



The Arbitrariness of the Sign in Linguistics and the Arabic Linguistic Heritage

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Abstract

The linguistic sign is a fundamental concept in modern linguistics, introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure, who argued that the relationship between the signifier (word or sound) and the signified (meaning) is arbitrary, relying on social convention rather than a natural connection. This marked a significant shift in linguistic thought, viewing language as a mental and social system rather than a direct reflection of reality. In the Arabic linguistic tradition, although the concept was not expressed in the same terms, scholars explored similar questions about the origin of language. Some believed language was divinely revealed, while others saw it as a result of human convention and agreement. This indicates an awareness of the possibility that the link between word and meaning is not essential and can change. Such perspectives provide a basis for comparing Saussure's theory with traditional Arabic views. Through this comparison, we can identify both convergences and divergences between modern Western linguistic theory and Arabic intellectual traditions, shedding light on their philosophical reflections on language and meaning.

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1. Introduction

The theory of the Arbitrariness of the Linguistic Sign is one of the central concepts in modern linguistics and has played a significant role in reshaping our understanding of the nature of language and the relationships among its components. This theory is primarily attributed to the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who proposed that the relationship between the signifier (the sound-image of the word) and the signified (the mental concept to which the word refers) is not necessary or natural. Rather, it

This article begins with these questions, aiming to open a comparative window between the modern Western understanding of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, as developed by Saussure and his followers, and the perspectives found in the Arabic linguistic tradition regarding the relationship between words and meanings. It focuses on analyzing the views of prominent Arab linguists such as Ibn Jinni. Through this analysis, the article seeks to identify points of similarity and difference between the two perspectives and to explore the extent to which the idea of "arbitrariness" was present in the classical Arabic linguistic worldview.

2. "The Concept of the Arbitrariness of the Linguistic Sign in Modern Linguistics": The concept of the *arbitrariness of the linguistic sign* refers to the idea that the relationship between a word (the *signifier*) and the meaning it represents (the *signified*) is neither natural nor logically determined by the characteristics of things or the nature of human thought. Rather, it is a relationship based on social convention and mutual agreement among members of a linguistic community. In other words, there is no inherent reason why the object we refer to as a "book" should carry that particular label. If society had agreed to call it a "notebook," for example, that would have

is arbitrary, based on social convention and implicit agreement among members of a linguistic community. This idea marked a conceptual revolution in Western linguistic studies, challenging earlier assumptions that viewed language as a system that directly or inherently reflects the world.

However, although this notion appears modern within its Western context, it raises essential questions about its uniqueness and novelty. Was this idea entirely absent from linguistic thought in other civilizations? Can we say that early Arab linguists explored this concept—explicitly, implicitly, or at least partially?

(d. 392 AH), who discussed the notions of convention and agreement in language; 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (d. 474 AH), who examined the harmony between word and meaning; and al-Sakkākī (d. 626 AH), who worked on the eloquence of expression—among others who contributed to building a comprehensive linguistic theory within their historical and cultural context.

become its accepted name—without any change to the nature of the object itself.

As presented by Saussure, this concept reflects the idea that language is a symbolic system independent of the external world, and that words are merely signs whose meanings are determined by convention, with no necessary or natural connection to the things they signify.

2.1 Saussure's Theory of the Linguistic Sign

Ferdinand de Saussure, in his lectures compiled posthumously in the book *Course in General Linguistics* (1916), discussed the nature of the linguistic sign, proposing that it is composed of two fundamental elements:

- **Signifier (Signifiant):** The sound-image of the word, that is, the audible or spoken form.
- **Signified (Signifié):** The mental concept or idea that the word evokes (Saussure, 1916, p. 67).

Saussure emphasized that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary (*arbitraire*), meaning there is no natural or necessary link between the sound “kalb” (dog in Arabic) and the actual animal. The connection is purely conventional, agreed upon within a linguistic community (Saussure, 1916). Similarly, the English word “dog” and the French “chien” bear no intrinsic relationship to the animal itself, which clearly illustrates that the bond between sound and meaning is contractual and not inherent (Saussure, 1916, pp. 68–69).

