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The Authority of Language in Arab Cultural and Intellectual Discourse
An Analytical Approach to the Systems of Arab Thought

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Abstract

This study examines the dialectical relationship between language and culture from the perspective of symbolic authority, seeking to deconstruct the mechanisms through which the linguistic system dominates the formation of Arab cultural discourse. The paper attempts to answer a central problematic concerning how language transforms from a mere tool of communication into a system of authority that directs thought and determines representations of reality.

The study adopts a critical analytical approach that traces the development of the concept of language in classical Arabic dictionaries and modern linguistic studies. It then proceeds to analyze the concept of culture as a complex whole before discussing the mechanisms of cultural authority and the ways in which they permeate through the linguistic system.

The study concludes that language in Arab culture is not merely a vessel for thought; rather, it constitutes a mind within the mind and a referential system embedded in collective consciousness, exercising its authority in subtle ways through sanctification, education, and socialization. The study further reveals that the cultural authority of language manifests itself in its ability to shape perceptions, direct ideas, and construct identities, making it a central subject for the critique of Arab cultural discourse.

Keywords: language, culture, cultural authority, linguistic system, Arab thought, discourse, Sapir–Whorf, Bourdieu.

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Introduction

This study is founded on a central problematic concerning how the relationship between language and culture is formed, and how this relationship extends into power-related dimensions that make language more than a mere communicative tool. Since Ferdinand de Saussure declared that language is a system of signs, Noam Chomsky described it as a set of sentences, and Pierre Bourdieu conceptualized language as a social practice imbued with power, the question of the nature of language and its influence on thought and culture has remained a key concern across philosophy, linguistics, and anthropology.

The importance of this study lies in its attempt to approach language from a critical perspective that views it as a distinctly cultural system. In this view, language is not limited to transmitting meaning; rather, it extends to producing meaning, guiding thought, and shaping representations. This approach is significant because it treats language as a "system of authority" that permeates both collective consciousness and the unconscious, determining ways of thinking and modes of inquiry before even shaping forms of expression.

The study adopts a descriptive-analytical methodology, tracing the evolution of the concept of language in classical Arabic lexicographical works (Lisan al-Arab, Al-Ayn, Asas al-Balagha) as well as in modern linguistic studies (Saussure, Chomsky). It then moves to analyzing the concept of culture through the classical definition of Edward B. Tylor and contemporary approaches, before examining the notion of cultural power and its mechanisms, with a focus on the relationship between linguistic systems and thought.

The study is structured into six main sections: the first addresses the concept of language in both Arab heritage and modern theory; the second discusses the concept of culture and its developments; the third analyzes the reciprocal relationship between language and culture; the fourth deconstructs the concept of cultural power and its dimensions; the fifth applies the notion of power to linguistic systems; and the sixth examines the impact of linguistic authority on thought. The study concludes with a final section presenting the main findings and recommendations.

1. The Concept of Language (Lexical Semantics and Conceptual Meaning)

When attempting to define the concept of language, it is necessary at the outset to refer to its meanings in its original linguistic usage, namely in Arabic lexicons that establish its primary sense. The later terminological concept did not emerge in a vacuum; rather, it is a natural development of the meanings and connotations of language through usage. Classical Arabic dictionaries provide a clear picture of how early Arab linguistic consciousness was formed, and how the term "language" itself carried, in its roots, meanings that may appear modest or even negative, yet contain within them the seeds of its later semantic development.

A return to the Arabic lexical root "ل غ و" reveals multiple semantic layers, ranging from meanings such as error and idle speech, to speech and articulation, and extending further to notions of elicitation, dialogue, and transgression. This semantic evolution reflects a shift in the perception of language itself: from being regarded as transient, unstructured speech, to being understood as a complex epistemic system.

A survey of Arabic lexicons in search of the concept of language shows that it does not depart from meanings associated with idle talk, uncontrolled speech, and redundancy. This indicates that the initial perception of language focused more on its apparent verbal dimension than on its status as a structured cognitive system. As Ibn Manzur states under the root "لغا": "*al-laghw and al-laghā: it is fallen speech and what is not taken into account from speech and otherwise. Al-laghw and al-laghā and al-laghwā: that which is speech not relied upon (al-Farrā'). Al-Azhari said: language (al-lughah) is among defective nouns, and its origin is lughawah from laghā, meaning to speak*" (Ibn Manzur, 2003, vol. 8, p. 98).

This demonstrates that language, in its initial conception, was associated with what is excessive or marginal in speech, before evolving into its more complex terminological meaning. Early Arab linguistic consciousness tended to view speech as a human act subject to error, excess, and deficiency; thus, "language" in its first semantic layer was close to the notion of "idle speech" (laghw), i.e., surplus and trivial talk.

