

## Semantic Evolution of the Word *Nafs* in the Qur'an Based on Contextual Semantics and the Qur'anic Worldview

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### Abstract

This study aims to analyze the meaning of the term *nafs* in the Qur'an using a contextual semantic, syntagmatic, and paradigmatic approach, while also connecting it to the Qur'anic worldview. The research focuses on uncovering the semantic complexity of *nafs* in three main domains: self-identity, psychological aspects, and spiritual dimensions. A qualitative research method is applied, utilizing primary data from Qur'anic verses containing the term *nafs* and secondary data from classical exegetical literature, such as *Mufradat Alfadh al-Qur'an* and *Lisan al-Arab*. The data is analyzed through syntagmatic analysis to understand the relationship of *nafs* within the structure of verses and paradigmatic analysis to compare it with other terms such as *ruh* and *qalb*. The results reveal that the term *nafs* exhibits a diverse distribution of meanings in the Qur'an, covering three primary themes: self-identity (112 verses), psychological aspects (98 verses), and spiritual dimensions (85 verses). Syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations enhance contextual understanding, while the analysis of the Qur'anic worldview highlights the central role of *nafs* in theological, anthropological, and eschatological domains. This study makes a significant contribution to Qur'anic semantics, modern exegesis, and the translation of religious texts. In conclusion, this research integrates classical and contemporary approaches to enrich the understanding of the meaning of *nafs* in the Qur'an. Further studies are recommended to expand the exploration of this term in other Islamic textual corpora and employ natural language processing technologies for advanced analyses.

Keywords: *Nafs*, Qur'an, Contextual Semantics, Qur'anic Worldview.

### Introduction

The Qur'an, as a divine revelation, was sent down to Prophet Muhammad in the Arabic language (Haji et al., 2022). In fact, the Qur'an itself explicitly states that its language is Arabic, highlighting the necessity of mastering Arabic to grasp its meanings and essence (Rochim et al., 2023). Consequently, any attempt to interpret the Qur'an must begin with a deep understanding of its linguistic structure. Semantic studies in Qur'anic research play a crucial role in understanding the complexity of this sacred text. The semantic approach allows for the unveiling of the meanings of words and phrases that are critical to capturing the essence of the Qur'an, especially considering its rich linguistic and cultural context (Rochim et al., 2023)(Fadhilah & Nugroho, 2024). For instance, Chukhanov emphasizes that the semantic approach is essential in interpreting the Qur'anic and Sunnah texts, as it enables a deeper understanding of the actions and sayings of the Prophet that can illuminate the meanings of the Qur'an (Chukhanov, 2024). The importance of this study becomes more evident in efforts to translate the Qur'an into other languages, where idiomatic expressions and collocations present significant challenges. Obeidat and Mahadi assert that translators must confront the semantic complexities in order to accurately convey the Qur'anic message while considering cultural nuances (Obeidat & Mahadi, 2020). Semantics is not merely concerned with analyzing word structures or tracing their etymological origins. More than that, it must be understood as the study of key terms within a language to uncover the worldview (*weltanschauung*) of the people who use it (Tawakkal et al., 2024). This highlights the need for semantic studies as an important tool for preserving the beauty and depth of the Qur'an in translation. Furthermore, the development of an ontology framework for semantic searches in the Qur'an strengthens the relevance of semantic studies. Khan et al. discuss the obstacles in achieving effective semantic search, calling for the creation of domain ontologies that can enhance the understanding and information retrieval from the text (Muhammad et al., 2023). Similarly, Khazani et al. propose a semantic-based knowledge representation model that utilizes

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word dependencies to facilitate the understanding of Qur'anic verses (Khazani et al., 2021). Such frameworks not only support academic research but also assist general readers in accessing the teachings of the Qur'an more effectively.

In this context, it is important to understand the evolution of the meanings of certain words in the Qur'an, such as "nafs," which has a wide range of meanings and theological and philosophical implications. "Nafs" is often translated as "soul," "self," or "psyche," and holds great significance in Islamic theology and psychology. A study by Jamal et al. highlights the concept of "an-nafs al-mutma'innah" or the tranquil soul, as mentioned in QS 89:27 (Jamal et al., 2019). This concept is related to the motivation for altruistic behavior, showing that a content soul is a key driver for altruism, reflecting broader psychological implications of the term. Furthermore, Husain argues that "nafs" can be understood in contemporary terms as referring to the mind and intellect, indicating its psychological domain, which is relevant in modern discussions on mental health and self-awareness (Husain, 2022). The challenge of translating "nafs" into English also becomes a focal point of research. Alhaj addresses the lexical-semantic issues faced by translators when rendering "nafs," highlighting the challenges posed by the rich semantic field of the term. This issue is significant as it affects how non-Arab speakers understand the Qur'anic text and teachings (Alhaj, 2023).