Saussure summarized this idea by stating: “*The link between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary... the linguistic sign is arbitrary by nature*” (Saussure, 1916, p. 67).

This proposition laid the foundation for what would later become known as *structural linguistics*, where language came to be understood as a system of signs that derive their meaning through internal relationships rather than through direct connections with the external world. This view also opened the door for further developments in semiotics, literary criticism, and cultural studies. Scholars such as Roland Barthes and Roman Jakobson adopted this perspective in their analyses of discourse and cultural symbols.

2.2 Arbitrariness vs. Naturalness (Motivation):

Although Ferdinand de Saussure emphasized that the relationship between the *signifier* and the *signified* in language is arbitrary and not governed by any natural or logical necessity (Saussure, 1916, p. 67), this view has not gone unchallenged across linguistic schools of thought. In contrast, some theories have proposed that there is a natural relationship, or a form of *motivation*, between words and their meanings.

Among the most prominent of these theories are:

* – Onomatopoeia Theory:

This theory suggests that certain words are directly linked to the natural sounds they imitate. For example, words like *na īq* (the sound of a crow), *kharīr* (the sound of flowing water), or *tanīn* (the buzzing of bees) are believed to have originated from mimicking the actual sounds they describe. Similar examples exist in other languages, such as *buzz* in English or *coucou* in French (Lyons, 1968, p. 74).

However, from Saussure’s perspective, these cases are considered limited exceptions and do not contradict the overall arbitrary nature of language, since they constitute only a small fraction of a language’s vocabulary (Saussure, 1916, pp. 69–70).

* – Root-Based Theories:

Some scholars, particularly in historical linguistics, argue that there are original linguistic roots that carry a consistent or shared meaning across a group of words. For instance, the Arabic root “**kh-r-j**” (خ ر ج) is semantically linked to the concept of exiting or going out, as seen in words like *kharaja* (he went out), *makhraj* (exit), and *khārijī* (external). A similar phenomenon has been observed in Indo-European languages, where certain phonetic roots are associated with general meanings (Lyons, 1968, p. 75).

However, this view faces criticism, as language evolves and meanings shift over time. Words may drift away from their original roots or acquire new meanings unrelated to the root, weakening the explanatory power of this theory. For this reason, Saussure maintained that even if some roots convey general meanings, the reliance on them is insufficient to disprove arbitrariness as the dominant characteristic of the linguistic sign system (Saussure, 1916, p. 71).

While “motivated” theories highlight aspects of the relationship between sound and meaning, Saussure—and the

structuralist school with him—argue that such connections are partial and secondary. They do not undermine the essence of language as an arbitrary symbolic system based on social convention among speakers.

3. The Concept of Arbitrariness in the Arab Linguistic Tradition

3.1 Ibn Jinni's Position on the Relationship Between Word and Meaning:

Ibn Jinni is considered one of the most prominent figures in Arabic linguistic thought during the 4th century AH. He was distinguished by his deep approaches to questions concerning language, its origins, and its structure. Among these was the issue of the relationship between word and meaning — the same issue that would later become known in modern Western linguistics as the *arbitrariness of the linguistic sign*.

A. Linguistic Convention and Agreement:

Ibn Jinni maintained that words are not naturally or inherently linked to their meanings, but are assigned by mutual agreement and convention among speakers ('Uthmān, 1952).

In this regard, Ibn Jinni's position closely aligns with that of Ferdinand de Saussure centuries later, as both hold that the relationship between the *signifier* and the *signified* is not necessary, but socially constructed. Ibn Jinni used the term *wad'* (assignment) to refer to this contractual nature, a concept that mirrors Saussure's notion of *arbitrariness* (Saussure, 1916, p. 67).