However, this same early awareness paved the way for a distinction between "language" as a system and "idle speech" as a defect in usage.

The same semantic connotations are also found in the work of Al-Khalil ibn Ahmad al-Farahidi, the founder of prosody and the first compiler of the dictionary *Al-'Ayn*. He states that the linguistic root itself carries connotations of mixture and excess. Al-Khalil writes: "*al-lughah and al-lughāt [and al-lughūn]: the variation of speech in one meaning. Lagha yalghū [laghw] means the mixing of speech with falsehood. I 'cancelled' this word, meaning I considered it false, surplus, and redundant*" (Al-Farahidi, 2003, vol. 4, p. 92).

This early linguistic conception reflects a practical view of language as a human phenomenon subject to error and excess, before becoming an object of systematic theoretical reflection. Here, Al-Khalil does not so much define language as he describes one of its characteristics, namely its susceptibility to "variation" and "difference." It is precisely this variation that makes synonymy and semantic multiplicity possible.

Moreover, his association of language with "the mixing of speech with falsehood" suggests that language, in its everyday use, is neither neutral nor transparent, but rather vulnerable to non-truthful or distorted usages. This ethical dimension of language would remain deeply embedded in Arab culture, where truthfulness in speech is praised, lying is condemned, and utterances are classified into categories such as truth and falsehood, benefit and harm.

However, Al-Zamakhshari, in *Asas al-Balagha*, introduces additional semantic dimensions that are more developed and closely related to figurative usage and semantic transformation that the root "لغة" underwent through living linguistic practice. He notes that the word *laghw* derives from *laghā* and states: "*it does not laghw (yalghū), and he spoke with laghw and laghā; he deviated from correctness, became coarse, and spoke obscenely. Al-laghā: I uttered it and spoke it. And if you wish to hear from the Bedouins, then 'istalghihim': meaning ask them to speak. And 'lāghaytuhu': I joked with him. Metaphorically, 'laghā 'an al-tarīq wa 'an al-sawāb': he deviated from the path and from correctness*" (Al-Zamakhshari, 1998, vol. 2, pp. 172–173).

Here, we observe how the meaning shifts from mere "redundancy" or "idle speech" to encompass speaking itself, elicitation, and even provocation of speech, which prepares the ground for a major terminological transformation. Al-Zamakhshari's inclusion of figurative meanings is particularly significant, as it reveals an awareness of semantic change: words do not carry fixed meanings, but rather meanings that are formed through usage.

The expression "*istalghaytu al-a'rāb*" (I asked the Bedouins to speak) turns language into something that can be elicited, provoked, or drawn out into expression. Similarly, "*lāghaytuhu*" (I joked with him) shows that language is not always serious; it contains play, humor, and figurative dimensions. This metaphorical aspect of language is precisely what enables its development and creativity, but it also makes it susceptible to manipulation and distortion.

In terminological usage, the most prominent definition of language among early Arab scholars is that of Ibn Jinni in *Al-Khasa'is*, where he describes it in the chapter on defining language as follows: "*Its definition is that it is sounds through which every people express their purposes*" (Ibn Jinni, 1987, vol. 1, p. 33).

This concise definition represents a pivotal moment in the history of Arab linguistic thought, as it strips language of its earlier associations with redundancy and idle speech, and establishes a linguistic science grounded in sound and intentional expression. Here, Ibn Jinni offers an operational definition that is less concerned with the essence of language than with its function and material nature.

For him, language is not an abstract essence but "sounds," i.e., a physical material produced by the vocal organs. These sounds are not arbitrary; rather, they are "used to express," meaning they carry intention and meaning. Nor are they expression of anything whatsoever, but of "purposes," that is, practical needs and intentions. The phrase "every people" indicates that language is inherently tied to the community and is not an individual phenomenon.

Through this definition, Ibn Jinni lays the foundations of functional linguistics centuries before its emergence in the West.

This definition also contains the core components of the concept of language and aligns with many modern linguistic definitions. It highlights the phonetic nature of language (as opposed to the misconception that language is fundamentally a written phenomenon), thus correcting the common error that reduces language to writing. It also clarifies the nature of language as a sound system and its function as a means of expressing purposes (Hijazi, n.d., p. 10).

Hijazi's emphasis on the compatibility between Ibn Jinni's definition and modern linguistics demonstrates the originality of Arab linguistic thought in this domain, and confirms that a purely mechanical view of language as a communication tool does not encompass its full dimensions.

Indeed, Ibn Jinni does not say that language is "merely" sounds, but rather "sounds through which expression is made," meaning that sound is the material component, while the expression of purposes is the function; together they constitute language. This definition thus integrates materiality (sound), functionality (expression of purposes), and sociality (every people), making it a comprehensive and balanced conceptualization.

