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Semantic Plurality in Comprehensive Prophetic Hadith and Its Impact on Juristic Disagreement: An Analytical Applied Study

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Abstract: This article examines when interpretive possibilities in concise Prophetic traditions (Jawāmi' al-Kalim) contribute to substantive disagreement among jurists. Four hadiths are analyzed across distinct legal domains: actions and intentions ('Innamā al-a'mālu bi-al-niyyāt'), the option of cancellation during a sale ('Al-bayyi'āni bi-al-khiyār mā lam yatafarraqā'), the prohibition of harm ('Lā ḍarara wa lā ḍirār'), and the universal prohibition of intoxicants ('Kullu muskirin ḥarām'). Rather than treating all disagreements as instances of mere lexical ambiguity, the study compares the wording of each report with the relevant juristic reasoning and legal categorization (taḥqīq al-manāṭ). The discussion finds a relatively direct semantic dispute over physical versus constructive separation in the sales tradition. In the other three cases, differences in legal classification, supporting evidence, and the identification of the operative factual condition play a far greater role. The proposed distinction between textual meaning and the application of a rule helps identify precisely what has divided the jurists in each case.

Keywords: Prophetic hadith; Jawāmiʿ al-kalim; Semantic plurality; Juristic disagreement; Legal interpretation; Islamic jurisprudence.

Introduction

The Prophetic Sunnah is characterized not only by conciseness, but by embedding extensive normative rulings within brief statements. In authentic traditions, the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) described himself as having been granted jawāmi' al-kalim (comprehensive speech). However, transitioning from this rhetorical conciseness to legal jurisprudence is not self-evident. Textual brevity may allow multiple linguistic interpretations, or a phrase may be unambiguous in language yet jurists disagree on the specific factual scenarios falling under its scope. [2], [3]

Distinguishing between semantic ambiguity and legal application is critical when studying juristic disagreement (ikhtilāf). Citing opposing rulings does not automatically reveal the underlying cause of divergence; two legal schools may agree on a hadith's literal wording and general meaning, yet differ on restricting evidence, corroborating reports, or the characterization of the act. Such disputes cannot be resolved by lexicon alone. [23]

In this study, 'comprehensive hadith' (al-ḥadīth al-jāmi') is used as an operational term for concise traditions containing principles applicable across multiple jurisprudence branches. Four celebrated texts representing ritual worship, commercial sales, legal maxims, and dietary prohibitions were selected to evaluate the relationship between textual meaning and legal ruling without limiting the study to a single juristic domain. [10]

Research Problem and Questions

The central problem addresses a key methodological question: When does the semantic interpretation of a phrase in a comprehensive hadith directly cause juristic disagreement, and when does the divergence

occur subsequent to understanding the text, relating instead to practical application or external legal evidence?

To address this problem, the study formulates the following questions:

1. What are the precise semantic boundaries and legal implications of the key terms across the four selected traditions?
2. How do legal schools differentiate between intrinsic linguistic ambiguity and external legal verification (taḥqīq al-manāṭ)?
3. What objective criteria determine whether a juristic dispute stems from lexical variance or legal characterization?

Literature Review

Foundational hadith compilations establish the reported wording that guides legal interpretation. Al-Bukhārī and Muslim preserve the traditions concerning intention, contractual separation, and intoxicants, while Mālik and Ibn Mājah transmit variants of the prohibition of harm. [2], [3], [4], [5]

Classical hadith commentary and comparative jurisprudence supply the interpretive setting for these texts. Ibn Ḥajar explains narrational and linguistic issues, Ibn Rushd reconstructs the causes of juristic disagreement, al-Sarakhsī represents important Ḥanafī arguments, and Ibn Qudāmah records positions in comparative substantive law. [6], [7], [8], [9]

Broader analyses of legal maxims and transmitted evidence are provided by Ibn Rajab, Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr, al-Ṭaḥāwī, and Ibn Ḥibbān. These sources help separate the meaning of a general statement from the legal characterization and evidentiary status of particular applications. [10], [11], [12], [13]

The methodological background also includes reasoning about textual evidence in Ibn Taymiyyah and al-Ghazālī and transmitted variants in al-Nasāʾī. This combination is relevant when examining whether disagreement arises from wording, additional evidence, or juristic inference. [14], [15], [16]

Recent scholarship investigates the accuracy of legal-scriptural readings, semantic homonymy, and linguistic causes of juristic disagreement. Abu Yahya, Belnour and colleagues, and Mesrar address different aspects of textual interpretation; al-Obeidi considers the relationship between transmission and legal opinion. [17], [18], [19], [20]