B. Acknowledgment of Partial Motivation:

However, Ibn Jinni did not stop at absolute arbitrariness. His view is more balanced and nuanced. He acknowledged the existence of a certain degree of *motivation*—that is, a symbolic or sensory link between the signifier and the signified in specific cases ('Uthmān, 1952, pp. 46–

47), a concept recognized in modern linguistics as *motivation*.

Among the key examples he cited:

1. Onomatopoeia:

Ibn Jinni argued that some words imitate the nature of the sounds or movements they refer to. He dedicated a chapter to this phenomenon titled "*A Chapter on Words Resembling Their Meanings*," where he highlighted its importance and the respect it received among early Arabic linguists such as Sībawayh (d. 180 AH) and his teacher al-Khalīl ibn Aḥmad (d. 175 AH). He provided insightful examples ('Uthmān, 1952, Vol. 2, pp. 152–168). This is strikingly similar to modern linguistic theories regarding words like *buzz*, *bang*, or *murmur*, which imitate real-world sounds (Lyons, 1968, p. 74).

2. Derivation and Root Semantics:

Ibn Jinni believed that linguistic roots could carry shared semantic elements that are exploited in forming new, related words. For example, the root "ḍ-r-b" (ض ر ب) gives rise to *ḍaraba* (he struck), *dārib* (striker), and *maḍrūb* (struck), all of which retain the core meaning related to striking or impact. This is understood as a form of *structural harmony* between word and meaning ('Uthmān, 1952, p. 134).

C. A Balance Between Arbitrariness and Motivation:

Ibn Jinni's position strikes a balance between acknowledging the fundamental arbitrariness of linguistic assignment and recognizing the expressive potential of language, which can utilize phonetic or morphological elements to enhance the connection between form and meaning. This balanced view demonstrates the depth of classical Arabic linguistic thought and brings it closer to perspectives later developed in modern Western linguistics ('Uthmān, 1952, p. 47).

3.2 Al-Jurjānī and the Theory of Naẓm (Syntactic Arrangement)

It is important to begin by noting that 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī alludes to the concept of

arbitrariness in a precise manner, grounded in his understanding of the relationship between word and meaning, and his view of *convention* (*tawāṭu'*) as a foundational idea in the Arabic linguistic theory. He states:

"If the originator of language had said rabaḍ instead of ḍaraba, it would not have led to any confusion." (al-Jurjānī, 1984, p. 49)

This statement clearly illustrates the notion of convention: had the linguistic community agreed to use any other word in place of a known one, it would not have been considered anomalous, as mutual agreement legitimizes the form.

Contrary to views that place emphasis on individual words, al-Jurjānī argues that the beauty and eloquence of language lie not in isolated words, but in how they are arranged within context—a concept he famously termed "naẓm" (composition or syntactic arrangement).

A. Meaning Arises from Structure, Not Isolated Words:

Al-Jurjānī asserts that words do not carry full meaning on their own, but rather derive meaning from their placement within a syntactic structure and their relation to surrounding words. He writes: *"Know that naẓm is nothing other than placing your words in accordance with what grammar requires, and following its principles and rules, and recognizing what suits meanings and aligns with them."* (al-Jurjānī, 1984, p. 81)

This concept places syntax and grammatical structure as essential conditions for meaning. Al-Jurjānī believed that words, when detached from their context, lose much of their semantic value. Thus, eloquence and linguistic beauty cannot be judged by vocabulary alone. In this, his thought aligns with modern structuralist linguistics, which holds that meaning emerges only within the system of

language as a whole (cf. Saussure, 1916, pp. 142–143).

