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Enhancing Ethical Understanding Through Inquisitive Semantics: A Study on Food-Related Hadith

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Abstract

Prophetic narrations (hadith) are essential sources of muslim moral guidance, yet students often struggle to move beyond their literal meanings to grasp deeper ethical wisdom. This study addresses the pedagogical challenge where food-related hadith are frequently limited to legal or medicinal discussions, remains a developing area of interest. The primary objective is to evaluate the effectiveness of the Inquisitive Semantics (IS) framework in uncovering the pedagogical and ethical values within brief traditions. Meanwhile, The Inquisitive Semantics (IS) framework, as introduced by Nor Hashimah Jalaluddin (2014), is a linguistic approach capable of stimulating cognitive engagement by unraveling implicit meanings within a text. This qualitative study adopts a textual analysis design supported by observations of ten sixth-grade students to evaluate the effectiveness of the IS framework in interpreting food-related in hadith. Two hadith were specifically selected to demonstrate how a single symbol (vinegar) can carry contrasting ethical meanings as a symbol of moderation and as a warning against moral corruption. The study applies the three-tiered model of IS comprising the script, resonance, and inquisitive layers to guide the interpretive process from literal understanding toward deeper ethical reflection. Findings indicate that the IS framework effectively assists students in transitioning from identifying the physical attributes of vinegar to articulating its metaphorical significance as a symbol of moderation (*qana'ah*) and moral integrity. The inquisitive stage further reveals how bad character is likened to vinegar that "spoils honey," emphasizing the spiritual consequences of one's conduct. This research contributes to Islamic education by providing a systematic method to uncover the intellectual wisdom (*'aql budi*) within hadith, aligning with the requirements of 21st-century learning (PAK21).

Keywords: Hadith, Vinegar, Inquisitive Semantics, Islamic Ethics.

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INTRODUCTION

The Prophetic narrations (hadith) are widely recognized as a primary source of ethical guidance in Islam, providing a framework for daily conduct, including dietary habits. Among these traditions, those concerning food offer profound insights into ethical pedagogy of particular relevance are two concise sayings of the Prophet Muhammad SAW regarding vinegar (al-khall). The first hadith, “The best condiment is vinegar” while the second asserts, “Indeed, bad character corrupts deeds just as vinegar spoils honey”. At first glance, these hadith may appear simple, employing only familiar household items such as vinegar and honey. Yet, they encapsulate deeply layered didactic and philosophical values. The former highlights moderation, contentment (*qanā'ah*), and gratitude for sustenance, whereas the latter warns of the destructive consequences of ill character upon the value of righteous deeds. Both sayings employ a metaphorical style that is easily accessible while simultaneously conveying complex moral messages.

The proposes the use of Inquisitive Semantics (IS) to stimulate deeper engagement with hadith texts, such as those concerning vinegar (al-khall). Currently, the Inquisitive Semantics (IS) approach has seen significant success in analyzing Malay linguistic heritage, such as proverbs, poetry and song lyrics to uncover cultural wisdom. By integrating IS, this approach aligns with the goals of 21st-century learning (PAK21) within Islamic Education. It encourages students to move beyond the "script" or literal meaning and investigate the "why" behind the Prophet's (SAW) choice of expressions. Ultimately, this method seeks to demonstrate hadith can be utilized to nurture moral-intellectual wisdom) and spiritual awareness in a way that is both intellectually rigorous and relevant to the students' lived experiences.

Problem Statement

The Prophetic narrations (hadith) are widely recognised as an important source of ethical guidance in Islam. However, students often encounter difficulties in uncovering the implicit meanings embedded in concise hadith texts. This situation may be influenced by several factors that hinder deeper comprehension, including limited cognitive engagement with contextual interpretation.¹ In addition, studies concerning food-related hadith have frequently focused on legal rulings (*Halal wal Haram*) and medical benefits

¹ George Romiko Bujang and Mary Fatimah Subet, “Merungkai Makna Sajak ‘Istimewanya Kita’: Pengaplikasian Semantik Inkuisitif dalam Kalangan Murid Tahun Empat,” *Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Melayu* 11, no. 2 (2021): 68-79.

(*Tibb Nabawi*), with comparatively less attention given to their ethical and philosophical dimensions.²

As a result, students' understanding of some concise hadith remains largely confined to their literal meaning. Much like primary pupils who struggle with the archaic vocabulary of classical Malay poetry, learners may find it challenging to move beyond surface meanings without appropriate analytical guidance.³ Moreover, Hassan (1987), cited in Othman and Jamian (2013), states that ineffective strategies in language pedagogy may render the delivery of content unsuccessful.⁴ This issue can be observed in the hadith concerning vinegar (al-khall), including the Prophet's sayings, "*The best condiment is vinegar*" and "*Bad character corrupts deeds just as vinegar spoils honey.*" Despite their brevity, these hadith contain wider ethical and pedagogical insights that extend beyond their immediate literal meaning. Given these challenges, a more holistic and multidisciplinary approach is needed to explore the philosophical and moral dimensions of hadith. Accordingly, this study proposes the application of Inquisitive Semantics (IS),⁵ as introduced by Jalaluddin (2014), to stimulate deeper engagement with hadith texts. This approach is expected to encourage learners to explore even brief reports, such as those concerning vinegar, at deeper levels of interpretation, thereby highlighting their enduring pedagogical and moral significance.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

In light of the problem outlined above, this study sets forth the following two objectives:

1. To analyse the meanings in two Prophetic traditions concerning vinegar using the Inquisitive Semantics approach.

² Razi, M, F., Zuhri, M., Saefulloh, A., Yahaya, M, B., (2025), The Concept of Moral Education About Eating and Drinking In The Book *Bulughul Maram* and Its Relevance to Islamic Education In Indonesia, *Muaddib: International Journal of Islamic Teaching and Learning*, 1 (2), 1-6

³ George Romiko Bujang and Mary Fatimah Subet, "Merungkai Makna Sajak 'Istimewanya Kita': Pengaplikasian Semantik Inkuisitif dalam Kalangan Murid Tahun Empat," *Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Melayu* 11, no. 2 (2021): 68-79.

