Polysemy as Hermeneutic Key in Ibn ʿArabī's *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*

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Abstract   The present contribution discusses the role of polysemy within Ibn ʿArabī's hermeneutic approach in the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*. It argues that the Andalusian master's conception of polysemy bears implications that stretch far beyond the field of Arabic linguistics, strictly understood, and that are tightly related to his vision of the polysemous and pansemiotic nature of existence. Thus, when investigated in the light of his metaphysical views, Ibn ʿArabī's hermeneutic use of word polysemy, as arbitrary as it might appear at first sight, results perfectly consistent with his conception of the descent of language through multiple states of being and of the conjunction of form and meaning in the world of imagination. These metaphysical premises provide the epistemological foundations for Ibn ʿArabī's linguistic and hermeneutic practices and build up one the finest and most complete metaphysical conceptions of language elaborated within the broader context of what might be defined the domain of 'Islamic linguistics'.

Keywords   Arabic linguistic tradition. Islamic linguistic thought. Koranic Hermeneutics. Akbarian studies. Semantics.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 Polysemy and Hermeneutics. – 3 Polysemy and Linguistic Form. – 4 Word Polysemy in the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*. – 5 Conclusions.

1   Introduction

Scholars have often remarked on the copiousness in the works of Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240) of Koranic quotations accompanied by the author's own interpretations (Chodkiewicz 1992, 40-1). Thus, the whole production of the Andalusian master has been depicted as "essentially Koranic hermeneutics" and "nothing if not commentary upon the Holy Book" (Chittick 1989, XV-XVI). Not an ordinary commentary though, but one that in many cases advances rather peculiar, unconventional, and thought-provoking linguistic explanations. This idiosyncratic approach to hermeneutics (and semantics) has not escaped the attention of scholars who, in their own turn, have interpreted it from divergent perspectives.

Some academics have described Ibn ʿArabī's exegetical method as an attempt to overcome the rigidity of the Koranic letter to seek the true spirit of the sacred text that lies behind it (Chodkiewicz 1992, 40). Among them Corbin argues that, in order to discover new meanings, Ibn ʿArabī moves beyond the linguistic form of the revelation and concerns himself with the *bāṭin* of the Koran, the inner dimension of the sacred text where inextinguishable meanings are hidden beneath the surface (1998, 242).

On the other hand, scholars like Chittick have questioned this interpretation and remarked that Ibn ʿArabī "displays tremendous reverence for the literary text" and that in his hermeneutic approach "the linguistic form of the text takes precedence over all else" (1989, XVI). Consequently, according to Chittick one cannot affirm that the bewildering Koranic interpretations frequently found in Ibn ʿArabī's works are reached at the expense of the deference to the letter.

To solve the paradox of how a strict adherence to the letter can coexist with the alternative and unconventional interpretations proposed by the Andalusian master throughout his works, Chodkiewicz calls our attention to the role played by polysemy as exegetical principle within Ibn ʿArabī's hermeneutics:

> Compte tenu de la très riche polysémie du vocabulaire arabe, la rigoureuse fidélité à la lettre de la Révélation n'exclut donc pas mais implique nécessairement, au contraire, la multiplicité des interprétations. (1992, 51)

In other words, within Ibn ʿArabī's hermeneutic approach, new meanings are not discovered despite the linguistic form of the revelation but within it and as a consequence of the possibility of multiple interpretations offered by the polysemous nature of the linguistic medium of revelation. This disclosure of a plurality of meanings, embedded in the letter of the Koranic text, bears, within Ibn ʿArabī's thought, implications that stretch far beyond the domain of Arabic linguistics,

