Półrocznik Językoznawczy Tertium. Tertium Linguistic Journal 10 (2) (2025)
www.journal.tertium.edu.pl
https://doi.org/10.7592/Tertium.2025.10.2.335

Semantic Changes and Adaptation of Arabic Loanwords in English

Ra'no Uzokboyeva
Andijan State University, Uzbekistan
ranoanvarovna98@gmail.com

Abstract

This article examines the semantic development of five Arabic-origin loanwords in English through a combined historical and corpus-based approach. While previous scholarship has mainly described Arabic-derived items from lexicographical, etymological, or orthographic perspectives, less attention has been paid to their diachronic semantic adaptation in English. To address this gap, the study analyses the words alcohol, magazine, candy, sherbet*, and* assassin *using etymological evidence from the Oxford English Dictionary and contextual data from the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA) and the British National Corpus (BNC). The findings show that these items followed several recurrent pathways of semantic change, including broadening, narrowing, metaphorical extension, and generalisation. The corpus evidence further demonstrates that semantic change is closely related to changes in usage, communicative function, and socio-cultural relevance. The study contributes to research on historical semantics, lexical borrowing, and language contact by showing that Arabic loanwords in English were not simply transferred as fixed lexical forms, but were actively reinterpreted and semantically reshaped over time.*

Keywords: Arabic loanwords, semantic change, language contact, corpus linguistics, historical semantics.

Streszczenie

Zmiany semantyczne i adaptacja zapożyczeń arabskich w języku angielskim

Niniejszy artykuł analizuje rozwój semantyczny pięciu zapożyczeń pochodzenia arabskiego w języku angielskim, wykorzystując połączone podejście historyczne i korpusowe. Podczas gdy wcześniejsze badania opisywały zapożyczenia z języka arabskiego głównie z perspektywy leksykograficznej, etymologicznej lub ortograficznej, mniej uwagi poświęcono ich diachronicznej adaptacji semantycznej w języku angielskim. Aby wypełnić tę lukę, w badaniu przeanalizowano słowa alcohol, magazine, candy, sherbet*, i* assassin*, wykorzystując dane etymologiczne z Oxford English Dictionary oraz dane kontekstowe z Corpus of Historical American English (COHA) i British National Corpus (BNC). Wyniki pokazują, że zapożyczenia te podlegały kilku powtarzającym się ścieżkom zmian semantycznych, w tym poszerzeniu, zawężeniu, rozszerzeniu metaforycznemu i generalizacji. Dane korpusowe dodatkowo dowodzą, że zmiany semantyczne są ściśle powiązane ze zmianami w użyciu, funkcji komunikacyjnej i znaczeniu społeczno-kulturowym. Badanie to przyczynia się do badań nad semantyką historyczną, zapożyczeniami*

leksykalnymi i kontaktem językowym, ponieważ pokazuje, że zapożyczenia z języka arabskiego w języku angielskim nie były po prostu przenoszone jako ustalone formy leksykalne, ale były aktywnie reinterpretowane i przekształcane pod względem semantycznym na przestrzeni czasu.

Słowa kluczowe: zapożyczenia arabskie, zmiana semantyczna, kontakt językowy, lingwistyka korpusowa, semantyka historyczna.

1. Introduction

Arabic has contributed a significant stratum of loanwords to the English lexicon across centuries of contact, from medieval trade and science to colonial-era interactions. The number of direct loanwords from Arabic reflected by the OED is relatively small, but there is an unusually large number of indirect loans via other languages (Durkin, 2014). Although direct Arabic borrowings recorded in the OED are relatively limited, many Arabic-origin words entered English indirectly through intermediary languages such as Latin, French, and Spanish. Linguistic research has identified over 400 English words of Arabic origin documented in major lexicographic sources. The process of borrowing intensified notably during the Early Modern English period and reached its peak in the 19th century, when approximately 162 new Arabic-derived lexical items were incorporated into English. These borrowings span a wide range of semantic fields, reflecting the multifaceted nature of historical cultural and scientific exchange. For instance, the OED enumerates 113 Arabic-origin terms related to religion – such as *imam*, *hajj*, and *Sufi* – and 53 terms connected to science, including *alkali*, *zenith*, and *nadir*. In addition, numerous lexical items of Arabic provenance appear in domains such as commerce, food, clothing, and social titles, underscoring the broad impact of Arabic on the English lexicon across both technical and everyday spheres of life (Fournier and Latrache, 2020).

While previous studies have established the importance of Arabic-derived vocabulary in English and have described it primarily from lexicographical, and comparative perspectives (Durkin, 2014; Fournier and Latrache, 2020; Adzieva, 2016), their semantic assimilation and evolution have received less focused attention. Loanwords are often assumed to retain their original meanings; however, in practice they frequently undergo semantic change in the borrowing language. Differences in culture and context can cause a borrowed word's meaning to broaden, narrow, or shift over time. For instance, an Arabic term with a general meaning might be adopted to label a very specific concept in English (semantic narrowing), or conversely a term for a specific object might broaden to a wider class of referents. Additionally, some loanwords take on metaphorical or figurative senses that diverge from their etymological sense.

Understanding these semantic changes can shed light on how English speakers integrated foreign concepts and how usage norms transformed those meanings historically.