Additional sources illuminate differing legal methods and contextual interpretation, including al-Shāfiʿī, Ibn al-Mulaqqin, Ibn Taymiyyah, and al-Kabsh. The commentarial and legal frameworks of al-Nawawī, al-Suyūṭī, al-Shāṭibī, al-Kāsānī, al-ʿAynī, and al-Zurqānī further demonstrate the need to distinguish a text's meaning from later juristic application. [21], [22], [23], [24], [25], [26], [27], [28], [29], [30]

Prior studies have addressed the role of wording in juristic disagreement, including works by Salih Belnour et al. (2016), Ali Abu Yahya (2021), Mahmoud Al-Kabsh (2022), and Hamid Mesrar (2026). While these studies examine homonymy and textual accuracy, limiting the inquiry to homonymy (ishterāk) leaves out instances where the text is general or clear yet jurists dispute its qualification or factual application. This study contributes by systematically isolating textual meaning from legal application across diverse juristic topics.

Methodology

The research combines Hadith textual critique, semantic analysis, and comparative jurisprudence. The text of each hadith is established through primary Hadith collections, variants are compared, and legal positions are reconstructed directly from classical jurisprudence and Hadith commentaries. The findings provide a descriptive-analytical taxonomy of disagreement mechanisms within the selected examples.

The unit of analysis is the juristic inference attached to each of four selected hadiths. The procedure compares the transmitted wording, the relevant linguistic interpretation, supporting evidence from classical commentaries and legal sources, and the legal ruling that follows. This is a qualitative textual and comparative analysis; no human-subject sample, statistical test, or newly collected field data are claimed.

Conceptual Framework

A concise hadith does not automatically imply lexical ambiguity. In 'Kullu muskirin ḥarām' (Every intoxicant is prohibited), the rule is clear, yet disagreement arises over whether a specific beverage is intoxicating or how specific variants qualify the general statement. Conversely, in 'mā lam yatafarraqā'

(until they separate), the primary dispute precedes application: Does separation mean physical departure or termination of contractual negotiation?
To analyze these dynamics, three analytical dimensions must be distinguished:
1. Linguistic & Contextual Dimension: Analysis of lexical meaning, syntax, and rhetoric in Arabic.
2. Normative Scope Dimension: Application of rules regarding generality ('umūm), specification (takhṣīṣ), and restriction (ḥaṣr).
3. Legal Characterization Dimension: Verifying whether the legal ratio (manāṭ) is realized in a specific factual occurrence.
Interpretive variance can arise from an individual word (e.g., defining tafarruq), sentence structure (e.g., identifying the object of restriction in 'innamā'), or external context (e.g., conflicting corroborating reports or customs). Furthermore, a legitimate interpretive possibility must be supported by established Arabic usage, align with textual context, and harmonize with relevant Hadith variants.

Results

The comparative reading of the four selected traditions yielded distinct patterns of disagreement. In the sales tradition, the meaning of separation is a direct source of differing rulings. In the traditions concerning intentions, harm, and intoxicants, legal classification, contextual evidence, and verification of factual conditions carry greater explanatory weight. The following cases present the source-based findings individually.
Case Study 1: Actions Are by Intentions and Ablution
Reported by Al-Bukhari and Muslim from 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb: 'Actions are but by intentions, and every person shall have only what he intended.' The analytical issue lies in the scope of restriction (ḥaṣr): If applied to the validity of the action, intention becomes an indispensable legal condition (sharṭ); if applied to spiritual reward and divine acceptance, intention governs merit without necessarily invalidating physical compliance. [2], [3]
In 'Bidāyat al-Mujtahid', Ibn Rushd demonstrates that the dispute over requiring intention for wudū' between the Mālikīs, Shāfi'īs, and Ḥanbalīs (who require it) and the Ḥanafīs and Al-Thawrī (who do not) stems from whether wudū' is categorized as pure devotional worship (t'abbud) or a rationalized cleansing act (ma'qūl al-m'anā). Thus, the divergence relies on the legal characterization of ablution itself rather than a simple lexical dispute over the particle 'innamā'. [7], [21], [9]
Case Study 2: Separation of Buyer and Seller
Al-Bukhari and Muslim report from Ḥakīm ibn Ḥizām and Ibn 'Umar: 'The buyer and the seller retain the option [to cancel] as long as they have not separated.' The direct linguistic question is: Does 'tafarruq' mean physical departure from the contractual scene or the verbal conclusion of the agreement? [2], [3], [6]
The Shāfi'īs and Ḥanbalīs interpret 'tafarruq' as physical separation of bodies, affirming the option of the session (khiyār al-majlis). Conversely, the Ḥanafīs and Mālikīs hold that the contract becomes binding upon verbal offer and acceptance, interpreting 'tafarruq' as speech termination. Here, linguistic interpretation directly generates the substantive legal difference. [8], [9], [28]
Case Study 3: No Harm and No Reciprocation of Harm
Reported by Mālik (mursal) and Ibn Mājah (musnad): 'Lā ḍarara wa lā ḍirār.' Syntactically, absolute negation ('lā') signifies legal prohibition and invalidation of harm. Scholars divided over the distinction between ḍarar and ḍirār—some viewing them as synonymous for emphasis, others defining ḍarar as initiating unprovoked harm and ḍirār as retaliatory harm. [4], [5], [10]
In property disputes (e.g., a landlord causing disturbance to a neighbor), juristic disagreement rarely stems from lexical definitions of ḍirār. Instead, jurists dispute whether the harm is customary or excessive, and how to balance property rights with injury prevention. Disagreement here resides in ratio verification (taḥqīq al-manāṭ) rather than textual meaning. [11], [26], [27]
Case Study 4: Every Intoxicant Is Prohibited
Muslim reports from Ibn 'Umar: 'Every intoxicant is khamr, and every intoxicant is unlawful.' When Abū Mūsā al-Ash'arī asked about specific beverages (bit' and mizr), the Prophet supplied this universal rule. [3], [25]

