HISTORICAL STAGES OF ARABIC LOANWORDS IN ENGLISH: A HISTORICAL-LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Arabic loanwords in the English language from a historical-linguistic perspective. The study focuses on the chronological distribution of Arabic borrowings and the socio historical conditions that facilitated their integration into English. Using a diachronic and descriptive approach, the paper classifies Arabic loanwords into major historical periods: early borrowings, medieval borrowings, Renaissance borrowings, borrowings of the early modern and colonial period, and contemporary borrowings. The findings show that the entry of Arabic lexical items into English was not accidental but was closely connected with trade, scientific transmission, religious contact, colonial expansion, and globalization. The study also demonstrates that Arabic loanwords entered English both directly and through intermediary languages such as Latin, French, and Spanish. In addition, the semantic fields of these borrowings changed over time: while medieval Arabic loanwords were mainly associated with science and astronomy, modern borrowings are more frequently linked to religion, politics, migration, and gastronomy. The article argues that the historical-linguistic approach provides an effective framework for understanding the evolution, adaptation, and cultural significance of Arabic-derived vocabulary in English.

KEYWORDS: Arabic loanwords, English lexicon, historical linguistics, borrowing, lexical adaptation, diachronic analysis.

INTRODUCTION

The study of loanwords is an important area of historical linguistics because lexical borrowing reflects not only linguistic change but also cultural, political, and intellectual contact between peoples. Among the many foreign elements in English vocabulary, Arabic loanwords occupy a distinctive place due to their wide chronological range and diverse semantic domains.

A historical-linguistic approach to Arabic loanwords in English investigates when these words entered the language, under what historical conditions they were adopted, and how they were gradually integrated into the English lexical system. This approach allows Arabic borrowings to be classified according to major periods of entry, such as medieval borrowings, Renaissance borrowings, and modern borrowings [1].

Recent research has shown that the chronological distribution of Arabic loanwords in English is uneven. According to Fournier and Latrache, the number of Arabic-derived words increased significantly in the nineteenth century, when scientific, religious, and cultural terms entered English more actively [1]. At the same time, earlier layers of Arabic borrowings reveal the importance of medieval scholarship, translation movements, and intercultural trade in shaping the English lexicon.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the historical stages of Arabic loanwords in English and to identify the main sociocultural and linguistic factors that contributed to their spread. The study also aims to classify Arabic borrowings by period and semantic domain in order to show how their functions changed over time.

2. Methods

This research is based on a historical-linguistic and descriptive method. The study employs diachronic analysis to trace the emergence of Arabic loanwords in English across different historical periods. In addition, comparative and etymological observations are used to identify the pathways through which Arabic words entered English, whether directly or through intermediary languages such as Latin, French, or Spanish.

The material analyzed in this article is drawn from scholarly works on Arabic borrowings in English, lexicographic studies, and historical accounts of foreign words in English [1]–[7]. Particular attention is given to the first recorded occurrences of Arabic-derived words, their semantic development, and the extralinguistic contexts that motivated their adoption.

For analytical convenience, Arabic loanwords are grouped into five major chronological stages:
1. early borrowings (8th–11th centuries);
2. medieval borrowings (12th–14th centuries);
3. Renaissance borrowings (15th–16th centuries);
4. early modern and colonial-period borrowings (17th–19th centuries);
5. contemporary borrowings (20th–21st centuries).

This classification makes it possible to identify both continuity and change in the historical development of Arabic lexical influence on English.

3. Results

3.1. Early Borrowings (8th–11th centuries)

One of the earliest Arabic-derived words attested in English is mancus, the name of a gold coin equivalent to the Latin solidus. The word is believed to derive from the Arabic manqūş ("struck" or "stamped") and is thought to have entered English around the year 799 through French or Spanish mediation [2]. Although some scholars differ in identifying the earliest Arabic borrowing in English, the diachronic evidence confirms the antiquity of this lexical layer.

Another early example is ealfara, cited by some researchers as one of the earliest Arabic loanwords in English, referring to a pack horse [3]. Serjeantson notes that this form appears only once in the eleventh-century text The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle, and the route of borrowing was most likely Old French [4]. These early cases illustrate that Arabic lexical influence on English began indirectly and sporadically.

3.2. Medieval Borrowings (12th–14th centuries)

The medieval period was especially important for the transmission of Arabic scientific and scholarly vocabulary into Europe. The Arab conquest of Spain, the Crusades, and the intensification of trade relations between Europe and the Arab world created favorable conditions for lexical transfer [5]. During this period, many Arabic scientific terms entered European languages through Latin translations of Arabic works, especially in astronomy, mathematics, medicine, and alchemy [6].

A notable example is Aldebaran, derived from Arabic al-dabarān, which was recorded in written English sources in 1393 [7]. This word is often regarded as one of the earliest direct Arabic borrowings in English. Other words associated with the medieval layer include algebra, alembic, azimuth, and elixir. These terms demonstrate the central role of Arabic scholarship in the intellectual history of Europe and, consequently, in the enrichment of English vocabulary.