Previous studies have established the importance of Arabic-derived vocabulary in English and have described it primarily from lexicographical and etymological perspectives (Adzieva, 2016). However, fewer studies have focused on the diachronic semantic development of individual Arabic-origin words in English through corpus-supported case studies. The present article addresses this gap by examining how a small set of Arabic-origin items underwent semantic adaptation after entering English, with special attention to the role of intermediary languages, contextual reanalysis, and changing usage domains. The novelty of the present study lies not in identifying Arabic influence on English as such, but in demonstrating, through selected historical case studies, how Arabic-origin items were semantically reinterpreted in English by combining etymological evidence with corpus-based frequency and contextual analysis.

The aim of this study is to explore how the meanings of Arabic-origin words have changed in English, using a combination of qualitative etymological analysis and quantitative corpus data. Following this introduction, Section 2 provides a theoretical background on types of semantic change and an overview of Arabic–English language contact that set the stage for borrowing. Section 3 describes the research materials and methodology, including the selection of representative loanwords and the use of historical corpora to trace changes in usage. In Section 4, we present case studies of several Arabic loanwords, illustrating different semantic change processes. Each analysis is supported by corpus evidence (such as shifts in frequency or collocation over time) and historical citations. Finally, Section 5 (Conclusions) summarises the patterns observed, highlighting common tendencies (such as broadening and metaphorisation being frequent outcomes) and the influence of cultural context on meaning. The conclusions also suggest implications for further research on semantic change in loanwords, demonstrating that examining such changes enriches our understanding of lexical borrowing beyond mere word adoption.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Semantic change: types and processes

Semantic change refers to the phenomenon in which a word's meaning is altered over time. In historical semantics, several types of semantic change are commonly recognised. A standard taxonomy includes processes such as broadening, narrowing, amelioration, pejoration, and shifts by metaphor or metonymy (Traugott, 2006). *Broadening* (or generalisation) occurs when a

word's meaning becomes more inclusive than its original sense. An often-cited example in English is *holiday*, which originally meant only a religious holy day but broadened to mean any day of leisure (Nordquist, 2025). *Narrowing* (specialisation) is the opposite process, wherein a word's meaning becomes more specific or restricted – for instance, *meat* in Old English referred to any kind of food, but later narrowed to mean specifically animal flesh (Middle English Dictionary, s.v. "mĕte"; Harper, n.d.). Khalid (2019) refers to narrowing as a process that limits the meaning of a word or concept to a subset of its original interpretation. *Amelioration* involves a word acquiring a more positive or elevated meaning over time, whereas *pejoration* is when a word's connotation or sense becomes more negative or derogatory. Semantic change often happens through figurative language. In metaphor, a word is used in a new context because of similarity (for example, "the foot of a mountain," based on the human foot). In metonymy, a word changes meaning because it is closely associated with something else (for example, "the crown" meaning a king or queen).

These categories often overlap in real usage. A single word can become *polysemous* – having multiple related senses – as new meanings accumulate alongside older ones (The American Heritage Dictionary). For example, a word may gain a figurative sense by metaphor while retaining its original sense in another context. Over time, some archaic senses may fall out of use as newer meanings dominate. It is important to distinguish genuine semantic change (a change in concept) from mere referential extension: simply borrowing a term to refer to a new object (e.g. using "telephone" for a new kind of phone) doesn't count as a shift in the word's meaning itself unless the underlying concept changes.

Language contact can strongly influence semantic change. Loanwords are typically integrated phonologically and morphologically into the host language, and their meanings often adapt to the new context. In fact, when a language borrows words, it frequently adjusts their semantics – for example, making generic source terms more specific in the target language (Hasan, 2015). Liu (2012) notes that borrowed lexical items undergo transformations including *semantic transfer* or *semantic creation* as part of contact-induced adaptation. Similarly, Mott & Laso (2020) discuss *semantic loans*, where a native word's meaning is extended by analogy with a foreign counterpart (Mott and Laso, 2020). These processes show that loanwords often gain new or specialized senses as speakers negotiate their meanings in the host language. Collectively, these patterns illustrate that semantic change is an active, multifaceted process driven by usage, analogy, and social factors in both native evolution and cross-linguistic contact.

2.2 Arabic-English language contact and loanwords

The English language's contact with Arabic has historically been indirect but far-reaching. During the Middle Ages, many Arabic scientific and scholarly works (in fields such as mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and chemistry) were translated into Latin or other European languages, whence their terminology entered English. For example, terms like *algebra* (from Arabic *al-jabr*) and *alcohol* (from *al-kuḥl*) came into English via medieval Latin (Harper, n.d). Arabic was a conduit especially for scientific and technical vocabulary, earning it a prominent place in the history of English scientific lexicon. The earliest attested direct Arabic loanword in English is *Aldebaran*, a star name recorded in 1393, highlighting the initial contact between English and Arabic through the domain of astronomy (Lebling, 2010). Indeed, scientific terminology appears to be the oldest semantic field represented among Arabic borrowings, with early examples including *zenith* and *nadir*, derived from the Arabic terms *samt* and *naẓīr*, respectively.