⁴ Asmah Hassan, *Isu-Isu Pembelajaran dan Pengajaran Bahasa Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1987), 36-52.

⁵ Nor Hashimah Jalaluddin, *Semantik dan Akal Budi Melayu* (Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2014), 119.

2. To examine the effectiveness of Inquisitive Semantics as an analytical approach in uncovering the pedagogical, and ethical values contained within these hadith.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. The Application of Inquisitive Semantics in Education

The Inquisitive Semantics (IS) framework, introduced by Nor Hashimah Jalaluddin (2014), has increasingly attracted scholarly attention in the fields of linguistics and language education due to its multidisciplinary orientation. Unlike traditional semantic analysis, which largely emphasises the relationship between language and literal meaning, IS allows researchers to interrogate authentic data by integrating linguistic, contextual, cognitive, cultural, and intellectual dimensions. Consequently, IS enables texts to be analysed beyond their surface meaning, uncovering layers of philosophy and cultural wisdom inherent in the speaker's worldview. Empirical evidence from local studies has demonstrated the effectiveness of IS across a variety of textual media. For instance, Nasir & Subet (2023) applied IS to Malay proverbs, showing that the expression "*Melentur buluh biarlah dari rebungnya*" ("Bend the bamboo while it is still a shoot") could be elucidated up to the level of cultural philosophy and intellectual ethos.⁶ Similarly, Samaon & Subet (2020), drawing upon Relevance Theory (RT), analysed character development in the novel *Di Sebalik Dinara* and found that the use of Cross-Referencing Frames (RRS) facilitated readers' comprehension of implicit meanings.⁷

In addition, George Romiko Bujang & Mary Fatimah Subet (2021a) illustrated that the integration of IS with Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) enabled students to uncover latent meanings in poetry.⁸ While, Wong & Jalaluddin (2019) successfully applied IS to the song lyrics *Mati Hidup Semula*, thereby extracting the philosophical values and intellectual creativity of the songwriter.⁹ Collectively, these findings underscore IS as an effective tool for cultivating critical thinking skills among learners, and they highlight its potential relevance for application to religious texts, including hadith.

⁶ Mohd Ridzwan Nasir and Mary Fatimah Subet, Malay Proverbs in Inquisitive Semantics Approach Lens: The Case of Malaysian Textbooks," *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics* 13, no. 2 (2023): 317–332.

⁷ S. S. Samaon and Mary Fatimah Subet, "Perwatakan Dalam Novel Komsas 'Di Sebalik Dinara'," *Asian People Journal (APJ)* 3, no. 1 (2020): 84–100.

⁸ George Romiko Bujang and Mary Fatimah Subet, "Merungkai Makna Sajak 'Istimewanya Kita'," *Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Melayu* 11, no. 2 (2021): 68–79.

⁹ S. H. Wong and Nor Hashimah Jalaluddin, "Figurative Language in 'Mati Hidup Semula' Song," *Jurnal Bahasa* 19 (2019): 231–258.

According to Jalaluddin (2014, 2015) and Daud (2018), IS is inherently interdisciplinary. Beyond its foundations in linguistics, it extends into history, culture, religion, science, sociology, and etymology¹⁰. Owing to this comprehensive nature, IS has been applied not only to literary texts and proverbs but also to contemporary discourse and oral communication. For example, Daud (2017) analysed slang expressions in conversations from coffee shops in Kuala Lumpur and Kota Samarahan, uncovering hidden meanings through attention to the speakers' social context, cognitive orientation, and cultural setting¹¹.

Furthermore, a wide range of studies (Jalaluddin, 2014, 2015; Zakaria & Jalaluddin, 2016; Kasdan, 2015; Wan Mansor & Jalaluddin, 2015, 2016; Kasdan, Jalaluddin & Wan Ismail., 2016; Daud, 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c; Subet & Daud, 2018; Murthy & Subet, 2018a, 2018b) further consolidate evidence that IS can be effectively applied across diverse linguistic contexts. Taken together, this breadth of scholarship attests to the flexibility of IS as an analytical framework capable of elucidating literal, resonant, and philosophical meanings within a systematic structure.

2. Islamic Food Studies and the hadith on Vinegar

In the field of Islamic food studies, contemporary scholarship has expanded its focus beyond the binary of *ḥalāl* and *ḥarām* to encompass broader dimensions of philosophy, ethics, and pedagogy. The concept of *ḥalālṭayyib* has been interpreted as an ethico-linguistic value, shaping the Qur'ānic lexicon while guiding sustainable dietary practices.¹² *Al-khall* (vinegar) gains its narrative legitimacy from the Sunnah, and modern research has further highlighted its benefits as both a condiment and a preservative.¹³ Within the regional corpus, Sempo & Razif (2019) explored the connection between *Ṭibb al-Nabawī* and Malay manuscripts.¹⁴ However, their emphasis remained largely on legal and medicinal aspects rather than linguistic or semantic dimensions. Similarly, Burhanuddin et al. (2021) observed that halal awareness among Muslim consumers is significant in the context of vinegar

¹⁰ Nor Hashimah Jalaluddin, *Semantik dan Akal Budi Melayu* (Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2014), 52.

Nor Hashimah Jalaluddin, "Peribahasa 'Parasit' dan Akal Budi Melayu: Analisis Semantik Inkuisitif," 2015, 281–293.

¹¹ Mohd Zainal Daud, *Slanga Kedai Kopi: Satu Analisis Semantik Inkuisitif* (Bachelor's thesis, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, 2017), 55.