While the majority of jurists applied this universal statement to all intoxicating liquids regardless of source, classical Ḥanafī jurists (such as Al-Ṭaḥāwī and Al-Sarakhsī) distinguished between raw grape wine (khamr) and fermented date or barley drinks (nabīdh), restricting the automatic application of mandatory penal sanctions (ḥadd). Disagreement in this domain centers on defining the legal scope of khamr and verifying actual intoxication in specific beverages. [8], [12], [28]

Table 1. Comparative findings on the mechanisms of juristic disagreement

Hadith / legal topic	Principal point of disagreement	Dominant explanatory mechanism
Intentions / wudūʾ	Requirement of intention for ablution	Classification of the act and scope of obligation
Sale / tafarruq	Physical or contractual separation	Direct semantic interpretation
No harm / ḍarar	What constitutes legally relevant harm	Legal characterization and factual verification
Intoxicants / khamr	Scope of prohibited beverages and sanctions	Normative scope and factual verification

Discussion

The comparison indicates that semantic plurality is not sufficient on its own to explain juristic disagreement. The sales hadith presents the clearest case of a difference rooted in the referent of a linguistic expression, while the other three cases require attention to the relationship between general wording, supporting sources, and the classification of particular conduct.

The intention example illustrates how an apparently shared understanding of a concise tradition can yield different legal effects when ablution is understood as a purely devotional act or a form of cleansing. The discussion of intoxication similarly requires differentiating the universality of a prohibition from the legal classification of individual drinks and sanctions. [7], [8], [12], [25]

In the harm case, defining the operative harm and balancing potentially competing rights are central to application. This supports the methodological distinction between linguistic interpretation and taḥqīq al-manāṭ, rather than attributing every difference to ambiguity in the wording alone. [10], [11], [26], [27]

Comparing these four cases demonstrates that juristic disagreement cannot be uniformly attributed to semantic plurality. The study establishes three sequential requirements before attributing legal divergence to textual meaning:

1. Textual Identification: Isolating the precise phrase cited by the jurist and verifying its variant chains.
2. Contextual Evidence: Identifying the linguistic or legal evidence used to justify a specific reading.
3. Causal Testing: Demonstrating that adopting an alternative linguistic interpretation would directly alter the final legal ruling.

An important limitation is that this study examines four purposively selected traditions and reconstructs legal positions from published sources; it does not exhaustively survey all hadith variants or all school-internal disagreements. Future analysis may extend the framework to additional traditions and explicitly document variant chains and the legal consequences of each interpretive choice.

Conclusion

This study concludes that semantic ambiguity is only one of several factors driving juristic disagreement in comprehensive Prophetic hadiths. While lexical interpretation directly dictates outcomes in cases like contractual separation (tafarruq), other disputes—such as intention in wudū', property harm, and intoxication classifications—are governed primarily by action characterization, ratio verification (taḥqīq al-manāṭ), and inter-textual synthesis.

Categorical Distinction: Exegetes must separate linguistic meaning from legal characterization and factual application.

Methodological Rigor: Attributing juristic disagreement to a hadith requires proving that the linguistic interpretation was the primary cause of the legal outcome.

Practical Utility: A four-part analytical framework (Text, Interpretation, Supporting Evidence, Legal Ruling) ensures transparent, objective evaluation of classical juristic debates.

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