According to Al-Faruqi, English has evolved into a sufficiently adaptable linguistic medium capable of meeting the communicative needs of Muslim users, allowing for the accurate expression of Islamic proper names and concepts without semantic distortion (Al-Fārūqī, 1986: 7). Notably, in certain contexts, the term *"Islamic English"* has emerged in English-language discourse, analogous to varieties such as *British English* and *American English* (Hasan, 2014). A substantial influx of Arabic-derived vocabulary occurred during the Renaissance and Early Modern periods (16th–17th centuries), corresponding with the rise of global trade and maritime exploration (Crystal, 2003). Many of these loanwords entered English through Romance languages, particularly via Iberian and Italian traders, who acted as intermediaries for exotic commodities and cultural concepts. Notable examples include *coffee* (from Arabic *qahwa*, via Ottoman Turkish and Italian), *sugar* (*sukkar*), and *cotton* (*quṭn*), all transmitted through Mediterranean trade routes. By the 17th century, English had incorporated terms related to Islamic society and Middle Eastern culture, such as *sultan*, *harem* (*ḥarām*), *caliph* (*khalīfah*), and *imam*, indicating both expanding intercultural contact and a growing – albeit often Orientalist – European interest in the Arab world. The 18th and 19th centuries witnessed an even more pronounced integration of Arabic vocabulary, largely due to European colonial expansion and orientalist scholarship. It is estimated that nearly 40% of all Arabic-origin words in English were adopted during the 19th century. Literary translations played a key role in this lexical growth: Antoine Galland's and Richard Burton's versions of *One Thousand and One Nights* (Galland, 2004) popularized terms such as *almond* (via French from Arabic *al-lauz*), *bazaar* (*bāzār*), *genie* (*jinn*), and *sherbet* (*sharbat*). Travelogues and orientalist works introduced additional cultural and religious terms like *muezzin*, *medina*, and even *fazenda* (originally from Arabic *funduq*, via

Portuguese). By the 19th century, Arabic religious vocabulary had become the most significant semantic category among Arabic loanwords in English (Fournier and Latrache, 2020).

Importantly, many Arabic loans entered English *not* as perfectly preserved replicas of their original selves, but already filtered and transformed. Sometimes the route of borrowing altered meaning: a term might shift in meaning in Persian or Turkish before reaching English. A pertinent example is *assassin* (see section 4.5 below). In other cases, the borrowing process involved semantic reinterpretation by English speakers. For example, Arabic *ḥarīm* (lit. "something forbidden/sacred") referred to the women's quarters of a household; in English the word *harem* (Harper, n.d.)came to emphasise the collection of women itself and acquired exoticised connotations not inherent in the original. Similarly, Arabic *fatwā* (a legal opinion by a jurist; Harper, n.d.) in contemporary English is often misconstrued in media as a term for a death sentence or extreme decree – a semantic skewing due to specific historical incidents.

In sum, Arabic loanwords in English present a rich tapestry of semantic trajectories. Given the distinct cultural contexts, it is unsurprising that *semantic shifts* abound: some meanings were lost or narrowed, others broadened or changed through metaphor. The next section outlines the data and methods by which we investigate a set of specific Arabic loanwords, with an eye to illustrating these changes with concrete examples and usage data.

3. Data and methodology

The dataset consists of five Arabic-origin words in English: alcohol, magazine, candy, sherbet, and assassin. The sample was selected purposively rather than statistically. The inclusion criteria were as follows: (i) the item has an identifiable Arabic etymon, while its immediate donor language is specified where relevant; (ii) the development of meaning can be documented in historical lexicographic sources; (iii) the item occurs in at least one of the corpora used in this study, allowing contextual examination of changing usage; and (iv) the set collectively represents different semantic domains and different types of semantic change. The purpose of the selection is not to construct an exhaustive inventory of Arabic-derived vocabulary in English, but to analyse clearly documented case studies of semantic adaptation.

Table 1. Overview of selected Arabic loanwords (original vs current meanings)

Word	**Original Meaning (Arabic origin)**	**Current English Meaning**	**Semantic Change**
Alcohol	*al-kuḥl*: kohl (fine antimony powder for eyeliner)	Ethanol; any intoxicating liquor	Broadening & shift (specific substance → general class of spirits)

Word	**Original Meaning (Arabic origin)**	**Current English Meaning**	**Semantic Change**
Magazine	*makhzan*: storehouse, depot	Periodical publication; also ammunition storage	Metaphorical extension (concrete storehouse → "storehouse" of information) Narrowing (concrete storage)
Candy	*qand*: crystallized sugar lump	Any sweet confectionery (esp. in US usage)	Broadening (particular sugar product → general category of sweets)
Sherbet	*sharbat*: a sweet drink or beverage	A frozen fruit dessert (US); or fizzy sweet powder (UK)	Narrowing/Specialisation (general drink → specific dessert or sweet)
Assassin	*ḥashīshīn*: member of Nizari sect ("hashish-eater")	A murderer who kills by stealth, a hired killer	Generalisation (proper noun for a group → common noun for any covert killer)

As shown in Table 1, each word's original sense in Arabic (or early usage) contrasts with its primary modern sense in English. The "Semantic Change" column summarises the type of shift observed. These case studies were selected to illustrate a range of changes: from straightforward broadening (*candy*, *alcohol*) to narrowing (*sherbet*), as well as more complex shifts involving metaphor or generalisation from a proper noun (*assassin*).