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strictly understood. Since the entire manifestation is existentiated through an act of divine speech, and consequently the whole world is considered as a cosmic Koran (*Qurʾān takwīnī*), polysemy becomes a hermeneutic key not only for the interpretation of the word but also for that of the world. In Ibn ʿArabī's conception, both the word and the world, in their coming into being, proceed through multiple ontological and cosmological levels of existence (*marātib al-wuǧūd*) (Chittick 1989, 14). These multiple levels of existence are thus related to the multiple levels of the meanings that can be discovered behind both linguistic and cosmological phenomena. In order to better understand the epistemological framework behind those ideas, we will examine Ibn ʿArabī's explicit position on the matter as expressed in the "Chapter of Noah" of his *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* and in comparison with relevant passages from the *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyah*. This will lead us to a discussion about Ibn ʿArabī's notion of the world of imagination (*ʿālam ḫayāl*); a world that is described by the Andalusian master as the intermediate state of being, between the spiritual and corporeal worlds, where meanings are associated with forms. Eventually, through examples excerpted from the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, we will try to elucidate how, according to the *šayḫ al-ʾakbar* (the Greatest Master), every meaning of a single term, if admitted by the Arabic language and its rules, can virtually represent an acceptable explanation even when this leads to paradoxical conclusions contradicting the common understanding and challenging the agreed upon interpretation of the scriptures. In addition to that, we will attempt to show how such linguistic and semantic explanations are regularly tightly related to the broader context of the metaphysical doctrines developed by the Sufi master. This way, without engaging in a thorough exploration of such doctrines per se (that would lie beyond the purposes of the present article), we aim at clarifying the metaphysical foundations of Ibn ʿArabī's linguistic and hermeneutic thought. A linguistic and hermeneutic thought that fits into the wider framework of what might be referred to as 'Islamic linguistics'; that is to say the complex of the linguistic conceptions elaborated within the Islamic civilisation by confronting the sacred text and the linguistic structure of revelation. Such conceptions, grounded in the Koranic passages that explicitly deal with the nature of language in general and with that of the language of revelation in particular, are not severed from metaphysical concerns and include, among others, speculations about the origin of language, its hidden structure and ultimate purpose.

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2 Polysemy and Hermeneutics

The concept of polysemy in technical terms applies to "a single word-form with semantically overlapping meanings" (Frisson, Pickering 2016, 511) and is distinguished from homonymy that refers to "a single word-form with separate, semantically non-overlapping meanings" (Frisson, Pickering 2016, 510) and with "no connected semantic relations" (Pottier 2008, 95). Therefore, while in the case of polysemous words a single original word acquires multiple and often related meanings (usually referred to as 'senses'), in the case of homonyms different words with different etymological origins and unrelated meanings accidentally share the same auditory (homophones) or visual (homographs) linguistic form. The discrimination between the two categories is not always straightforward, and often requires a careful reconstruction of the origin of the word and the resort to the methods of diachronic, comparative, and historical linguistics. Needles to say, this approach to polysemy, which is based on the founding methodology of modern linguistics, is not the one endorsed within the Arabic linguistic tradition. Traditional Arabic linguistic thought favours a synchronic perspective, rather than a diachronic one (Versteegh 1984, 45), and usually confines itself to the boundaries of a single language: the Arabic language (*al-ʿarabiyyah*). In addition to that, in the traditional approach to semantic explanations, roots play a key role. Thus, more often than not, to elucidate the meaning of a given word the meanings of other words sharing the same radical letters are also taken into account.

This leads us to the quite intricate problem of roots' polysemy since, as noted by Rosenthal, when dealing with roots that exhibit a great variety of seemingly unrelated meanings, we should always suspect the existence of "different origins and mergers of roots" (Rosenthal 2000, 7). Again, the traditional Arabic linguistic approach does not normally concern itself with this historical and comparative perspective, nor does Ibn ʿArabī who frequently takes a rather liberal stance on establishing semantic connection between words. In fact, for him two or more words might be considered semantically related even when they share only some of their radical letters (and not necessarily all of them)[1] or on the simple basis of pure homography/homophony. As arbitrary and even "devious and tortuous" (Austin 1980, 20) as his approach might seem, Ibn ʿArabī's interpretative methods directly stem from his metaphysical speculations on the nature of the sacred text and on the linguistic structure of revelation.

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[1] On Ibn ʿArabī's hermeneutic use of *ištiqāq kabīr/ʾakbar* 'great/greater etymology' and its relation with the linguistic theories of Ibn Ǧinnī (d. 1002), see Salvaggio 2020; Versteegh 1997, 76; Baalbaki 2014, 281.

