-Rājiḥi, 1984; Muṣṭafā et al., 1989). This morphological diversity demonstrates that the semantic interpretation of h-j-r is highly dependent on its derived form and contextual usage.

Previous scholarship therefore establishes an important linguistic basis for examining muhajir as a specialized term. However, the relationship between its morphological derivation, Quranic semantic development, and emerging terminological use in Malay requires further systematic analysis. This study addresses this gap by examining the morphological and semantic specialization of muhajir across Arabic and Malay contexts.

METHODOLOGY

To achieve this objective, componential analysis and descriptive-comparative analysis methods are applied to this lexical item and its Arabic synonyms, alongside their Malay semantic equivalents. Grounded in the linguistic theory, this lexical item is analyzed in depth to explain its implications within Malay discourse. Furthermore, the contextual aspects and semantics of this lexical item are also traced using the Quranic text for comparative purposes. The Quranic text was retrieved using the digital corpus The Quranic Arabic Corpus (Copyright © Kais Dukes, 2009-2017) from the University of Leeds, England.

DISCUSSION

Based on componential analysis, several other lexical items share the same semantic features as this lexical item, namely انتقل, اجتنب, ترك, and فارق. This is based on a study of denotative meaning as referenced in Arabic-Arabic and Arabic-Malay dictionaries.

Following a thorough examination and comparison of the four lexical items and their respective synonyms, the findings were validated by four experts in the Arabic language from public and private higher institutional learning. The tables below indicate the semantic boundaries of each stated synonym based on lexicographical references.

Fā-ra-qa: leaving, separating, severing ties

Table 2: Variations of Verb Patterns فرق

Lexical/Pattern	One letter	Two letters	Two letters	Two letters
فعل	أفعل	افتعل	تفاعل	انفعل
فرق	أفرق	افترق	تفارق	انفرق

In Table 2 above, derivations of this word can be found across several patterns with specific meanings, such as فرق (fa-ra-qa) “to separate, to distinguish,” while فرق (fa-ri-qa) “to be terrified and deeply afraid,” أفرق (af-ra-qa) “to recover from illness, to intimidate,” فرّق (far-ra-qa) “to differentiate, to compare between two things,” افترق (if-ta-ra-qa) and تفارق (ta-fa-ra-qa) “to mutually leave one another,” انفرق (in-fa-ra-qa) “to be separated or abandoned” and تفرق (ta-far-ra-qa) “to go one's separate ways” (Muṣṭafā et al., 1989).

Ta-ra-ka: to leave, to leave unattended, to discard

Table 3: Variations of Verb Patterns ترك

Lexical/Pattern	One letter	Two letters
فعل	فاعِل	افتعل
ترك	تارك	اترك

Table 3 above shows the variations of verb patterns for ترك used in the Arabic language. ترك (ta-ra-ka) “to leave, to let alone, to discard it,” ترك (ta-ri-ka) “to marry a widow,” تارك البيع “to make a business settlement,” and اترك الشيء (it-ta-ra-ka) “to leave something” (Muṣṭafā et al., 1989).

Ja-na-ba: becoming a stranger or foreign, keeping away from it

Table 4: Variations of Verb Patterns جنب

Lexical/Pattern	One letter	One letter	One letter	Two letter	Two letter	Three letter
فعل	أفعل	فاعِل	فَعَل	افتعل	تفاعل	استفعل
جنب	أجنب	جانب	جنب	اجتنب	تجانب	استجنب

Table 4 above shows the variation of verb patterns derived from جنب, where single-letter affixes carry the meanings of “to keep away” for أجنب, “to remove to a distance” for جانب and “to decrease and become few” for جَنَّب. Meanwhile, two-letter affixes convey meanings such as “to be beside” or “to avoid, to be at the side and keep away” for اجتنب, followed by تجانب “to play alongside one another while keeping distance.” As for the three-letter affix, it carries the meaning of “to be beside (something)” for استجنب. (Muṣṭafā et al., 1989).

Na-qa-la: to relocate, to shift position or place, to transfer

Table 5: Variations of Verb Patterns نقل

Lexical/Pattern	One letter	One letter	Two letters	Two letters
فعل	أفعل	فاعِل	تفاعل	تفعّل
نقل	أنقل	ناقل	تناقل	تنقل

Table 5 above shows the patterns of this word based on In-ta-qa-la: moving, shifting location, نقل (naq-qa-la) “changing from one place to another,” نقل المكان (na-qi-la) “moving many times,” أنقل الشيء (an-qa-la) “moving or transferring it,” ناقل الفرس (nā-qa-la) “a horse placing its hind foot where its forefoot was when walking, talking about someone and what pertains to them,” تناقل (ta-nā-qa-la) “mutually passing news within a community,” and تنقل (ta-naq-qa-la) “changing or shifting” (Muṣṭafā et al., 1989).