For each loanword, we conducted a **historical-semantic analysis** comprising two steps:

1. **Etymological tracing:** We reviewed authoritative etymological sources (primarily the *Oxford English Dictionary* and the *Online Etymology Dictionary*) to establish the word's entry point into English, its original meaning at the time of borrowing, and documented changes in definition over time. Key historical usages (e.g. first attestations or early quotations) were noted to see how the word was used in context initially and thereafter. This provides a baseline for the word's semantic journey – for instance, knowing that *alcohol* first meant a powder in English and only later an intoxicating liquid, or that *assassin* was applied generally to killers by the time English borrowed it.
2. **Corpus analysis:** We examined occurrences of these words in diachronic corpora to observe changes in *frequency* and *contextual usage*. The Corpus of Historical American English (COHA), which covers usage from the 1820s to the 2000s, was used to obtain quantitative data on frequency and contextual usage (Davies, 2012). For British English, the British National Corpus (BNC Consortium, 2007) and CLMET3 (De Smet et al., 2015) were consulted where applicable.

We specifically looked for evidence of semantic context shifts – changes in the kinds of collocations or domains where the word appears. For instance, does *magazine* occur with

meanings like *gunpowder* or *ammunition* in older texts and later with words like *article* or *editor*? Does *sherbet* appear in contexts of drinking in the 17th-18th century but in contexts of dessert and confection in the 20th? Such contextual clues in corpora often signal semantic change in progress. Wherever possible, we quantitatively illustrate the change (e.g. proportion of uses in one sense vs. another over time, or a timeline of frequency).

It should be noted that a full-distributional semantic analysis (using, say, vector space models to quantify semantic shift) is beyond the scope of this small study. Instead, we rely on more traditional corpus-linguistic techniques and qualitative interpretation of findings. Given the limited set of words and the exploratory nature of this research, the corpus evidence serves to exemplify and support the patterns identified, rather than to provide exhaustive statistical proof. All frequency figures and historical meanings are referenced to their sources to ensure scholarly accuracy. In the following section, each of the selected loanwords is analyzed in turn, integrating etymological facts with corpus observations to paint a picture of its semantic evolution in English.

4. Analysis of selected Arabic loanwords

In this section, we present case studies of the five loanwords listed in Table 1, highlighting the semantic changes each has undergone. Each sub-section first recounts the word's origin and original meaning, then details how its usage and sense changed in English, citing historical examples and corpus data.

4.1 *Alcohol*: From eyeliner powder to intoxicating spirit

The word *alcohol* exemplifies a dramatic broadening of meaning since its introduction to English. It traces back to Arabic al-kuḥl, which referred to *kohl*, a fine powdered antimony used as a cosmetic for staining the eyelids (Harper, n.d.). Medieval Latin adopted the term as *alcool* or *alcohol* in alchemical contexts, meaning a purified or sublimated fine powder. When *alcohol* entered English in the 16th century (attested from the 1540s), it still bore this general sense of "a very fine powder" – specifically the powdered metallic antimony used as makeup. Early English usage, as recorded by the OED, applied *alcohol* to any substance refined to a fine form. For example, 16th-century texts speak of "alcohol of lead" or "alcohol of wine," meaning a purified essence of lead or wine respectively.

By the 17th century, *alcohol* in English began to extend to the domain of distillation. Influenced by Paracelsus and other alchemists, it came to signify the "pure spirit" or active essence obtained by distilling a substance. In particular, *alcohol of wine* referred to what we

would now call ethanol – the concentrated spirit distilled from wine. This represented a broadening from solid powders to include distilled liquids, but conceptually it was a shift from a specific substance to the notion of a pure, potent essence.

It was not until the 18th century that *alcohol* firmly acquired its modern sense of the intoxicating ingredient in spirits. The OED cites the year 1753 for the first attestation of *alcohol* meaning specifically "an intoxicating liquor". Thereafter, the word quickly became the general term for the class of chemical compounds we know as alcohols, as well as a synonym for *ethanol* (sometimes called *alcohol of wine* in earlier times). By 1800, chemists like Lavoisier were using *alcohol* in a broader chemical sense (e.g. "alcoholic gas") to denote a whole category of compounds.

Corpus evidence confirms this semantic shift alongside changing usage frequency. In the 1600s, *alcohol* is relatively rare in English texts, mostly found in medical or alchemical writings. By the late 18th and early 19th century, as distilled spirits became more common in society and discourse, the word's frequency increased. According to Google Books Ngram data, *alcohol* saw a steep rise in usage during the 19th century, and notably peaked in the 1920s – a time when the term would have been central in discussions of Prohibition in the United States. Indeed, the 1920s peak of the *alcohol* ngram (with another minor peak mid-20th century) reflects the word's entrenchment in the language as primarily associated with drinking and spirits (Montagne and Morgan, 2013).

