

RESEARCH  
ARTICLE**Historical Dictionary of the Arabic Language: A Study in Industry, Efforts, and Development Proposal****Benallou Samia**

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**Abstract**

The historical dictionary of the Arabic language has successfully bridged the gap between the theoretical and applied aspects, a gap that had long been absent in Arabic lexicographical studies. Following numerous theoretical calls for the creation of a comprehensive and historic dictionary of the Arabic language, the "Project of the Century" emerged in both paper and digital forms. It is certain that this lexicographic undertaking involved carefully planned conditions and steps developed by the researchers who contributed to it. After the major publication phase of the historical dictionary, we will propose several developmental perspectives for its future.

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**Introduction:**

The Arabic language is renowned for its lexical richness, a feature unmatched by any other language. Moreover, its long and storied history—spanning over seventeen centuries since the pre-Islamic era—warrants the creation of a historical dictionary that preserves it from the decline experienced by many other languages. Such a dictionary would also serve to introduce future generations to the evolution, changes, and precision of their language. The mere consideration that language is a core part of a nation's identity further justifies the launch of a historical lexicographic project for Arabic.

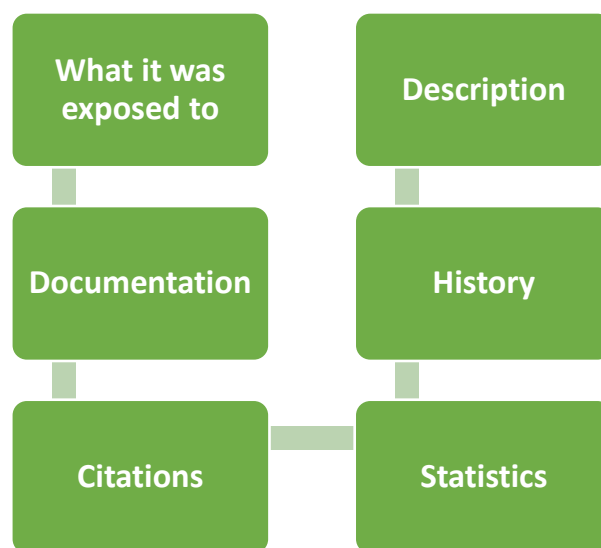
As a result, researchers of various ranks have developed a dictionary that chronicles the Arabic language by tracking the evolution of its units and outlining the distinct trends of each (stylistic, morphological, syntactic, etc.). This achievement stands as a project for the entire nation, despite the long wait, and the steps taken in its production—publicized by those who contributed—were meticulous, owing to the vast and shared expertise that emerged from numerous parties that positioned themselves as guardians of the Arabic language. Our study will examine the creation of this dictionary and the efforts of the contributors involved. Furthermore, we will propose practical developmental directions for the dictionary, using a descriptive and statistical methodology. We will also address the following questions:

- How was the historical dictionary of the Arabic language created?
- What were the key efforts that contributed to the production of this lexicographic work?
- How can the historical dictionary of the Arabic language be developed to safeguard our linguistic identity?