In modern Western linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure defines language as "a system of signs that express ideas" (De Saussure, 1971, p. 33).

This characterization of language as a system constitutes a major intellectual shift compared to earlier conceptions that reduced language to a mere instrument or a material carrier of cultural heritage. For Saussure, the essence of language lies not in substance but in form, established through the network of relations linking its constitutive elements, namely signs. Its function is communication, and its observable feature is the expression of ideas.

This shift—from viewing language as a set of self-contained units to understanding it as a system of differential relations—marks the defining feature of structural linguistics and its later developments. Saussure moves linguistic analysis away from treating words and sounds as isolated entities toward focusing on the relational structures that organize them.

A single signifier (for example, the sound /b/) has no value in itself except through its differential relation to other sounds (/t/, /th/, /j/...). Likewise, a single meaning (for example, "father") can only be understood within a relational system of kinship that distinguishes it from "uncle," "brother," or "grandfather."

Language, therefore, in Saussure's view, is not a collection of labels but a structured network of differences.

With Noam Chomsky, the concept of language acquires another dimension related to its generative and structural aspect. In his work *Syntactic Structures*, he states: "From now on I will consider a language to be a set (finite or infinite) of sentences, each finite in length and constructed from a finite set of elements" (Lyons, n.d., vol. 1, p. 9).

This operational definition opens the way to studying the speaker's capacity to generate an unlimited number of sentences from a finite set of rules, thereby shifting linguistic inquiry from describing sentences to explaining the generative competence of the speaker.

Although **Lyons** presents this definition within his introduction to Chomsky's theory, he highlights a radical shift from viewing language as a social system (as in **Saussure**) to

understanding it as an individual mental capacity. Chomsky is not concerned with language as a social institution (*langue* in Saussure's terms), but rather as an innate human capacity (*competence*) whose rules enable the production of an infinite number of utterances (*performance*).

This inward turn toward the mind defines transformational-generative grammar and is what led Chomsky to criticize structuralism for being merely descriptive and superficial, failing to reach the deeper cognitive structures of language.

2. The Concept of Culture (Definition and Expansion)

The term "culture," widely used in Arabic scholarly literature, is a translation of the European word *culture*, which originates from the Latin *cultura*, meaning agriculture, as well as the cultivation or refinement of the spirit, among other related meanings (Mu'nis, 1419 AH, p. 377). This agrarian origin of the term indicates that, in its early European usage, "culture" referred to the "cultivation of the soul" or its "nurturing," in analogy with the cultivation of land.

This metaphorical meaning remains present in certain modern usages, such as "agricultural culture" or "health education." The shift from the literal meaning (cultivation of land) to the metaphorical meaning (cultivation of the self) was not arbitrary; rather, it reflects a conception of the human being as a being who requires the "planting" of values and knowledge, just as seeds are planted in soil. This conception carries a pedagogical orientation aimed at shaping individuals and guiding them toward what society considers virtuous and proper.

However, this formative meaning would later be expanded, particularly with the emergence of anthropology, which broadened the concept of culture to include everything produced by humans, not only what is considered "refined" or "highly cultivated."

Western thinkers largely agree on the classical definition proposed by Edward Burnett Tylor, who defines culture as a complex whole that includes a set of interrelated and interwoven components: beliefs, arts, morals, laws, and customs acquired by individuals as members of society (Valadier, 2001, p. 509). This definition, formulated in the second half of the nineteenth century, was revolutionary for its time, as it expanded the concept of culture to encompass all aspects of human life, not merely fine arts and literature.

It also laid the foundations of an anthropological approach that views so-called "primitive" societies as possessing their own cultures, rather than representing a lack of civilization. Tylor rejects the distinction between "civilized" societies with culture and "primitive" societies without culture, affirming that all human beings, wherever they are, live within a culture—that is, within a complex system of beliefs, laws, and customs.

However, despite its breadth, this definition remains descriptive and static, as it presents culture as a list of components without explaining how these elements interact or how they change. It also overlooks the dynamic dimension of culture—its capacity for evolution, transformation, and influence by internal and external factors.

Some scholars have focused on social customs and behaviors, while others have emphasized historical, symbolic, or psychological dimensions of the concept. Each definition tends to highlight a particular aspect depending on the disciplinary background of its author. For instance, Alfred Kroeber**,** Talcott Parsons, and others have used the concept of culture in terms of values, ideas, and symbols rather than direct human behavior, viewing culture as belonging to the realm of abstract meanings, while behavior is its practical manifestation.

