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**Morphological and Syntactic Semantics of Lexical Polysemy in the Quran  
using 'Fitna' as a Case Study**

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**Abstract**

This study examines the lexical polysemy of the Arabic term *Fitna* in the Quran, emphasizing morphological and syntactic analysis. Using *Fitna* as a case study, we demonstrate how specific grammatical forms and syntactic positions signal distinct meanings such as trial, persecution, temptation, discord, and punishment. Through classical lexicons and Quranic verses, this research concludes that diverse meanings of *Fitna* share the common concept of testing or affliction. The findings highlight the importance of linguistic context in ensuring accurate Quranic interpretation in exegesis.

**Keywords:** Lexical Polysemy; Quranic Semantics; Morphological analysis; Syntactic analysis

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**1.0 Introduction**

The Quran is highly regarded for its linguistic precision and complexity, prominently reflected through its use of lexical polysemy, whereby a single term can carry multiple context-specific meanings. Although polysemy enriches the semantic and interpretive depth of the Quranic discourse, it simultaneously introduces significant interpretive challenges. Classical Islamic scholars have long documented this linguistic phenomenon through detailed compilations known as *Wujūh Wal-Nazā'ir* (literally, "aspects and counterparts"), cataloging terms such as *Ummah* (community/nation) and *ayat* ("sign/verse") along with their variant contextual meanings. These foundational works consistently emphasize the crucial role of linguistic context, particularly morphological and syntactic cues, in accurately determining the intended meaning.

Recent scholarship further expands upon these classical foundations by addressing unresolved issues and introducing contemporary methodologies in Quranic linguistic analysis. For instance, Al-Jallad (2020) emphasizes a morphological approach to disambiguating polysemous terms in the Quran, underscoring that subtle morphological variations significantly influence semantic interpretation. Similarly, Alhawary and Almahri (2021) advocate the integration of syntactic analysis, highlighting how sentence structure and syntactic positioning function as reliable indicators for resolving lexical ambiguities in Quranic Arabic. Furthermore, Suleiman and

Mohamed (2022) conducted a corpus-based linguistic analysis of key polysemous terms, demonstrating that context-driven approaches effectively minimize interpretive discrepancies, especially critical in Quranic exegesis (tafsir) and translation.

Building upon these contemporary insights, the present study specifically analyzes the term *Fitna* (فتنة), systematically exploring how morphological form and syntactic constructions employed by the Quran precisely guide the reader toward the correct semantic interpretation, thereby resolving polysemous ambiguity.

### 1.1 Problem Statement and Objectives

Interpreting polysemous terms in the Quran requires examining morphological and syntactic indicators. Although classical scholars acknowledged context as important, detailed linguistic analyses remain limited. This study aims to clearly define lexical polysemy based on classical and contemporary scholarship, examine the various meanings of the term *Fitna* in the Quran using authoritative sources, and identify the morphological and syntactic features that indicate its specific interpretations.

## 2.0 Literature Review

Lexical polysemy refers to the linguistic phenomenon wherein a single word carries multiple related meanings depending on the context, distinct from homonymy, which involves unrelated meanings. Classical Arabic linguists such as Ibn Jinnī and ‘Abd al-Qāhīr al-Jurjānī recognized the interpretive significance of polysemy early on, emphasizing grammatical context as a key factor for accurate semantic interpretation. The classical Islamic scholarly tradition documented polysemous Quranic terms systematically through the genre known as *Wujūh wal-Nazā’ir*. Pioneered by Muqātil ibn Sulaymān and expanded upon by scholars like Ibn al-Jawzī and al-Damaghānī, these classical lexicons illustrate how polysemy was carefully resolved by examining contextual usage.

In contemporary scholarship, lexical polysemy poses significant challenges, particularly within Quranic translation studies. Rostami and HajiAbadi (2010), for instance, highlight serious translation errors that result when translators neglect the nuanced context of polysemous terms such as *fitna*. Empirical analyses by Kembaren et al. (2024) and Chtaoui and Lachgar (2025) further underscore the variation in how translators handle polysemous terms, calling for standardized, context-sensitive translation approaches. Recent linguistic studies have proposed structured morphological and syntactic analyses to disambiguate polysemous Quranic words systematically. Alturki (2025) recommends qualitative morphological and syntactic examination as foundational for accurate translation, advocating that attention to grammatical cues significantly aids semantic interpretation.