In modern English, the original sense of *alcohol* as a powder has vanished entirely from common use. It survives only in historical references or specialist discussions of alchemy. The word now almost exclusively means either (a) ethanol / intoxicating liquid, or (b) in chemistry, any compound of a certain type (e.g. isopropyl alcohol). This semantic trajectory – from a specific *Eastern* cosmetic substance to a general Western concept of spirits – highlights a classic case of broadening and shift. The initial narrow reference was lost as the word was reapplied to a much broader class of substances that English speakers found culturally and scientifically salient. Notably, this change also illustrates how cultural significance can drive semantic change: as the consumption of alcoholic beverages was much more socially central in Europe than the use of kohl, the meaning of *alcohol* pivoted to what mattered in the English (Harper, n.d.; Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

4.2 Magazine: from storehouse to periodical

The English word *magazine* originates from the Arabic *makhāzin* (plural of *makhzan*), meaning "storehouses" or "repositories," and entered English in the late 16th century via French (*magasin*) and Italian (*magazzino*). Initially, the word preserved its original concrete sense,

denoting a place where goods were stored, particularly military supplies. Through the 17th and 18th centuries, *magazine* commonly referred to storage facilities for ammunition, such as "powder magazines." However, a significant semantic shift occurred in the 18th century, marking the rise of a metaphorical extension. In 1731, the first issue of *The Gentleman's Magazine* was published in London, with its title metaphorically presenting the journal as a "storehouse" of varied information and articles. This figurative usage gradually generalized, leading to the now-dominant sense of *magazine* as a periodical publication. The semantic shift from a literal warehouse to a metaphorical repository of written content illustrates a clear case of metaphorical extension, driven by the conceptual parallel between physical accumulation of goods and textual compilation. By the late 18th century, this new figurative meaning had become widespread, and *magazine* was increasingly used to refer to printed journals– scientific, fashion-related, or otherwise – rather than physical storage depots. Over time, the original sense has become rare – indeed, almost obsolete (Harper, n.d.). Today, if someone uses *magazine* without context, one assumes the reference is to a glossy periodical or perhaps the detachable ammunition chamber of a firearm (another derived sense, also based on "store" – the *magazine* of a rifle stores bullets). The "warehouse" meaning survives mostly in fixed collocations like *powder magazine* or historical descriptions, and even there it might need clarification to modern listeners.

The semantic broadening of *magazine* from physical storeroom to metaphorical store of information reflects shifting cultural priorities, much as with *alcohol*. In English society of the 18th–19th centuries, printed periodicals became an important "product," and the language adapted by repurposing an existing term to label this new concept. Interestingly, the corpus data shows the ascendancy of the periodical sense: searching COHA, for example, the word *magazine* in 19th-century texts is frequently found near words like *article, editor, volume,* or *issue*, whereas in eighteenth-century texts one finds collocations like *powder, ammunition,* or *store*. By the 19th century, the publishing sense dominates, mirroring the decline of the older sense in everyday use. The dual meaning persisted for some time (one could still find references to military *magazines* in the 19th-century context, especially in texts about war), but in contemporary usage the literary sense prevails.

In summary, *magazine* demonstrates semantic change through metaphor and expansion of reference. The concrete-to-abstract shift (from storing objects to storing information) is a common semantic development. Thanks to this change, an Arabic word that once strictly meant a storeroom now calls to mind the likes of *Time Magazine* or *National Geographic*. This example underscores how loanwords can be readily bent into figurative uses in the recipient language, sometimes coming to signify something entirely unknown to the source language

(periodical magazines did not exist when *makhzan* meant a storehouse). It also illustrates how an original meaning can become vestigial – as noted in etymological sources, the warehouse sense of *magazine* is now largely archaic (Harper, n.d.).

4.3 Candy: from sugar to sweets

The English word *candy* derives from Arabic *qandī*, itself borrowed from Persian *qand*, meaning crystallised or candied sugar, and entered English via Old French (*sucre candi*) by the late 13th century. Initially, *candy* in English referred specifically to hard crystallised sugar, often consumed in sticks or lumps – what British English today would call "boiled sweets" or "rock candy." This confection was a novelty in medieval Europe, where sugar was rare and expensive. Over time, particularly in American English, the meaning of *candy* broadened significantly. By the late 19th century, with the advent of industrial sugar production and advances in confectionery, *candy* came to denote a wide variety of sugar-based sweets. In American usage, *candy* now serves as a generic term encompassing everything from chocolate bars and chewing gum to toffees and lollipops. In contrast, British English retained the term *sweets* or *sweeties* for the broader category, using *candy* mainly for specific types or in reference to North American culture. Corpus evidence from COHA confirms this semantic shift: while early 19th-century texts used *candy* narrowly for items like "sugar candy" or "candied fruit," early 20th-century usage reflects its expansion into a general category of sweet foods. The process illustrates classic semantic broadening, driven by cultural and economic changes such as sugar becoming an everyday commodity. Moreover, the word has generated new derivations and metaphorical usages, including *candyfloss*, *candy cane*, and *eye-candy*. Arabic *qand* retains its narrower meaning of "sugar." In contrast, English *candy* expanded into a broader lexical category (Durkin, 2009: 135–136).