This distinction between culture as a symbolic system and behavior as a material practice has made it possible to study culture as an autonomous "thing in itself," independent of the

individuals who embody it. In contrast, Harold Lasswell examined the relationship between culture and personality, linking national character to cultural structures and attempting to understand how patterns of socialization produce certain personality types compatible with political and cultural systems (Al-Sharqawi, 2008, p. 107).

This diversity of approaches reflects the richness of the concept, but also its resistance to a single definitive definition. Every attempt to define culture either becomes too broad (including everything), too narrow (excluding essential aspects), too rigid (ignoring change), or too flexible (becoming analytically vague).

The concept of culture has undergone numerous developments and transformations; however, all of these shifts have moved in the direction of expanding the concept and diversifying the elements it includes. Culture has thus come to express the overall form and way of life in which human beings exist. It is no longer limited to artistic or intellectual production, but now encompasses patterns of food, clothing, housing, family relations, and the use of time.

The dual relationship between humans and culture—being simultaneously both its subject and its objective—further increases the complexity and comprehensiveness of the concept, extending it to both material and spiritual dimensions, and encompassing both creation and action. Humans produce culture, but culture also produces humans; this dialectical interaction is what makes the study of culture a study of humanity itself in its collective and historical dimensions.

This duality (humans produce culture, and culture produces humans) is what some theorists refer to as a "constructivist dialectic," where it becomes impossible to separate agent and structure, individual and society, creation and repetition. Human beings are born into a pre-existing culture that they learn and are shaped by, yet at the same time they reproduce, transform, and contribute to its development.

This circular relationship makes the study of culture inherently dynamic and complex, resistant to reduction into static lists or linear theories.

3. Culture and Language (Contextual Interaction)

Language and culture interact within multiple contexts, giving rise to a relationship of mutual influence. Culture flourishes and civilization expands when language becomes unified and its usage is widespread. Language is not merely a tool for communication; it is the primary guarantor of cultural continuity across time, and the medium through which members of the same society share visions and representations.

As stated, "the unity of language is the path toward the unity of culture and the convergence of perspectives on life, and a factor in shaping collective consciousness, unity of purpose, and shared destiny" (Al-Jalabi et al., n.d., p. 188). This linkage between linguistic unity, cultural unity, and the collective destiny of a nation places language in a strategic position within any civilizational or reformist project. Language is thus not simply a means of understanding, but a force that constructs the "nation" as an imagined community, making its members feel that they belong to a single entity and pursue shared goals.

For this reason, the Arabic language has historically been a central pillar in Arab nationalist revival projects, being regarded as a foundation of identity and unity. However, this unifying vision of language carries an inherent risk: the exclusion of dialects and other languages, and their framing as a threat to national unity. The relationship between the standard language and local dialects, and between *fuṣḥā* and vernaculars, is therefore as much a relation of power as it is one of communication.

Language is the repository of cultural heritage; through it, this heritage spreads and is transmitted from one generation to another. It is the most important means of disseminating shared culture, acting as both its mirror and its key, and playing a fundamental role in shaping the culture of human societies (Al-Jalabi et al., n.d., p. 188). Language is thus the carrier of culture and responsible for its dissemination; indeed, it participates in shaping culture itself and its components, since culture can only manifest through language.

Members of a cultural group can express their belonging, loyalty, and attitudes toward their culture only through language. In this sense, language becomes an existential condition of culture, not merely its external vessel. The idea of language as a "container" of culture is a useful metaphor, but it can also be misleading. Language is not a passive vessel that holds cultural content; rather, it is an active element in shaping that content.

When a cultural concept changes, the words that express it also change; and when words change, the concept itself is transformed. This dialectical interaction between language and culture makes it impossible to separate them: any study of culture without language is impossible, and any study of language without culture is abstract and incomplete.

Language is also a tool of communication and understanding, bringing concepts closer among members of the same society. It is likewise an instrument of self-expression through artistic and literary forms (Al-Jalabi et al., n.d., p. 188). Since literature and the arts are among the most important components of culture, and since their structures are expressed through language, they interact linguistically with the culture of the nation, translating audience responses both linguistically and behaviorally.

A literary text, for example, is not merely an individual expression; it is a dialogue with the entire culture of society, formed through language and interacting with it in a circular dynamic. The writer does not use language as a transparent tool but reshapes it, produces new meanings, and subjects it to their own vision. At the same time, readers receive the text through their own cultural frameworks, interpreting it according to their linguistic and cultural representations.

This interaction between writer, language, culture, and readers makes literature simultaneously a social and linguistic phenomenon.

Despite the existence of other means of communication such as gestures, images, and symbols, language remains the most effective and fastest tool that humans can use to express their thoughts (Tunis et al., n.d., p. 5). Other communicative systems are either derived from language (such as writing) or limited in their capacity to express abstract and complex meanings.

