

## A Review Study: Critique and Review of Izutsu's Qur'anic Semantic Methodology

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### ABSTRACT

*Lexical structural semantics is a branch of semantics that Izutsu applied to the Qur'anic domain using a diachronic approach based on the semantic theories of Leo Weisgerber and ethnolinguistics. In his Qur'anic semantics, Izutsu introduced a novel perspective on the conceptual and lexical studies of the Qur'an. Notably, his discussions on mapping semantic networks and concepts have significantly contributed to presenting a cohesive picture of Qur'anic concepts and vocabulary. The systematization of semantic studies in the Qur'an and the provision of a diachronic perspective in lexical studies can be considered among the major achievements of Izutsu's semantic method. However, alongside the strengths of this method, its weaknesses must also be addressed. Izutsu's ethnolinguistic semantics, due to its reliance on the extreme form of the linguistic relativity hypothesis (or the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis), has faced serious criticisms. These include an excessive emphasis on the role of language in thought and an overly ethnocentric analysis of linguistic topics. Furthermore, Izutsu's Qur'anic semantic method requires further scientific investigation in certain foundational aspects, such as the formation of semantic fields. This article, using a descriptive method, seeks to examine Izutsu's semantic method and critique its foundations in this field, aiming to facilitate a more effective utilization of semantics.*

**KEYWORDS:** Qur'an, Ethnolinguistic Semantics, Izutsu, Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis.

### 1. Introduction

The necessity of semantic studies in the field of Quranic research, as a new horizon in Quranic studies, is undeniable. These studies, driven by the need to modernize Quranic research, have attracted the attention of Quranic scholars in various branches of this domain. The pioneer of this approach was Toshihiko Izutsu's work on Quranic semantics, which introduced a model of structural lexical semantics to Quranic studies for the first time. His proposed method was widely welcomed by Quranic researchers, leading to numerous works based on this approach in the Islamic world.

Izutsu elaborated on his semantic method in two of his significant books, *God and Man in the Qur'an* and *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an*. He emphasized that this method was not his personal invention but a combination of Weisgerber's theories and ethnolinguistics (Izutsu, 2003, p. 5). Ethnolinguistics was introduced by Edward Sapir, an American linguist and anthropologist, and later expanded by his student Benjamin Whorf. These theories became known as the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis or the linguistic relativity hypothesis (Crystal, 1992: 342; Yule, 2022, p. 3).

Using Weisgerber's theories and the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, Izutsu offered an innovative approach to semantics that gained a special status in the study of Quranic concepts and vocabulary. This approach, as a framework for explaining meanings within the Quranic text, has provided Quranic scholars with a useful tool for understanding semantic structures.

## 2-Izutsu's Theoretical Foundations in Semantics

Izutsu does not view semantics as a uniform and organized scientific discipline due to the diversity of existing theories and their lack of consistency. Based on this perspective, he sought to present his own view of semantics. Izutsu defines semantics as the investigative study of the key words of a language, which leads to the identification and understanding of a nation's worldview. In this approach, semantics is not merely a tool for communication but a means of portraying and interpreting the worldview surrounding a particular group of people.

Accordingly, Izutsu defines semantics as "*the science of investigating the nature and structure of a nation's worldview in a specific period of history, carried out through the methodological analysis of key cultural concepts and ideas that the nation has developed, which are crystallized in the key words of their language*" (Izutsu, 2003, p. 4).

From Izutsu's perspective, the term "Quranic semantics" refers to the worldview of the Quran—its particular perspective on the world.

Izutsu devoted significant effort to developing Quranic semantics. His intellectual journey included learning Arabic, translating the Quran, residing in Islamic countries, and engaging with Muslim scholars. After achieving a deep understanding of Quranic concepts, he studied pre-Islamic Arabic literature to identify the Quran's key words and fundamental concepts and analyze their transformation after Islam.

The results of his studies include the publication of *The Structure of Ethical Terms in the Quran* in 1953 in Japan, which underwent a complete revision and was republished in 1966 under the title *The Semantic Structure of Ethical and Religious Concepts in the Quran* (Izutsu, 2003, p. 3-5). This revision was influenced by his earlier work, *God and Man in the Quran*, published in 1964.