¹² R. Saputra et al., "Integrating Halal-Thayyib Food Values into Islamic Education," *Journal of Posthumanism* 5 (2025).

¹³ S. A. M. Khalifa et al., "Vinegar – A Beneficial Food Additive," *Food & Function* 15, no. 20 (2024): 10270.

¹⁴ Mohd Wali Sempo and Mohd Azuan Razif, "Integrated Studies on Health Benefits of Vinegar in the Sunnah," *Ulum Islamiyyah* 26 (2019): 40.

products.¹⁵ Yet, discussions on vinegar as a rhetorical object in hadith discourse remain strikingly limited.

3. Arabic Islamic Linguistics and the Rhetoric of Hadith

Within Arabic Islamic linguistics, the disciplines of semantics and *balāghah* (rhetoric) focus on non-literal interpretation through *kināyah* (metonymy), *tashbīh* (simile), and *isti'ārah* (metaphor). Naseef (2018) called for a systematic mapping of rhetorical styles in religious texts, underscoring their pedagogical value.¹⁶ Hussin et al. (2025) demonstrated that the Prophet's Muhammad SAW rhetoric frequently employed concise parables capable of conveying moral messages with profound impact, as seen in the comparison between vinegar and honey.¹⁷ Abd Alhadi et al. (2023) proposed formal instruments for measuring rhetorical density¹⁸, while Rahman et al. (2019) discussed the challenges of translating implicit meanings of hadith into other languages without diminishing their rhetorical force.¹⁹

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design employing textual analysis of two Prophetic reports (hadith) concerning vinegar: “The best condiment is vinegar” and “Indeed, bad character corrupts deeds just as vinegar spoils honey”. These hadith are selected because they form a thematic pair in which vinegar appears as both a dietary reference and a moral comparison. The analysis is guided by the framework of Inquisitive Semantics (IS) developed by Jalaluddin (2014), which examines meaning through three interpretive levels: script, resonance, and inquisitive. To support the interpretation of the texts, classical commentaries by scholars such as al-Nawawī, al-Munāwī, and

¹⁵ Burhanuddin, I. H., Shukri, A. S. @ Z. M., Sulong, M. R., Rahim, N. M., & Azman, S. A. H. (2021). Muslim Consumers' Awareness Levels On Halal Vinegar Products: A Case Study In Selangor. *Al-Qanadir: International Journal of Islamic Studies*, 24(1), (2021) 10–24.

¹⁶ R. A. M. Naseef, *Kināyah as a Figure of Speech in the Qur'an: An Analysis of Four English Translations* (Leeds: School of Languages, Cultures and Societies, Faculty of Arts, University of Leeds, 2018), 45.

¹⁷ M. Hussin, M. Alaqad, S. R. Rifain @ M., and Yoyo, “Figures of Speech in the hadith of Prophet Muhammad: An Analysis of Tashbīh, Isti'ārah, and Kināyah,” *Southeastern Philippines Journal of Research and Development* 30, no. 1 (2025): 80, <https://doi.org/10.53899/spjrd.v30i1.862>.

¹⁸ Abd Alhadi, H., Alhadi, H. A., Hussein, A. A., & Kuflik, T. (2023). Automatic Identification of Rhetorical Elements in classical Arabic Poetry. *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, 017(2).

¹⁹ N. Rahman et al., “Translating Isti'ārah and Kināyah in Quranic Verses,” *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development* 8 (2019).

Ibn Hajar are consulted alongside selected contemporary discussions related to Islamic ethics and food-related hadith.

In addition, classroom observations involving a small group of sixth-grade primary school students (n = 10) were engaged during Islamic education lesson. Small participant groups are commonly used in qualitative educational research to allow closer observation of interpretive processes²⁰. Their responses were observed to illustrate how the stages of Inquisitive may facilitate deeper engagement with the meanings of the hadith. Meanwhile, guiding questions were provided by the researcher to stimulate reflection; however, the interpretations and assumptions were generated by the students themselves during the discussion.

Theoretical Framework

The analytical foundation of this study is the Inquisitive Semantics (IS) approach, pioneered by Nor Hashimah Jalaluddin (2014)²¹. This framework takes into account authentic data, linguistic and semantic features, the cognitive engagement of speaker and listener, cultural context, and ultimately, the dimension of *ʿaql budī* (moral-intellectual wisdom). IS operates through three interrelated levels of analysis:

1. Script Stage

At this preliminary stage, the hadith is examined in terms of its literal meaning. For instance, in the report *“The best condiment is vinegar”*, the keyword *khall* is lexically defined as “sour vinegar,” while in the tradition *“Bad character corrupts deeds just as vinegar spoils honey”*, the terms *sūʿ al-khuluq* and *ʿamal* are understood respectively as “bad character” and “righteous deeds or actions.” This level is restricted to the relationship between language and surface meaning, without delving into deeper implications.

2. Resonance Stage

At the second stage, interpretation shifts to the cognitive dimension of the speaker and audience. This process is guided by Relevance Theory (RT), as formulated by (Sperber & Wilson, 1996), which emphasises three central notions: context, cognitive effect, and processing effort. For example, when learners connect “vinegar” with its commonly sour taste and “honey” with

²⁰ Creswell, J. W. *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, (2013).

²¹ Jalaluddin, *Semantik dan Akal Budi Melayu*, 52.

its prized sweetness, they readily grasp the parable that bad character can annul the value of good deeds. In this way, familiar culinary experiences render the hadith cognitively accessible and more easily processed.