One approach used in this context is contextual semantic analysis to understand the meanings of words in specific contexts. This method includes lexical-semantic analysis, as explained by Chukhanov, where understanding the lexical and semantic elements is crucial for accurately interpreting sacred texts (Chukhanov, 2024). Another approach is the use of contextualized embeddings in natural language processing (NLP). Kutuzov et al. describe how contextualized embeddings can be used to detect semantic shifts over time, offering insights into how meanings evolve in various contexts (Kutuzov et al., 2022). Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) methods, such as those applied by Durie, use a set of core semantics to break down complex meanings into simpler components (Durie, 2022). This method is highly useful for analyzing Qur'anic vocabulary as it enables a clearer understanding of the foundational concepts conveyed by certain terms. Cognitive semantic analysis has also proven to be a valuable approach, as shown by Hammadi, who applies conceptual metaphor theory to analyze specific verses. This analysis reveals how abstract concepts are understood through sensory experiences, highlighting the cognitive processes involved in meaning formation (Hammadi, 2023).

However, previous research on "nafs" in the Qur'an shows a gap in comprehensive analysis using syntagmatic and paradigmatic frameworks. Existing studies tend to focus on isolated interpretations rather than integrating these linguistic approaches to provide a holistic understanding of the evolution and usage of the term "nafs" in the Qur'an. For instance, Khan and Ali's research on the interpretation of metaphors in the Qur'an reveals that many linguistic studies tend to overlook the broader conceptual framework that governs the meaning of words (Khan & Ali, 2021). This trend is also reflected in the literature on "nafs," where the lack of a systematic approach to syntagmatic and paradigmatic relationships limits the depth of understanding. Additionally, bibliometric analysis by Kaleel highlights the evolution of Qur'anic studies but shows that many existing works fail to adequately address the syntagmatic and paradigmatic domains of key terms like "nafs" (Kaleel, 2024). This indicates an urgent need for more comprehensive research that not only explores the syntagmatic relationships of "nafs" but also its connections with other words in the relevant semantic field.

This research aims to address this need by analyzing the meaning of "nafs" in the Qur'an through contextual, syntagmatic, and paradigmatic semantic perspectives. This approach seeks to explore the linear and substitutive relationships of the word "nafs" in the context of Qur'anic verses, as well as to explain the evolution of its meaning within the Qur'anic worldview. By integrating these methods, this study aims to provide new insights that are not only relevant to Qur'anic studies but also to translators, scholars, and the general public seeking a deeper understanding of the Qur'anic message.

## Research Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design with a contextual semantic approach to examine the meaning of the word *nafs* in the Qur'an. The primary focus was analyzing the term *nafs* based on its relationships within syntagmatic and paradigmatic structures, as well as its role within the Qur'anic worldview framework. The primary data consisted of Qur'anic verses containing the word *nafs*, identified through textual analysis using digital tools such as the Quranic Arabic Corpus to map its occurrences in various contexts. Secondary data included classical and modern exegeses, such as *Mufradat Alfadh al-Qur'an* by Al-Raghib al-Isfahani and *Lisan al-Arab* by Ibn Manzur, which provided semantic and interpretative foundations for this study.

The sample was selected using purposive sampling, focusing on verses containing *nafs* that are theologically significant and contextually relevant. A total of 295 Qur'anic verses mentioning *nafs* were analyzed in depth. The research instruments included a semantic analysis worksheet designed to categorize the meanings of *nafs* based on linguistic, syntagmatic, and paradigmatic contexts. The data collection procedure began with identifying relevant verses, followed by in-depth analysis using a syntagmatic approach to understand the relationship of *nafs* with other words within the verse structure. Subsequently, a paradigmatic analysis was applied to compare *nafs* with related terms such as *ruh* and *qalb*, to explore lexical choices within specific contexts.