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In the "Chapter of Noah", in the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, Ibn ʿArabī explicitly touches upon his conception of the polysemous nature of the linguistic medium of revelation and presents us with a concise account of his hermeneutic approach. After arguing that considering the divine under its transcendent aspect (*tanzīh*) means to limit and restrict its reality, he compares the one that holds that position to the one who only believes in part of the revelation and disbelieves in other parts (*ka-man āmana bi-baʿḍ wa-kafara bi-baʿḍin*).[2] He then elucidates his point by mentioning an example related to the exegesis of sacred scriptures. He maintains that every divine book can be interpreted at various levels. In fact, while on the common level (*fī l-ʿumūm*) divine books may only convey the primary and apparent meaning (*al-mafhūm al-ʾawwal*) of the letter, on a more specific level (*ʿalà l-ḥuṣūṣ*), they imply every meaning (*kull mafhūm*) that might be ascribed to a particular linguistic form (*lafẓ*) of a given language (*bi-ʾayy lisān kān*) according to the rules of that specific language (*fī waḍʿ ḏālika al-lisān*) (*Fuṣūṣ*, 68).[3] Thus, in Ibn ʿArabī's perspective the possibility of multiple interpretation of the sacred text directly derives from a thorough knowledge of the linguistic structure of the language of revelation. It is noteworthy that this, in his view, does not exclusively apply to the Arabic language but to every language (*bi-ʾayy lisān kān*) that functions as a vehicle of divine revelation. As noted by Chodkiewicz (1992, 51) a similar position is also found in his monumental work *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyah* where he states:

> As far as the word of God [*kalām Allāh*] is concerned, when it descends in the language of a given people [*bi-lisān qawm*], and the speakers of that language disagree as to what was meant by God by a particular word [*al-kalimah*] or group of words [*al-kalimāt*] because of the different possible meanings of those words [*maʿa iḫtilāf madlūlāti-hā*], each speaker, despite all the divergent interpretations, properly understands what God meant […] provided that his interpretation does not deviate from the rules of that specific language [*mā lam yaḫruǧ min al-lisān*]. (*Futūḥāt*, IV: 31)[4]

Thus, the relation between form and meaning, respectively called in the passages above *lafẓ* and *mafhūm* (and *kalimah* and *madlūl*), can

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2 A reference to Koranic verses "We believe in part, and disbelieve in part" (Koran V, 150). All Koranic quotations refer to Arberry's translation (see references).

3 Page numbers of the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* refer to Affifi's edition (see Bibliography). We would like to express our gratitude to Dr. Marco Aurelio Golfetto, University of Milan (IT) who kindly made available to us, for comparison purposes, a copy of his forthcoming critical edition of the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* based on a different and autograph manuscript (see Bibliography).

4 Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the Author.

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be looked at as an asymmetric one since to a single form is opposed an indefinite multitude of possible meanings.

3 Polysemy And Linguistic Form

The above considerations on the unbalanced relation between form and meaning, in Ibn ʿArabī's thought, could misguide us to the hasty conclusion that meaning is regarded by the *šayḫ al-ʾakbar* as more important than form. We should be reminded though, that, as already mentioned, from the specific standpoint of his hermeneutic approach, one could rightfully affirm quite the opposite: within Ibn ʿArabī's exegetical practices form has a clear pre-eminence over meaning (Chittick 1989, XVI). The rationale behind that is that a meaning attributed to a form, however elevated, and regardless of the degree and the nature of its inspiration, inevitably remains just one single conceivable meaning among an indefinite multitude of others. Conversely, the form of a word is precisely what encompasses and preserves all possible meanings by including them within its letter.

When one gives priority to meaning, one only confines himself to his own understanding of a linguistic form in a particular moment, while the entirety of the message, that is embedded in the form, unavoidably escapes him. Ibn ʿArabī compares this case to that of somebody who, in relating a *ḥadīṯ*, reports it according to its meaning (*ʿalà al-maʿnà*) and not to its actual words (Chodkiewicz 1992, 45). In doing so, what that person does in reality is not recounting the *ḥadīṯ* but only what he has made of it (*ʾinnamā yanqulu ʾilay-nā fahma-hu*). Had he stuck to a faithful reproduction of the letter of the *ḥadīṯ*, adds Ibn ʿArabī, he would have enabled others to find in it not only similar (*miṯla mā fahima*), but also different (*ʾakṯar ʾaw ʾaqall*) and even opposite (*ʿaksa mā fahima*) meanings to those found by him (*Futūḥāt*, I: 442). In the case of the revelation, since God knew all the meanings of a particular linguistic form, when he chose that specific form he expressly intended all the meanings related to it:

> *fa-ʾinna-hu ʿālimu bi-ǧamīʿi al-wuǧūhi taʿālà wa-mā min waǧhin ʾillā wa-huwa maqṣūdun li-Llāhi taʿālà min tilka al-kalimati*

> He [God] knows all the meanings [of a particular word or expression] and there is none of those meanings that was not meant by God the Most High by that word. (*Futūḥāt*, IV: 31)

Consequently as none of those meanings can include in itself all the others, it is only through form that a plurality of possible meanings can be simultaneously and synthetically contemplated. Thus since

form represents what God actually meant, under this specific perspective, form is meaning:

> la *forme* de la Parole de Dieu […] étant divine, n'est pas seulement l'expression la plus adéquate de la Vérité : elle *est* la Vérité ; elle n'est pas seulement porteuse de sens, elle est le sens. (Chodkiewicz 1992, 45; italics in the text)

In the continuation of the above-mentioned passage in the "Chapter of Noah", Ibn ʿArabī further elaborates on this relation between form and meaning:

> *fa-ʾinna li-l-ḥaqqi fī kulli ḫalqin ẓuhūran, fa-huwa al-ẓāhiru fī kulli mafhūmin, wa-huwa al-bāṭinu ʿan kulli fahmin,ʾillā ʿan fahmi man qāla ʾinna al-ʿālama ṣūratu-hu wa-huwiyyatu-hu: wa-huwa al-ismu al-ẓāhiru, kamā ʾanna-hu bi-l-maʿnà rūḥu mā ẓahara, fa-huwa al-bāṭinu.*

> The Real has a manifestation in every created reality. He is the Manifest in every concept and the Hidden from all understanding, except from the understanding of those who affirm that the world is His image and ipseity. He is the name the Manifest, as well as He is, through the meaning, the spirit of what is manifested, and thus the Hidden. (*Fuṣūṣ*, 68)

The expression *al-ism al-ẓāhir* in the excerpt above implies an immediate reference to name the Manifest, *al-ẓāhir*, one of God's divine names (cf. Austin 1980, 73). At the same time since the term *ism* is used in the Arabic grammatical tradition to indicate 'name' (and 'noun') in linguistic contexts, the expression could also be interpreted as meaning that the Real is *the name that is evident*, i.e. the external linguistic form, the letter that can be perceived. This reading would thus directly relate to what Ibn ʿArabī states immediately after that, when he adds that the Real is also the spirit of that letter, the meaning (*al-maʿnà*) that is hidden (*al-bāṭin*) from the view. Hence, in the same way as it is present in the cosmological manifestation (*al-ʿālam*) with its *ṣūrah* and *huwiyyah*, the Real is present within the revelation as both *ism* and *maʿnà*: "the book manifests the divine realities in both its form and meaning" (Chittick 1989, XV). Furthermore, on the basis of this last remark, one can more clearly see why Ibn ʿArabī's considerations on the nature of the relation between form and meaning are embedded in a chapter where he mostly deals with the opposition between the transcendent (*tanzīh*) and immanent (*tašbīh*) conceptions of God, and with the necessity of integrating both perspectives in one's representation of the divine reality:

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fa-ʾin qulta bi-l-tanzīhi kunta muqayyidan
wa-ʾin qulta bi-l-tašbīhi kunta muḥaddidan
wa-ʾin qulta bi-l-ʾamrayni kunta musaddidan

If you affirm transcendence you restrict Him
and if you affirm immanence you limit Him
and if you affirm both aspects you are pointing to the right path.
(*Fuṣūṣ*, 70)

The implicit parallel suggested by these verses is that as one should contemplate the Real in both its transcendent and immanent aspects, one should likewise be aware that *ism* and *maʿnà*, *lafẓ* and *mafhūm*, *kalimah* and *madlūl*, only represent different facets of the same reality. The extent of this intrinsic interrelation of form and meaning is such that for Ibn ʿArabī not only, as already mentioned, form can be conceived of as meaning, but meaning in order to be communicated necessarily needs to acquire a form.