3. Inquisitive Stage

The highest tier of IS interrogates the moral and philosophical wisdom underlying the hadith expression. At this stage, analysis proceeds by asking “why” and “for what reason,” in order to unveil the spiritual significance. Why, for instance, did the Prophet Muhammad SAW select vinegar and honey? The answer spans multiple disciplines: from the perspective of Arab food culture, vinegar was a basic household condiment; from the standpoint of ethics, it symbolises moderation and *qanā’ah* (contentment); and from a moral vantage, it functions as a metaphor for the destructive effect of blameworthy traits on good deeds. At this level, the hadith emerges as a vehicle of *tarbiyyah* (moral education), integrating language, culture, cognition, and Islamic ethics.

Synthesis

In short, this theoretical framework integrates IS with RT to explicate the vinegar traditions across three layers of meaning: literal, cognitive-contextual, and philosophical-ethical. In doing so, the hadith message can be apprehended not merely at the textual level but also at deeper moral and spiritual dimensions.

Table 1. Levels of Inquisitive Semantics Applied to the Vinegar Hadith

Level	Analytical Focus	Application to the Vinegar Hadith
Level 1 – Script Semantics	Literal meaning (surface interpretation of key terms)	<i>Khall</i> = vinegar; <i>’asal</i> = honey; <i>’amal</i> = righteous deed; <i>sū’ al-khuluq</i> = bad character. The first hadith praises vinegar as a condiment, while the second likens bad character to vinegar that spoils honey.
Level 2 – Resonance Semantics	Data situated within theoretical framework; cognitive inferences elicited and abstract connections drawn	Learners associate “vinegar” with sourness (a symbol of moderation/ <i>qanā’ah</i>) and “honey” with sweetness (a symbol of goodness/reward). Such everyday culinary experiences facilitate the understanding that bad character can nullify the value of good deeds.
Level 3 – Inquisitive Semantics	Probing deeper questions (“why” and “for what reason”) to uncover philosophical and spiritual wisdom (<i>’aql budī</i>)	Why did the Prophet Muhammad SAW choose vinegar? → Because it was a staple in Arab households and a symbol of moderation. Why honey? → As a symbol of the sweetness of righteous deeds. Why link it with character? → To emphasise the philosophy that deeds without good character are devoid of true value. This stage

Source: Adapted and modified from Nor Hashimah Jalaluddin (2014).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section analyses two Prophetic narrations (hadith) concerning vinegar through the framework of Inquisitive Semantics (IS). The first is the saying, “*The best condiment is vinegar*” (*ni‘ma al-idām al-khall*), while the second is the statement, “*Indeed, bad character corrupts deeds just as vinegar spoils honey*” (*wa inna sū’ al-khuluq la-yufsidu al-‘amal kamā yufsidu al-khall al-‘asa*).

Data 1: Ni‘ma al-idām al-khall

- Script Stage

The First dataset derives from the following Prophetic report:

حَدَّثَنِي عَبْدُ اللَّهِ بْنُ عَبْدِ الرَّحْمَنِ الدَّارِمِيُّ. أَخْبَرَنَا يَحْيَى بْنُ حَسَّانَ. أَخْبَرَنَا سَلِيمَانُ بْنُ بِلَالٍ عَنْ
هِشَامِ بْنِ عُرْوَةَ، عَنْ أَبِيهِ، عَنْ عَائِشَ؛ إِنَّ النَّبِيَّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ: نَعْمَ الْأَدَمُ، أَوْ الْإِدَامُ،
الْخَلُّ ((رواه مسلم))

Meaning: Aisyah reported Allah's Apostle (ﷺ) as saying: The best of condiments or condiment is vinegar.²²

The utterance “*Ni‘ma al-idām al-khall*” (*The best condiment is vinegar*) was selected at random by the researcher as a guiding text for students in an exploratory meaning-making activity. At this script-semantic level, students were guided by the instructor to search for surface meanings using reliable sources such as Arabic–English dictionaries such as Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic Hans. At this stage, the task was relatively straightforward: students were required only to extract the explicit lexical meaning of the key terms, without delving into symbolic or ethical implications. Thus, vinegar (*al-khall*) was identified literally as a type of condiment (*idām*) mentioned by

²² Hadith. Imām Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj. *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*. Kitāb al-Ashriba, Bāb Faḍīlat al-Khall wa al-Ta‘addum bih. Juz’ 3, p. 1622, #2051a.

the Prophet Muhammad SAW without yet moving toward figurative or philosophical layers of interpretation.

Table 2. Literal Meaning of “Ni‘ma al-idām al-khall”

Data	Expression	Word	Meaning
1	<i>Ni‘ma al-idām al-khall</i>	<i>Ni‘ma</i>	excellent, best, highly praiseworthy
		<i>idām</i>	condiment, side dish eaten with bread
		<i>al-khall</i>	vinegar, product of fermented grapes/dates

When examined at this literal level, as illustrated in Table 2, the meaning obtained remains confined to the surface layer. The phrase may be rendered as “*The best condiment is vinegar*”, which represents a straightforward commendation of a common food item. However, this literal sense alone does not convey the deeper ethical or spiritual message intended by the Prophet Muhammad SAW. Consequently, the teacher explained to students that the analysis must proceed to subsequent levels, which would gradually uncover more profound layers of meaning. These further stages would allow learners to grasp not only the linguistic surface but also the ethical, cultural, and philosophical wisdom embedded within the hadith.

- **Resonance Stage**

At the second stage, known as resonance semantics students were guided by the instructor to uncover deeper meanings through the lens of Relevance Theory (RT),²³ as developed by Sperber & Wilson (1996). RT underscores the significance of context and the cognitive effort required to determine the relevance of an utterance. In the case of the hadith “*Ni‘ma al-idām al-khall*” (*The best condiment is vinegar*), the literal interpretation at the previous stage conveyed only a commendation of vinegar as a food supplement. At the resonance level, however, students were prompted to engage in higher-order cognitive reasoning by asking why the Prophet Muhammad SAW selected vinegar a simple and inexpensive food as an illustrative example.