Izutsu's revised version of *The Semantic Structure of Ethical and Religious Concepts in the Quran* reflects his methodological approach to Quranic semantics, as detailed in *God and Man in the Quran*. His semantic theories, as articulated in the latter, significantly influenced the second edition of his earlier work, demonstrating the interrelation between his works on Quranic studies (*Ibid*, p. 315-316).

Izutsu explicitly stated that his semantic method is based on the theories of Leo Weisgerber and ethno-linguistics, which align in many respects with Humboldt's philosophy of language and the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Weisgerber, for instance, presented the concept of "temporal worldview" in a unique framework, forming the basis of a school of thought in post-World War II German linguistics.

Izutsu's works in semantics—especially in his first book, *The Structure of Ethical Terms in the Quran*—are closely tied to theories of moral language and structural semantics. His analyses demonstrate how Quranic ethics and human concepts align with the broader philosophical and linguistic traditions he engaged with. (Ismail, 2012, p.8).

## 3-Existence of a Linguistic System

According to structural semantics, language is considered to have a system, and semantic analysis is valid at the level of the units within this system. (Geeraerts, 2014, p. 20-21). Izutsu also emphasizes the existence of a linguistic system and seeks to outline the linguistic system within the Qur'anic context. According to his view, words in a language form an interconnected network or system (Izutsu, 2003, p. 22).

Based on Sapir's view, which Izutsu cites, every system or device has a fundamental map or method that governs it. To obtain this fundamental map, one must explore the underlying structural nature and the essence of the entire system. Regarding the Qur'an, achieving this structural essence and its method is what the semanticist must focus on (Ibid, p. 36). According to this perspective, understanding a language depends on identifying its semantic system, which is manifested in the form of semantic fields that become crystallized over time.

Izutsu's approach indicates that linguistic understanding is deeply tied to uncovering the underlying system of meaning that governs the use of words and their relationships within a language, particularly in the Qur'anic context.

#### 4-Quranic Semantic Fields

Izutsu's theory of Quranic semantic fields is derived from Weisgerber's theory of semantic domains. This theory suggests that language occupies an intermediary level between the mind and the external world, providing a conceptual framework known as the lexical domain or semantic field. According to this perspective, the external world consists of objects and events within the material realm, while language mediates between this world and the mental realities and concepts we form about it. Therefore, a lexical domain contains a set of lexemes that are semantically interrelated and interconnected. Together, these meanings shape the conceptual structure of a specific range of external realities (Lyons, 1981, p. 250; Geuerts, 2014, p. 20-21).

Weisgerber's semantic field theory emphasizes a diachronic and deep connection between language, culture, and thought. Izutsu applies this approach to shape semantic fields based on key words. He divides Arabic vocabulary into two types—**relational words** and **essential words**—to construct semantic fields. The core of a semantic field is formed by essential words.

Izutsu identifies three levels of semantics in the context of Classical Arabic:

##### 1. Pre-Qur'anic or Jahili (Pre-Islamic Era)

At this level, he describes three distinct categories of vocabulary reflecting different worldviews:

- Purely Nomadic Vocabulary: This set represents the oldest and most prominent worldview of Arab desert life, characterized by the harsh and simple lifestyle of the Bedouins.
- Commercial Vocabulary: This category is closely related to the primary nomadic vocabulary and evolved from it. It was predominantly used in Mecca and reflects the unique spirit and worldview shaped by the expansion of Mecca's commercial economy. The terms and ideas specific to Meccan merchants became notably integrated into this vocabulary.
- Judeo-Christian Vocabulary: This includes terms commonly used among the Jewish and Christian communities residing in Arabia. It also encompasses certain theological terms from the Hanif tradition, offering a more complex and refined vocabulary.

##### 2. Qur'anic Vocabulary

According to Bronson's view, the Qur'anic vocabulary linguistically represents a mixture of these three categories, which are freely reflected within its semantic structure. In other words, the vocabulary of the Qur'an encompasses a wide semantic field, presenting an organized system where terms—despite originating from diverse sources—are harmonized into a coherent and systematic framework.