Language is also a tool for acquiring knowledge and expanding human experience, as it enables individuals to learn from the experiences of others, thereby transcending the limits of time and space (Al-Jalabi et al., n.d., p. 188). Thought itself depends heavily on language; words are what clarify ideas, stabilize them, and allow them to grow, multiply, and produce new meanings (Mohamed Zidan & Mohamed El-Sayed Al-Sharbini, 1965, p. 99).

Language and religion constitute the two most stable pillars of identity, as both precede the individual, are acquired in early childhood, and are difficult to abandon. For this reason, language and religion have often become central axes of identity conflicts in many societies, particularly during periods of colonization and historical transformation.

Language can function both as a tool of resistance and as an instrument of domination, just as religion can serve as a source of liberation or as a cover for authority and power.

4. Cultural Authority (Power, Argumentation, and Coercion)

Authority refers, on the one hand, to power, influence, and capability; on the other hand, it denotes severity, coercion, domination, oppression, and repression. It also refers, in a third sense, to argument and proof (Asfour, 1999, p. 128). These three interwoven dimensions make authority one of the most problematic concepts in the human sciences, as it combines coercion and persuasion, material force and symbolic power.

Authority is not merely the ability to force others to do what one wants; it is also the ability to persuade them that what one wants is right, and that obedience is in their own interest. This persuasive dimension is what makes authority more effective and less costly than power based on violence alone. An authority that requires constant violence to suppress opposition is a weak and fragile authority, whereas an authority that succeeds in instilling in the governed the conviction that its actions serve their interest is a stable and powerful one.

It is possible to conceive of the relationship between the three dimensions of authority in its classical linguistic meanings—as recorded in *Lisan al-Arab*—as inseparable from the notions of power and capability, which in turn lead to influence and guidance, and ultimately to argumentation and proof. This is what makes influence or direction possible without resistance; otherwise, it becomes coercion accompanied by severity, domination, or repression (Asfour, 1999, p. 128). This is the very semantic layer that links authority (*sulṭa*) to domination (*tasalluṭ*). Ibn Manzur notes that the term *sultan* (authority/ruler) is so called because it represents "God's proof on earth," and that rulers are called *sultans* because through them rights are established and arguments are upheld. This reveals the deep connection between material power and persuasive legitimacy in the concept of authority. The *sultan* possesses weapons and soldiers, but also possesses argument and legitimacy.

This legitimacy may be religious (God's proof on earth), legal (the establishment of rights), or ethical (the realization of justice). Authority without legitimacy is mere repression, while authority without power is merely advice.

Authority constitutes a fundamental pillar of any social system. It is rare—indeed almost impossible—to find any social system, no matter how simple, that is devoid of authority occupying its highest level and working to organize and direct its basic structures. At its most basic social level, authority appears as a pure force, yet one that imposes itself upon society, as it is a defining feature of all forms of social organization.

Authority is therefore not an accidental or abnormal phenomenon, but a constitutive element of social life, manifesting in different forms depending on the nature and development of the society. Even societies that claim to be without authority (such as certain anarchist or utopian groups) inevitably produce informal forms of authority, such as expertise, charisma, or majority influence. Authority, then, is not an absolute evil to be eliminated, but a social necessity. The real issue lies in the nature of this authority, its limits, and the mechanisms through which it is exercised.

Authority is a form of power and guidance that determines for members of a cultural group what should or should not be done. Authority is not confined to a clearly identifiable source; rather, it may take the form of "authority of texts, authority of rituals, authority of signs in public space, authority of imaginations and ghosts, or authority of something unspecified" (Marsal, 1975, p. 13).

In some of its manifestations, authority is not exercised by a specific individual; instead, it is produced by the cultural group itself as a mechanism of social regulation. It becomes embedded in institutions, customs, and symbols, and gradually settles into collective consciousness before appearing as an externally imposed force. This "diffuse" or "invisible" authority is the most

effective, because it does not require overt violence; rather, it operates through self-regulating mechanisms of control and discipline.

Education, for instance, is a form of soft authority that instills in the child from an early age what they should believe and how they should behave, turning the individual into a guardian of social norms. Similarly, media constitutes a hidden authority that shapes our desires, tastes, and interests without our awareness.

Authority, in its symbolic sense, consists of cultural systems, forms of consciousness, and value structures that encompass the three semantic dimensions of authority: the content or basis of argument, the force of influence and direction, and the force of coercion and domination (Asfour, 1999, p. 128). This implies that there is no authority without power, even in its symbolic or cultural forms.