At this stage, students were encouraged to employ the inferential assumptions required by RT to approximate the intended message. For instance, they were guided to connect the social context of Arab society, in which condiments (*idām*) often determined the perceived quality of a meal, with the Prophet’s elevation of vinegar as a symbol of moderation (*qanā‘ah*) and gratitude for divine provision. By drawing inferences from experience,

²³ Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1996), 73-90

social history, and traditional accounts, students came to understand that the hadith does not merely acknowledge vinegar as a condiment but conveys an ethical principle: that even the simplest blessings should not be undervalued. To consolidate this exercise, students were provided with analysis sheets in which they wrote summaries, codes, inferences, and assumptions related to the hadith. The outcomes of these teacher student discussions are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Codes, Inferences, and Assumptions from RT Analysis of “Ni’ma al-idām al-khall”

Code	Inference	Assumptions
<i>al-khall</i>	A simple and inexpensive food	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. One must appreciate foods of seemingly little value. 2. The hadith teaches <i>qanā’ah</i> (contentment) and gratitude. 3. Extravagance (<i>isrāf</i>) and ostentation in food are to be rejected.

Once students identified codes, generated inferences, and formulated sets of assumptions, they proceeded to determine which assumptions carried the greatest relevance. Based on their group discussions (see Table 3), three primary assumptions emerged: (1) appreciating simple foods, (2) cultivating *qanā’ah* and gratitude, and (3) rejecting extravagance and ostentation in eating. These assumptions resonate with the students’ existing knowledge of Islamic dietary ethics, enabling them to see more clearly that the Prophet’s Muhammad SAW praise of vinegar extends beyond its taste, carrying instead a profound moral and spiritual message. In sum, the resonance analysis demonstrates how context, inference, and assumption converge to uncover meanings far deeper than a literal reading could convey.

- **Inquisitive Level**

The two preceding stages, script semantics and resonance semantics remain insufficient to capture the full depth of the utterance “*Ni’ma al-idām al-khall*” (*The best condiment is vinegar*). At the inquisitive level, students are guided to probe further by asking the critical “why” questions: *Why vinegar, and not another food? Why this phrasing? Why this comparison?* Such questions stimulate higher-order inquiry, enabling learners to uncover the philosophical and ethical wisdom of the Prophet Muhammad SAW as the conveyor of revelation. Why, then, did the Prophet Muhammad SAW choose *al-khall* (vinegar) rather than other foods commonly associated with status? Classical commentaries provide valuable intertextual answers. Al-Nawawī, in his *Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, explained that the commendatory expression

“*ni‘ma*” affirms vinegar’s recognised value as a condiment (*idām*) that complements bread in a modest yet sufficient way.

This literal appraisal resonates with contemporary studies of vinegar hadith, which highlight its practical dietary functions in daily consumption.²⁴ Meanwhile, Abū Sulaymān al-Khaṭṭābī - 388 AH, (1932)²⁵ and al-Qāḍī ‘Iyāḍ - d. 544 AH / 1149 CE (1998) emphasised the pedagogical dimension: the praise of vinegar inculcates *qanā‘ah* (contentment) and acceptance of what is available, while discouraging excessive pursuit of luxury that can harm both religion and health.²⁶ Thus, the statement “The best condiment is vinegar” operates on two complementary layers:

1. A literal commendation of vinegar itself, and
2. A moral indication that “the best” is whatever provision lies before one and is received with gratitude, rather than an absolute ranking of vinegar above all condiments.²⁷

From a philological-juristic perspective, al-Munāwī in *Fayḍ al-Qadīr* noted that *ni‘ma* functions as a verb of praise, while *idām* refers broadly to any accompaniment to bread. The definite article *al-idam* in *al-khall* conveys a generic rather than particular reference. He further highlighted vinegar’s health benefits, including its balancing effect on excess bile (*ṣafra*), thereby justifying its suitability as a simple condiment that “completes” a meal.²⁸ Al-Munāwī also transmitted supplementary reports, such as the use of *sakanjabīn* (a vinegar-honey mixture) known among physicians, and references to vinegar being the staple condiment in the Prophet’s Muhammad SAW household after his passing.

These narrations, while sometimes weak in transmission, broaden the socio-medical horizon, functioning as cultural background rather than as binding legal proofs. On a socio - cultural plane, early Arab society often regarded condiments as status markers. The Prophet’s Muhammad SAW deliberate choice of vinegar a readily available, inexpensive, and “lowly” food

²⁴ Mohd Wali Sempo and Mohd Azuan Razif, “Integrated Studies on Health Benefits of Vinegar in the Sunnah and Malay Medical Manuscripts,” *Ulum Islamiyyah* 26 (2019): 37–46.

²⁵ Abū Sulaymān al-Khaṭṭābī, *Ma‘ālim al-Sunan wa-huwa Sharḥ Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, 1st ed., 1351H (Cairo: al-Maṭba‘ah al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1932),

²⁶ al-Qāḍī ‘Iyāḍ, *Ikmāl al-Mu‘allim bi-Fawā‘id Muslim*, 1st ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Wafā‘ li’l-Ṭibā‘ah wa’l-Nashr wa’l-Tawzī‘, 1998), 301.

²⁷ M. Yurika and I. Riyani,

“Takhrij and Syarah Hadith of Chemistry: The Virtue of Vinegar in Hadith and Science Perspective,” *IJDIAS* 1, no. 3 (2021): 4.

²⁸ Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Ra‘ūf al-Manāwī, *Fayḍ al-Qadīr Sharḥ al-Jāmi‘ al-Ṣaghīr*, 1st ed. (Cairo: al-Maktabah al-Tijārīyah al-Kubrā, 1356H), 575.

operates rhetorically to redirect taste, discipline desire, and normalise moderation as an ethic of dining. In this sense, *al-khall* becomes a value-signifier, denoting ethical orientations such as gratitude, *qanā'ah*, and rejection of *isrāf* (extravagance).