**The Terminological Framework of the Historical Linguistic Dictionary:**

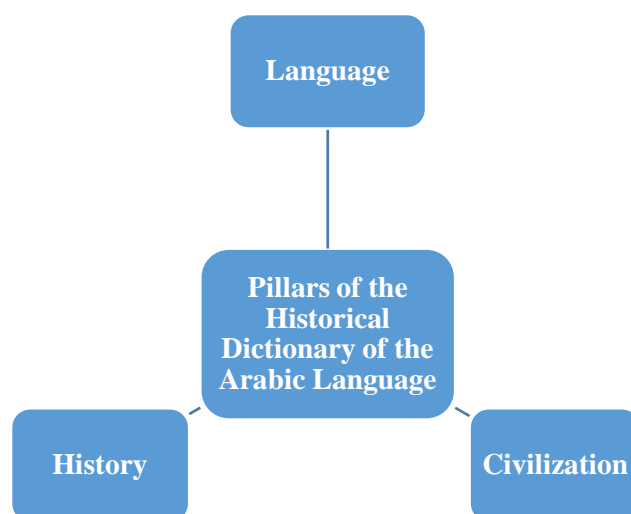
Given the urgent need to control the overwhelming linguistic influx, particularly due to the intellectual fusion between cultures, the creation of historical linguistic dictionaries has become essential to regulate linguistic meanings and their development and generation<sup>1</sup>. Lexicographers have made considerable efforts to clarify the concept of this type of dictionary, addressing its conceptual chaos. Their definitions have been precise, asserting that such a dictionary traces, through description, statistics, and historical accounts, the words that have been used.<sup>2</sup> Each word spoken by the Arabs is entitled to have a place in this historical dictionary, even if it was used only once. This is because the chance of its revival is highly likely.<sup>3</sup> The tracking involves documenting every change and development it undergoes,<sup>4</sup> adhering to reliable documentation of words from trusted sources and increasing citations from the contexts in which the word was first used, if research permits.<sup>5</sup> All of these steps reflect the depth of this lexicographic endeavor and its role in uniting languages. Arabic, in particular, has embraced this effort and has established a historical dictionary that represents the linguistic wealth of the nation.

#### Fundamentals of Work in the Historical Linguistic Dictionary.



#### The Historical Dictionary of the Arabic Language: Between Initiative and Action:

Arabic lexicographers have long recognized the necessity of undertaking the task of constructing a historical dictionary for the Arabic language. This effort includes earlier attempts such as the member of the Cairo Academy's initiative, the Tunisian Lexicographical Association, and the Arab Poetry Dictionary project, coordinated between Kuwait and the University of Cambridge. Additionally, the Tunisian Academy contributed by completing a portion of the work initiated by Kuwait and Cambridge, focusing specifically on the pre-Islamic era. However, the true breakthrough in producing the current historical Arabic dictionary emerged from a proposal presented by the Damascus, Baghdad, and Omani Language Academies to the Union of Arabic Language Academies in 1998.<sup>6</sup> Upon receiving approval, a specialized committee was formed to work on this project, followed by the organization of a scientific conference titled "The Historical Dictionary of the Arabic Language" in 2006. With funding and support from the ruler of Sharjah, the project's headquarters was established in Cairo, and a scientific council was created to select its sources. This led to the launch of the digital archive, which contains more than one billion words. Work on the actual production of the historical dictionary began in 2020, and Sharjah first released seventeen volumes of the work in 2021. Doha later released an additional nineteen volumes. The work is ongoing to ensure the preservation of the Arabic linguistic identity and the nation's history through this unified effort, following in the footsteps of the Oxford Dictionary.<sup>7</sup> The enormous number of volumes released clearly indicates the researchers' commitment and their remarkable ability to create a groundbreaking scientific, lexicographical, and historical revolution that the nation has never experienced before.<sup>8</sup>



### The Historical Dictionary of the Arabic Language and Its Associated Expertise:

Dozens of volumes of the Historical Dictionary of the Arabic Language have been published, and it is certain that many specialists have contributed to this achievement. This lexicographic undertaking has followed in the footsteps of the Oxford Dictionary by publicly acknowledging the contributors, whether directly or indirectly involved in the project. Simply browsing the official page of the dictionary (whether from Sharjah or Doha) presents a list of the participants along with their biographies. This is a clear indication that no efforts have been overlooked, highlighting the scientific value and the importance of the researchers involved.

#### A. The Doha Dictionary:

The website of the Doha Dictionary allows users to search for contributors of various ranks and learn about their biographies. Below, we present the icon available on the site, along with a link for access:

#### Icon of Participants in the Doha Dictionary on its Website.

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***Members of the Scientific Council***

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***Current Staff of the Dictionary***

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***Former Staff of the Dictionary***