When cultural discourse persuades, it does so because it carries arguments; these arguments inherently involve direction, and this direction is itself grounded in a form of power—even if it is purely symbolic. Symbolic power, as Bourdieu calls it, is the most dangerous form of power precisely because it operates through persuasion, attraction, and misrecognition, such that those subjected to it do not perceive themselves as dominated but believe instead that they are freely choosing.

This symbolic power is evident in all forms of cultural discourse: in religious discourse, which presents itself as absolute truth; in scientific discourse, which presents itself as absolute neutrality; and in artistic discourse, which presents itself as pure self-expression—while in reality, all of these are forms of power-laden practice.

Accordingly, the authority of culture permeates all forms of knowledge, insofar as it provides their justification, ensures belief in their validity, and induces compliance with their messages, prescriptions, or prohibitions. It is within this framework that we situate our own approach, extending it to the point of conceiving cultural authority as deeply embedded in Arab thought through cultural systems, each of which carries claims of universality, generalization, and absoluteness, in addition to a high degree of abstraction that enables its applicability to an unlimited number of phenomena across time and space.

Thus, major Arab cultural systems—such as language, religion, and custom—present themselves as valid for all times and places. This claim to universality constitutes the highest form of symbolic authority. If religious discourse asserts its validity for all times and places, if the Arabic language presents itself as the eternal language of the Qur'an, and if custom is framed as inherited wisdom, then all these systems obscure their historical and relative nature and present themselves as eternal truths.

We argue that an objective analysis of cultural authority from this perspective should not separate authority from culture. The former, insofar as it is a form of knowledge established across its various fields and systems, necessarily incorporates power as a constitutive element. The latter, culture, is understood as a plurality of forms of cognitive consciousness emerging from a set of relationships among heterogeneous and often conflicting components within the general cultural discourse of the nation.

Culture is therefore not a homogeneous whole, but rather a field of struggle among multiple discourses, each possessing a relative form of authority. The cultural agent is not a passive receiver, but a site of tension where these competing authorities intersect. Arab culture, for instance, is shaped by multiple discourses: religious, national, secular, modernist, traditionalist, feminist, and others. These discourses compete and intersect, each exercising relative authority

within specific domains, while the individual experiences this tension internally, attempting to reconcile multiple allegiances.

From this standpoint, cultural authority has permeated all aspects of Arab civilization and manifested itself through an unlimited set of symbols and representations, such that the social and cognitive structure has never been immune to its influence or control. Culture imposes authority and simultaneously invokes it in order to consolidate its dominance over all aspects of life, guiding opinions and shaping ideas that ensure its continuity.

Indeed, culture has transformed its constitutive elements into relatively autonomous systems that enable it to exercise control over all human activities. In doing so, it affirms both its political presence and its civil dimension, encompassing material and social existence, governing civil and judicial systems, and intervening in the shaping of individual lives.

This implies that Arab thought has never stood outside the authority of cultural discourse, nor has it remained marginal to its concerns or priorities; rather, it has been governed by it at its deepest levels.

5. The Cultural Authority of the Linguistic System

Societies are often associated with a sacred language, whose sanctity derives from its operation within a doctrinal system, or because the doctrinal source itself takes the form of a linguistic text, as in the case of revealed religions. Language thus becomes linked to transcendent, metaphysical forces that exceed human nature, and it acquires sanctity from the sanctity of the religion it conveys through its forms and expressions.

Language also acquires sacred status through the functions it performs within society: it is the primary tool of communication and mutual understanding among members of a cultural group, and it facilitates the transmission of cultural content across generations. Language thereby becomes a form of heritage, or a material carrier of heritage, which further enhances its sanctity and consolidates its authority as a cultural system.

In Arab culture, all these factors converge: the Arabic language is the language of the Holy Qur'an, the language of a vast scientific and literary heritage, and the language of national identity. This convergence gives it cultural, religious, and political authority simultaneously. Such sacralization places the Arabic language beyond critique and questioning, making any discussion of its reform, simplification, or adaptation for scientific use a sensitive and contested matter. Arabic thus ceases to be a mere tool and becomes a symbol of identity and faith, where any challenge to it is perceived as a challenge to both religion and the الأمة (community).

The linguistic system becomes intertwined with society, and its authority permeates cultural discourse, enabling it to shape tendencies, desires, and representations. At this point, the authority of discourse emerges as a mixture of forms of violence shared between language, with its slogans and naming practices, and education, with its tendency toward rigid classification and normalization (Lecercle, 2005, pp. 425–426).

Linguistic socialization is simultaneously cultural and political socialization. Through language, individuals learn not only how to speak, but also how to think, how to categorize the world, and how to define their identity and their position toward the Other. From early childhood, children are taught that Arabic is "the language of the Qur'an," "the language of Paradise," and "the language of ḍād," whereas other languages are labeled as "foreign languages" or "languages of the colonizer." These labels carry evaluative judgments, create hierarchies among languages, and shape the individual's perception of self and others.