### 3. Post-Qur'anic, Especially Abbasid Era

Izutsu highlights the semantic evolution in the Arabic language during the Abbasid period, shaped significantly by the cultural and intellectual developments of the time.

To define a semantic field in Quranic studies, Izutsu outlines the following principles:

1. Lexical Interconnectedness: Words in a language form a network of interlinked concepts.
2. Core Vocabulary: The primary structure of this network is built around key words of particular significance.
3. Unequal Conceptual Contribution: Not all lexical items within a field contribute equally to the conceptual framework.
4. Key Quranic Terms: Certain words play a decisive role in shaping the Quranic worldview, such as *Allah*, *Islam*, *faith*, *prophecy*, and *messenger*. These are referred to as Quranic key terms.
5. Extracting Key Terms: The most important and challenging task in Quranic semantics is identifying the Quran's key terms from its vocabulary.
6. Semantic Fields as Conceptual Domains: Key words define a semantic field, with each field representing an independent conceptual domain similar in nature to the words it encompasses.
7. Multiplicity of Fields: A single word may belong to multiple semantic fields.

Comparing pre-Islamic and Quranic systems highlights how historical processes have influenced the development of thought and cultural life. This comparative analysis is essential for understanding the evolution of meaning and the Quranic conceptual system (*Izutsu, 2003, p. 22-26*).

By applying these principles, Izutsu provides a method to reveal the interconnectedness of Quranic concepts and their relation to historical and cultural contexts. This method underscores the dynamic interplay between language and worldview in Quranic semantics.

8- Due to the precedence of the vocabulary in pre-Islamic poetry over that of the Quran, referring to the pre-Islamic system clarifies the fundamental meanings of certain key Quranic terms. Consequently, Izutsu consistently relies on this system in his analysis of Quranic vocabulary. The comparison between these two systems sheds light on the influence of history on the thought and cultural life of a community and its transformations (*Ibid, 2003, p. 26*).

### 5-Izutsu and the Hypothesis of Linguistic Relativity

As previously mentioned, Izutsu's foundation in semantics aligns with the hypothesis of Sapir and Whorf. Izutsu, in explaining his method, refers to the views and perspectives of Sapir and Whorf. He considers the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis to be effective to the extent that it regards semantics as a cultural science. Izutsu (2003, p. 36) views the role of language as so significant that he does not consider semantic analysis to be a formal structural analysis of a word or its etymological meaning. Instead, he perceives semantic analysis as a cultural discipline.

He based on the linguistic relativity hypothesis, seeks to achieve a semantic worldview. The analysis of fundamental and relative elements of a key word must be conducted in such a way that, if truly successful, the combination of the two aspects of a word's meaning brings a specific dimension into clarity. This dimension should highlight a prominent feature of that culture as it was or is, consciously experienced by those who belonged to it. Ultimately, if it becomes possible to reach this final stage, all analyses conducted should contribute to the reconstruction of the entire cultural structure as it genuinely existed in the minds of those connected to it. This is what I call the semantic worldview (*Izutsu, 2003, p. 21*).

Considering the criticisms directed at both the strong and weak forms of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, defending this hypothesis is challenging, and it is equally difficult to fully defend Izutsu's theory in this area. The objections raised against the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis also apply to Izutsu's views. Izutsu establishes a strong relationship between language and culture, viewing the formation of linguistic concepts as heavily influenced by ethnic culture. Based on this perspective, he grounds his analysis and studies in the Qur'anic domain. Thus, the strong form of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is evident in his assertions and analyses, and he frequently references and bases his framework on it throughout his works.