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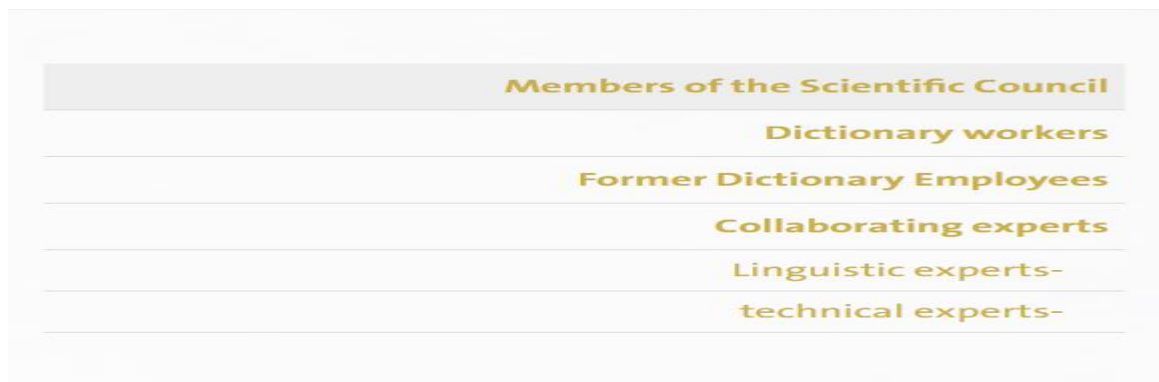
***Collaborating Experts***

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***- Linguistic Experts***

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***- Technical Experts***



Source: <https://www.dohadictionary.org/participants>

The following is a list of members of the scientific council of the Doha Dictionary, with a noticeable diversity in nationalities and areas of scientific expertise, including lexicographic, stylistic, and syntactic experience.

#### Members of the Scientific Council of the Doha Dictionary.

Azmi Bishara	Mohammed Al-Obaidi
Ahmed bin Mohammed Al-Dhabib	Abdul Karim Mohammed Hassan Jabal
Ramzi Munir Al-Baalbaki	Ali Ahmed Al-Kubaisi
Elias Deeb Atallah	Ali Mohammed Ghaleb Al-Mikhlafi
Abdul Salam Al-Masdi	Ali Al-Qasimi
Siham Al-Farih	Latifa Al-Najjar
Ibrahim bin Murad	Mohammed Hassan bin Hassani Al-Tayyan
Al-Shahed bin Mohammed Al-Bouchihi	Mohammed bin Salem Al-Maashani
Hassan Hamza	Riyadh Zaki Qasim
Abdul Hamid Al-Harama	Taher Mila
Ezzeddine Al-Bouchihi	Mahdi Asaad Arar
Rashid Ahmed Bou Al-Habib	Ismail Al-Amayreh
Abdul Ali Al-Wadghiri	Nihad bin Yassin Al-Musa
Abdul Qader Al-Fassi Al-Fihri	Mahmoud Fahmy Hijazi

Source: <https://www.dohadictionary.org/participants>

#### B. The Sharjah Dictionary:

Similarly, the Sharjah Dictionary also provides its visitors with the opportunity to learn about the team working on the project. The following link allows access to this information by clicking the icon provided:



<https://www.almojam.org/home>

Here is a list of the names of the members of the scientific council as presented on the official website of the dictionary:

Members of the Sharjah Dictionary Scientific Council:	
Al-Khalil Al-Nahwi	Hassan Abdel-Latif Shafie
Amhamed Safi Al-Mostghanemi	Bakri Mohammed Al-Hajj
Ahmed Abdel-Azim Abdel-Ghani	Mohamed Abdel-Halim
Mamoun Abdel-Halim Wagih	Ahmed Shahlan
Mahmoud Al-Rubaie	Saleh Balaid
Mohamed Khalifa Al-Difaa	Mohamed Hassan Abdel-Aziz
Abdel-Hakim Radhi	Abdel-Hamid Madkour
Ahmed Al-Dhabib	Mahmoud Al-Sayed

Source: <https://www.almojam.org/about/participants>

### The Rationale for Creating the Historical Dictionary of the Arabic Language:

Through research and examining the reasons behind this lexicographical undertaking, it becomes clear to us, in the context of this study, that there are three main motivations:

## Reasons for the creation of the Historical Dictionary of the Arabic Language

### Scientific Reasons

### Civilizational Reasons

### Nationalistic Reasons

#### 1. Scientific Motives:

The primary driver for creating this dictionary is the need to track the semantic changes that Arabic words have undergone over time, utilizing these insights to name newly emerging phenomena and inventions. This is one of the key motivations for establishing such a dictionary.