The collected data was analyzed using content analysis techniques and the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) method as outlined by Durie (Durie, 2022). This analysis aimed to break down the meaning of *nafs* into basic semantic components to explain its varied usage in the Qur'an. Additionally, the Qur'anic worldview related to *nafs* was analyzed

based on a framework suggested by Badrun, covering theological, anthropological, and eschatological domains (Badrun, 2023). The researcher also utilized data triangulation by comparing textual analysis results with interpretations from classical and modern exegeses to ensure the validity of the findings. This methodology aims to replicate similar analyses for other Qur'anic terms, thereby enriching the overall semantic study of the Qur'an.

## Research Findings

Based on the analysis of primary literature, it was found that the term *nafs* in the Qur'an holds three fundamental meanings as explained in *Mufradat Alfadh al-Qur'an* by Al-Raghib al-Isfahani and *Lisan al-Arab* by Ibn Manzur. First, *nafs* refers to self-identity or individuality, as in QS 3:185 (*kullu nafsin dzaa'iqatu almawt*), indicating the human soul or self that will experience death. Second, *nafs* represents psychological aspects, encompassing desires or inner urges, as in QS 12:53 (*inna an-nafs ammaratun bis-su'*). Third, *nafs* describes the spiritual aspect, capable of purification or corruption, as in QS 91:7–10 (*wa nafsin wa maa sawwaaha*). These usages illustrate significant semantic variations depending on the verse's context.

In the syntagmatic analysis, which focuses on the specific relationships and meanings between words in their structures (Ahmad et al., 2024), it was found that *nafs* often appears in conjunction with verbs, attributes, or specific phrases that add meaning. For example, in QS 12:53, *nafs* is linked with the verb *ammaratun* (commanding), indicating that *nafs* has a tendency to command evil. In QS 91:7–10, *nafs* is followed by the verb *fa-alamaha* (inspired), signifying the connection between the human soul and divine inspiration. Additionally, in QS 3:185, the phrase *kullu nafsin* provides generalization, referring to all individuals without exception. This syntagmatic relationship demonstrates that the meaning of *nafs* is not solely derived from the word itself but also from its connection with other words in the sentence structure.

In paradigmatic analysis, which examines linguistic similarities and relationships among terms (Ahmad et al., 2024), *nafs* is frequently compared with terms like *ruh* and *qalb*, which have distinct meanings despite being used in similar contexts. *Nafs* refers to the essence or entirety of an individual, while *ruh* often describes the non-physical element originating from God, as in QS 17:85 (*wa yasalunaka 'anir-ruh*). Meanwhile, *qalb* tends to refer to emotional or cognitive aspects of a human, as in QS 22:46 (*fa-innaaha laa ta'mal-abshaar wa laakin ta'mal-qulub allati fis-sudoor*). This analysis reveals that word choices in the Qur'an are highly contextual, with each term carrying specific theological and philosophical implications.

Through textual analysis using digital tools, it was identified that *nafs* appears 295 times in the Qur'an. The frequency distribution of *nafs* indicates that its usage spans three main themes: self-identity, psychological aspects, and spiritual dimensions. The theme of self-identity accounts for 112 verses, psychological aspects for 98 verses, and spiritual dimensions for 85 verses. This data underscores the significant diversity in the meaning of *nafs* across various contexts.

Furthermore, the analysis of literature and verse contexts revealed that the use of *nafs* is closely related to three main domains within the Qur'anic worldview. The theological domain uses *nafs* to emphasize the relationship between humans and God, such as in QS 39:54 (*wa aniibu ilaa rabbikum wa aslimuu lahu min qabli an ya'tiyakum al-adzaab tsumma laa tunsaruun*). The anthropological domain portrays *nafs* as the essence of humanity with the freedom to choose between good and evil, as described in QS 91:8 (*fa-alamaha fujuuraha wa taqwaaha*). The eschatological domain links *nafs* to moral responsibility and the afterlife, as in QS 75:2 (*wa laa uqsimu bin-nafsil-lawwaamah*). These three domains affirm that *nafs* plays a crucial role within the Qur'an's theological and ethical framework.

As a result of this study, a semantic representation model for *nafs* in the Qur'an is proposed, comprising three main components. The first component is the core meaning, encompassing identity, psychological, and spiritual aspects. The second component is syntagmatic relations, highlighting the connections between *nafs* and other words within sentence structures. The third component is paradigmatic relations, comparing *nafs* with other terms in the semantic field, such as *ruh* and *qalb*. This model provides a holistic perspective on the complexity of *nafs* and is expected to serve as a foundation for further research in Qur'anic semantic studies.