B. Word-Meaning Relationship Is Contextual:

For al-Jurjānī, meaning is not an inherent property of words, but a product of their position within the sentence and their relation to other words. For example, the word "hand" (*yad*) may signify very different things in the phrases *"the hand of justice"* versus *"his hand was extended."* This shows that meaning changes with context, and thus is not an essential feature of the word itself but a compositional function (al-Jurjānī, 1984, pp. 93–105). This view anticipates what modern linguistics later termed the *functional theory of meaning*, championed by scholars such as Firth and Halliday, who argued that *meaning is use*—an idea that al-Jurjānī articulated centuries earlier (cf. Halliday, 1978).

C. The Word Serves Meaning, Not the Other Way Around:

A foundational principle in al-Jurjānī's approach is that the word follows meaning, not the opposite. A writer or speaker does not begin by selecting elegant words to construct a meaning; rather, they start with the intended meaning and seek out words that best express it. This prioritization of meaning over form places his theory ahead in terms of linguistic communication, linking communicative intention with the verbal structure of discourse (al-Jurjānī, 1984, p. 264).

D. Rhetorical Impact Lies in Composition, Not Individual Words:

One of al-Jurjānī's most significant contributions is his precise distinction between the beauty of words and the beauty of composition. The rhetorical value of an expression, he argues, lies not in the word itself, but in how it is used. He states that the merit of speech lies in its arrangement and the elegance of its structure—not just

in the quality of the words (al-Jurjānī, 1984, p. 98).

This means that the aesthetic and emotional power of a text stems from how words are combined and how meanings are distributed—thus restoring the importance of structure and context in meaning production.

Comparison with Modern Linguistic Theories:

Al-Jurjānī's theory intersects significantly with modern structuralist linguistics. Just as Saussure argued that the "value of the sign" is determined by its relation to other signs within the linguistic system (Saussure, 1916, p. 115), al-Jurjānī maintained that a word's meaning cannot be understood outside its grammatical and semantic context. His concept of *naẓm* closely resembles modern notions of syntax and syntactic function in discourse analysis.

3.3 Al-Sakkākī's View on the Word-Meaning Relationship Through Metaphor and Figurative Language:

Al-Sakkākī was a prominent figure in Arabic rhetoric and grammar, and in his seminal work *Miftāḥ al-'Ulūm (The Key to the Sciences)*, he integrated linguistics, rhetoric, and logic, constructing a comprehensive system for analyzing discourse. Among the key issues he tackled was metaphor and figurative language, which are directly tied to the nature of the relationship between words and meanings—especially when that relationship is non-literal or symbolic.

3.3.1. Metaphor as Convention, Not Necessity:

Al-Sakkākī viewed metaphor—whether linguistic or cognitive—as dependent on transferring a word from its original meaning to a new one due to some conceptual relationship (like similarity or causality). This transfer is not based on a natural connection but on an implicit agreement among speakers to understand the association (Ya'qūb, 1987, p. 359).

For example, in the metaphor "*I saw a lion fighting*," the word "*lion*" does not literally refer to the animal, but to a brave man. This meaning is understood only through a shared cultural convention that associates bravery with lions. Here, the word-meaning relationship is clearly contractual, not natural—echoing Saussure's later idea of linguistic arbitrariness (Saussure, 1916, p. 69).

3.3.2. Metaphor and Arbitrariness:

According to al-Sakkākī, metaphor involves perceiving a relationship between two elements that lack a direct linguistic connection. When we attribute lion-like qualities to a man, this is based on an interpretive act: imagining two categories of "lions"—the literal animal, and a metaphorical version with the same bravery and power but in human form (Ya'qūb, 1987, p. 372). This perspective strengthens the idea that language does not rely on inherent matches between words and meanings, but on the speaker's and listener's interpretive capacity—shaped by cultural and cognitive context.

Thus, al-Sakkākī's rhetorical analysis reinforces a symbolic and conventional view of language, where meaning is not embedded in the word itself, but results from its contextual use. This closely aligns with modern pragmatic theories, which argue that meaning arises from speaker intention and communicative context (Levinson, 1983, p. 21).