#### 2. Civilizational Motives:

For a nation to elevate its stature, it must advance its language, enabling it to keep pace with global languages. This can be achieved through lexicographical works that demonstrate the language's capacity to carry intellectual and scientific meanings, as well as reflect the nation's achievements by illustrating the development of its language. In this way, the present is connected with the past.

#### 3. Nationalistic Motives:

The creation of a historical dictionary for any language—regardless of its classification or performance—aims to preserve the national language, protect the identity, safeguard the local heritage, and unify the nation's language in one cohesive work that prevents linguistic chaos.

One of the most notable characteristics of this dictionary is its inclusiveness, as it combines language, civilization, science, identity, and history—traits that previous dictionaries failed to encompass.

### **The Importance of the Historical Dictionary of the Arabic Language for the Nation:**

This lexicographic work is viewed as a reference for the nation and a source of pride in its language. Specialists have attempted to preserve Arabic through it, showcasing the development the language has undergone. Below are the key points regarding the importance of this dictionary in maintaining and developing its functionality:

- Preventing misinterpretations and erroneous readings of Arab heritage by accurately defining the meanings of its words.
- Providing a unified source for specialists in Arabic linguistics, preventing fragmentation and the constant need to search through multiple Arabic dictionaries.<sup>10</sup>
- Offering a semantic reservoir of Arabic words spanning over eighteen centuries.
- Evolving from a general historical dictionary of Arabic into a specialized historical dictionary.
- Providing the appropriate semantic derivations that allow the nation to keep pace with scientific advancements.
- Leveraging this lexicographical effort in the automated processing of the Arabic language.<sup>11</sup>

Upon the completion of this work, anyone with a connection to the Arabic language will be able to determine its richness and strength, along with its connections to other languages, and appreciate its depth without neglecting its foundational language.

### **Steps in Building the Historical Dictionary of the Arabic Language:**

The lexicographic process behind the Historical Dictionary of the Arabic Language followed a scientific, methodical approach. This assertion is supported by testimonies from numerous individuals interested in the Arabic language, either directly or indirectly. The most compelling evidence for this is that the process followed two major conditions laid down by one of the greatest Arabic lexicographers, Ibn Manzur, whose work in the *Lisan al-Arab* is considered a cornerstone of Arabic lexicography. He stipulated that for any lexicographic project to succeed, two key principles must be followed: thorough gathering and proper compilation.<sup>12</sup>

The first condition, gathering the linguistic material, requires clear objectives. Accurate goal-setting leads to the identification of the sources from which the linguistic material is collected, and establishes the time and place of the material. Once this step is achieved, the next phase is to determine how to present the material in the dictionary, including how to organize entries, write the dictionary's introduction, document citations, and list the sources and references for the linguistic material. This process concludes with the publication of the dictionary.<sup>13</sup> The participants in the Historical Dictionary of the Arabic Language adhered to these steps, ensuring the success of the project both practically and subjectively.

### **Objectives of the Historical Dictionary of the Arabic Language:**

Upon investigation, it becomes clear that the general objective of this lexicographic project is to collect Arabic words into a single work, document their origins, and trace the semantic changes they have undergone. The specific objectives include:<sup>14</sup>