Linguistically, the root F-T-N (فتن) in Arabic carries a primary sense of “to test, especially by fire.” Classical lexicons define *Fitna* in its original usage as the process of assaying metals by heating, to distinguish pure metal from dross. From this literal meaning of burning as a trial, the term evolved metaphorically to encompass various kinds of tests and afflictions – whether spiritual, social, or physical. Ibn Fāris (d. 395 AH) in *Maqāyīs al-Lughah* confirms that *fa-ta-na* fundamentally denotes testing or trial. Over time, *fitna* acquired multiple related meanings: trial, temptation, persecution, discord, punishment, and even excuse or deception. Crucially, these diverse meanings share the notion of *being put to the test*. What differs is the context and form in which *fitna* appears. As this literature review has shown, both classical scholars and modern researchers stress that context (supported by linguistic markers) is the key to unlocking which meaning is intended in each verse. Building on these insights, our study will analyze the occurrences of *fitna* in the Quran to illustrate exactly how morphology and syntax guide interpretation.

Despite these advancements, a research gap remains: relatively few studies explicitly link each semantic variant of Quranic polysemous words to distinct morpho-syntactic features. Addressing this gap, the present study focuses specifically on the Quranic term *Fitna* (فتنة). Building upon classical lexicographical traditions and contemporary linguistic methodologies, this research aims to demonstrate systematically how morphological form and syntactic contexts precisely determine the intended meaning of *fitna* across different Quranic instances. By doing so, this study seeks to offer both theoretical insights and practical guidelines for improved accuracy in Quranic interpretation and translation.

## 3.0 Methodology

This research employs a descriptive-analytical approach that integrates classical Arabic linguistic methodologies with contextual exegesis of Quranic verses, focusing specifically on the polysemous term *Fitna* (فتنة). Initially, a comprehensive compilation of Quranic verses containing *fitna* and its morphological derivatives—such as the verb (*fatana*), passive form (*futinu*), plural form (*fitan*), and participles (*maftūn*)—was conducted using concordances and digital search tools, ensuring the analysis encompassed all relevant textual instances. Lexical meanings of *fitna* were established through consultation with authoritative classical Arabic lexicons, particularly *Lisān al-‘Arab* by Ibn Manẓūr and *Tahdhīb al-Lughah* by al-Azhari, confirming diverse meanings like trial, affliction, seduction, discord, and punishment, all linked semantically to the core concept of testing or trial.

Subsequently, each collected verse underwent rigorous contextual, morphological, and syntactic analysis. The contextual analysis involved evaluating immediate textual surroundings, thematic narratives, and historical circumstances of revelation, further enriched by consulting classical exegeses, especially those by Al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr, to confirm traditional scholarly interpretations. Morphological and syntactic analyses systematically identified the grammatical form (noun, verb, definite/indefinite) and syntactic roles (subject, object, or predicate) of *fitna*, enabling the prediction of intended meanings even before referencing classical commentaries. Findings derived from linguistic analysis were then validated against classical and contemporary scholarship, confirming consistency across

methodologies and strengthening interpretative reliability. This integrated methodological approach provided clarity on how specific morpho-syntactic contexts decisively guide the semantic interpretation of *fitna* in diverse Quranic passages.

#### 4.0 Analysis of the Word “Fitna” in the Quran (Morphological & Syntactic Perspectives)

In the Quran, the term *Fitna* (Arabic: فِتْنَة) and its root derivatives are used in a wide spectrum of meanings, all revolving around the core concept of *trial, affliction or disruption*. An authoritative summary lists the following senses of *fitna* attested in the Quran: (1) testing and trial, (2) persecution and oppression, (3) shirk (idolatry) or kufr (disbelief), (4) *Discord/Chaos (Social Disorder)*, (5) *Punishment (Especially by Fire)*, (6) *Excuse/Trial (as in Pretext)*. To structure this analysis, we discuss the key meanings of *fitna* in turn, providing examples of Quranic verses (in Arabic, with relevant translation or explanation) and highlighting the morphological form of *fitna* and its syntactic role in each example. We then comment on how these linguistic factors contribute to semantic interpretation.