> Meanings [in God's knowledge are] 'disengaged' (*mujarrad*), which is to say that they have no necessary connection to any locus of manifestation. They are essentially nonmanifest in relation to the external world or human knowledge [...]. These meanings are present in God's knowledge, then enter the suprasensory or spiritual world, then become embodied through imagination in auditory or visual form. (Chittick 1994, 74)

Thus meanings, originally present in God's knowledge and not manifested at that stage, enter the cosmological realm and are first manifested at the level of the spiritual world (*ʿālam al-ʾarwāḥ*), but still deprived of form. At the level of the world of imagination (*ʿālam al-ḫayāl*), "the intermediate world between the two fundamental created worlds, the spiritual and corporeal worlds" (Chittick 1994, 70), those meanings "without any outward form" are given a "sensory form (*ṣūrah maḥsūsah*)" (Chittick 1989, 115). Hence language, understood as union of meaning and form, originates in the "imaginal domain" (Chittick 1994, 75-6), the domain where the union of *maʿnà* and *ṣūrah* takes place within a process by which meanings are made thicker (*kaṯṯafa al-maʿnà*) and sensory objects softer (*laṭṭafa al-maḥsūs*) (*Futūḥāt*, III: 588). The very nature of language, in Ibn ʿArabī's view, is therefore an imaginal (*ḫayālī*) one (Chittick 1994, 75). Eventually, at the level of the physical world (*ʿālam al-ʾaǧsām*), language assumes the form that we encounter in the language of revelation.

Since "revelation has to do with the imaginal embodiment of meanings in language" and since "these embodiments are not haphazard" (Chittick 1994, 77) and "no word is accidental" (Chittick 1989, XVI), for Ibn ʿArabī, nothing in the language of revelation is arbitrary and

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everything is endowed with a providential nature. With respect to the providential nature of revelation and its Arabic medium, discussing the order and the shape in which the letters of the Arabic script have been transmitted, he affirms:

> *wa-naḥnu ʾinnamā nanẓuru fī l-ʾašyāʾi min ḥayṯu ʾanna l-bāriya wāḍiʿu-hā, lā min ḥayṯu yadi man ẓaharat min-hu, fa-lā budda min al-qaṣdi fī ḏālika wa-l-taḥṣīṣi*

> we only look at things from the perspective of their having been set down by the Creator and not from the point of view of the human hand from which they came into sight and therefore [in the appearance of things] there must be a purpose and a specification. (*Futūḥāt*, II: 162)

Thus, for him, whatever secondary causes intervene in the production of language, and regardless of the extent of human intervention in the process, the first and ultimate cause must always be sought in the divine decree that established that specific sequence of providential events. In addition to that, as already seen, for Ibn ʿArabī the language of the sacred book is not only the language of revelation, but is regarded as *revelation in language*. With reference to the Jewish tradition, Scholem describes this tendency as a shift from the concept of language of revelation, *die Sprache der Offenbarung*, to the concept of language as revelation, *die Sprache als Offenbarung* (Scholem 1987, 9). Thus the language of revelation is conceived of as an epiphanic reality perpetually revealed, and constantly renewed:

> Le Coran perpétuellement révélé est à la fois rigoureusement identique à lui-même […] et à chaque instant *inouï* : aux cœurs préparés à le recevoir il apporte sans cesse des significations nouvelles, dont aucune n'annule les précédentes et qui toutes étaient dès l'origine inscrites dans la plénitude de sa lettre. (Chodkiewicz 1992, 47; italics in the text)

In connection with this idea that in approaching the sacred text one should regard it as "perpetual revelation" (*al-waḥī al-dāʾim*) always "new and never old" (*ǧadīd lā yablà*) (*Futūḥāt*, III: 143), Ibn ʿArabī insists on the point that one should not just try to understand the words of the divine book but rather the intentions of the divine speaker behind those words. This is because, he argues, understanding the real meaning of a word does not simply consist in knowing and enumerating all the senses encompassed by that particular word (*mā tataḍammanu-hu tilka al-kalimah bi-ṭarīq al-ḥaṣr*), but entails comprehending what the speaker actually meant by his speech (*mā qaṣada-hu al-mutakallim bi-ḏālika al-kalām*) (*Futūḥāt*, III: 170). Embracing the