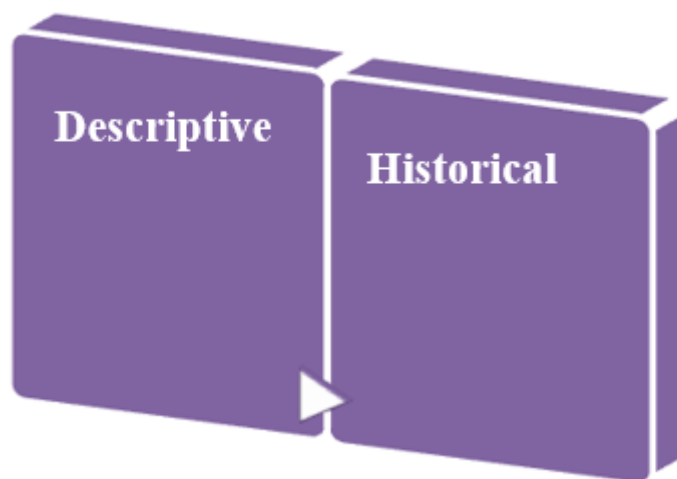
- Reviving Arab civilization through the restoration of their words and highlighting those that have been neglected.
- Determining the temporal and spatial context of Arabic words by investigating the places and times in which they originated.
- Sifting through foreign and newly coined words in Arab civilization to protect the Arabic linguistic heritage.
- Categorizing the different linguistic levels of Arabic words, including their syntactic, morphological, and rhetorical aspects.
- Addressing linguistic chaos, particularly terminological confusion based on insufficiently studied foundations.
- Targeting both the specialized researchers in Arabic linguistics and the general public.

A lexicographical work that clearly defines its general and specific objectives allows subsequent works to establish their own goals, areas of focus, and distinctive contributions, enhancing the field rather than hindering it.<sup>15</sup>

### **The Methodology for Building the Historical Dictionary of the Arabic Language:**

The idea of this monumental project has been in consideration for a long time, with several attempts presented by language academies and associations concerned with Arabic. However, one of the main obstacles that hindered progress was the issue of determining the working methodology through which potential conflicts could be addressed, especially in the period following the 2nd century AH (200 CE) and in the contemporary phase, where collecting linguistic material and determining when and where a particular Arabic word<sup>16</sup> was used became challenging. Eventually, the participants, as indicated in the introduction and on the official website of the dictionary, decided on adopting a descriptive and historical approach, while refraining from critiquing how the linguistic material was used or neglected.<sup>17</sup> Notably, the timeline for this work is open, both in terms of the citation period and the time dedicated to its development, making this project truly a national one.<sup>18</sup> It unites the entire Arabic language in a single work by documenting and dating its words, with the task of citing and verifying them. This approach imparts credibility and authority to the project.

#### **Methodology of the Historical Dictionary of the Arabic Language**



### **Writing in the Historical Dictionary of the Arabic Language (The Language):**

Like other linguistic dictionaries, the Historical Dictionary of the Arabic Language undertook the task of collecting and organizing Arabic words according to agreed-upon collection standards, then arranging them following a set of widely recognized methodological rules. The methodology for word collection and organization is detailed in the dictionary itself, as well as on its online platforms and the researchers' publications. What should be emphasized is that this project took on a broader and more extensive scope than any previous lexicographic work. It traces the history of the meaning of Arabic words, starting with their original meanings and outlining the semantic changes they have undergone, supported by trusted citations. The dictionary reveals the active, obsolete, and even extinct words in Arabic, highlighting its broad research scope in terms of time, place, and citation. After publication, the language of the dictionary is open to the past and present, presenting newly evolved meanings.

The Historical Dictionary of the Arabic Language does not merely document the history of word meanings but also includes various linguistic derivations of words and their relations to other languages through borrowing and other processes. This practice, known as etymology, is one of the dictionary's key tasks. The participants noted the importance of methodological flexibility when addressing the purity and eloquence of the Arabic language, reminding that all languages borrow from others, and it is often difficult to pinpoint the original root of a word, particularly when related languages belong to the same linguistic family.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the language of the dictionary is reliable, methodologically sound, and serves as a project for the Arab nation.



### Verified Sources Used in Building the Historical Dictionary of the Arabic Language:

The bibliography of the Historical Dictionary of the Arabic Language, which is documented in a single digital archive, reflects the reliability of the word-collection process.<sup>20</sup> It's worth noting that this approach mirrors that of Western lexicographers in creating the Oxford Dictionary. Every Arabic word was traced, and the semantic changes it underwent were tracked as far as the researchers were able to determine. This method has led to open temporal and spatial boundaries for the sources of the dictionary. Defining the time and place for any dictionary typically depends on the target audience. Since the goal of the Historical Dictionary is to document the history of the language, the sources were extended to encompass all Arabic words, which is a first in Arabic lexicography.