This moral horizon is further reinforced by contemporary halal-science discourse, where debates on *taḥawwul* (substantial transformation) and ethanol levels in fermentation distinguish between lawful and unlawful vinegar.²⁹ From the perspective of Islamic food philosophy, the praise of an ordinary food underscores a principle of distributive equality: that which seems minor in human estimation may, through gratitude, become significant in the sight of God. Students thus come to appreciate that this hadith transcends literal reference to a condiment, embedding layers of ethical, spiritual, and cultural meaning that train the intellect and nurture the soul. Accordingly, the utterance “*Ni'ma al-idām al-khall*” emerges, at the inquisitive level, as a profound lesson in Islamic moral pedagogy: to value moderation, reject excess, and cultivate spiritual awareness in the ordinary acts of daily life.

Data 2: Hadith about “Bad Character Corrupts Deeds”

- Script Stage

The second dataset derives from the following Prophetic report:

وَإِنَّ سُوءَ الْخُلُقِ لَيُفْسِدُ الْعَمَلَ كَمَا يُفْسِدُ الْخَلُّ الْعَسَلَ ((خلاصة حكم المحدث : صحيح))

Meaning: Indeed, bad character corrupts deeds just as vinegar spoils honey
30

At this initial stage of script semantics, students were introduced to the process of extracting the literal meanings of individual words through reference to authoritative Arabic–English dictionaries, such as *Dictionary Of Modern Written Arabic Hans*. Because they had already been exposed to the analysis of the earlier text (*Ni'ma al-idām al-khall*), students found this stage relatively straightforward. Within the framework of Inquisitive Semantics,

²⁹ I. Harahap et al., “The Application of *Taḥawwul* (Transformation) Process for Determination of Vinegar Status in the Malaysian Market,” *Food Research* 4, no. 3 (2020): 896–905.

³⁰ Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, *Silsilah al-Aḥādīth al-Ṣaḥīḥah wa Shay'un min Fiqihihā wa Fawā'idihā*, vol. 2 (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Ma'ārif, n.d.), 575, no. 906.

the script level is considered the most accessible, as it focuses exclusively on surface meaning without probing hidden layers of implication.

Table 4. Literal Meanings of “Bad Character Corrupts Deeds”

Data	Expression	Word	Literal Meaning
2	<i>yufsidu al- 'amal</i>	<i>yufsidu</i>	to spoil, to ruin, to destroy
		<i>al- 'amal</i>	action, deed, work
		<i>al-khall</i>	vinegar, acidic substance
		<i>al-'asal</i>	honey, sweetness, something precious/valuable

The combined expression therefore reads: “*Bad character can corrupt one’s deeds, just as the sourness of vinegar destroys the sweetness of honey.*” Although the students successfully determined the literal sense of the words, this stage of analysis still falls short of capturing the full import of the hadith. The literal reading simply sets forth a comparison between vinegar and honey, without yet revealing the moral and philosophical implications intended by the Prophet Muhammad SAW. Consequently, the learners needed to be guided into the subsequent stages of analysis in order to excavate the deeper ethical and spiritual meaning.

- **Resonance Stage**

The next stage of analysis in the Inquisitive Semantics framework is resonance semantics, operationalised here through the principles of Relevance Theory (RT), pioneered by Sperber & Wilson (1996). According to RT, the use of codes, inferences, and assumptions constitutes the core strength of interpretation, as these elements allow the text to be cognitively processed and linked to prior knowledge.³¹ At this stage, the analysis connects the hadith data with the cognitive frameworks of speaker and audience. The activated context extends beyond the literal meanings of “vinegar” and “honey” to the broader human experience in which these substances carry familiar connotations: honey is associated with sweetness, value, and nourishment, while vinegar signifies sourness, sharpness, and the potential to spoil sweetness.

Such associations are already stored in students’ long-term memory: that something valuable (honey) may lose its goodness when corrupted by something negative (vinegar). The resonance process, therefore, facilitates

³¹ Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance*, 73-90.

the generation of the cognitive effects required by RT. Students begin to associate “the corruption of deeds” with the way in which destructive traits such as arrogance, anger, or envy can nullify the value of righteous actions, even if those actions were initially good and pure. Accordingly, the resonance level demonstrates that this hadith does more than compare two food substances. Rather, it utilises a parable drawn from everyday sensory experience to cultivate a deeper ethical understanding.

Table 5. Codes, Inferences, and Assumptions from RT Analysis of “Bad Character Corrupts Deeds”

Data	Code	Inference	Set of Assumptions
2	(corruption of deeds)	Bad character can undermine the value of an action	1. Even good deeds lose their value when tainted by bad character. 2. <i>Mazmūmah</i> traits (arrogance, envy, anger) erode the blessings of righteous deeds.

After codes were identified, inferences drawn, and assumptions articulated, the process of determining the most relevant assumptions was carried out. The respondents comprising a group of school students were tasked with reflecting upon assumptions connected to the hadith. Based on their discussions (see Table 5), two central assumptions emerged. Firstly, Even righteous actions may lose their worth when accompanied by bad character. Secondly, Destructive traits such as arrogance, envy, and anger obliterate the spiritual merit of good deeds.

At this stage, students drew upon knowledge already stored in their long-term memory, reinforced through prior religious instruction. They were already familiar, from lessons and sermons, that righteous deeds (*‘amal ṣāliḥ*) are not judged merely by their outward form, but also by inner qualities such as sincerity (*ikhhlās*), character (*akhlāq*), and intention (*niyyah*). This understanding was further strengthened through their readings of classical religious texts tafsīr, hadith commentaries, and transmitted reports. The saying “*ill-conduct ruins deeds just as vinegar spoils honey*” appears in several sources. Its authenticity, however, is disputed: certain scholars classify it as weak. In this study, the hadith is not treated primarily for its *sanad* validity, but rather engaged as a semantic and cultural text within the Islamic tradition to signify moral corruption.