3.3.3. A Rhetorical Analysis Beyond the Word:

Al-Sakkākī's linguistic insights treated words not as fixed, self-contained units, but as flexible elements whose meaning is reshaped by context, occasion, and communicative circumstances. Figurative language, in his view, cannot be understood from the word alone—it must be interpreted in relation to the *maqām* (situational context) and the intended mental association.

This means that language is not limited to fixed dictionary definitions but is open to multiple interpretive possibilities—which is the core of the idea that the word-meaning relationship is non-natural (Ya'qūb, 1987, p. 358).

In conclusion, al-Sakkākī's view on metaphor and figurative expression clearly illustrates that the relationship between word and meaning in language is not natural or necessary, but rather based on conceptual convention and rhetorical agreement. This positions rhetoric not as a study of fixed meanings, but as an exploration of how meanings are produced, bringing his thought remarkably close to modern approaches in semantics and linguistic theory.

4. Third: A Comparison Between the Western and Arab Concepts

4.1 Points of Agreement:

Despite the temporal and cultural gap between them, Ferdinand de Saussure and Ibn Jinni converge in their fundamental view of the nature of language. Both believe that language is a system based on convention and social agreement, not on a natural or innate relationship between words and meanings.

* — Language for Saussure is an arbitrary system governed by convention:

Saussure sees the relationship between the signifier (sound) and the signified (meaning) as arbitrary, meaning it is not based on rational logic or natural correspondence but rather on an implicit agreement among members of a linguistic community. He states clearly: "The link between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary... the linguistic sign in its essence is not governed by any natural necessity" (Saussure, 1916, pp. 67–69). For example, the word "kalb" in Arabic or "dog" in English both refer to the same animal despite the different sounds, indicating that the sound-meaning relationship is not

natural but a social convention. This is the core of Saussure's linguistic arbitrariness, which sees language as a "system of signs" whose meanings are acquired internally through relations among its units, not through any essential connection to the external world.

* — Convention and arbitrariness as the basis of language for Ibn Jinni:

Ibn Jinni—several centuries before Saussure—expressed a similar concept in his book *Al-Khasa'is* ("The Characteristics"), where he states that most scholars believe the origin of language is convention and agreement, not revelation or divine decree (Othman, 1952, p. 40). This acknowledges that words are established for meanings through human collusion, not because there is a natural relationship between the word and what it signifies. This aligns him with structural linguists who see language as an arbitrary system whose meanings are derived from within the society, not from outside language.

In other words, language for Ibn Jinni is not innate but the product of a collective human intellect based on agreement within cultural and historical limits. This idea indicates a very early awareness of the nature of the linguistic sign as a social symbol.

Phonetic Exceptions: Onomatopoeia and Accidental Resemblance:

Despite this agreement on the arbitrary or conventional nature of language, both Saussure and Ibn Jinni acknowledge the existence of some phonetic exceptions—words that imitate natural or sensory sounds, known today as onomatopoeia.

1/For Saussure:

He admits that some words like *tic-tac* (clock ticks), *boum* (explosion) in French, or *buzz* in English imitate the sounds they describe, but insists these words are very limited in the language and do not negate

the overall arbitrariness of the linguistic system (Saussure, 1916, p. 69).

2/For..Ibn.Jinni:

Ibn Jinni did not deny the existence of linguistic forms linked to some natural imitation of sound or movement, considering this one of the methods of meaning generation that embody the vitality of language. This indicates he recognized a special intersection between sound and meaning where the relationship can be justified. However, like Saussure, he saw this as an exception that does not invalidate the fundamental rule that language is based on convention and agreement (Othman, 1952, p. 154; Ibn Jinni, *Al-Khasa'is*, Vol. 2, p. 154).

Both Ibn Jinni and Saussure agree that language is not governed by natural laws or direct causal relations between words and meanings, but is the product of social agreement. This convention gives language its flexibility and ability to evolve, derive, and vary between communities. Nevertheless, they acknowledge limited exceptions, such as onomatopoeic words, which do not alter the general arbitrary nature of language.