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divine speaker's perspective implies accepting the idea that, having a flawless and thorough knowledge of the linguistic medium used, he is aware of all the meanings, explicit or implicit references, assonances, puns, and allusions conveyed by the words and expressions he chooses. As a result of that, if the human interpreter can see a particular implication in a word of the revelation, the divine speaker must, *a fortiori*, have been perfectly conscious of that implication when picking out that specific word. Therefore none of the interpretations based on that implication can be a priori discarded. At the same time, the ultimate confirmation of the correctness of any of such interpretations, Ibn ʿArabī specifies, lies with the divine speaker himself who takes charge of the instruction of his servant and, if the latter is endowed with a prepared heart, explains and interprets for him what he really meant (*ʾanā llaḏī ʾašraḥu la-hu kalāmī wa-ʾutarǧimu la-hu*) (*Futūḥāt*, I, 267).

4 Word Polysemy in the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*

In several passages of the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, polysemy plays a key role within the linguistic explanations offered by Ibn ʿArabī. In the first chapter, the "Chapter of Adam", Ibn ʿArabī explains that man is called *ʾinsān* because he is the pupil (another meaning for the word *ʾinsān*)[5] "through which the Real looks at his creation and has mercy on them" (*fa-ʾinna-hu bi-hi yanẓuru al-ḥaqq ʾilà ḫalqi-hi fa-yarḥamu-hum*) (*Fuṣūṣ*, 70). The polysemy of the term *ʾinsān* thus provides an explanation of the original motivation behind man's name (*fa-li-hāḏā summiya ʾinsānan*) and establishes a connection between that name and the metaphysical function within the creation of its owner.

In the "Chapter of Jacob", Ibn ʿArabī profusely dwells upon the polysemy of the term *dīn* 'religion'. This highly polysemous term has been the object of several academic studies that have extensively debated its etymological derivation (from one or more, Semitic or non-Semitic, roots) and explored the multiple nuances of its Koranic usage (cf. Glei, Reichmuth 2012; Reichmuth 2016). In the chapter, Ibn ʿArabī discusses three of *dīn*'s fundamental meanings: *inqiyād* 'obedience' (*fa-l-dīn ʿibārah ʿan inqiyādi-ka*) (*Fuṣūṣ*, 94), *ǧazā* 'recompense' (*fa-ṣaḥḥa ʾanna al-dīn huwa al-ǧazāʾ*) (*Fuṣūṣ*, 96), and *ʿādah* 'custom'. This last interpretation occurs in a passage that appears particularly relevant to our topic and in which Ibn ʿArabī points to the meaning of *ʿādah* as the most closely related one to the inner and secret reality (*sirru-hu wa-bāṭinu-hu*) of the concept of *dīn* (*Fuṣūṣ*, 96). Af-

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[5] This is a case of proper polysemy since the pupil is so called because of the human figure that is reflected in the eye of the other (cf. Latin *pupilla*, Greek *korē*, and Sanskrit *puruṣa*).

ter stating that "nothing is received [*yaʿūdu ʿalà*] by the possible beings [al-*mumkināt*] from the Real save what their essences (*ḏawātu-hum*) give them in their states [*fī ʾaḥwāli-hā*]" (*Fuṣūṣ*, 96), the *šayḫ al-ʾakbar* argues that it is for this reason that *dīn* "is referred to and explained as 'custom'"[6] (*summiya ʾaw šuriḥa al-dīn bi-l-ʿādah*) since, under this metaphysical perspective, *dīn* is what "returns to the servant because of what is required and demanded by his state" (*li-ʾanna-hu ʿāda ʿalay-hi mā yaqtaḍī-hi wa-yaṭlubu-hu ḥālu-hu*) (*Fuṣūṣ*, 96). *ʿādah* 'custom' is thus explained by associating it to the verb *ʿāda*, from the same root (ʿ*wd*), carrying the fundamental meaning of 'to come back, return' and the attribution of this semantic connection[7] to the term helps Ibn ʿArabī reinforce his metaphysical point. Through this series of semantic shifts, *dīn* 'religion' is firstly conceived as *ʿādah* 'custom' that, in its own turn, is then interpreted as *ʿawdah* 'return' and this last semantic nuance is used to illustrate Ibn ʿArabī's interpretation of *dīn* as a reality that entails much more than just obedience and recompense for good or evil deeds and that in its inner and hidden dimension is directly connected to the very essence of beings.