##### 4.1 *Fitna as General Affliction or Test of Faith*

One of the most frequent usages of *fitna* in the Quran is to signify a general test or trial, often one that God imposes to prove or reveal the faith of people. This meaning aligns closely with the root definition of “assaying by fire.” Morphologically, such instances usually involve *fitna* in verbal form or in indefinite noun form, indicating an unspecified trial. Syntactically, the term often appears in contexts of divine testing or passive scenarios (people “being subjected” to *fitna*).

For example, in Surah Al-Ankabūt (29:2):

أَحْسِبَ النَّاسُ أَنْ يُتْرَكُوا أَنْ يَقُولُوا آمَنَّا وَهُمْ لَا يُفْتَنُونَ

“Do people think they will be left alone to say ‘We believe’ without being tested?”

Here, *yuftanūn* (يُفْتَنُونَ) is a passive verb, imperfect tense, meaning “they are put to *fitna*”. Morphologically, the passive voice indicates the subject (people) are receiving the action – being tested – without naming the tester (implicitly, God). The syntactic context – a rhetorical question about believers expecting to avoid trials – makes it clear that *fitna* refers to tests of faith. The use of the passive voice is significant: it generalizes the statement to any test that might come, and in Arabic, passives often imply divine action when no agent is mentioned. The verse thus strongly conveys the doctrine that believers will inevitably face trials as part of God’s plan to distinguish the truth from the false. Because *fitna* here is indefinite (not *al-*), it denotes trials in a broad sense, not one specific trial. Many translators render *la yuftanūn* as “without being put to trial,” reflecting this general meaning.

Whenever *Fitna* denotes a general test or affliction, it tends to appear as an indefinite noun or in verb form, without the definite article, and often in passive or predicative constructions. These grammatical features signal that the *fitna* in question is not a single specific event but any ordeal that tests one’s mettle or faith. The underlying semantic of “test” is arguably the umbrella concept uniting all other meanings – every *fitna* in the Quran is a trial of some sort, though the specific nature of the trial varies by context.

##### 4.2 *Fitna as Persecution / Oppression in Religion*

In the Quran, the term *fitna* is frequently used in contexts that describe persecution or religious oppression, especially related to issues of religious freedom and conflicts faced by the early Muslim community. Morphologically, this usage typically involves the definite form (*al-fitnah*), signifying a specific, recognized form of severe trial. Classical commentators such as Al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr have explicitly associated this usage of *fitna* with forced polytheism (*shirk*) and the systematic persecution inflicted upon Muslims to coerce them into renouncing their faith. Syntactically, verses employing this meaning often place *al-fitnah* prominently, either as a subject or direct object in statements related to conflict or prohibitions against persecution, thereby emphasizing the seriousness of this condition and the necessity of ending it.

A representative example is found in Surah Al-Baqarah (2:191–193), which authorizes Muslims to defend themselves from oppression: “Fight them until there is no more *fitna*, and worship is dedicated solely to God alone.” In verse 2:191 specifically—“الْفِتْنَةُ أَكْبَرُ مِنَ الْقَتْلِ” (Persecution is worse than killing)—the term *al-fitnah* is explicitly interpreted by classical exegetes as referring to religious persecution and coercive pressure towards polytheism. Grammatically, the definite form and syntactic prominence of *al-fitnah* in an emphatic nominal structure underline its severity, illustrating persecution as even more harmful than physical violence. Consequently, linguistic markers and contextual evidence within the Quranic text consistently clarify that when associated with conflict, *fitna* specifically indicates religious persecution or oppressive conditions that threaten the believers’ faith more gravely than warfare itself.

##### 4.3 *Fitna as Unbelief or Shirk*

Closely related to the above is the use of *fitna* to mean outright unbelief or apostasy, essentially the result of severe temptation or pressure in faith. In some exegetical interpretations, *fitna* is almost synonymous with *shirk* (polytheism) in certain verses. For instance, the phrase “والْفِتْنَةُ أَكْبَرُ مِنَ الْقَتْلِ” in Quran 2:217 (like 2:191) is taken to mean “and idolatry (or trying to force someone into idolatry) is worse than killing.” Here, *fitna* is directly glossed as *shirk* by many commentators. The context of 2:217 is a question about the sacred months and fighting; the Quran responds that preventing people from the path of Allah and disbelieving in Him (which are aspects of *fitna*) is a greater sin than fighting in the sacred month. Morphologically, again, *al-fitna* is used, signaling a known evil (the pagan practices imposed on believers).