The sources for the dictionary include:

- The Qur'an
- The Hadith
- Poetry
- Prose
- Oral sources
- Verified texts and editions of sources

The Doha Dictionary relied on a selective method after the comprehensive approach proved impossible due to the vastness of Arabic vocabulary. In contrast, the Sharjah Dictionary adopted the first method, collecting material from primary sources and secondary ones to support or supplement the primary material when necessary.

### Primary Sources:

- Poetry
- The Qur'an
- Hadith
- Books
- Inscriptions
- Spoken Arabic

**Secondary Sources:** These include various dictionaries, both ancient and modern, as well as encyclopedias and other references.<sup>21</sup>

After publication, participants avoided unreliable citations that could distort the Arabic language and instead followed the descriptive method by documenting every Arabic word and discarding any lone citations.

### Citations in the Historical Dictionary of the Arabic Language:

The Historical Dictionary of the Arabic Language, by relying on verified citations, has greater credibility and a strong historical focus. A user browsing the dictionary or its digital citation archive will notice the clear diversity in the selected citations, with each citation corresponding to a specific era or pivotal moment in the history of the Arabic word. This stands in contrast to previous lexicographic works, which typically relied on the earliest available citation of a word. The dictionary's aim does not permit it to employ a large number of citations, but it carefully chooses only the most relevant and reliable ones, as these citations represent the word's original form and its semantic evolution. The use of a dedicated citation archive allows for greater variety and depth. Had this not been the case, the contributors would have had to rely on the text archive alone, as earlier lexicographic works did.<sup>22</sup>

This work is the first of its kind in Arabic lexicography, successfully documenting Arabic words with accuracy and precision.

### The Digitalization of the Arabic Language through the Historical Dictionary:



The digitalization of the dictionary was conducted in alignment with the scientific and technological demands of the modern era, responding to the clear shift away from printed books toward digital formats. Given the massive content of the dictionary, which contains over a billion words, the contributors turned to digitalization. This move provides a textual archive and a citation archive, both in digital formats.<sup>23</sup> The computational process overcomes the limitations of paper, offering a more compact and efficient way to store and search through the Arabic language's vast lexicon. The contributors took on a heavy responsibility due to the sheer volume of Arabic linguistic material, but drawing from Western lexicographical experiences and leveraging the technical and scientific skills of Arab professionals has made all the difference.

### **Programs Used in the Digitalization of the Historical Dictionary of the Arabic Language:**

The process of lexicography traditionally relied on manual collection and compilation for a long time. However, in the recent years of the 21st century, the automation of language processing has undergone undeniable progress, significantly reducing effort and time, especially in light of the linguistic openness experienced by many languages. This expansion has enriched languages, including Arabic, which boasts millions of words, in addition to the derivations of these words. This vast linguistic resource makes it difficult to trace words historically using traditional manual methods. As a result, lexicographers working on the Historical Dictionary of the Arabic Language shifted to automated language processing, utilizing technology to mimic the human process efficiently. Below is a list of the computer programs and applications used in the construction of the Historical Dictionary of the Arabic Language:

#### **1. Converting Paper Texts into Digital Texts:**

- Document, Portable Document Format (PDF), Hyper Text Markup Language (HTML)

#### **2. Converting Manuscripts, Inscriptions, and Similar Sources into Digital Texts:**

- Scanner, Speech to Text

#### **3. Text Formatting (Vowelization):**

- Al-Khalil Vowelization Program
- Mishkal Vowelization Program
- Sakhr Automated Vowelization Program

#### **4. Linguistic Proofreading:**

- Hansel Automated Proofreader
- Coletic Automated Proofreader

#### **5. Morphological Analysis:**

- Al-Khalil Automated Morphological Program

#### **6. Syntactic Analysis:**

- Al-Khalil Automated Part-of-Speech Tagging Program
- Stanford Part-of-Speech Tagging Program
- Amiri Program