## Discussion

The results of this study reaffirm previous findings related to the core meaning and semantic complexity of the term *nafs* in the Qur'an. In *Mufradat Alfadh al-Qur'an*, Al-Raghib al-Isfahani describes *nafs* as an entity encompassing the essence of the individual, the psychological domain, and the spiritual aspect. This aligns with the findings of the study, which identifies three primary meanings of *nafs*: self-identity (QS 3:185), psychological aspects (QS 12:53), and spiritual aspects (QS 91:7–10). This perspective is also supported by Ibn Manzur in *Lisan al-Arab*, where *nafs* is associated with life, vitality, and moral impulses involved in the struggle between good and evil tendencies.

In the syntagmatic analysis, this study demonstrates that the relationship between *nafs* and other words in the structure of a verse provides additional important meanings. For instance, in QS 12:53, the relationship between *nafs* and the verb *ammaratun* emphasizes that the human soul has a tendency to command evil. This finding supports the study by Obeidat and Mahadi on the importance of understanding syntagmatic context in the idiomatic analysis of the Qur'an. Moreover, QS 91:7–10 shows the relationship between *nafs* and the verb *fa-alamaha*, illustrating divine inspiration to the human soul to

recognize both good and evil tendencies (Obeidat and Mahadi, 2020). This relationship reinforces the syntagmatic complexity that was also highlighted by Khazani et al. through a word-dependency-based knowledge representation model (Khazani et al., 2021).

In the paradigmatic analysis, it was found that *nafs* is often compared with terms such as *ruh* and *qalb*. This study shows that *nafs* refers to the entire individual, whereas *ruh* is more closely associated with the non-physical element that originates from God, as stated in QS 17:85. On the other hand, *qalb* is more often used to describe the emotional and cognitive aspects of a human, as in QS 22:46. This paradigmatic study aligns with the findings of Kazemi and Nodoushan, who emphasized that lexical choices in the Qur'an reflect a rich and highly contextual semantic framework (Kazemi & Nodoushan, 2018). This result also fills the gap identified by Kaleel, who highlighted the lack of systematic exploration of the paradigmatic domain of key terms in the Qur'an (Kaleel, 2024).

The frequency distribution of the term *nafs* in the Qur'an, covering three main themes—self-identity, psychological aspects, and spiritual dimensions—provides a more holistic view of its usage. The theme of self-identity (112 verses), psychological aspects (98 verses), and spiritual aspects (85 verses) indicates that *nafs* plays a significant role in various theological and anthropological contexts. This data supports Kaleel's bibliometric analysis, which underscores the importance of statistical analysis to understand the patterns of term usage in sacred texts (Kaleel, 2024).

From the perspective of the Qur'anic worldview, this study finds that the term *nafs* holds significant relevance in the theological, anthropological, and eschatological domains. The theological domain is evident in the relationship between humans and God, as shown in QS 39:54, which emphasizes the importance of obedience and submission before the coming of punishment. This is consistent with the worldview framework outlined by Badrun, where the vertical relationship between humans and God is a core element (Badrun, 2023). The anthropological domain is illustrated through the human freedom to choose between good and evil, as in QS 91:8. This finding also supports Husain's argument, stating that *nafs* encompasses the psychological and moral domains relevant in modern discussions about self-awareness (Husain, 2022). Meanwhile, the eschatological domain is seen in QS 75:2, where *nafs* is portrayed as a morally responsible entity that will be held accountable on the Day of Judgment. This perspective is supported by Suddahazai, who emphasizes the importance of belief in ultimate accountability as a core element of the Islamic worldview (Suddahazai, 2023).

## Contributions of the Study and Its Implications

The findings of this study are important as they provide a deeper understanding of the meaning of the term *nafs* in the Qur'an, which has long been recognized for its complex semantic diversity. By identifying three main meanings of *nafs*—self-identity, psychological aspects, and spiritual aspects—this research successfully offers a comprehensive interpretative framework for scholars, tafsir practitioners, and Qur'anic translators. In the context of Qur'anic studies, these findings support existing literature such as *Mufradat Alfadh al-Qur'an* and *Lisan al-Arab*, while also filling the gaps in syntagmatic and paradigmatic analyses, as identified by Kaleel (Kaleel, 2024).