As in the just-mentioned case of *ʿādah*, in the following examples semantic explanations are not based on the polysemy of a single term but on the polysemy (or supposed so) of their roots. In the "Chapter of Šuʿayb", commenting the Koranic verses "Surely in that there is a reminder to him who has a heart [*li-man kāna la-hu qalb*]" (Koran L, 37), Ibn ʿArabī explains that the verses refer to the one who is able "to change himself [*li-taqallubi-hi*] in various forms and attributes" (*Fuṣūṣ*, 122) and in so doing "he knows the transformation [*taqallub*] of the Real in various forms by adapting himself [*bi-taqlībi-hi*] to the different shapes" (*Fuṣūṣ*, 122). The high rank of these specific category of knowers of the divine reality, able to recognise the Real behind and through its multifarious manifestations, is thus illustrated by relating the noun *qalb* 'heart' to the verbal nouns *taqallub* 'transformation' (form V) and *taqlīb* 'reshaping' (form II) all from the same root (*qlb*).

In the "Chapter of Ṣāliḥ", Ibn ʿArabī discusses the use of the verb *baššara*, that is normally employed with the sense of 'to give good news', in two different Koranic passages where that verb is utilised to announce both mercy and punishment: "their Lord gives them good tidings [*yubašširu-hum*) of mercy from Him and good pleasure" (Koran IX, 21) and "give them the good tidings [*fa-baššir-hum*]of a painful chastisement (*bi-ʿaḏāb ʾalīm*)" (Koran III, 21). The Andalusian master

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6 In the same passage, to demonstrate the actual existence and usage of this sense in the language, Ibn ʿArabī adds a quotation from a poem of the famous pre-Islamic poet ʾImruʾ al-Qays (Austin 1980, 116) where the word *dīn* is used with the meaning of 'custom'.

7 The semantic connection of *ʿādah* 'custom' to the verb *ʿāda* 'to come back' is based on the conception of a custom as a 'recurrent and repetitive habit or action'.

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explains that the idea of *bušrà* 'glad tidings' is applied to both groups because the tidings mentioned in the verses changed the colour of the skin (*bašarah*) of those who received them as a consequence of the joy or pain they experienced after hearing the news (*Fuṣūṣ*, 118). Although this could be one of those cases discussed above where roots with different etymological origins might have merged into one, from the synchronic (and providential) perspective endorsed by Ibn ʿArabī (see above) the fact that the form II verb *baššara* and the nouns *bušrà* and *bašarah* share the same three radical letters (*bšr*) is enough a reason to see (or not to exclude) a semantic connection.

The oxymoron created by the juxtaposition, in excerpt above, of the concepts of *bušrà* 'glad tidings' and *ʿaḏāb* 'punishment' can be further explored in the light of Ibn ʿArabī's own interpretation of the term *ʿaḏāb* in the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*. In the "Chapter of Hūd", analysing the Koranic verses "a wind, wherein is a painful chastisement (*ʿaḏāb*)" (Koran XLVI, 24), to illustrate the ambivalent nature of God's chastisement, which is at the same time an act of punishment and of mercy, Ibn ʿArabī gives a positive connotation to the word *ʿaḏāb* 'punishment' by clarifying that those who are punished, after tasting their punishment, will find it sweet (*yastaʿḏibūna-hu ʾiḏā ḏāqū-hu*) (*Fuṣūṣ*, 109). He thus interpret the word *ʿaḏāb* through its association to the form X verb *istaʿḏaba* 'to find sweet or pleasant' from the same root (*ʿaḏb*). A similar connection is established in the "Chapter of Ishmael" where Ibn ʿArabī remarks that *ʿaḏāb* is so called for the "sweetness of its taste" (*min ʿuḏūbati ṭaʿmi-hi*) (*Fuṣūṣ*, 94) hence relating *ʿaḏāb* to the noun *ʿuḏūbah* 'sweetness' from the same root.