Thus, a child raised on the idea that their language is sacred and that other languages are merely worldly develops both a sense of superiority and a difficulty in accepting and respecting other languages and cultures.

If human beings are distinguished from other creatures by reason and language, and thereby granted dominion over other beings through the faculties bestowed upon them by God—primarily language itself—as stated in the Qur'anic verse: "And He taught Adam the names—all of them" (Surah Al-Baqarah, 2:31), then language becomes linked to an original form of divinely granted authority.

Discourse, as a linguistic representation, is thus connected to power, and this conception of the linguistic system has become a central concern in sociology. Pierre Bourdieu sought to theorize this relationship between linguistic systems and power when he argues that anyone attempting, through linguistics, to understand the power and effectiveness of linguistic phenomena, or searching for the cause of the efficacy of institutional language and its governing logic, forgets that language derives its authority from outside itself.

As he notes, "at most, language represents this authority and symbolizes it… and the linguistic features that characterize the speech of priests, professors, and institutions in general—such as imitation, repetition, formulaic expressions, and lack of effort—derive from the position occupied by those who are granted authority within a field of competition and struggle" (Bourdieu, 1982, p. 103).

This Bourdieusian critique of internal linguistics confirms that language does not possess authority in itself; rather, it derives it from social institutions that grant certain speakers the right to speak in its name. The difference between the speech of a university professor and that of a manual worker is not merely linguistic, but fundamentally social and institutional: it is the difference between a position that grants authority to speak and another that is denied it.

Standard Arabic, in Arab societies, is therefore not merely a linguistic variety distinct from dialects; it is the language of authority, institutions, education, and media. Mastery of it confers higher social status, while lack of mastery leads to exclusion from that status.

This means that the linguistic system guides individuals within the cultural group, insofar as it constitutes a referential system embedded within the human mind, steering it toward unforeseen and unpredictable directions of change. Language thus becomes a "mind within the mind," forming a system of values and principles distinct from both the individual's personal system and the broader social system, which together constitute the foundations of interaction within the frameworks of custom and collective logic (Al-Ajmi, 2010, vol. 1, p. 13).

Language is therefore not merely a tool that we use; rather, it is a system that precedes us and survives beyond us. We are born into it just as we are born into our culture, and we learn to perceive the world through it before we become capable of questioning it. This "unconscious" dimension of language is what makes it one of the most deeply rooted forms of authority, because it operates without our awareness, directing our thoughts and representations without us realizing that we are subject to its guidance.

An Arabic speaker, for example, does not choose for their language to possess a specific phonetic system (such as the distinction between *ḍād* and *ẓā'*), a particular morphological structure (such as triliteral roots), or a specific grammatical system (such as masculine and feminine forms). Rather, they find themselves compelled to conform to these systems, and deviation from them risks either misunderstanding or being perceived as uneducated.

Most contemporary linguistic theories affirm that the world is, in some sense, constructed through language. As the anthropologist at Boston University, Miciolando, states: "The revolution

in twentieth-century linguistic studies lies in recognizing that language is not merely a means of communicating ideas about the world, but an instrument for bringing the world into existence in the first place. Reality is not simply 'lived' or 'reflected' in language; it is actually produced by language" (Lewin, 1993, p. 80).

This constructivist view of language overturns the traditional relationship between language and reality. Reality is no longer regarded as a fixed entity to which language merely assigns names; rather, language itself shapes reality as we know and perceive it. There is no pre-given "world" existing independently outside language waiting to be labeled. Instead, language segments the world, classifies it, and creates categories such as "time," "space," "causality," "substance," and "attribute"—categories that we assume to exist objectively in reality, while they are in fact linguistic constructs.

This radical perspective places language at the center of existence itself, making the study of language equivalent to the study of being.

Accordingly, anthropological approaches—beginning with the theory of linguistic relativity (or the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis)—have emphasized that human beings are governed in their ways of thinking and behavioral choices by their culture and by what their first language imposes upon them (Al-Ajmi, 2010, p. 20).

The pioneers of this theory, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf, went even further, arguing that individuals can derive from experience only what their language permits them to derive (Easthope, 1999, p. 63). This radical epistemological position implies that speakers of different languages inhabit different perceptual worlds, because their languages segment reality in different ways.

For example, some languages do not distinguish between blue and green, and consequently their speakers may not perceive a clear distinction between the two. Some languages lack a grammatical future tense, leading their speakers to experience time in a more present-oriented way. Other languages do not clearly differentiate between subject and object, influencing how agency and passivity are conceptualized.

According to Sapir and Whorf, these linguistic differences generate genuine cognitive differences and may even render certain concepts untranslatable from one language into another.