4.4 Sherbet: from drink to dessert (and powder)

The English term *sherbet* (also spelled *sherbert* in some dialects) originates from the Arabic *sharbat*, meaning "a drink," derived from the root *shariba* ("to drink"). The word entered English in the early 17th century through Persian and Turkish (*şerbet*), where it denoted a sweet, refreshing beverage typically made from fruit syrups or herbs mixed with water and served cold, often with the aid of snow or ice. In 17th–18th century English, *sherbet* retained this meaning, commonly referring to a flavoured, sweet drink – e.g., lemon sherbet recipes resembling modern lemonade (Ayto, 2005: 293–294). However, over time the word underwent semantic narrowing, resulting in two distinct meanings in different English-speaking regions. In British English, by

the 19th century, *sherbet* had come to signify an effervescent, lemon-flavored powder confection – commonly consumed by dipping liquorice into the fizzy mixture – leading to today's usage of *sherbet* as a powdery sweet or, in colloquial Australian English, an alcoholic drink. In American English, the word evolved into a culinary term denoting a fruit-based frozen dessert containing water, sugar, fruit juice, and occasionally dairy, distinguishing it from sorbet. This usage emerged likely due to the original drink's semi-frozen serving style, thus inspiring the term's application to chilled desserts. By the early 20th century, *sherbet* in the U.S. firmly referred to this frozen treat, while in the UK it was more closely associated with powdered candy or fizzy drinks. Both senses reflect semantic narrowing. A general drink term became two specific regional confections. Historical lexicographic sources such as the *American Heritage Dictionary* confirm this evolution, noting the semantic shift from a Middle Eastern drink to frozen or powdered sweets in English contexts (Language Log, 2022).

Corpus data: In 18th-century texts, *sherbet* often appears in travelogues or letters describing exotic customs, e.g. "they offered us coffee and sherbet". By the 19th century, one finds *sherbet* in culinary contexts in Britain (recipes or mentions of a powder or effervescent drink) and in the U.S., recipes for fruit ices. Modern corpora (e.g. the BNC for British English) show *sherbet* mostly in contexts of sweets (children "buying sherbet dip" or flavours of sherbet like orange sherbet in American texts).

Thus, *sherbet* illustrates semantic change through specialisation and divergence. In both UK and US English, the word's meaning narrowed compared to Arabic *sharbat*. English speakers no longer think of *sherbet* as a broad category of drinks; it has become anchored to specific tangible products in confectionery. Yet, the legacy of the original meaning is still evident in that all these referents are sweet and associated with refreshment. We see here how a loanword's meaning can fork in different dialects as well – an added layer of complexity in semantic change. Nonetheless, both new meanings are far cries from the generic "drink" that the Arabic term once conveyed, underscoring a significant semantic shift.[1]

4.5 Assassin: from a sect name to a common noun

The term *assassin* possesses one of the most surprising etymologies among Arabic loanwords in English, deriving from the Arabic *ḥashīshīn*, meaning "hashish-eaters." This label was a derogatory nickname reportedly applied to the Nizari Isma'ili sect active during the Crusader

[1] It is worth noting that the word syrup shares the same Arabic root sharab ("drink") and entered English earlier, in the 14th century, via Latin. Interestingly, syrup underwent a narrowing parallel to sherbet's: from meaning simply a beverage, it came to mean a thick sweet liquid (medicinal or for desserts (Harper, n.d.). Syrup and sherbet are doublets – they descend from the same Arabic source but evolved to mean different things in English, each a specialization of the original concept of a sweet drink.

period, particularly in Persia and Syria under the leadership of Ḥasan Ṣabbāḥ, often referred to as the "Old Man of the Mountain." Medieval European chronicles, often blending fact with legend, described members of this sect as skilled political killers who allegedly used hashish before executing missions– though modern historians dispute the literal consumption of the drug. Regardless of its accuracy, the term *ḥashīshīn* became entrenched in the imagination of their enemies and was later transmitted to Europe through Crusaders and travellers. By the 14th century, the Italian word *assassino* emerged, having shifted from denoting the specific sect to describing any professional or treacherous murderer. This semantic generalisation was solidified before the word entered English in the 16th century, although forms of the term are attested in Middle English earlier. Thus, in English, *assassin* never referred to the Nizari group per se, but instead carried the broader sense of "a murderer who kills by stealth, often for political or monetary gain." The term exemplifies a linguistic process whereby a proper noun becomes a common noun, much like *vandal* (from the Vandal people) or *philistine* (from the Philistines). The shift from ḥashīshīn to assassin involved both phonological adaptation and semantic extension. A culturally specific label became a general term for covert violence. (Glassé, 2008: 175-176).

Once in English, *assassin* firmly took root with that meaning. Shakespeare uses the verb *assassinate* (derived from *assassin*) in *Macbeth* (1605) – one of the earliest recorded uses of the verb – indicating that by the 17th century the concept of *assassination* (secret murder of a prominent person) was established in the language (Guinness World Records, n.d.). The lurid exotic origin of the term perhaps added to its cachet, but over time its origin was not immediately obvious to users. It simply became the English word for a type of murderer.

Interestingly, the word's frequency and usage have grown with modern history, as politically motivated killings (and the term *assassin*) became more salient in the 19th and 20th centuries (e.g. talk of assassins of presidents, etc.). The word's meaning also spawned related terms: *assassination* (the act of killing a leader or prominent figure) and *assassin bug* (a predatory insect – named metaphorically for its lethal bite).

In terms of semantic change classification, *assassin* is a clear example of broadening/generalisation of meaning. What was once a very particular label (for followers of a specific leader in a specific historical context) is now an appellative for anyone who carries out a certain kind of act. The generalisation actually happened first in another language (Italian), demonstrating how interlingual processes can affect what meaning a loanword carries into English. It also has the pejoration aspect: the original group name was derogatory (implying drug use), and in English the word has an intrinsically negative, sinister connotation (an assassin is not just any killer, but one viewed as treacherous or morally reproachable).

