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Case Study:
The Doha Historical Dictionary of Arabic

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Case Study: The Doha Historical Dictionary of Arabic

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The Doha Historical Dictionary of Arabic (DHDA)[1] is a not-for-profit research project founded in 2013 in Qatar, sponsored by the Arabic Center for Research and Policy Studies. The DHDA tracks around 200,000 Arabic words that date back from earliest documentations until 500 Hijri. DHDA's work includes an electronic corpus, an extensive bibliography, an advanced electronic portal, and a guide for lexical analysis. They cover changes to words over time and study contexts through documenting Arabic texts that have existed for twenty centuries: from the fifth century before Islam to fifteenth Hijri century.

Relatedly, Azmi Bishara, general director of the Arabic Center for Research and Policy Studies, argues that "despite the lexical culture" created by past and current linguists, Arabic speakers and writers lack up-to-date, authoritative references on the lexicon.[2] To ensure that DHDA would provide a basis for cumulative knowledge about words and meanings, the directors established a committee to plan and standardize procedures. Editorial guidelines and methods supported the rigor of their investigations and provided observable conventions for writing and presenting each entry. Since the directors emphasize the importance of incorporating multiple perspectives, agreed-on ground rules are essential. Ultimately, in the context of such large-scale endeavors, the time saved on reconciling house styles with the personal styles of contributors is notable.

The web portal attracts scholars, researchers, students, and teachers. For wider reach, they engage with the interested audience by sharing methods, based on comprehensive criteria, to better analyze and edit lexical entries. Their digital corpus includes around 150 million words as of 2021. To encourage engagement, DHDA hosts a discussion forum for researchers and lexicographers.[3] DHDA describes the forum as reflecting "the belief of the directors of the Doha Historical Dictionary of Arabic that this dictionary is a project of the whole nation and that lexicographers and researchers concerned with the Arabic

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[1] See https://news.dohadictionary.org/EN/Pages/default.aspx.

[2] Azmi Bishara, "A Challenge to Inspire a Nation," in Doha Historical Dictionary of Arabic, *Naḥwa muʿjam tārīkhī lil-lugha-l-ʿarabiya* [Toward an Arabic historical dictionary] (Doha: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2014), 13–17.

[3] "Lexicographers' Forum," Doha Historical Dictionary of Arabic, https://news.dohadictionary.org/EN/Pages/Forums.aspx.

language, its history, and the related intellect and civilization should participate in its achievement."[4]

The Arabic Center has published one book to date, titled *Toward an Arabic Historical Dictionary*.[5] The book describes common methods used in the creation of historical–etymological dictionaries. It also discusses the methods DHDA uses in developing the seminal Arabic corpus and print and digital dictionaries.

DHDA considers its work to be beneficial on different levels. To create a large comprehensive dictionary of Arabic, the organization aims to bring together the literary, religious scientific, and cultural meanings from texts no matter when and where they were written. It also focuses on the credibility of the information it provides, which is one of the main pillars of knowledge production and criticality. Moreover, DHDA makes sure to pay special attention to the context from which the words are taken. This shows that even though a dictionary can be a list of words in alphabetical order, the organization does not intend to create a dictionary from nothing and prefers to situate terminologies from their respective settings and contexts, considering that Arabic is a rich language with vastly different word and terms.

DHDA is an important tool in the social sciences and humanities. Since the latter fields mainly study the history, present, and future and changes in each, the dictionary is crucial for explaining the words that would reveal any substantial facts. In addition, DHDA could aid in explaining new phenomena and occurrences that cannot be easily explained by providing terminologies used in similar fields in the past. For these reasons, DHDA's work not only stems from research methodologies adopted in the social sciences and humanities but also contributes to the knowledge production in these fields.

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[4] "Introduction to the Doha Historical Dictionary of Arabic," Doha Historical Dictionary of Arabic, https://www.dohadictionary.org/about-dictionary.

[5] *Naḥwa muʿjam tārīkhī lil-lugha-l-ʿarabiya.*

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