#### **7. Automated Indexing of Texts:**

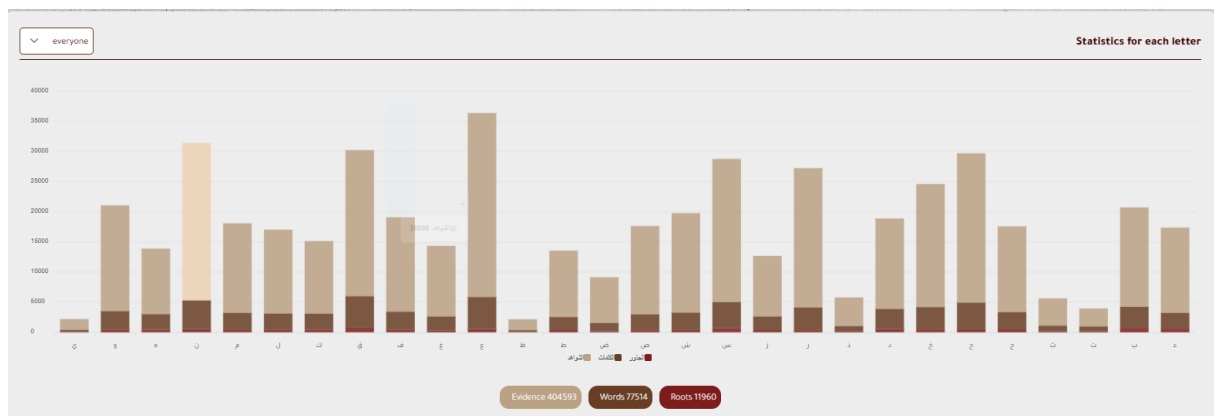
- Al-Khalil Automated Indexing Program<sup>24</sup>

The variety of computer programs and applications used in digitizing the Historical Dictionary of the Arabic Language has greatly facilitated its production in a precise and detailed form, representing a national project long awaited. Thus, technology, through its role in automating this project, has played a crucial role, enabling it to compete with historical lexicographical projects of other languages.

## Statistical Studies from the Historical Dictionary of the Arabic Language:

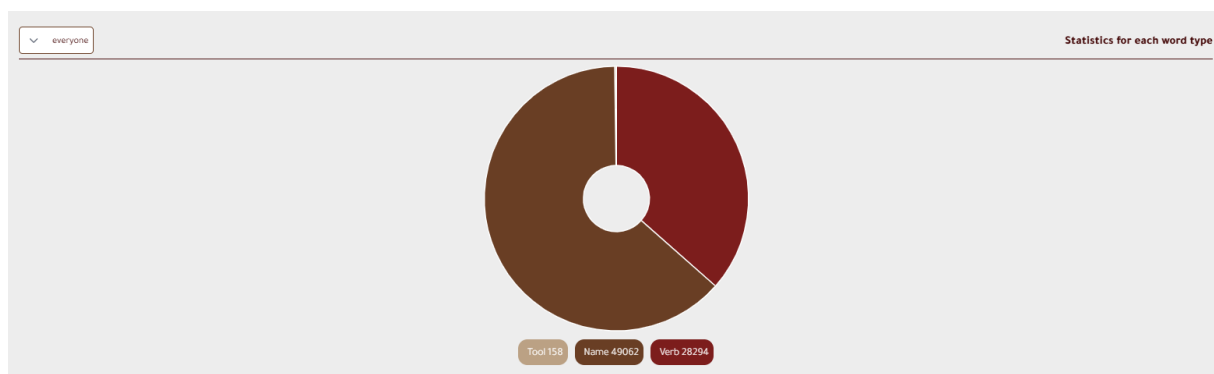
Statistical studies on the words and letters in the Historical Dictionary of the Arabic Language reveal the richness and vastness of the Arabic language, which surpasses the linguistic materials found in any other language. Below are the statistical results available on the official website of the dictionary, representing the roots, words, and citations for each Arabic letter up to April 2025. It also includes the types of words, such as nouns, verbs, and particles.