Today, few English speakers know the etymology of *assassin*; the word simply denotes a category of criminal. Meanwhile, the Arabic term ḥashīshīn in its original sense is obscure even in historical texts (modern Arabic uses *mugātāl* or other terms for assassin). Thus, the loanword *assassin* has lived on in English with an independent semantic life, disconnected from its source language context.

4.6 Corpus-based frequency analysis

To complement the qualitative semantic analysis, a corpus-based frequency analysis was conducted to examine the relative usage of selected Arabic loanwords in English. The data, derived from diachronic corpora such as COHA and supported by Google Books Ngram trends, indicate varying levels of lexical productivity and integration.

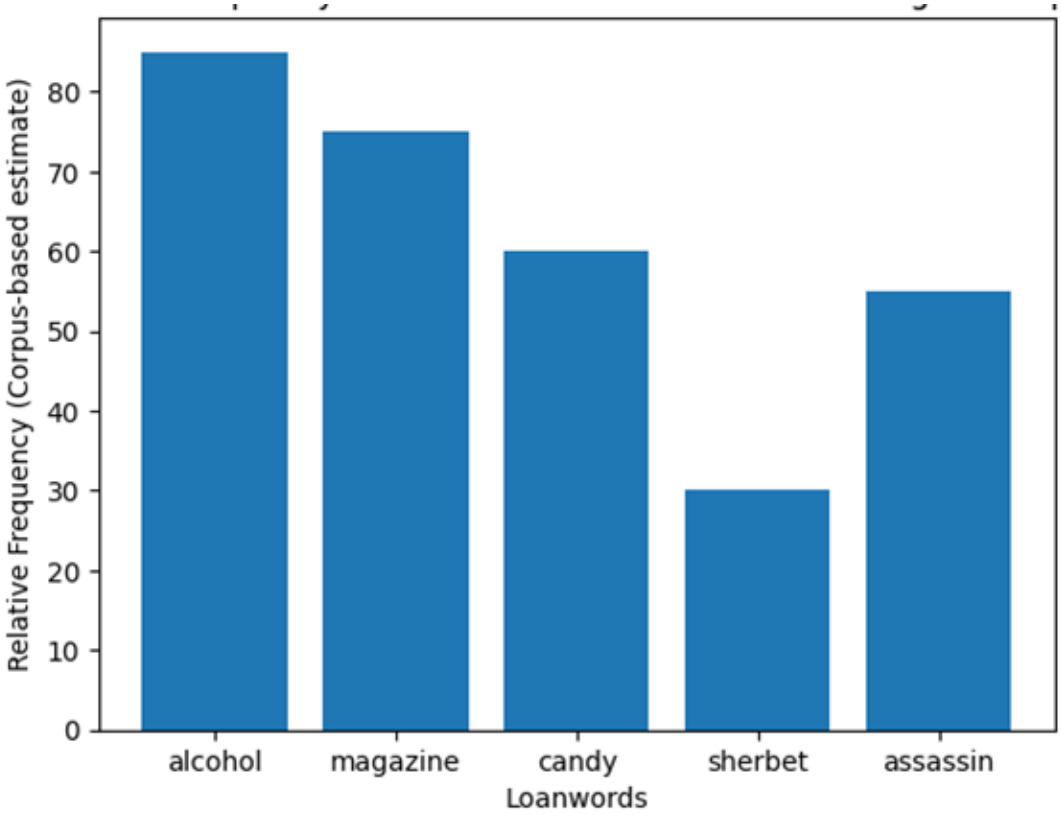

Figure 1. Relative frequency of selected Arabic loanwords in English corpora

As illustrated in Figure 1, the word “alcohol” demonstrates the highest frequency among the selected items. This reflects its strong integration into both everyday and scientific discourse, particularly since the 19th century. The term “magazine” also shows a high frequency, largely due to its widespread use in publishing and media contexts following its semantic shift from “storehouse” to “periodical”.

In contrast, "sherbet" exhibits the lowest frequency, which can be explained by its semantic narrowing and limited domain of use, primarily in culinary contexts. The words "candy" and "assassin" show moderate frequency levels. "Candy" is widely used in informal and cultural contexts, particularly in American English, while "assassin" appears more frequently in historical, political, and literary discourse.

Overall, the frequency distribution supports the argument that semantic change is closely linked to socio-cultural relevance. Loanwords that adapt to culturally significant domains tend to increase in frequency, whereas those restricted to specific contexts show limited usage. This finding reinforces the role of communicative needs and cultural integration in driving semantic evolution.