The table above shows a comparison of semantic boundaries and thoroughly demonstrates that there are nuances that distinguish each term from one another. Nevertheless, the semantic overlap among these four lexical items can be summarized by the meanings of “distancing, avoiding, leaving, and separating.”

Semantic Boundaries and Morphological Patterns					
The Four Arabic Verb Roots: فرق - ترك - جنب - نقل					
(with focus on the meaning "to separate, to leave, to distance, and to move")					
فرق (Fā-ra-qa) "to separate, to distinguish, to break a connection"			ترك (Ta-ra-ka) "to leave, to abandon, to let go"		جنب (Ja-na-ba) "to become aside, to keep away"
نقل (Na-qa-la) "to move, to transfer"					
Table 2. Verb Forms of فرق			Table 3. Verb Forms of ترك		Table 4. Verb Forms of جنب
Form	Verb Pattern	Specific Meaning	Form	Verb Pattern	Specific Meaning
فعل	فرق	to separate, to divide	فعل	ترك	to leave, to abandon, to let go
أفعل	أفرق	to distinguish, to set apart	فاعل	تارك	one who leaves (in a certain context)
تفعّل	اتفرّق	to separate, to disband	مفعّل	أترك	(In context) to marry the widow / settlement of business
تفاعل	تفرّق	to scatter, to break apart			
انفعل	انفترّق	to be separated			
تفاعل	تفرّق	to isolate oneself, to go one's own way			
Main Semantic Nuances			Main Semantic Nuances		Main Semantic Nuances
• To separate and divide			• To leave or abandon		• To put aside and avoid
• To distinguish and differentiate			• To release or let go		• To stand beside
• To set apart or keep distant			• (In context) to marry the widow / settlement of business		• To become distant or separated
Table 5. Verb Forms of نقل					
Form	Verb Pattern	Specific Meaning	Form	Verb Pattern	Specific Meaning
فعل	نقل	to move, to transfer	فعل	جنب	to put aside
مفعّل	أنقل	to transfer, to convey	أفعل	أجنب	to keep away
فاعل	ناقل	a carrier, a transporter	فاعل	جانب	to stand beside
تفاعل	تناقل	to exchange information	فعل	جنب	to turn away, to avoid
تفعّل	تنقل	to change, to move	مفعّل	أجنب	to avoid
			تفاعل	تجنب	to keep away from each other
			استعمل	استجنب	to keep inside
Main Semantic Nuances			Main Semantic Nuances		
• To move and transfer			• To put aside and avoid		
• To convey or transmit			• To stand beside		
• To exchange information / to change			• To become distant or separated		
Comparison of Semantic Boundaries					
Aspect of Comparison	فرق (Fā-ra-qa)	ترك (Ta-ra-ka)	جنب (Ja-na-ba)	نقل (Na-qa-la)	Similarity in Meaning
Core Meaning	To separate, divide, distinguish	To leave, abandon, let go	To keep away, become aside	To move, transfer, convey	To separate, to distance, to leave, and to move.
Specific Nuances	Separation, differentiation, classification	Release, abandonment, withdrawal	Distance, avoidance, keeping apart	Movement, transfer, transportation	
Morphological Patterns	فعل - أفعل - تفعّل - تفاعل - انفعل	فعل - فاعِل - مفعّل	فعل - أفعل - تفاعل - استعمل	فعل - فاعِل - تفاعل - تنقل	
Common Examples	فرق، أفرق، اتفرّق، انفترّق، تفرّق	ترك، تارك، أترك	جنب، أجنب، اجانب، استجنب، تجنب	نقل، أنقل، ناقل، تناقل، تنقل	

Figure 1. Semantic Boundaries and Morphological Patterns

From a contextual aspect, the lexeme Ha-ja-ra is mentioned in 31 verses across six morphological patterns as verbs and nouns, as presented in the table below