3.3. Renaissance Borrowings (15th–16th centuries)

The Renaissance period marked another important phase in the integration of Arabic-derived vocabulary into English. The revival of learning, increased interest in astronomy and geography, and continued translation activity contributed to the spread of specialized terminology. During this period, words such as zenith, nadir, almanac, and Aldebaran became more firmly established in scholarly and literary usage.

This stage shows that Arabic loanwords were not only borrowed for practical communication but also became part of the scientific worldview of early modern Europe. Their survival in modern English indicates a high degree of lexical integration.

3.4. Early Modern and Colonial-Period Borrowings (17th–19th centuries)

The next major stage corresponds to the early modern and colonial period, when trade, travel, diplomacy, and imperial expansion increased contact with the Middle East and South Asia. In this period, many words referring to everyday life, commerce, and material culture entered English. Examples include coffee, caravan, bazaar, and sultan [8].

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, English contact with the East through colonial networks led to the spread of additional oriental terms. Some of these words were borrowed from Arabic directly, while others reached English through Persian, Turkish, or South Asian languages. Although this layer was less extensive than the scientific borrowings of the medieval period, it broadened the semantic range of Arabic influence in English [9].

3.5. Contemporary Borrowings (20th–21st centuries)

In contemporary English, the number of newly borrowed Arabic words may be more limited than in earlier periods, but their semantic range has expanded considerably. Modern Arabic-derived vocabulary in English is strongly associated with religion, politics, migration, media discourse, and global food culture.

Words such as jihad, fatwa, hijab, halal, imam, and sharia have become widespread in English-language media and political discourse [10]. However, some of these terms have undergone semantic narrowing or distortion in Western usage. For example, jihad in Arabic broadly means "struggle," including an inner moral or spiritual struggle, whereas in much Western media discourse it is often reduced to the meaning of "holy war" or associated primarily with extremism [10].

Another important contemporary group includes culinary borrowings such as hummus, falafel, shawarma, and tabbouleh [11]. These words have entered everyday English largely without translation, reflecting the globalization of Arab cuisine and the increasing visibility of Arab cultural practices in international contexts.

3.6. Chronological Classification of Arabic Loanwords in English

Based on the historical-linguistic analysis, Arabic loanwords in English may be grouped as follows:

•   Early borrowings (8th–11th centuries): mancus, ealfara, arsenal, alcohol

•   Medieval period (12th–14th centuries): algebra, alembic, azimuth, elixir

•   Renaissance period (15th–16th centuries): zenith, nadir, almanac, Aldebaran

•   Early modern and colonial period (17th–19th centuries): coffee, caravan, bazaar, sultan, hookah, sham

•   Contemporary period (20th–21st centuries): jihad, fatwa, halal, hummus, falafel, sharia, imam

4. Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that the incorporation of Arabic loanwords into English was shaped by identifiable historical processes rather than by random lexical borrowing. Each chronological stage corresponds to a distinct pattern of cultural contact.

The earliest borrowings were relatively rare and entered English indirectly. Medieval borrowings were heavily associated with scientific knowledge and translation movements, showing the prestige of Arabic intellectual traditions in Europe. Renaissance borrowings consolidated this scientific layer and preserved Arabic-derived terminology in academic discourse. In contrast, early modern and colonial borrowings reflected practical interaction in trade, travel, and intercultural exchange. Finally, contemporary borrowings reveal the impact of globalization, migration, mass media, and political discourse on lexical borrowing.

Another important observation concerns mediation. Many Arabic words did not pass directly into English but arrived through Latin, French, Spanish, Persian, or Turkish. This confirms that lexical borrowing is often a multilayered process involving several contact zones. The historical-linguistic approach is therefore especially useful because it does not isolate words from their cultural routes of transmission.

The study also indicates that Arabic loanwords in English underwent semantic and stylistic adaptation. Some retained technical or scholarly meanings, such as algebra and azimuth, while others acquired new connotations in English-speaking societies, especially terms related to religion and politics. This semantic transformation demonstrates that borrowing is not merely lexical transfer but also conceptual reinterpretation.

5. Conclusion

The historical-linguistic analysis of Arabic loanwords in English demonstrates that these lexical items entered the language through a long and complex process closely related to historical, cultural, scientific, and political interaction. Arabic influence on English developed unevenly across time, with different periods favoring different semantic domains.

The medieval period was especially productive in the transmission of scientific terminology, while the modern period has been characterized by borrowings related to religion, politics, and food culture. In many cases, intermediary languages played a decisive role in the borrowing process, and the meanings of Arabic-derived words were reshaped as they became integrated into English.

Therefore, the historical-linguistic approach provides a valuable framework for classifying Arabic loanwords, tracing their pathways of transmission, and explaining their semantic and

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cultural functions in English. Such an approach makes it possible to better understand not only the history of English vocabulary but also the broader intercultural processes that have contributed to its development.

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