The key observation is that when *fitna* denotes unbelief, it is typically in contexts emphasizing its gravity as a spiritual affliction. Often, it is something inflicted or feared (beware lest *fitna* strikes you) that implies loss of guidance. Morphologically, it doesn't have a unique form but relies on context and often appears in association with words like *kufr* (disbelief) or *ḍalāl* (misguidance). In translations, these instances might render *fitna* as "trial" or "discord" but footnotes or tafsir clarify that *trial* in these verses specifically means a trial that leads to unbelief.

#### 4.4 *Fitna as Temptation*

The Quran also uses derivatives of *fitna* in the sense of tempting, luring, or seducing someone (often away from the right path). For example, in the story of Adam and Iblis, Surah Al-A'rāf (7:27) says: "O Children of Adam, do not let Satan tempt/seduce you (لَا يُفْتِنَنَّكُمْ) (الشَّيْطَانُ) as he removed your parents from the Garden....". Here, the verb *la yafṭinannakum* (with an emphatic nun) is form I verb in jussive: "Let him not put you to *fitna*," meaning let him not cause you to fall into temptation. Morphologically, this is an active verb form of the root, and syntactically it is in a negative imperative construction. The use of *fitna* in this context means *temptation that leads to downfall*.

These examples show *fitna* as an *active seduction or enticement* that leads one astray. Morphologically, the active verb form (*fatana*, *yafṭinu*) often carries this meaning of *to tempt or to cause to fall into trial*. The participle *maftūn* (tempted one) indicates the result of having been tempted – often understood as possessed or crazed. In translations, verbs like *fatana* in these contexts are rendered "to tempt, allure, seduce," and *maftūn* as "bewitched/insane." This again underscores the flexible nuance of the root: from the perspective of the seducer, it is a deliberate act of causing *fitna*; from the victim's perspective, it is being in a state of *fitna* (trouble/confusion).

#### 4.5 *Fitna as Social Chaos*

Beyond individual temptation, *fitna* can describe broader social discord, turmoil or civil strife. In later Islamic history, as noted, the term *fitna* became a label for civil wars. In the Quran, an example can be inferred in verses like Surah Al-Tawbah (9:47) which says about hypocrites: "Had they gone out among you, they would have added nothing, but confusion (*fitna*) and they would have hurried about in your midst spreading dissension...." (paraphrase). Here *fitna* (often translated as chaos or disorder) is attributed to the hypocrites' potential influence on the Muslim ranks. Morphologically, it is an indefinite noun, and syntactically it is the object of the verb "to increase" (they would increase you in nothing but *fitna*). The meaning is *internal trouble or discord*. Another verse, Surah Al-Tawbah (9:48), continues: "Indeed they had sought *fitna* (discord) before and upset matters for you....".

In these cases, *fitna* refers to the actions that cause community-wide upheaval or conflict. It is not a God-sent trial per se, but rather the mischief caused by malicious actors. Notably, the form is singular but can be considered a collective concept (disorder in general). The context (hypocrites, social destabilization) guides the meaning.

Therefore, *fitna* as social chaos is usually discerned by context – often political or group contexts – and by verbs meaning *to cause or seek* (as in "they sought *fitna*"). The translation might use words like *turmoil*, *sedition*, *chaos*, *dissension*. This meaning connects back to the root idea of testing: a societal *fitna* is a trial for the community's unity and resolve.

#### 4.6 *Fitna - Punishment (Especially by Fire)*

The Quran also uses *fitna* in contexts meaning punishment, in particular divine punishment either in this world or the hereafter. This sometimes overlaps with the "test" meaning, since a punishment itself tests those who receive it. But some verses point to *fitna* as *retribution*. One explicit example is in Surah Al-Dhāriyāt (51:13-14): "[It will be] the Day they are tormented over the Fire (*yufṭanūna* عَلَى النَّارِ) [and will be told], 'Taste your *fitna* – this is what you used to hasten.'". In 51:13, *yufṭanūna 'ala al-nār* means "they will be burned on the Fire," using the passive form of *fatana* to specifically mean burn (consistent with the root meaning of heating metal). Then, in 51:14, it says "*dhuqū fitnatakum*" – "Taste your *fitna*." Here, *fitna* is referring to the *punishment* (the Fire) itself.