Table 6: Lexical Variations of هجر in the Quran

No.	Surah: Verse	Quranic Expression	Morphological Form	Contextual Meaning
1	2:218 البقرة	هَاجِرُوا	فَاعِل – فعل ماضٍ	berhijrah (to emigrate) (to emigrate)
2	3:195 عمران	هَاجِرُوا آل عمران	فَاعِل – فعل ماضٍ	berhijrah (to emigrate)
3	4:34 النساء	وَاهْجُرُوهُنَّ	فَعْل أمر	meninggalkan/menjauhi (leaving/avoiding)
4	4:89 النساء	يُهَاجِرُوا	فَاعِل – مضارع	berhijrah (to emigrate)
5	4:97 النساء	فَتُهَاجِرُوا	فَاعِل – مضارع	berhijrah (to emigrate)
6	4:100 النساء	يُهَاجِرُ	فَاعِل – مضارع	berhijrah (to emigrate)
7	4:100 النساء	مُهَاجِرًا	اسم فاعل	orang yang berhijrah (a person who emigrates)
8	8:72 الأنفال	هَاجِرُوا	فَاعِل – ماضٍ وَهَاجِرُوا	berhijrah (to emigrate)
9	8:72 الأنفال	يُهَاجِرُوا	فَاعِل – مضارع	berhijrah (to emigrate)
10	8:72 الأنفال	يُهَاجِرُوا	فَاعِل – مضارع	berhijrah (to emigrate)
11	8:74 الأنفال	هَاجِرُوا	فَاعِل – ماضٍ وَهَاجِرُوا	berhijrah (to emigrate)
12	8:75 الأنفال	هَاجِرُوا	فَاعِل – ماضٍ وَهَاجِرُوا	berhijrah (to emigrate)
13	9:20 التوبة	هَاجِرُوا	فَاعِل – ماضٍ وَهَاجِرُوا	berhijrah (to emigrate)
14	9:100 التوبة	الْمُهَاجِرِينَ	اسم فاعل	golongan Muhajirin (the Muhajirin group)
15	9:117 التوبة	وَالْمُهَاجِرِينَ	اسم فاعل	golongan Muhajirin (the Muhajirin group)
16	16:41 النحل	هَاجِرُوا	فَاعِل – ماضٍ	berhijrah (to emigrate)
17	16:110 النحل	هَاجِرُوا	فَاعِل – ماضٍ	berhijrah (to emigrate)
18	19:46 مريم	أَمْرُوا هَاجِرِي	فَعْل أمر	tinggalkanlah aku (leave me alone)
19	22:58 الحج	هَاجِرُوا	فَاعِل – ماضٍ	berhijrah (to emigrate)
20	23:67 المؤمنون	تَهْجُرُونَ	فَعْل مضارع	berkata/bercakap secara menjauh/meninggalkan kebenaran (speaking while turning away/abandoning the truth)
21	24:22 النور	وَالْمُهَاجِرِينَ	اسم فاعل	golongan Muhajirin (the Muhajirin group)
22	25:30 الفرقان	مَهْجُورًا	اسم مفعول	yang ditinggalkan/diabaikan (abandoned/ neglected)
23	29:26 العنكبوت	مُهَاجِرٌ	اسم فاعل	orang yang berhijrah (to emigrate)
24	33:6 الأحزاب	وَالْمُهَاجِرِينَ	اسم فاعل	golongan Muhajirin (the Muhajirin group)

25	33:50	الأحزاب	هَاجَرْنَ	فاعل – ماضٍ	mereka (wanita) berhijrah (they (women) emigrated)
26	59:8	الحشر	الْمُهَاجِرِينَ	اسم فاعل	golongan Muhajirin (the Muhajirin group)
27	59:9	الحشر	هَاجَرَ	فاعل – ماضٍ	berhijrah (to emigrate)
28	60:10	المتحنة	مُهاجِرَاتٍ	اسم فاعل مُهاجِرَاتٍ	wanita-wanita yang berhijrah (women who emigrate)
29	73:10	المزمل	فَعْلَ أَمْرٍ وَأَهْجُرْهُمْ	فعل أمر	jauhilah mereka (keep away from them)
30	73:10	المزمل	هَجَرًا	مصدر	meninggalkan/menjauhi (leaving/avoiding)
31	74:5	المدثر	فَاهْجُرْ	فعل أمر	tinggalkan/jauhi (leave/avoid)

From the perspective of lexical semantics, there is a conceptual relationship between “leaving” and “emigrating.” However, sharing a common root does not mean exactly that every derivation of ه ج ر carries the meaning of emigration (hijrah). Quranic data clearly shows that the same root yields meanings such as “avoiding, leaving, neglecting, and speaking ill,” alongside the meaning of “emigrating.”