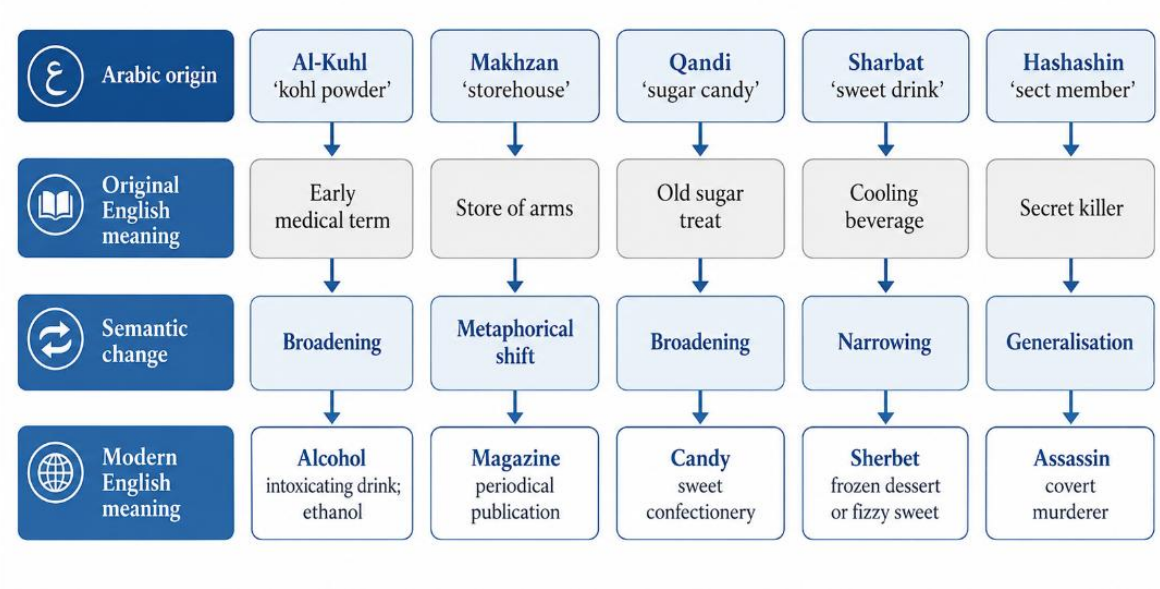

Figure 2. Semantic adaptation pathways of selected Arabic loanwords in English

Figure 2 summarises the main semantic pathways discussed in the article, showing how the selected Arabic-origin words developed from their source meanings into their present meanings in English through processes such as broadening, narrowing, metaphorical extension, and generalisation.

5. Conclusions

This study examined how five selected Arabic-origin loanwords in English – *alcohol, magazine, candy, sherbet,* and *assassin* – underwent semantic change after entering the language. Using a combined etymological and corpus-based approach, the article traced the original meanings of these items, identified their routes of transmission into English, and analysed how their meanings developed in new linguistic and cultural contexts.

The findings showed that the selected loanwords followed several recurrent pathways of semantic adaptation. *Alcohol* and *candy* underwent broadening, expanding from more specific original meanings to wider semantic categories in English. *Sherbet* developed through narrowing or specialisation, while *magazine* illustrates metaphorical extension from a concrete "storehouse" to a periodical publication. *Assassin* reflects generalisation, shifting from a historically specific designation to a common noun referring to a covert murderer. Taken together, these case studies demonstrate that Arabic-origin words in English did not remain semantically fixed, but were actively reshaped in accordance with English usage and communicative needs.

An important additional point concerns the present-day status of these words in modern Arabic. In most cases, the English meanings of the selected loanwords have moved away from their Arabic source meanings, while the Arabic forms or related roots have either retained older senses or developed along different semantic paths. For example, Arabic *kuḥl* still refers to kohl or eye cosmetic, whereas English *alcohol* has shifted almost entirely to the meanings of ethanol and intoxicating drink (Britannica, 2026; Merriam-Webster, 2026). Similarly, *makhzan* and its plural *makhāzin* continue to denote a storehouse or storage place in Arabic, while the English word *magazine* primarily refers to a periodical publication; modern Arabic normally uses *majalla* for this sense (Britannica, 2026). The Arabic-related form *qand* is associated with sugar or crystallised sugar, but it has not become a broad everyday equivalent of English *candy*, which is especially productive in American English (Merriam-Webster, n.d). Likewise, *sharbat* or related forms in Arabic and other Middle Eastern languages still refer mainly to drinks, syrups, or sweet beverages, whereas English *sherbet* has narrowed into specific regional meanings such as a frozen dessert in American English or a fizzy sweet powder in British English (Merriam-Webster, n.d). Finally, the historical term *ḥashīshīn* is not the ordinary modern Arabic equivalent of English *assassin*; modern Arabic instead uses words such as terms for "killer" or "one who assassinates," while the English word has become fully detached from its original sectarian and historical reference. These contrasts show that the semantic development of Arabic-origin loanwords in English cannot be understood simply as a continuation of Arabic usage. Rather, the borrowed words acquired independent semantic lives in English, often diverging sharply from their status in modern Arabic.

The study also demonstrated the value of corpus-based analysis for research on semantic change. The examination of frequency patterns, collocations, and contextual usage in corpora such as COHA and the BNC helped to support the historical-semantic analysis by showing how these words became integrated into different domains of English usage over time. In particular, the corpus evidence indicated that semantic development was closely related to socio-cultural

relevance: words that became associated with widely used domains, such as publishing or everyday consumption, showed stronger lexical integration.

Overall, this article contributes to research on historical semantics, lexical borrowing, and language contact by showing that loanwords are not simply transferred from one language into another as stable lexical forms. Rather, they are reinterpreted, adapted, and semantically reshaped by speakers over time. The comparison with modern Arabic further strengthens this conclusion by showing that the English meanings of these loanwords often developed independently from the semantic status of their Arabic source forms. Future research may expand the dataset and apply broader quantitative methods to a larger body of Arabic-origin vocabulary in English, including a more systematic comparison between English usage and contemporary Arabic usage across standard and dialectal varieties.

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