4.2. Points of Difference

A/ Methodologically, Saussure offered a clear methodological model, while Arab scholars approached the issue within a holistic interpretation of linguistic phenomena consistent with their linguistic study tradition. In other words, Saussure's methodology aims to understand the linguistic system by focusing solely on its formal aspect. For Saussure, language consists of linguistic signs realized only when the signifier-signified relationship is

stable within a shared social context. Thus, his study focused on the overall structure, not on aesthetic or rhetorical aspects, but on how language is organized and how its parts interact.

B/ The Arabs emphasized the study of rhetorical and aesthetic aspects: such as rhyme and metaphor, unlike Saussure who focused on the abstract linguistic structure. Arab scholars approached linguistic issues through rhetorical and aesthetic perspectives rather than purely structural methods. They did not separate linguistic structure from meaning, which is why Arabic rhetoric was an essential part of language study. Scholars like Ibn Jinni, Al-Jurjani, and Al-Sakkaki focused on how meanings are generated and interpreted through rhetorical devices like metaphor, simile, and rhyme, rather than relying solely on the abstract structural aspect of language. In summary, Saussure presented a clear methodological model focusing on the formal structural study of language as a closed system relying on relations between parts without studying meaning, believing meaning forms among linguistic units. In contrast, the Arab scholars' approach combined structure and meaning in light of context and linguistic norms, based on their close relationship. While Saussure confined himself to internal linguistic structure as a mechanism for producing meaning, the Arabs cared about how language interacts with the receiver and how rhetorical methods create aesthetic and emotional effects in linguistic texts. This consideration was later corrected by some post-Saussurean schools.

5. CONCLUSION

This study shows that the idea of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure in modern linguistics, is not a foreign or newly invented concept in linguistic thought. Rather, it is a deeply rooted issue in the Arab linguistic heritage. Although Arab linguists did not use Western terms like “arbitrariness” or “structure and structuralism” as in Saussure’s theory, they acknowledged in their linguistic research that language is the product of social convention among members of the linguistic community, not a necessary or natural connection between words and meanings. They expressed this with terminology suited to the nature of Arabic linguistic research. Arab scholars, including Ibn Jinni, Al-Jurjani, and Al-Sakkaki, presented views consistent with Saussure’s idea that language is not rooted in nature itself but is a system of symbolic agreements. For example, Ibn Jinni affirmed in *Al-Khasa’is* that words are not governed by a natural relation with their meanings but are the result of social collusion. Al-Jurjani explored the aesthetics of language through rhetorical structure and rhyme, reflecting language as a social contract more than a mere innate phenomenon. Al-Sakkaki offered similar approaches when discussing the concept of “metaphor,” emphasizing that meanings form through intellectual and social consensus without a direct natural relation between words and meanings. What distinguishes Arab linguists is their addition of deep rhetorical and descriptive dimensions that enriched the subject. While Saussure pointed to the general structure of language and its governing system, Arabs gave special attention to the beauty of language and its effect on the receiver through rhetorical devices such as metaphor and simile. This rhetorical addition reflects a cultural and aesthetic dimension in understanding language as a means of communication and creativity, a distinctive feature of ancient Arab linguistic thought. These rhetorical and linguistic

approaches demonstrate the depth and precedence of Arab linguistic thinking in addressing many issues that underlie some modern linguistic theories, beginning with viewing language as a dynamic social system beyond the mechanical, formal cognitive dimension of linguistic signs. What characterizes the Arab linguistic heritage is the diversity of methodologies. Arab linguists offered different visions and conceptions of linguistic issues similar to those addressed by Western linguists but within a specific cultural framework. This clearly shows that Arab thought was not isolated from global linguistic developments but contributed significantly to various linguistic issues, including understanding the relationship between word and meaning, reflecting a linguistic creativity aligned with the latest theories in modern linguistics.

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