This is important from the perspective of this study because the analysis of مُهاجِر must originate within the morphological matrix of the root ه ج ر, rather than if all of its forms necessarily mean “migrant” or “a person who emigrates.”

Morphologically, the Quran shows two main verb forms from that root:

Table 7: Lexical Verbs Patterns هجر of in the Quran

Form	Pattern	Type	Example from the Quran	Main Semantic Function
هَجَرَ / يَهْجُرُ	فَعْلٌ / يَفْعُلُ	Triliteral verb	وَأَهْجُرُوهُمْ (4:34)	leaving, avoiding
هَاجَرَ / يَهَاجِرُ	فَاعِلٌ / يَفَاعِلُ	Augmented verb	وَالَّذِينَ هَاجَرُوا (2:218)	emigrating (to emigrate), relocating

Copyright © Kais Dukes, (2009-2017) records five occurrences of the unaugmented triliteral verb هَجَرَ (فعل ثلاثي مجرد) and 16 occurrences of the augmented verb هَاجَرَ (فعل مزيد). This distinction has semantic significance. The pattern هَجَرَ in the Quran generally retains the core meaning of اجتناب / مفارقة / ترك, namely, leaving or avoiding. For example:

وَأَهْجُرْهُمْ هَجْرًا جَمِيلًا ﴿١٠﴾

“and depart from them courteously”

(المزمل 73:10)

In contrast, هَاجَرَ in most Quranic contexts has acquired a more specialized meaning, namely leaving a place or community for the sake of Allah and religion, as in:

وَالَّذِينَ هَاجَرُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ

“As for those who emigrate in the cause of Allah”

(الحج 22:58)

Therefore, it can be said that *فعل مزيد* “هَاجَرَ” presents a specialization of meaning from the core concept of “leaving” to the concept of “emigrating.” In the Malay language, *hijrah* / *berhijrah* is an Arabic loanword meaning to relocate, change, migrate, seeking a change of atmosphere (*tukar angin*), and evacuate (*mengili*) (Ismail Dahaman et al., 2010). There is a semantic addition to this word in Malay namely, the sense of “changing / switching” or “a change of environment” which is not present in its denotative meaning in Arabic. This fact becomes interesting when the term ‘*muhajir*’ is used to refer to individuals who convert from their original religion to Islam, even though in Teuku Iskandar & Baharuddin Zainal (2000), ‘*muhajir*’ only refers to those who migrated alongside the Prophet (peace be upon him) from Mecca to Medina.

CONCLUSION

Based on the overall data and discussion above, three important academic observations can be concluded:

This study demonstrates that the meaning of *muhajir* cannot be understood solely from its association with migration or from its common reference to the *muhajirin*. The analysis shows that its semantic development is closely related to the morphological and contextual properties of the root *ه ج ر*. At the root level, the core semantic concepts involve leaving, separating and distancing, while derivation *هَاجَرَ* in the *فَاعِلٌ* pattern develops a more specialized meaning associated with migration, particularly migration undertaken in the context of faith and leaving one’s place for the sake of Allah. This distinction demonstrates that the semantic interpretation of *ه ج ر* is shaped not only by its lexical root but also by its morphological form and contextual use.

The analysis further indicates that *مُهَاجِرٌ* represents a shift from describing an individual engaged in the act of migration to identify a social group associated with the experience of *hijrah*. This development provides an important basis for understanding how the term may acquire a broader terminological function beyond its original Quranic and historical reference. In the Malay context, the studies examined in this research have proposed *muhajir* as an alternative designation for Muslim converts, alongside established terms such as *mualaf* and *saudara baru*. Thus, the proposed Malay use of *muhajir* can be understood as a form of semantic extension that draws upon the existing semantic association between leaving a previous state or place and entering a new religious identity.

Overall, the findings highlight that the word *muhajir* in Malay should be viewed within a broader process of lexical and terminological development rather than as a direct equivalent of the Quranic term *muhajirin*. Its potential as a term for Muslim converts is grounded in the semantic relationship between the original concept of leaving and the socioreligious notion of transition to Islam, while its acceptability as a developing Malay term requires continued consideration of linguistic usage of how Arabic derived lexical items may undergo semantic specialization and extension when incorporated into Malay Muslim discourse. By complementing established terms such as *conversion*, *reversion*, *tawbah*, *aslama*, *mualaf* and *saudara baru* this semantic extension enriches the Malay sociolinguistic landscape with a term that emphasizes the transformative and ongoing nature of religious transition (Azman et al, 2019).

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