For example, the hadith “*Bad character corrupts deeds just as vinegar spoils honey*” is cited by Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī & al-Albānī, in *al-Ṣaghīr* (no. 6690/7033), supported by narrations from al-Ḥārith ibn Abī Usāmah, al-

Ḥākīm, Abū Nu‘aym, and al-Daylamī.³² Although most of its chains are graded weak (*ḍa‘īf*), commentators such as (al-Munāwī, *al-Qadīr Fayḍ*, 4/113) clarified that the expression “*yufsidu al-‘amal*” signifies *ihbāt* (nullification of reward). In other words, a good deed tainted by bad character no longer yields reward.³³ Al-‘Askarī illustrated this parable with the example of one who gives charity but accompanies it with reproach or harm, thereby nullifying its merit. This explanation corresponds with the Qur’ānic warning:

﴿يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لَا تُبْطِلُوا صَدَقَاتِكُمْ بِالْمَنِّ وَالْأَذَىٰ كَالَّذِي كَالَّذِي يُنْفِقُ مَالَهُ رِثَاءَ النَّاسِ وَلَا يُؤْمِنُ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ فَمَثَلُهُ كَمَثَلِ صَفْوَانٍ عَلَيْهِ تُرَابٌ فَأَصَابَهُ وَابِلٌ فَتَرَكَهُ صَلْدًا لَا يَقْدِرُونَ عَلَىٰ شَيْءٍ مِّمَّا كَسَبُوا وَاللَّهُ لَا يَهْدِي الْقَوْمَ الْكَافِرِينَ...﴾ (٢٦٤)

Meaning: “*O you who believe! Do not render void your charities by reminders [of your generosity] or by injury (to the feelings of the recipient)*”³⁴

Intertextual evidence from both the Qur’ān and the Sunnah reinforces the central message of this hadith: acts of devotion must be accompanied by noble character in order to be accepted. Commentaries by scholars such as al-Munāwī and others concur that the phrase “*yufsidu al-‘amal*” in this context refers to the nullification of reward or the loss of the spiritual benefit of a deed, rather than the legal invalidation of the act in jurisprudential terms. As al-Munāwī explains:

وقد يستعمل الفساد كما في الأثر الضعيف السابق، ويقصد به إحباط العمل وذهاب نفعه

Meaning: “*The term corruption (fasād), as in the aforementioned weak report, is used to mean the nullification of reward and the disappearance of its benefit.*”

He further added:

³²Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī and Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, *Ṣaḥīḥ wa-Ḍa‘īf al-Jāmi‘ al-Ṣaḥīḥ wa-Ziyādātuḥu* (n.p., n.d.), no. 3112.

³³al-Manāwī, *Fayḍ al-Qadīr*, 575.

³⁴ al-Quran. al-Baqarah 2:264

سوء الخلق يفسد العمل كما يفسد الخل العسل، أي أنه يعود عليه بالإحباط؛ كالمصدق إذا أتبع صدقته بالمن والأذى . ((التيسير بشرح الجامع الصغير, 61/2))

Meaning: “Bad character corrupts deeds just as vinegar spoils honey, meaning it rebounds upon the doer with nullification of reward; such as one who gives charity but follows it with reproach and injury.” (al-Manāwī, *al-Taysīr bi-sharḥ al-Jāmi‘ al-Ṣaghīr*, 2/61)³⁵.

Therefore, corruption (fasād) in this context is best understood as *iḥbāt al-‘amal* (the nullification of a deed’s reward). Nevertheless, scholars of *Ahl al-Sunnah* caution that, as a matter of principle, no sin other than unbelief (kufr) annuls *all* of a person’s good deeds. Bad character is indeed a sin, but it only effaces the reward of particular acts or renders them spiritually worthless before God; it does not invalidate every deed wholesale. As Ibn Taymiyyah رحمه الله states:³⁶

ولا تجبب الأعمال بغير الكفر؛ لأن من مات على الإيمان فإنه لا بد من أن يدخل الجنة ويخرج من النار إن دخلها، ولو حبب عمله كله لم يدخل الجنة قط، ولأن الأعمال إنما يحبطها ما ينافيها، ولا ينافي الأعمال مطلقاً إلا الكفر، وهذا معروف من أصول أهل السنة. ((الصارم المسلمول 2/114))

Meaning: (Deeds are not nullified except by unbelief; for whoever dies upon faith will inevitably enter Paradise and will depart from the Fire if he enters it. Were all his deeds to be nullified, he would never enter Paradise at all. Deeds are only nullified by that which contradicts them, and nothing contradicts righteous deeds absolutely except unbelief. This is well known among the principles of *Ahl al-Sunnah*.) (Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-Ṣārim al-Maslūl*, 2/114)

In conclusion, although this hadith is weak (*ḍa‘īf*) in its isnād, it nonetheless functions within the register of *targhīb wa tarhīb* that is, it exhorts the purification of character to safeguard the reward of one’s deeds while issuing a stern warning about the spiritual consequences of bad

³⁵ al-Manāwī, *Fayḍ al-Qadīr*, 575.