## 6- Review and Critique

The criticisms of Izutsu's method are presented in several aspects:

- Lack of a clear criterion for selecting key words, Izutsu himself has acknowledged this by stating that the selection of key words is subjective and influenced by the researcher's personal judgment. (Izutsu, 1361, p. 22). Based on this, there will be no systematic framework for selecting and analyzing words, which leads to a kind of scientific disorder. Any research, even under the same title, will not result in identical outcomes, and a common language for semantic studies cannot be established. This issue is evident in semantic studies conducted based on Izutsu's method. In such studies, the selection of key words is left to the researcher, and due to the variety of personal preferences.
- Methodology for Accessing the Semantic Field, The selection of Qur'anic vocabulary is subjective. In addition to the subjectivity involved in choosing words, Izutsu does not provide a method for arranging these words together to form a semantic field. For this reason, researchers create these fields according to their own preferences, which opens the possibility of deriving different semantic fields for a single word.
- According to Izutsu, relative meaning is tied to the concept of culture, and this aspect of his argument can be explained through the hypothesis of linguistic relativity. In fact, alongside semantics, we also need to examine the relationship between culture and vocabulary. First, where does this relationship originate?  
Second, through what process can relative meaning be accessed?

Izutsu's writings do not offer a practical methodology for this purpose. Thus, achieving meaning involves examining the culture of a particular group, a task that the researchers will address in their study.

### • Diachronic Study and Semantic Fields

The diachronic study of semantic fields allows for the examination of the evolution of lexical units over time, leading to what can be considered a historical semantics. A significant portion of Weissgerber's work was focused on diachronic analysis, with little attention given to synchronic studies (Safawi, 1379, p. 196). Similarly, Izutsu based much of his work on the diachronic study of the Qur'anic semantic fields. However, a critique of Izutsu's approach is his failure to fully adhere to diachronic methods in his book *The Semantic Structure of Religious-Ethical Terms in the Qur'an*. In this book, Izutsu occasionally incorporates elements of synchronic analysis (Izutsu, 2003, p. 148-222), even though he initially emphasizes that his work is grounded in the diachronic approach of Weissgerber. Additionally, the diachronic method is not universally acceptable. A diachronic approach, while valuable, must be integrated with a synchronic approach, as both methods must engage with the interdependent elements of a language system. According to Lyons (1981, p. 261-264), a diachronic study should not operate in isolation from synchronic elements. While Izutsu's focus is predominantly diachronic, parts of his study rely on synchronic analysis,

which contradicts his initial premise that his semantic analysis is based solely on a diachronic framework. Thus, his semantic studies do not fully align with his stated methodological approach.

## Conclusion

1. Semantic methodology, effective as an approach in Qur'anic studies, would hardly operate by itself in bringing the very systematizing of those studies. The forerunner in this field has been Izutsu, who derived his semantic discussions largely from Weisgerber's semantic theory and ethnolinguistics.
2. In accordance with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, language influences perception, thought, and worldview. Each language around the world has its own different representation in external reality that speakers will internalize and picture the world in that way in what the linguistics or words define.
3. Conditions for the methodological foundations of Izutsu's semantic approach include the reciprocal relationship between language, thought and worldview; the existence of linguistic systems and their semantic fields; and a diachronic study.
4. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis-the weak and the strong-which argues for the relationship between language and thought, is what Izutsu wields. Strong version states that language creates and determines thought, while weak one speaks of the influence of language on thought and cognition. The strong version faces many criticisms, such as that found in the research of Steven Pinker, who maintains that language and thought are independent phenomena. Further, Whorfian evidence has been challenged: for example, one charge against him is that he never came into contact with real Native Americans; thus, his evaluations are considered untrustworthy. The weak version of the hypothesis has been examined in cross-cultural studies of color perception, leading to the conclusion that despite the linguistic differences in color terms, there are universal categories for colors that are not influenced by language.
5. According to Izutsu, on the basis of a linguistic worldview concerning ethnicity, there is a Qur'anic worldview that construes as limited by the definition of that view the universal message of the Qur'an to the Arab cultural and linguistic context of its time, portraying the culture and worldview of this period without surpassing it.
6. The semantic field theory of Izutsu is dependent on the semantic domains theory of Weisgerber. Critics of Izutsu's semantic fields are: absence of clear origin-considering criteria for accepting key terms; relative linkages of meanings to culture-aspects of language issues-aine with linguistic relativity; and lack of evidence on the existence of three-worldview structure in pre-Islamic or Jahili Arabic.

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