### Bar Graphs Representing the Number of Roots, Words, and Citations in Each Arabic Letter.



Source: <https://www.almojam.org/statistics>

### Pie Chart Representing Word Types (Verb, Noun, and Particle) in Arabic Letters Up to 2025.



Source: <https://www.almojam.org/statistics>

## Development Proposal for the Historical Dictionary of the Arabic Language:

The academies and contributors involved in preparing this dictionary have already published extensive volumes, but the Arab community is still waiting for more parts of the dictionary to be released and for the finalization of the project. It is essential for the Arabic language to have a resource that safeguards and promotes it. Therefore, we propose a series of practical measures to help further the work:

- **Establish True Partnerships with Experts in the Technical Field:**

A closer collaboration with technological specialists should be pursued to further automate the Arabic language, speeding up the completion of the final dictionary. This partnership could also involve international experts.

- **Designate a Company for Investment in the Dictionary:**

Create a dedicated company or group of stakeholders to financially support the dictionary and provide international scientific partnerships that can help promote and advance the project.

- **Establish a Permanent Department or University Division:**

A dedicated Arabic department, faculty, or university should continuously work on the dictionary, ensuring that all those contributing genuinely enhance its development.

### Conclusion:

This study, from tracking the development of the Historical Dictionary to proposing ways to enhance it, has demonstrated that this project—through the release of some of its parts—has managed to represent the Arabic language through its words. After centuries of the Arabic language lacking a single resource to protect its identity, the Historical Dictionary has accomplished this task. As a result, we have reached the following research findings:

- The Historical Dictionary of the Arabic Language protects the Arabic identity.
- The Historical Dictionary of the Arabic Language competes with the historical dictionaries of other languages, especially if its work is meticulously refined.
- This work is a genuine reference for researchers in Arabic linguistics, especially those in the field of Arabic lexicography.

Among the practical recommendations we propose are the following:

- Clearly define the objectives and goals of the dictionary to expedite its progress.
- Organize the collection and lexicographical placement processes with greater precision than currently practiced.
- Set a definitive timeline for its completion and announce it, ensuring adherence to this schedule.
- Take advantage of technological advancements to accelerate the completion of the dictionary by utilizing available techniques.
- Involve Arabic Master's and Ph.D. students in lexicographical research that supports this work.
- Increase efforts to seek scientific, technical, and financial support that will save time and resources for completing the dictionary.
- Promote the importance of the dictionary through continuous scientific conferences and gatherings.

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<sup>2</sup> Abdelghani Abu Al-Azm, *The Historical Linguistic Dictionary: Its Methodology and Sources*, 1st ed., Rabat, 2006, Al-Ghany Publishing House, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> August Fischer, *The Historical Linguistic Dictionary*, General Egyptian Authority for Printing, Cairo, 1st ed., 1967, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Ali Al-Qasimi, *Terminology Science*, 1st ed., Lebanon, 2003, Lebanon Publishers Library, p. 705.

<sup>5</sup> A Group of Authors, *Towards a Historical Dictionary of the Arabic Language*, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 1st ed., Beirut, Lebanon, 2014, p. 45.

<sup>6</sup> Ihsan Al-Nass, *The Historical Dictionary of the Arabic Language: Journey and History*, *Arabic Language Academy Journal*, Damascus, Vol. 72, Part 1, p. 7-8.

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<sup>8</sup> Mohamed Hassan Abdel Aziz, *The Historical Dictionary of the Arabic Language: Sources and Models*, 1st ed., Cairo, 2008, Dar Al-Salam for Printing and Publishing, p. 42.

<sup>9</sup> A Group of Authors, *Towards a Historical Dictionary of the Arabic Language*, Previous Reference, p. 20, 21.

<sup>10</sup> Issa Barhouma, *Memory of Meaning: A Study of Arabic Dictionaries*, 1st ed., Arab Studies and Publishing Institute, 2005, Beirut, Lebanon.

<sup>11</sup> A Group of Authors, *Towards a Historical Dictionary of the Arabic Language*, Previous Reference, p. 27.

<sup>12</sup> Ibn Manzur, *Lisan Al-Arab*, Dar Sader, Beirut, 1968.

<sup>13</sup> Raga'a Hamad Sunkal, Murooj Ghani Jabar, *Dr. Ali Al-Qasimi's Efforts in Historical Lexicography Methodology (Through His Membership in the Scientific Committees of the Doha and Sharjah Arabic Historical Dictionary Projects)*, *Al-Adab Journal*, Issue 149, 2024, p. 125.

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