³⁶ Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn Taymiyyah, *Al-Ṣārim al-Maslūl ‘alā Shātim al-Rasūl* (Riyadh: al-Ḥaras al-Waṭanī al-Sa‘ūdī, 1972), 45.

character that can erode the value of those deeds before God. Within the framework of Relevance Theory (RT), the hadith's message is readily intelligible to students. At the script-semantic tier, its literal meaning is transparent; at the resonance tier, the parable is mapped onto familiar experience sweetness (righteous deeds) loses its value when adulterated by sourness (bad character). These findings further indicate that the contextual effects activated by plausible assumptions are achieved at a low cognitive processing cost. Respondents readily aligned the report with their prior religious knowledge concerning the primacy of virtuous character in preserving deeds. Nevertheless, notwithstanding these demonstrated cognitive gains, a third tier of analysis remains necessary in the Inquisitive Semantics approach namely, the inquisitive-semantic tier to probe more deeply the hadith's intended philosophical and spiritual import.

- **Inquisitive Stage**

At this stage, the analysis uncovers the philosophical and moral wisdom embedded in the Prophet's Muhammad SAW words. Literal and resonance meanings alone are insufficient to convey the hadith's ultimate purpose. Students are thus guided to pursue knowledge across disciplines linking the hadith to Islamic ethics, psychology, and moral education. Here, the guiding questions are framed as *"why, why, and why."* For example: *Why did the Prophet Muhammad SAW employ the parable of vinegar and honey? Why is bad character likened to something that corrupts innate sweetness? Why is the corruption of deeds attributed specifically to character rather than to other factors?*

From the standpoint of Islamic moral philosophy, the hadith indicates that righteous deeds are not defined by outward form alone; rather, their worth depends on inner quality. Good deeds are likened to honey sweet, valuable, and nourishing while vices such as arrogance, anger, envy, or malice resemble vinegar, capable of corroding that sweetness. The Prophet Muhammad SAW demonstrated profound pedagogical wisdom by choosing a familiar culinary image from Arab daily life to communicate deep spiritual truths. This message is reinforced by another authentic hadith reported by Ahmad, al-Hākim, Ibn Hibbān, and al-Bayhaqī, in which Abū Hurayrah narrated that a man said: *"O Messenger of Allah, there is a woman who is known for her abundant prayers, fasting, and charity, but she harms her neighbour with her tongue."* The Prophet Muhammad SAW replied: *"She is in the Fire."* The man then said: *"Another woman performs fewer prayers, fasts, and acts of charity, but she gives small pieces of dried cheese in charity and*

does not harm her neighbour.”The Prophet Muhammad SAW said: “*She is in Paradise.*”³⁷

This narration shows that the true measure of goodness lies not in the quantity of ritual worship, but in the quality of character. The first woman’s abundant acts of devotion were rendered worthless by her harm to others, while the second, though limited in her ritual, was honoured with Paradise because of her upright character. As al-Qārī remarked in *al-Mirqāt*, the foundation of religion rests upon fulfilling obligations and avoiding prohibitions; supererogatory acts lose their value if accompanied by violations of ethical conduct. In the Islamic moral-philosophical tradition, this aligns with the view of thinkers such as al-Ghazālī, who stressed that the outward form of worship is but its body, while sincerity and character constitute its soul. Without this inner essence, worship becomes an empty shell, lifeless and devoid of worth (Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn* 4/75). Thus, the dictum “*there is no goodness in a woman who prays much yet harms her neighbour*” expresses the principle that substance outweighs form character is more fundamental than the external appearance of ritual piety.³⁸

From the perspective of psychology and sociology, this hadith may be read through role theory.³⁹ Bad behaviour not only undermines personal integrity but also disrupts the social function of good deeds. Noble character preserves and amplifies the effect of deeds, whereas bad character cancels their value in the eyes of society and before God. As Jalaluddin (2014) explained, inquisitive semantics entails probing the hidden meanings behind an utterance. In this light, the hadith answers why good deeds are not automatically accepted: they depend upon the ethical disposition that underlies them. One who gives charity ostentatiously or arrogantly, for instance, nullifies its reward because the “vinegar” of bad character spoils the “honey” of the deed. In sum, the inquisitive semantic analysis highlights the hadith’s pedagogical philosophy: righteous deeds must be safeguarded by noble character, for without it, deeds lose both value and blessing. students and compelling them to examine the profound relationship between outward form and inner essence, and reaffirming that in the Islamic worldview, character is the essential core that preserves the integrity of all deeds.

³⁷ Ṣaḥīḥ, authenticated by al-Albānī; *Musnad Aḥmad*, no. 9675.

³⁸ Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, vol. 4 (Beirut: Dār al-Ma‘rifah, n.d.), 107

³⁹ Jennifer M. George, “Personality, Affect, and Behavior in Groups,” *Journal of Applied Psychology* 75, no. 2 (1990): 107-116.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the application of Inquisitive Semantics (IS) to the Prophetic reports on vinegar demonstrates its potential to promote deeper understanding of the ethical meanings contained in the hadith among students. Through its three-tier analysis, learners are guided not only to apprehend the literal meaning of the sayings “*The best condiment is vinegar*” and “*Bad character corrupts deeds just as vinegar spoils honey*” but also to excavate their deeper philosophical, ethical, and spiritual dimensions as well as the integration of Relevance Theory (RT) at the resonance level further facilitates the exploration of implicit meanings. For instance, vinegar is interpreted as a symbol of moderation and *qanā’ah* in the first hadith, while honey is understood as a metaphor for the sweetness of righteous deeds, which can be nullified by bad character in the second.

This connection highlights how ordinary objects of daily life are deployed in hadith discourse to impart profound ethical lessons with rhetorical elegance. An exploratory approach fosters students’ capacity for critical and creative thinking, enabling them to link revelation with food culture and the moral philosophy of Islam. This also aligns with the framework of twenty-first-century learning (known in Malay as Pembelajaran Abad ke-21 and in English refers to 21st Century Learning (PAK21)), which highlight analytical and reflective engagement. Ultimately, it is anticipated that this study will benefit not only students but also teachers and researchers, by demonstrating how brief Prophetic reports can be harnessed to strengthen moral education and to nurture upright character within society.

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