These last examples concerning the root *ʿaḏb* can be regarded as a case of enantionymy, a particular type of polysemy where the meanings associated to a certain linguistic form are not just different but opposite to each other. The existence in the Arabic lexicon of words and roots exhibiting this peculiar property did not go unnoticed within the Arabic linguistic tradition and long lists were compiled to gather all the terms that fell (or seemed to fall) into what was since referred to as the category of *ʾaḍḍād* 'contraries'. The great interest observed in classical Arabic lexicographical studies for this phenomenon has attracted the attention of contemporary scholarship that has analysed (and sometimes criticized) the principles applied for the identification of *ʾaḍḍād* (Cohen 1961; Grigore 2004), discussed the significance of *ʾaḍḍād* in relation to the general notion of ambivalence within the Arab thought (Reig 1971), and explored the heated debate that arose inside the Arabic linguistic tradition as a reaction to the positions of those who argued that the presence of the *ʾaḍḍād* in the Arabic language was responsible for the ambiguity and lack of clarity of the language (Baalbaki 2014, 188-98).

Within Ibn ʿArabī's vision of language the ambivalence and ambiguity conveyed by the *ʾaḍḍād* bears extremely important symbol-

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ic implications. Throughout the *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyah* on several occasions (Chittick 1989, 67) he mentions the episode of the question "Through what did you know Allāh?" addressed to Abū Saʿīd al-Ḥarrāz (d. ca. 899) to which al-Ḥarrāz gave his famous answer "By his bringing opposites together" (*bi-ğamʿi-hi bayna al-ḍiddayni*) and then added the recitation of the Koranic verses "He is the First and the Last, the Outward and the Inward" (Koran LVII, 3) (*Futūḥāt*, IV, 418). Since "Allāh is the totality of opposite names" (*Allāh mağmūʿ al-ʾasmāʾ al-mutaqābilah*) (*Futūḥāt*, II, 208), Ibn ʿArabī explains, it is only through this process of *coincidentia oppositorum* that his reality may be known. The relevance of these remarks to the language issue is that such a *coincidentia oppositorum* can only take place at the level of the world of imagination, that is the world precisely created "in order to manifest the union of opposites" (*li-yaẓhara fī-hi al-ğamʿ bayna al-ʾaḍdād*) (*Futūḥāt*, IV, 418) and which, as already seen, is the level where disengaged meaning (*maʿnà muğarrad*) assumes a sensory form (*ṣūrah maḥsūsah*) (Chittick 1989, 115). Thus, the presence of *ʾaḍdād* in the language, from Ibn ʿArabī's perspective, has to be looked at as a reflection of the ontological ambiguity of language and of its *ḫayālī* nature.

5 Conclusions

Founded on the belief in the linguistic miracle of the revelation and in the sacredness of its linguistic medium, the Islamic civilisation has been defined as "clearly logocentric" (Chittick 1989, XV) and the role played by language within Islam as "complètement axial" (Lory 2004, 8). This vertical vision of language represents one of the fundamental principles of Ibn ʿArabī's hermeneutic approach. Looked at from the perspective of his conception of the descent of language through multiple states of being, the language of the revelation is no longer simply conceived as the means of the revelation but rather as revelation under the form of language. The ascription of this epiphanic nature to the language of the sacred text brings radical implications, not only at the theoretical level, but also at the level of applied exegetical practice. As illustrated in the present study, Ibn ʿArabī's hermeneutic approach to word polysemy, as fanciful and arbitrary as it might appear at first sight, when investigated in the light of his metaphysical views, appears perfectly consistent with his vision of the origin of language and of the conjunction of form and meaning in the world of imagination. This last represents one the finest and most complete metaphysical conceptions of language elaborated within the broader context of what has been above defined as the domain of 'Islamic linguistics'. Lastly, we hope that the reflections offered, from the perspective of Islamic linguistics in the present contribution, will add to

the varieties of approaches that distinguish the current state of the discipline and that are clearly reflected in the theoretical divide between Arabic linguistics and Arab linguistics (Carter 1988; Owens 2013, 11; Giolfo 2014).

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