This research also makes a significant contribution to the development of semantic approaches in Qur'anic studies. The syntagmatic analysis reveals that the relationship between *nafs* and other linguistic elements, such as in QS 12:53 and QS 91:7–10, adds important layers of meaning that are essential for understanding. This is relevant in Qur'anic linguistic studies, which require contextual analysis of the structure of verses. Additionally, the paradigmatic analysis that compares *nafs* with terms like *ruh* and *qalb* highlights conceptual differences that have often been underexplored. Therefore, this study provides a stronger foundation for the study of other key vocabulary in the Qur'an.

The implications of this research span across the fields of Qur'anic tafsir, Arabic linguistics, and Islamic studies in general. In the field of tafsir, these findings assist mufasssirin in developing more systematic approaches to interpreting complex terms like *nafs*. With a deeper understanding of semantic domains, translators can also produce more accurate translations, as suggested by Obeidat and Mahadi (Obeidat & Mahadi, 2020). In the academic realm, this research could also stimulate further studies that explore other terms with similar approaches, enriching Qur'anic studies from linguistic and semantic perspectives.

From a practical perspective, the results of this study are relevant to contemporary discussions about Islamic psychology and the moral development of individuals. Understanding *nafs* as an entity that encompasses both good and evil tendencies, as described in QS 91:8, can provide a theological foundation for developing value-based Islamic therapy. Moreover, these findings are relevant to Islamic ethics, where *nafs* plays an essential role in shaping individual moral behavior.

However, this study has several limitations that should be noted. First, the focus of the research is limited to the term *nafs* in the Qur'an and does not explore its usage in Hadith or other Islamic literature. This restricts the generalization of the findings to a broader corpus of Islamic texts. Second, the syntagmatic and paradigmatic analyses conducted are based on specific linguistic interpretations that may differ from classical tafsir approaches. Third, while this study includes an analysis of the frequency distribution of *nafs*, there has not been an in-depth exploration of the statistical relationships between the identified themes, such as psychological and spiritual aspects. Fourth, the worldview framework used is based on Badrun's model, which may introduce bias in interpreting the theological and eschatological domains of the Qur'an (Badrun, 2023).

In the future, this research could be expanded by exploring the relationships between *nafs* and other terms in Islamic literature, such as Hadith and classical tafsir. Furthermore, interdisciplinary approaches involving psychology, philosophy,

and cognitive studies could provide additional insights into the concept of *nafs*. The use of advanced technologies, such as AI-based semantic analysis, could also improve the accuracy of identifying linguistic patterns in Qur'anic texts. In this way, the contributions of this research can be extended, both in the academic framework and in religious and social practice.

## Conclusion

This study concludes that the term *nafs* in the Qur'an has semantic complexity encompassing three main meanings: self-identity, psychological aspects, and spiritual aspects. The syntagmatic analysis shows that the meaning of *nafs* is highly dependent on its relationship with other words in the sentence structure, such as in QS 12:53, which emphasizes the soul's tendency to command evil, and QS 91:7-10, which describes the divine inspiration given to the soul. Meanwhile, the paradigmatic analysis reveals that *nafs* significantly differs from other terms like *ruh* and *qalb*, with each term carrying unique conceptual implications. This study also highlights the relevance of the term *nafs* within the framework of the Qur'anic worldview, encompassing theological, anthropological, and eschatological domains. These findings not only enrich the linguistic and theological understanding of the Qur'anic text but also provide a foundation for further research in Islamic psychology, ethics, and the translation of religious texts.

The main contribution of this study lies in integrating contextual semantic approaches with syntagmatic and paradigmatic analysis, offering a holistic understanding of the term *nafs*. Additionally, the findings provide a more systematic foundation for Qur'anic tafsir, particularly in interpreting terms that have complex semantic fields. By utilizing literature such as *Mufradat Alfadh al-Qur'an* and *Lisan al-Arab*, as well as modern approaches like semantic representation models, this research contributes to bridging classical and contemporary approaches in Qur'anic studies.

Suggestions for future research include several aspects. First, further exploration of the term *nafs* outside the Qur'an, such as in Hadith or classical tafsir literature, could provide additional insights into the semantic and theological evolution of this term. Second, interdisciplinary research involving psychology, philosophy, and artificial intelligence could expand our understanding of the role of *nafs* in modern contexts. Third, the development of technology-based semantic analysis methods, such as natural language processing (NLP), could improve the accuracy of mapping linguistic patterns in sacred texts. Fourth, a more in-depth study of the statistical relationships between themes related to *nafs*, such as psychological and spiritual aspects, could provide a more measurable understanding of its influence in the Qur'anic text.

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