Despite all that has been written about language and despite the achievements of modern science in explaining its functions, only limited conclusions have emerged regarding the relationship between language and the structures of the universe as perceived through human language. The fundamental difficulty in this type of inquiry is that human beings cannot perceive these cosmic structures independently of language itself (Al-Ajmi, 2010, p. 20).

In other words, language is not merely a window through which we observe the world; it determines the very shape of the window and what can be seen through it.

The source of the dominance of the linguistic system within Arab culture lies in the positioning of linguistic rules, structures, and systems within both individual and collective consciousness and unconsciousness. Its determinants remain governed by pre-formed structures and systems that assume specific orientations and configurations, playing a major role in directing Arab cultural discourse and defining its trajectories.

Language is thus an active system whose role in shaping cultural discourse cannot be denied (Bani Amer, 2015, p. 32). As stated, "every culture bears the nationality of the language that produces it, and the general system of knowledge within every culture must differ, to a greater or lesser extent, from the system of knowledge in other cultures, with language playing a fundamental role in this difference" (Hammad, 2007, p. 141).

This proposition explains why philosophies, scientific conceptions, and ethical systems differ from one culture to another: they are formulated through different languages, each carrying its own conceptions of time, space, causality, and human relations. The authority of language is therefore not merely authority over communication, but authority over thought itself, as well as over the production, classification, and evaluation of knowledge.

Hence, awareness of this authority becomes a fundamental condition for any serious critical project that seeks to liberate thought from the dominance of invisible linguistic systems and to open the possibility for alternative forms of thinking that transcend familiar linguistic and cultural patterns.

Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion, a number of central conclusions may be drawn, all of which confirm the profound dialectical relationship between language and culture and reveal the authoritative dimensions assumed by the linguistic system in shaping thought, identity, and Arab cultural discourse.

First, the study has shown that the concept of language underwent significant semantic development, moving from meanings associated with redundancy and incoherent speech in classical Arabic lexicons to its definition in modern linguistics as a system of signs or a set of sentences. This semantic transformation, however, was not merely a matter of epistemological progress; rather, it reflected a shift in the very conception of language itself: from viewing it as a human act subject to error and excess, to regarding it as an autonomous system governed by its own internal laws and relations.

Second, the study demonstrated that culture, in its conceptual evolution, moved from denoting cultivation and refinement of the spirit to signifying a complex whole encompassing beliefs, arts, laws, and customs. This expansion reflects a comprehensive tendency that transformed culture into an all-encompassing mode of life, making the human being simultaneously both its object and its goal.

Third, the study revealed that the relationship between language and culture is not one of container and content, but rather a dialectical relationship of mutual influence. Language shapes worldviews, determines conceptualizations, transmits heritage, and establishes identity. Language is therefore not merely a means of communication, but a repository of culture, an instrument for acquiring knowledge, and a medium for expressing belonging.

Fourth, the analysis of cultural authority demonstrated that authority extends beyond meanings of force and coercion to include persuasion, argumentation, and guidance, thereby rendering cultural discourse an authoritative system that exercises influence through symbolic and often invisible means. This authority manifests itself in major cultural systems such as language, religion, and custom, which present themselves as universal and absolute while directing thought and shaping consciousness.

Fifth, the study emphasized that the linguistic system derives its authority from outside language itself—through religious sanctity, institutional status, or its role in socialization. Language is therefore not an authority in itself, but rather a representation of external authorities. Yet it subsequently becomes an instrument for reproducing and consolidating those very authorities. This explains the dominance of Standard Arabic in religious, educational, and media spheres, as well as the marginalization of vernacular dialects.

Sixth, the study concluded that the authority of language extends into thought itself, since language and thought are so deeply intertwined that separating them becomes nearly impossible.

Thought is essentially internal speech, and language determines both what can and cannot be thought. This is precisely what the theory of linguistic relativity (Sapir–Whorf) affirms: language shapes our perception of the world and defines the boundaries of our cognitive experience.

In light of these findings, it may be argued that any critique of Arab cultural discourse necessarily requires, first and foremost, a critique of the linguistic system that directs and structures that discourse. Liberating thought from the authority of language does not mean abandoning language itself; rather, it means becoming conscious of the mechanisms of its authority and exposing the hidden relationships linking language, institution, identity, and power.

If the Arab cultural renaissance project seeks to become a genuinely critical project, it must begin by deconstructing dominant linguistic conceptions and reconsidering the relationships between Standard Arabic and dialects, between Arabic and other languages, and between linguistic heritage and modernity.

Above all, this requires recognizing that language is not merely a tool, but a field of struggle, a site of authority, and a fundamental element in the formation of identity, thought, and the future.

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