Classical scholars explain *fitnatakum* in this verse as "your trial" meaning *the punishment you earned or the consequences of your misdeeds*. Morphologically, it is a possessive construction (your *fitna*), which personalizes the punishment to the addressees. Syntactically, it is the object of "taste," which in Arabic idiomatically means "experience (something unpleasant)." The use of *fitna* here harks back to the root's literal sense of burning, as Al-Azhari noted that "*they will be tried (yufṭanūna) over the Fire* which means they will be burnt. Thus, *fitna* in these verses = burning torment as a test/punishment.

In summary, when *fitna* is used in the sense of punishment, it often appears in possessive or directive clauses ("taste your *fitna*!" or "beware of *fitna*!") and is closely linked with the idea of *burning or severe suffering*. Translation and interpretation in these cases often explicitly use "*punishment*". The morphological clue in 51:13 of the verb *yufṭanūn* (passive) directly told us it was about being burned, which helped confirm that *fitna* in 51:14 was the result of that – hence punishment by fire.

Table 1

Meaning of <i>fitna</i>	Example Verse (approximate translation)	Morpho-syntactic clue
Trial/Test (general)	"...they will not be tested (يُفْتَنُونَ)?" (29:2)	verb (passive) – general, indefinite trial
Persecution in religion (shirk)	"Persecution (al- <i>fitnah</i> ) is worse than killing." (2:191)	definite noun – specific known trial (idolatry)
Discord/Mischief (social)	"They would have only increased you in confusion ( <i>fitna</i> )..." (9:47)	object of verb – causing chaos
Temptation/Seduction	"Let not Satan tempt you (يُفْتِنَنَّكُمْ)...." (7:27)	verb (active) – Satan as subject, negative imperative
Punishment (by fire)	"Taste your torment ( <i>fitnatakum</i> )!" (51:14)	possessive noun – the punishment you earned
Insanity (being "afflicted")	"...which of you is <i>maftūn</i> (afflicted/mad)." (68:6)	passive participle – one who is led astray/mad

*Fitna operates in different realms of meaning with the language guiding the interpretation*

## 5.0 Findings and Discussion

The findings reveal that the various meanings of *fitna* consistently revolve around a central semantic theme of trial or testing, confirming the unified conceptual core inherent in this polysemous term. Morphologically, distinct linguistic patterns emerged clearly: definite form (*al-fitnah*) predominantly denotes specific types of trial or persecution, whereas indefinite and plural forms convey general or broader tests. Additionally, participial forms such as *maftūn* explicitly indicate conditions of personal affliction or states of temptation. Syntactically, the analysis demonstrates how grammatical structures effectively resolve semantic ambiguity; passive constructions frequently signify trials externally imposed upon individuals, while active form reflects deliberate acts of temptation or persecution. These linguistic findings closely align with classical exegesis, reinforcing traditional interpretations and underscoring the precision and intentionality of the Quran's linguistic choices.

These results extend beyond immediate linguistic interpretations, highlighting polysemy as an intentional rhetorical and semantic strategy that enriches textual meaning rather than producing ambiguity. By systematically linking morphological and syntactic features with specific meanings, this research provides a replicable analytical model for studying other polysemous terms in Quranic Arabic. The implications of this study transcend purely linguistic boundaries, offering valuable insights into Quranic semantic theory, Arabic linguistics education, and exegetical methodology. Consequently, future research could employ similar morpho-syntactic analytical frameworks to deepen scholarly understanding of the intricate semantic networks present throughout the Quran.

## 6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

This study emphasizes the importance of morphological and syntactic analysis for interpreting polysemous terms accurately. Findings confirm deliberate Quranic polysemy guided contextually, enhancing interpretive precision and eloquence. Recommendations include context-sensitive translations and applying this methodology to other polysemous terms (e.g., *ruh*, *ayat*) for deeper Quranic understanding.

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## Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper analyses the semantic complexity of the Quranic term *fitna* by clearly identifying how its morphological and syntactic contexts shape distinct meanings, emphasizing a systematic integration of classical exegetical insights and contemporary linguistic methods. By illustrating a structured approach to linguistic and contextual analysis, the study emphasizes the critical role of morpho-syntactic indicators in resolving semantic ambiguity, thereby advancing the scholarly understanding of Quranic polysemy. Ultimately, this research contributes a replicable analytical framework applicable to other polysemous Quranic terms, enhancing the methodological rigor and depth of Quranic semantic and linguistic studies.

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